

THE *NEW YORK TIMES*-BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Simone Elkeles

Chain Reaction



A **Perfect Chemistry** novel

Chain Reaction

Simone Elkeles



WALKER & COMPANY
New York

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[1. Luis](#)

[2. Nikki](#)

[3. Luis](#)

[4. Nikki](#)

[5. Luis](#)

[6. Nikki](#)

[7. Luis](#)

[8. Nikki](#)

[9. Luis](#)

[10. Nikki](#)

[11. Luis](#)

[12. Nikki](#)

[13. Luis](#)

[14. Nikki](#)

[15. Luis](#)

[16. Nikki](#)

[17. Luis](#)

[18. Nikki](#)

[19. Luis](#)

[20. Nikki](#)

[21. Luis](#)

[22. Nikki](#)

[23. Luis](#)

[24. Nikki](#)

[25. Luis](#)

[26. Nikki](#)

[27. Luis](#)

[28. Nikki](#)

[29. Luis](#)

[30. Nikki](#)

[31. Luis](#)

[32. Nikki](#)

[33. Luis](#)

[34. Nikki](#)

[35. Luis](#)

[36. Nikki](#)

[37. Luis](#)

[38. Nikki](#)

[39. Luis](#)

[40. Nikki](#)

[41. Luis](#)

[42. Nikki](#)

[43. Luis](#)

[44. Nikki](#)

[45. Luis](#)

[46. Nikki](#)

[47. Luis](#)

[48. Nikki](#)

[49. Luis](#)

[50. Nikki](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Ad Card](#)

[Imprint](#)

*To my agent, Kristin Nelson, and my editor, Emily Easton, for having faith in
me and your unending support*

1

Luis

Being the youngest of three boys definitely has its advantages. I've watched my brothers get into some serious trouble when they were in high school. I was never expected to follow in their footsteps. I get straight As, I don't get into fights, and from age eleven I knew what I wanted to be when I grew up. I'm known as "the good kid" in *mi familia*—the one who's expected to never fuck up.

My friends know I have a crazy rebellious streak, but my family doesn't. I can't help it—I'm a Fuentes, and being rebellious is deeply rooted in my genes. The kid my family sees on the outside isn't necessarily what's on the inside, and I intend to keep it that way. I vowed never to stray from my ultimate goal of going to college and studying aeronautics, but taking a few physical risks every once in a while feeds that adrenaline rush I crave.

I'm standing at the bottom of a rock formation in Boulder Canyon with four of my friends. Jack Reyerson brought rock climbing gear, but I don't wait to strap on a harness. I grab one of the ropes and attach it with a carabiner on my belt loop so when I reach the summit I can anchor the rope for the rest of the group.

"It's not safe to go up without gear, Luis," Brooke says. "But you already know that, don't you?"

"Yep," I say.

I start a free solo ascent, making my way up the rock formation. This isn't the first free solo I've done at Boulder Canyon, and I've had enough training to know what the hell I'm doing. I'm not saying it's not a risk—it's just a calculated one.

"You're crazy, Luis," Jamie Bloomfield yells from below as I climb even higher. "If you fall, you'll die!"

"I just want everyone here to know that I'm not responsible if you break every bone in your body," Jack says. "I should have had you sign a liability waiver."

Jack's father is a lawyer, so he has an annoying habit of announcing his lack of responsibility about pretty much everything we do.

I don't tell them that climbing without a safety harness is an adrenaline rush. It actually makes me want to push myself harder and take more risks. Jamie called me an adrenaline junkie after I snowboarded down the black diamond slope in Vail on the winter break trip last year. I didn't tell her that fooling around with the girl I met in the lobby that night was also an adrenaline rush. Does that qualify me as a junkie?

When I'm halfway to the summit, I've got my right hand secured above me and one foot planted inside a small crevice. It's high enough to make me look down to see what I might be falling on if I do lose my grip.

"Don't look down!" Jack says in a panic. "You'll get vertigo and fall."

"And die!" Jamie adds.

