

Third Person

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Arturo shuffles up the walkway to our house, arms trembling as he grips his walker. He's so bent over that his legs and torso make a ninety-degree angle. He places each foot gingerly in front of him, like he's walking through a minefield and each step might be his last. Miguel, Arturo's son and my partner, walks beside him, a beige suitcase in one hand and the other hand hovering above Arturo's back. Arturo's dog, a black Scottish terrier almost as old as he is, lifts his leg and trickles urine onto my pink asters.

It's like watching a bullet come at you in excruciating slo-mo. My lungs seize and constrict. A month ago, Arturo had a stroke and lay on his kitchen floor for two whole days before his neighbor, dropping off some lemon bars, discovered him. After that, Miguel was firm: Arturo was coming to live with us. So we converted the office into a bedroom, installed a ramp to the front door, and kissed our freedom goodbye.

As they walk in, I push my mouth into a smile. Arturo's face has changed

since the last time I saw him. He has crescent-moon-shaped bags under his eyes, his lips have all but disappeared, and the tendons of his neck stand out like metal rods inserted to support his head.

“Hi, Arturo,” I say. “How was your trip?”

He looks through me. “Did you see the price of gas at the Shell down the street?” he says to Miguel, or me, or no one. “Two sixty-nine!” He spits out a laugh. “They might as well put a gun to your head.”

“We don’t have much choice around here, Dad,” says Miguel. “Not many gas stations for competition.”

“I guess no one has much choice around here. You drag me to this shit-hole town when I was fine back in New Mexico.” His brown eyes square on me. “See? David agrees with me. He doesn’t want me here, either.”

I blink. I have to do better if a half-senile eighty-two-year-old man can tell how badly I want him anywhere but here.

“I think you’re tired from the long drive,” says Miguel, steering Arturo down the hallway. “Let me show you your room.”

“You mean my cell?” he says.

The Scotty follows them down the hallway, nails clicking on the hardwood floors. Bed springs creak, a pill bottle rattles, and Arturo continues to protest.

I go into the kitchen and open a beer. Beyond the window over the sink, our oak tree has just started to change, the green leaves mingling with a few red ones in a Christmasy democracy. To the left is a large clover field dotted with grazing black-and-white dairy cows, faces pressed to the ground and tails whipping flies. To the right, a stand of trees next to two grain silos and several long, white buildings. It could be an idyllic scene, but Arturo is right: Big Burr, Kansas, is a shithole.

Across the flat, sprawling fields, billboards advertise things like “God’s greatest creation: a baby!” and “The Holy Bible. Inspired. Absolute. Final.” Between the billboards are cattle feed lots that smell of feces and burned hair. When I told a cashier in the local Walmart I was from Brooklyn, she said, “Oh, that’s where the headquarters for Jehovah’s Witnesses is!” The food at

Giovanni's, the #1-rated Big Burr restaurant on Trip Advisor, is worse than Olive Garden—if Olive Garden is a four, Giovanni's is a two. A sign in front of the Baptist church reads, "Satan was the first to demand equal rights." Members from this church once kidnapped a gay teenager and attempted to strangle the gay out of him. Luckily they failed, but they never faced any charges.

A year ago, Big Burr was named the most homophobic town in the United States by a national poll, so a nonprofit called Acceptance Across America was sent to help remedy the problem. Unlike the other Triple A, people aren't so glad when we show up. I was doing research for Acceptance Across America at the time, at the New York City branch. They offered me a pretty good financial incentive to sign a two-year contract as AAA's director of research in Big Burr, which meant I could safely slouch behind my computer, collecting data, creating colorful pie charts, and—most importantly—avoiding the townspeople.

The charter school where Miguel taught literature had recently closed, and he hadn't found another job. We were barely making ends meet. The lease was up on our apartment in Ditmas Park, and we'd have to move to Coney Island to find the same rent. A couple of years in Kansas, to catch our breath and improve our finances, didn't sound so bad at the time. Now that we've been here a year, I know how long 365 days can feel. Next fall, when we'll leave, seems like a faraway point in space—a star, a planet, a black hole.

Miguel enters the kitchen and follows my lead, opening a beer and sighing. "Don't even say it," he says.

I hold up my hands in surrender. He leans his body into me and threads his fingers through mine. He looks into my eyes. His usually deep brown irises have lightened and taken on a green hint, something I haven't noticed before. The green creeps in from the edges of his pupils, like algae in a pond.

"I know what you're thinking." He pulls away, picks up his beer from the counter, and takes a sip. He sets it back down and takes the whiskey out of the cabinet, pouring an inch in a glass.