Dios mío. My friends seriously need to chill. They're white, and haven't been brought up in a Mexican family full of guys who thrive on challenges and living on the

edge. Even though I'm supposed to be the one Fuentes brother who's smart enough not to take risks, I feel most alive when I do.

The summit is a few feet away. I stop and look across the sky, getting a bird's-eye view of the landscape. It's fucking amazing. I used to live in Illinois, where the landscape was completely flat except for the skyscrapers. Looking out across the Colorado mountains makes me appreciate nature. The wind is at my back, the sun is high in the sky, and I feel invincible.

I reach up with my left hand and grab on to the edge of a crevice in the rock face about ten feet from the top. I'm almost there. As I scan the rock for a spot to place my foot, I feel something sharp pierce my hand.

Oh, hell. That wasn't good.

I just got bitten by something.

Instinctively, I quickly plant my foot as I snatch my hand back and glance at it. Two small puncture marks are on the back of my hand with my blood streaming out of them.

"Stop scratching your balls so we can get up there before the sun sets, Luis!" Eli Movitz screams from below.

"I hate to break the news to you guys," I call down to them as the tip of a snake's head appears above me, then sneaks back inside for cover, "but I just got bitten by a snake."

I didn't get a good look at the sucker, so I have no clue if it's venomous or not. Shit. I look down at my friends and vertigo hits almost immediately. This was not in the plan. My heart is racing and I squeeze my eyes shut, hoping to stop my head from spinning.

"Holy shit, man!" Eli yells to me. "Was it a rattler?"

"I don't know."

"What did it look like?" Jamie calls up to me. "Did it have stripes?"

"I only saw the tip of the head, and I'm not about to go back up there and get a closer look," I tell her, wondering if I should move sideways and continue the last ten feet of my ascent or attempt to go back down.

I'm a math guy, so I immediately consider the odds of surviving this situation. My hand definitely stings, but it's not numb. Surely if I was just pumped with a shitload of venom I'd start feeling numb and stiff right about now.

"I knew Luis shouldn't have free solo'd it," Jack's voice echoes from below. "I knew it! Nobody listened to me, and now he's stuck up there while venom is probably spreading throughout his body."

"Shut the fuck up, Jack!" I yell. "Snakes don't have fuckin' legs, so how was I supposed to think there'd be one hidin' in the face of a damn rock that's ten feet below the summit?"

"Do you feel, like, *normal*?" Brooke asks.

"A snake just punctured my skin with its fangs, Brooke," I say as I head back down slowly. It might be my imagination, but I think my hand is starting to get numb. "Of course I don't feel normal."

"Get a ranger with antivenom!" Jack yells to the rest of them. We'd have to drive to find one. None of us have our licenses yet, so we're screwed. Actually, I'm the only one who's screwed.

With all the talk of antivenom and rattlers, I can't think straight and lose traction.

My foot slips. Then my hand, the one without two puncture holes in it, starts sweating all of a sudden and I lose my grip. I slip down the side of the rock face and hear the gasps and screams of my friends below while I scramble to get a foothold or a hand on something solid. It's no use.

All I can think of before I hit the ground is *I'm not ready to die.*

2

Nikki

“I love you, Marco.”

I said it. I couldn't look into my boyfriend's deep, dark eyes as the words flowed seamlessly from my lips, because I'm also holding something back. I figured saying *I love you* as a conversation starter would be easier than saying *I might be pregnant*. It was cowardly not to look into his eyes and tell him everything, but saying those three words is a start. I feel more vulnerable than I've ever felt before.

I don't do vulnerable well.

I breathe out slowly and gather up the courage to look up at my boyfriend of a year. We lost our virginity to each other a month ago when his parents went to Mexico to visit his grandmother.

I can't even think about it now as I focus on him. *Okay, I said I love you. Your turn to say it back, like you whispered in my ear the first time we made love. Then I'll tell you I missed my period this month and I'm freaking out. Then you'll tell me everything will be okay and that we'll deal with it together.*

He's smiling. Well, kinda. The side of his mouth is quirked up, like he's amused. I wasn't going for amused. I was going for affection and adoration—signs that it was okay to tell him my secret. I look toward Lake Michigan, wishing we weren't outside and hoping nobody from our high school suddenly shows up. I wrap my arms around myself. It's not that warm in Illinois yet, and the wind off the lake is definitely making me shiver. Or maybe it's my nerves.

“You don't have to say it back to me,” I say to fill the silence, but that's a complete lie. I do expect Marco to say it back to me. I don't want to hear it just on special occasions and when we're making love.

The first time he said it was after the homecoming dance back in September. Then on New Year's Eve. And on Valentine's Day. And my birthday. So many nights I lie alone in my bed and think about how our love will last forever.

We don't have the same friends because we live on different sides of Fairfield, but that's never mattered. We've made it work. After school, we usually go to my house and just ... be with each other.

And now we might be having a baby. How is he going to take the news?

Today is the last day of our freshman year of high school before summer break. Marco suggested we go to the beach after school when I told him I needed to talk.

It makes sense, really. The beach is our special place.

We had our first kiss on the beach last summer. He asked me to be his official girlfriend there the second week of school. We made snow angels on that same beach back in January when we had a snow day. We come here to share all our private secrets, like once he told me where gang members stashed guns around town so the police wouldn't catch them carrying it. Marco has always known guys who were heavily connected.

He steps away from me, and immediately I get goose bumps as if my body knows something is up besides the wind coming off the lake. He combs his fingers through his jet-black hair. Then sighs. Twice.

“I think we should see other people,” he murmurs.

I cock my head to the side. Obviously I didn’t hear him right.

There are a few phrases that a girl expects to hear after she declares her love to her boyfriend. I can think of a few right off the top of my head, but *I think we should see other people* isn’t one of them.

I’m stunned. And I can’t stop shaking as I think about being pregnant without him at my side, smiling and telling me everything will be okay.

“W-w-why?”

“You always said you’d never date a gang member, and I’m gonna be one.”

“Of course I won’t date a gang member,” I blurt out. “Just two days ago you told me you’d never join the gang, Marco. It was right before we made love. Remember?”

He winces. “I said a lot of things I probably shouldn’t have. And could you please not call it *making love* ... every time you say it like that you make me feel like shit.”

“What do you want me to call it?”

“Sex.”

“Just sex, huh?”

He rolls his eyes, and I swear my stomach lurches in response. “See, now you’re making me feel like shit on purpose.”

“I’m not doing it on purpose.”

He opens his mouth to say something, then must think better of it, because he shuts it.

I scan his face, hoping he’ll say *Just joking! Of course I pick you over the Latino Blood*, but he doesn’t. My heart feels like someone is chipping away at it, piece by piece.

“We’re just ... so different.”

“No we’re not. We’re *perfect* together. We go to the same school, we have the best time together ... we’re both Mexican.”

He laughs. “You don’t even speak a word of Spanish, Nikki. My parents and friends talk about you while you’re in the room, and you’re clueless. You’re not *really* Mexican.”

Is he kidding me?

My parents were born in Mexico, just like the rest of my ancestors. Nobody would mistake them for anything other than Latino. Spanish is their first language. My parents came to the United States after they got married. After that, my dad went to medical school and did his residency at Chicago Memorial.

“The gang doesn’t make you more Mexican, Marco. Don’t make the gang more important than our relationship.”

He kicks up the sand with his toe. “*No hablas pinche español.*”

“I don’t know what you said. Can you translate, please?”

He holds his hands up in frustration. “That’s my point. To be honest, I’ve been hangin’ with the Blood for a while now.”

How can he say that? I put my hand over my stomach in a weak effort to protect any baby that might be growing inside me. I can’t help tears from welling in my eyes.

I know I look desperate and pathetic as a stream of tears runs down my cheeks. Everything I thought I had with Marco is blowing up in my face. I feel more alone than I ever have in my life.

"I can't believe this," I say in almost a whisper.

I should tell him my secret. Maybe it'll make him change his mind, knowing that we might have a baby. But if I'm not pregnant, am I just prolonging the inevitable?

"I just don't want you to give me shit for bein' a Blood," he blurts out. "All of my friends joined."