When you're young, it never occurs to you that part of love, part of sharing your life with another person, includes the shitty things. Then suddenly you're fifty-three, and it feels like love is *only* those things. Like compromising on where to live, needing a third person in your bed to be able to fuck each other, or inviting an aging parent into your house. "I'm thinking how, thirty years ago, we would have bet someone a thousand dollars our life wouldn't be this," I say.

"A thousand dollars would have been all our savings back then." Miguel tips his head back and drinks half the whiskey in his glass. "Which apartment were we living in?"

"Dean Street, above the barber shop and below the bowling ball family. Jeff told me Barclays Center takes up that whole block now."

"That fucking place." He lets out a breath of air in a half-laugh. "Remember the night you banged on the ceiling with the broom handle so hard you made a hole? And two dead mice fell out."

I shudder at the memory of the mice hitting my neck like furry hacky-sack balls. "I think that was the worst apartment we ever had."

"But we were happy," says Miguel.

We exchange weak smiles, like tea bags that have already been used once and barely color the water. I brush a few crumbs on the counter into my palm and deposit them in the trash.

Miguel opens the fridge. "Dinner?"

"I bought an eggplant and some fresh mozzarella yesterday," I say. "Eggplant parm?"

He grimaces.

"Let me guess. Your dad won't like it."

"He says eggplant tastes like a dirty dish sponge. I'll run to the store and get something he likes."

I look down the hallway toward Arturo's room. Despite my being with Miguel for thirty years, Arturo still doesn't feel like family. At holidays and reunions, he tolerates me the way you'd tolerate a persistent bunion on your

foot: you'd prefer it wasn't there, but you can live with it. To be fair, I guess I feel the same way toward him. At the thought of having to interact with him on my own, my lungs clench.

"I can go to the store," I say through a strangled breath.

"You don't know all his little quirks. There's a lot of stuff he doesn't like."

"Great."

Miguel gives me an exhausted look and finishes the whiskey in his glass.

"What am I supposed to do if he needs something?"

He gives me an even more exhausted look. I wonder sometimes why he hasn't left me. Once, years ago, after I berated him for giving ten dollars to a homeless drunk, he told me I had "zero empathy." He took it back later, but I knew he meant it. How can you love someone who has no empathy? I wonder if I've gotten meaner as I've grown older, or if I've always been mean. If I've always been selfish. Is it selfish not to want an ill old man in my house? Is it selfish to be honest about wanting to have sex with other people? Is it selfish to get a little tired of compromising on every single decision? Probably. Miguel moved to *Kansas* with me—for me?—and I can't even be nice to him.

He walks out of the kitchen, his keys jingling. The front door slams, and I'm afraid it might have woken Arturo. I stand in the kitchen absolutely still. I hold my breath, listening for a sound from down the hall. It's not that Arturo is so terrible. It's mostly the feeling of intense discomfort, of having a person in your space, disrupting your routines and your small pleasures. It's like having a roommate when you thought you'd never have a roommate again. When you need to shit, someone's in the bathroom. You can't knock on the door and say, "Hurry up, I've gotta go." You just stand in the hallway doing ass-Kegels, cursing humanity. When you want to watch trashy reality TV, guess who's already on the couch drinking your beers, the game only in the first quarter?

I think, with a start, that this is even worse than having a roommate. At least roommates are self-sufficient. Arturo will need care and looking-after. Oh my god, like a baby. When I never wanted anything remotely close to a

baby, not even a cat or a dog or a hamster. I repeat to myself, “There is nothing obstructing your airways; there is nothing obstructing your airways.” In the middle of the kitchen I start doing jumping jacks, my mother’s cure for panic attacks.

The first time it happened, I was thirteen, on the way to the last soccer match of the year. I was the goalie. As I pictured a succession of checkered balls flying just past my gloves and hitting the white netting of the goal, I told my mother I couldn’t breathe. She pulled the minivan over and, in a Dairy Queen parking lot, led me through some calisthenics. When I looked at her like she was insane, she slapped my face and told me to do jumping jacks. After about twenty seconds, the air flowed freely. My mother smiled, drumming her fake pink nails on her hip. “Told you,” she said.

The thing is, I wouldn’t even let my own parents move into my house. Not out of resentment, but because I don’t believe I owe them anything. Sure, they raised me, and did an all right job, but that was their choice. It would be one thing if I had asked to be born. Then sure, I would owe them. But when my mother constantly reminds me that she gave up everything for me, I remind her that she could have chosen not to have me—it wouldn’t have made a shred of difference to me. Maybe it’s easier to say all this when both parents are almost inordinately healthy, despite smoking a pack a day and having a proclivity for Big Gulp colas.

“Miguel!”

I stop my jumping jacks, hoping I’ve imagined Arturo calling for Miguel. But after he calls out again, his trembling voice insistent, like he’s being held off the edge of a cliff, I sigh and walk down the hallway. I knock on his door and push it open.