I look down at my nails. I'd painted them last night and drew a red heart design in the middle of each nail. On my thumbs, inside the little hearts, I put the initials MD—Marco Delgado. I thought he'd be flattered. Obviously I was delusional. I quickly hide my thumbs in my fists.

"I'm sorry," he says, then rubs my shoulder like a parent consoling a child. "Don't cry. We can still, you know, be friends ... friends with benefits, even."

"I don't want to be friends with benefits, Marco. I want to be your *girlfriend*." The entire contents of my lunch threaten to come up on me.

What is the gang giving him that I can't?

He stays silent and kicks the sand again.

My hands fall limply at my sides as I realize I can't fix this. He's looking at me differently, as if I'm just one of the other girls at school and not the girl of his dreams or the future mother of his children.

He pulls his cell phone out of his pocket and glances at the time. "Um ... about tonight."

"The end-of-year party at Malnatti's?" It's the "officially unofficial" pizza party for Fairfield High students. They put up a big tent outside their restaurant and have a DJ and an all-you-can-eat pizza party from six to eleven. Afterward, most of the students hang out at the Fairfield football field back forty until the police come to break it up.

"Yeah," he says. "So, uh, if you know of anyone who wants to be hooked up, let me know."

"You're selling drugs?" I ask him.

He shrugs. "It's money."

"It's dirty money, Marco. And illegal. Don't do it. You could get arrested and locked in jail."

"I don't need a fuckin' lecture from you."

He checks his phone again. Is he waiting for someone to call or text him? I feel like I've already lost everything we ever had.

The tears running silently down my cheeks are a clue that I am most definitely *not* okay, but he doesn't seem to care. I swipe them away and curse myself for being so weak.

I can handle this. I'm an independent girl who doesn't need a guy to figure out what to do. Obviously this is my problem, and my problem alone. If I'm pregnant, he'll figure it out when he sees my stomach swell up like a balloon. He'll know it's his. If he chooses to acknowledge us and clean up his life, then we'll talk.

I look up at Marco and give him a small smile. "I don't want to control you. I never wanted to be the girl who held you back."

“But you did ... you have. I can’t do it anymore.”

I guess in reality I’m not independent. Our relationship *did* define me, and I liked it that way. I can’t believe he wants me out of his life. It doesn’t make sense.

He gets a text, but I can’t see who it’s from. He texts back. “Can you make it home on your own?” he asks me. His fingers move fast and furious as he continues texting.

“I guess.”

“Cool.” He leans down and kisses me on the cheek. “My friends thought you’d go all *loco* on me. They thought you’d punch me or somethin’.”

Now there’s a thought. But no, I couldn’t punch him.

Before I can open my mouth to beg him to come back to me and lose any dignity I have left, he turns to leave. Then he’s just *gone*. Out of sight, but definitely not out of mind.

He picked the gang over me.

My breath hitches. I look out at the lake and feel like jumping in—to swim away and pretend this isn’t happening. Desperation washes over me like waves washing footprints off the shore, and I start to shake uncontrollably. My knees crumple to the sand, and I can feel my hot tears start to fall again. This time I don’t swipe them away. I break down and cry while recalling every single moment Marco and I spent together, and praying that my period is just late and I’m not really pregnant.

Pregnant at fifteen was never my plan.

3

Luis

I guess my secret is out. If it wasn't for that damn snake, I wouldn't have fallen off the rock and *mi'amá* wouldn't be sitting in the hospital room continuously shooting me threatening stares that translate into *You are in so much trouble*.

Ends up I didn't have venom running through my body. One of the snake's fangs punctured a nerve in my hand, which is why it felt numb. After I fell, Brooke called her father in a panic. He picked us up and drove me to the hospital. Surviving the snake bite was the easy part. Getting continuously lectured by *mi'amá* has been torture.

During the fall down the face of the rock, I scratched up my legs pretty bad. I should be grateful for finally being able to grab part of the rock that jugged out with my good hand, even though in the process I ripped my skin open from palm to wrist and almost needed stitches. In the end, the doc decided the cuts weren't deep enough to require stitches and decided to have a nurse bandage me up instead.