“Oh, it’s you.” Arturo’s propped up in the bed on one of those backrest pillows with arms, wearing a pair of blue striped pajamas that look brand new, the collar stiff at his neck, the fold lines still crisp. The dog lies next to him under the covers with his head on the pillow. Orange pill bottles make a miniature skyline on the bedside table. A black-and-white photo of Miguel’s

mom and Arturo standing in front of a vintage Chevy truck, in a tacky gold frame, leans against the windowsill. Miguel's mom left when he was three, and he never heard from her again. Arturo never got over it, and it was up to Miguel to take care of his dad after that.

"Miguel went to the store to get something you'll like for dinner," I say.

"Oh." He glances down at the blanket and smooths it. His hands look like they've been vacuum-sealed, the veins and tendons making valleys of his wrinkled skin. "Never mind, then," he says.

"Is there anything I can get you?"

"No," he says, peering at the semi-closed door like I'm lying about Miguel being gone. He clasps his shaking hands in his lap. It occurs to me that he had to give up his autonomy and leave a place he liked, where he had friends and routines. I picture him lying on his kitchen floor for two whole days, his cheek pressed against spotted pea-green linoleum, watching the sunlight slide across the countertops and fade into darkness, nodding off and having no idea how long he'd been there, wishing he could just make it to the sink for a drop of water on his wooly tongue, having to piss and shit himself and knowing that either someone would see him lying in a puddle of his own feculence, or he would die that way.

I've never thought about who will take care of me when I'm old, if I'll need taking care of if Miguel isn't in the picture. I like to imagine myself just falling over one day after a long life of perfect health. Poof. I wouldn't have to ask any favors and no one would be inconvenienced. If only we could all be so lucky. I should try to make it easier for Arturo, but I don't know what that would entail. Bringing him a glass of warm milk? A shot of whiskey? Asking him about old memories? Pretending to think his ancient, stinky dog is cute? Instead, I nod and close the door behind me.

I grab another beer and take it to the couch, then open up Grindr. It's been a few weeks since Miguel and I have used a third, and I think we need a release. A way to reconnect. I wait for the grid of pictures to load, hoping for someone new. One of the first faces to pop up is Kyle, another Acceptance

Across America transplant. His profile name is “Topsy Turvy.” I laugh and click on his profile. His description says, “Show me some Midwestern hospitality,” and he’s tagged his tribes as Otter and Leather. I’ll have to tease him at work on Monday. I return to the grid of pictures: a smattering of familiar six-packs, each muscle a dinner roll you could pick up and wolf down, mirror selfies cut off at the neck, and boxer-brief close-ups. Gay men in small Kansas towns aren’t going to risk showing their faces. There are five guys within a few miles—three of them have the thin, lanky bodies of high school students. The rest are at least thirty miles away.

A guy I haven’t seen before, with a beard and a half-sleeve, catches my eye. He lies prostrate on top of a fluffy white comforter and bites his bottom lip. I picture his mouth covering my cock while Miguel sticks a finger up my ass. His profile name is just “S,” and he’s fifty-two miles away. What is he doing in nowhere, Kansas? I send him a message asking what he’s up to tonight. He writes back that he’s home visiting family but could get away for an hour. Shit. Which means we couldn’t go to his place. And now, no one can come to ours. Would it be worth it to spring money on some seedy hotel room? And what would the clerk think, three men getting a room together? I go back to the pictures, and when I try to scroll down, there aren’t any more. Fucking Kansas.

Maybe living in this town with Arturo in our house will force us back into monogamy, like the fear of AIDS did in the ’80s. It wasn’t until the mid-’90s, when some of us started feeling like we might live to see old age, that Miguel and I started to sleep with other people. Once we weren’t terrified of dying, we could admit we were a little bored. First we had sex with other guys separately, never revealing the details to each other but promising to be careful. Soon there was too much we couldn’t say. We agreed never to have sex without each other again. Over the years we honed the rules: three-ways only, no friends, no repeats, no blonds (don’t ask), no overnights, no anal, no one with tribal tattoos, never in our bed, only when we both approved of the guy, and if one of us ever started to feel uncomfortable, we’d talk about it.

Now three-ways are the only way we have sex—I can't remember the last time it was just the two of us.

Miguel's car pulls into the driveway and I close Grindr. I turn the TV on to a *Real Housewives of Atlanta* marathon. Miguel walks in with two grocery bags, looking annoyed.

"I was going to make posole, but of course they didn't have any hominy. So I got stuff for carne adovada." He unloads groceries in the kitchen, raising his voice over the TV. "Thank god I still have that stash of dried chiles. Remember when you told me not to pack them?" If there was a fire in the house, and Miguel could take only two things with him, it would be his dried chiles and his Clint Eastwood DVD collection.