Mi'amá crosses her arms on her chest as she watches me adjust the hospital bed so I'm not lying down flat. "You scared me half to death, Luis. Who told you to climb up a mountain without a safety harness?"

"Nobody."

"It was stupid," she tells me, stating the obvious as she watches the nurse bandage my hand.

"I know."

I look over at my brother Alex, leaning against the window watching me. He's shaking his head, probably wondering how he got stuck with two younger brothers who were destined to do reckless, stupid things. *Papá* died before I was born, so Alex has been the oldest male in our immediate family since he was six. Now he's twenty-two.

I've got to give Alex credit. He's always tried to keep us out of trouble. Carlos was a lost cause from the start. *Mi'amá* said our other brother was born kicking and screaming, and never stopped until he was a teenager. Then all that pent-up energy was used to start fights with anyone who was stupid enough to piss him off.

Alex was twenty when *mi'amá* sent Carlos to live with him so Alex could straighten Carlos out.

Now Carlos is in the military and Alex is about to get married to Brittany Ellis, the girl he's been dating since high school.

A nurse peeks her head into the room. "Mrs. Fuentes, we need you to sign a few papers."

The second *mi'amá* leaves the room, Alex steps toward me. "You are one lucky motherfucker," he says. "If I ever find out you free solo again, I'll personally kick your ass. Got it?"

"Alex, it wasn't my fault."

"Oh, hell," he says, covering his eyes with his hand as if he has a big headache.

“You sound just like Carlos.”

“I’m not Carlos,” I say.

“So don’t act like him. I’m gettin’ married in two weeks. *Two weeks*, Luis. The last thing I need is one of my brothers fallin’ off a fuckin’ cliff and killin’ himself.”

“Technically it wasn’t a cliff,” I tell him. “And the odds of gettin’ a snake bite on an ascent is like—”

“Give me a break,” he says, cutting me off. “I don’t need statistics, Luis. I need my brother at my weddin’.”

Five girls, including Brooke, Jamie, and three of their friends, appear in the doorway. They’re all carrying balloons that say *Get well soon!* on them. I give a short laugh as my brother glances at the parade of girls with shock as they tie their balloons to the side rail of my bed.

“How are you feeling?” Brooke asks.

“Like crap,” I tell them, lifting up both of my bandaged hands—one with the snake bite and the other from being ripped open by the rocks.

“We came here to make you feel better,” Jamie says.

I smile wide and immediately feel better. Now that I know I’m not about to die, it’s all good. “What do you girls have in mind?”

I think I hear my brother snort as he steps back and the girls surround my bed.

“Want a back massage?” Angelica Muñoz asks with a flirty lilt to her voice.

“I brought some cookies from the Pearl Street Mall bakery,” Brooke says. “I can feed you since you can’t use your hands.”

“You’ve *got* to be kiddin’,” Alex mumbles from behind her.

Angelica settles behind me and starts massaging my back while Brooke takes one of the chocolate chip cookies she brought and lifts it to my mouth.

My future sister-in-law walks into the room, her high-heeled boots clicking on the hospital floor and her hair secured in a long blond ponytail running down her back. She takes one look at my entourage and shakes her head in confusion.

“What’s going on here?” she says to Alex.

“Don’t ask,” Alex says, coming up to her.

“Alex called me in a panic and said you’d had an accident,” she tells me.

I hold up both of my bandaged hands again. “I did. Hurts like a bitch, but the doc says I’ll survive.”

“Obviously,” she says. “But I don’t think you’ll be happy when your mother walks in the room and catches her fifteen-year-old son surrounded by his own harem. You know how protective she gets, Luis.”

“If she’s like my mom, she’ll freak,” Angelica says, then says to the other girls, “Maybe we should leave.”

Angelica is a girl I’ve casually fooled around with a few times at parties. She’s got Mexican parents, too, so she gets it. The other girls don’t have a clue how protective Mexican mothers can be.

I tell the girls that I’ll text them when I can use my hands, and they leave right before *mi’amá* walks back in the room.

“Who brought the balloons?” she asks. “Was it those girls I saw in the hallway?”

“Yeah,” I tell her. “They’re just friends from school.” No use getting into detail about how I’ve made out with three out of the five of them at one point or another.

That will bring on another lecture I definitely want to avoid.

The doc releases me a half hour later, after giving *mi'amá* instructions on how to rewrap my wounds at home.

"You're not invincible," Alex tells me after Brittany and *mi'amá* walk out of the room. "None of us are. Remember that."

"I know."

He pokes a finger into my chest and blocks my path. "You listen to me, Luis, because I know all too well what was goin' through that head of yours when you decided to climb that rock without safety gear. You liked the rush of knowin' you were sayin' *fuck you* to danger. I've got one brother in the military, a best friend who's been six feet under for more than four years, and I'm not about to sit back while my baby brother gets *la tengo dura* by flirtin' with danger."

"You take life too seriously," I say, moving past him. "I'm not your baby brother anymore, Alex, and I'm not as innocent as you think. I'm almost sixteen. You know that girl Brooke who brought me cookies? She's not innocent, either. You want to know how I know that?"

I can't help but crack a grin as Alex puts his hands over his ears like earmuffs.

"Don't tell me," he says. "You're too fuckin' young, bro. I swear, if you get a girl pregnant you'll have more than just two bandaged hands to deal with."

4

Nikki

I don't know how much time has gone by. Every time I get a call on my cell and realize it's not Marco, I ignore it. Every time I get a text from one of my friends, I ignore it.

I don't know how long I've been sitting on the beach crying, but I don't care. I tell my baby to give me strength, but I feel as weak as ever.

Until I hear a familiar voice. "Nik!"

I look up. It's Kendall. Kendall and I have been best friends since preschool, when we both wore the same dress on picture day and told everyone we were twins even when Miss Trudy said that lying wasn't part of the school's "core principles." We didn't know what "core principles" were back when we were four, but when Miss Trudy talked about them in her stern voice we knew we were in trouble.

Before I say anything, she kneels down to me. "I heard."

She might have heard about the breakup, but she has no clue I might be pregnant. I bury my face in my hands. "I can't believe this."

"I know." She sits beside me.

"He picked the gang over me." I look up at my friend who has light hair and hazel eyes—the exact opposite of me. "He said I wasn't Mexican enough."

Kendall shakes her head and snorts. "He's an idiot."

I sniff a few times, then try to wipe the tears off my face. "How did you find out?"

She winces. "I tried to call you and text you, but you didn't answer. So I texted Marco and asked where you were. He told me."

"I told him I loved him. Then he said he wanted to see other people. Then he said he was already hanging out with the Blood and we could be friends. *Friends with benefits*, Kendall. Can you believe it? As if I could just turn my feelings off like a faucet."

Just saying the words *friends* and *benefits* in the same breath makes me cringe.

Kendall sighs. "I know it doesn't seem like it right now, but you'll find someone else."

"I can't do this without him."

"Do *what*?" she asks, confused.

I look up at her, the one friend I can trust more than anyone else. "I might ... be pregnant."

Her look of shock mixed with a hefty amount of pity is enough to make me cry all over again.

She puts her hands on either side of my face and urges me to look at her. "You're going to be fine, Nikki. I'm here for you. You know that, right?"

I nod. I wish I'd heard those words come out of Marco's mouth.

"How late are you?" she asks.

“A week and a half.”

“Did you take a pregnancy test?”

I shake my head. I guess I thought after I told Marco, we’d get one together at a drugstore a few towns over where nobody knew us.

Kendall urges me to get up. “First, I’m going to get a pregnancy test for you. Then we’re going to figure it out. Listen, it is what it is and you can’t change it. Let’s find out so we know for sure. Cool?”

Truth is, at this point I don’t know if I want to know for sure. Ignorance is bliss, right?

I’m silent as Kendall drives me to a drugstore and back to her house. I sit on the edge of her tub and bite my fingernails nervously while she reads the instructions and hands me the stick I’m supposed to pee on so I know if I’m carrying Marco’s baby.

I look at the stick. “I can’t,” I tell Kendall. “I just ... need to see Marco one more time. I need to talk to him face-to-face before I do this. He’ll be at Malnatti’s. If I can pull him away from the party and talk to him, maybe we can work things out.”

“I ... I don’t know if that’s a good idea.”

“I have to see to him tonight, Kendall.” I look down at the pregnancy test. “I can’t do this without him.”

I know I sound desperate. I just have to find out if there’s anything I can do to change his mind about the Latino Blood ... and me ... and dealing drugs.

Kendall stands. “You sure you want to talk to him tonight?”

“Yeah.” I feel like I have so much to say, and was too caught off guard to say it before. If he knows how much I truly care about him, he’s got to change his mind. I can’t imagine any girl loving him more than I do. I put the pregnancy test back in the package and shove it in my purse.

“Come on, let’s get you ready then,” she says, taking me to her room and scanning her closet to pick something for me to wear. “I think seeing Marco right now is a horrible idea, but if you’re determined, I’m not going to stop you. First I’m going to make sure you look so hot, Marco will shit in his pants when he takes one look at you.”

In the end, Kendall picks out tight skinny jeans and a designer top that her mom gave her after she decided she didn’t want it anymore. At the party, I take a deep breath and hold my head high as I walk through the big white tent at Malnatti’s with Kendall at my side.

I scan the main area. It seems like the entire school is here celebrating the beginning of summer break.

Music is playing.

Some people are eating.

Some people are dancing.

I scan the tent for the familiar face that makes my heart race every time I look at him.

I finally see him ... making out with Mariana Castillo in the back corner. She’s one of the tough, pretty Latino Blood homegirls that most girls at Fairfield steer clear of. He’s kissing her in that familiar way I know all too well. And feeling her ass with hands that touched my naked body just two days ago.

No.

I close my eyes, wishing the image would disappear. But it doesn't.

I open my eyes, and now I notice that most of the freshmen and sophomores are staring at me. I get looks of pity from girls on the north side, but I notice most of the Latina girls from the south side are whispering to each other and laughing. They're gloating, happy that Marco dumped his rich north side girlfriend.

I tell Kendall not to follow me as I turn and run out of the tent, not stopping until I reach my house twenty minutes later. I bolt upstairs and lock myself in my room, feeling like a complete fool.

I pull out the pregnancy test from the zippered section of my purse and unwrap the stick. I let out a long, slow breath. This is it. *The moment of truth.*

I sneak off to the bathroom, glad the rest of my family is watching television in the family room.

After I follow the instructions, I hold the stick in my hand and wait impatiently for the results to show up. As I stare at the little plastic window that will tell me my fate, three things Marco taught me today race through my mind: boys will lie to your face just to have sex with you, don't trust any boy who says *I love you*, and never date a boy who lives on the south side of Fairfield.

5

Luis

Two weeks after my showdown with the snake, I'm in a tuxedo at my brother's wedding. I never thought I'd see Alex get married. Then again, I never thought I'd be back in Illinois again. This time, though, we're at a rented house on Sheridan Road in Winnetka. It's less than fifteen minutes from the south side of Fairfield where we used to live, but it feels like a whole other world.

"¿Estás nervioso?" I ask Alex as I watch him attempt to adjust the bowtie so it sits straight.

"*Estoy bien*, Luis. It's just that this damn thing won't go on right," Alex growls, then slides the strip of fabric from under his crisp white collar and whips it on the ground before running his hand through his hair. He sighs heavily, then glances at me. "How the hell did you get yours to tie without lookin' like a kid did it?"

I pull out a piece of folded-up paper from the back pocket of my rented tuxedo pants, ignoring the pain from my still-raw hand. "I printed instructions off the Internet," I tell him proudly as I hold out the piece of paper.

"You're such a geek, Luis," our brother Carlos chimes in as he moves from the opposite side of the room and rips the instructions out of my hand.

Carlos didn't have to worry about renting a tuxedo because he's wearing his dress uniform from the army. From the way he stands straight and tall when he wears it, I know he's proud he's in the service instead of being in the gang he was in when he lived in Mexico with me and *Mamá*.

"Here," Carlos says as he picks up the tie and shoves it and the instructions into Alex's empty hand. "You don't want to keep that bride of yours waitin' at the altar. She might decide to ditch you and marry a white dude with an investment portfolio instead."

"You tryin' to piss me off?" Alex says, shoving Carlos away when he laughs at the clear plastic container with the red rose boutonniere packed neatly inside.

Carlos nods. "*Estoy tratando*. I haven't had a chance to give you shit since I was deployed nine months ago, Alex. *No puedo parar*."

Just as I'm about to offer to tie Alex's bowtie for him, *mi'amá* comes into the room.

"What are you boys doing?" she asks, as if we're still little kids messing around.

"Arguin'," Carlos says matter-of-factly.

"There's no time for that."

Carlos kisses her on the cheek. "There's always time for arguin' when you're a Fuentes."

She glares at him, then looks up at the ceiling. "*Dios mío ayúdame*."

She grabs Alex's bowtie and wraps it around his neck. As if she's a pro, she has it tied in less than thirty seconds.

"Thanks, Ma," Alex says.

When she finishes, she looks up at Alex and cups his face in her hands. “My oldest *hijo* is getting married. Your father would be so proud of you, Alejandro. Graduating from college, and now getting married. Just ... don’t forget where you came from. *¿Me Entiendes?*”

“I won’t,” he assures her.

Mi’amá pins his boutonniere on his lapel, then steps back and looks at all three of us. Her hands press against her heart and her eyes get watery. “My boys are all grown up.”

“Don’t cry, Ma,” Alex tells her.

“I’m not,” she lies as a tear escapes the corner of her eye and runs down her face. She quickly brushes it away, then straightens and heads for the door. “Carlos and Luis, you should collect the rest of the groomsmen and tell them to line up soon.” She glances at Alex. “Finish getting dressed, Alejandro. The procession is about to start.”

She closes the door, leaving us alone.

I watch as Alex walks over to the window overlooking Lake Michigan. Chairs set up on the private beach are filled with guests waiting for him and his bride.

“I can’t do this,” he says.

I step closer, hoping to get a hint that he’s joking.

He’s not.

I glance at the clock on the wall. “Umm, Alex, you do realize that the weddin’ is supposed to start in ten minutes, don’t you?” I ask.

“I’ll handle this,” Carlos says, taking control. He braces his hands on Alex’s shoulders. “Did’ja cheat on Brittany?”

Alex shakes his head.

“You in love with another chick?”

Another shake.

Carlos leans away from Alex and crosses his arms on his chest. “Then you’re goin’ through with it. I didn’t get leave and fly all the way to Chicago for you to call it off, Alex. And besides, you love the *gringa* and promised you’d marry her after you both graduated college. This is a done deal. No backin’ out now.”

“What’d you do, Alex?” I ask, completely confused now.

He sighs heavily. “I haven’t told her the news that at the end of the summer we’re movin’ back to Chicago.”

Our entire family has lived in Colorado for almost three years. Moving back here isn’t gonna fly with Brittany. “What do you mean, *you’re movin’ back to Chicago?*”

“It’s a long story. Brit’s parents are handin’ over custody of her sister, Shelley, to the state of Illinois. She’s twenty-one and can go on state fundin’ for her care. That means she’ll be pulled from Sunny Acres and moved back here. Brit doesn’t know yet. She also doesn’t know I got into Northwestern for grad school. I accepted.”

“And you didn’t tell her any of it?” Carlos asks. “Oh, man, you are screwed.”

Alex rubs the back of his neck and winces. “I kinda never even told her I applied to Northwestern. She thinks we’re stayin’ in Boulder after the weddin’.”

I know full well my brother’s soon-to-be wife doesn’t want to come back to Illinois. I’ve heard her talk about her fear of coming back to the place where Alex got shot, and beat up within an inch of his life to get jumped out of the Latino Blood. He’s told her it’s safe now, since the gang broke off into different factions and the new head