I turn up the volume of *Real Housewives* even though I couldn't care less what they're saying. Miguel appears in the doorway between the kitchen and the living room. He watches me as I watch TV, and I know he's waiting for me to be his sous chef, but I'm still annoyed about the eggplant parm we won't be eating anytime soon. I don't feel like New Mexican food. If I'm being honest, I barely ever feel like New Mexican food—except for sopapillas, which are really just vehicles for honey. He turns around and walks back into the kitchen, and I think I've won, until he calls out twenty seconds later, "Would you like to help me?"

Miguel stands over the food processor, dumping in unmeasured amounts of dried coriander, oregano, and rehydrated red chile. He's placed two onions and a knife on a cutting board on the island. One of the few perks of living in Kansas is that we finally have an adult-sized kitchen. "Why do I always have to cut the onions?" I say, feeling like a petulant teenager.

"Your contacts," he says. "The onion doesn't sting your eyes as much."

"Sorry your perfect eyesight makes you cry." I slice the onion in half and trim off the ends.

"Stop being such a cabrón." He pours honey into the food processor and wipes the lip of the jar with his finger. He holds it in front of my face. I remember a night forever ago, when we had only been dating for a few months,

when he did the same thing. He had just made me my first sopapillas, and as I licked off the honey, circling my tongue around the tip of his finger, I watched him get hard in his jeans. He coated my lips in honey and kissed it off. He poured honey into his hand, a thick ribbon that coalesced into a sensuous pool, and enveloped my cock with it. He drizzled honey on my ass and lapped it off. Honey ended up in every crevice of our bodies. We had to peel the sheets off our sticky skin, our body hair matted.

Back in our kitchen in Kansas, I open my mouth and close it around his finger, but it feels sticky, not sexual. I wonder whether to fake it, act like it's turning me on, but when I look at Miguel, his lips are pressed together and he's looking over my shoulder. When he really likes something, he makes a deep moan that almost sounds like a snore. He moves to the sink and washes his hands, and I resume chopping the onion.

"What do you think about meeting up with someone tonight?" I say.

He turns around and squints at me. "Seriously?"

"It's been a while," I say, running my finger along the blade of the knife to release the curved squares of onion clinging there. "Could be fun."

"It's my father's first night in our house, and all you can think about is finding someone to suck you off?" He takes the pork out of the refrigerator and throws it onto a cutting board, the pink meat slapping against the plastic.

"Are our lives supposed to stop?"

He slices the pork down the middle and cuts each half in half again. "You should go by yourself tonight." He says it with no discernible tone, his back to me. His tricep flexes as he chops the pork into neat cubes.

"That's against the rules."

"Because the rules have been working so well for us."

I've finished dicing the onions into a sad, jagged snowbank. I pluck out a piece of light-orange onion skin sticking out from the side. "You wouldn't be jealous?"

He lays down the knife and sets his palms on the edges of the countertop. His back rises and expands as he takes a deep breath. "You were supposed to say

you don't want to go without me," he says, and returns to chopping the pork.

I throw up my hands and let them fall in my lap. "Then you shouldn't say things you don't mean. You told me to go."

He takes a pan out of the cabinet beneath the counter and places it on the stove. He fills it with a few glugs of oil and turns the burner on. "You should. You should go."

"Tonight or now?"

When he finally turns around, he looks like he's just gotten off a long flight and I'm the last person he wants to see. "Either." He turns back and drops cubes of pork into the hot oil.

I should go to him, hug him, apologize. Say we'll get through this. Say I love you. Ask what else I can do to help with dinner. Instead, I turn and walk out of the house. I get in the car and wonder where the fuck I'm going. When we fought in New York, I would take the train to the movies and see the most insipid thing playing. By the time it ended, our fight would feel silly.

There's a movie theater next to the mall that has some hilarious name like the Cinephile. I back out of the driveway and head toward downtown, if you can call it that. The sun is setting, wedging directly between two grain silos in the field across the street. Beams of light shoot across them like spokes of a wheel. The sky is pink and gauzy as a tutu, with thin, tulle-like clouds streaked across the sky. The cows are silhouettes, their black-and-white splotches indistinguishable. A truck passes me going the opposite direction, and looking in the rearview mirror I see the bed filled with teenagers, their hands clasping signature red-and-white Budweiser cans. I want to turn around and follow them, pull up, unroll my window, and yell, "Do you know what your lives will become?"

The houses draw closer together and suburbia flashes by: a man in a plaid shirt mows the lawn, a woman unloads grocery bags from the trunk of her silver SUV, a baby in a car seat screams on the front steps of a house, no parent in sight. How many of these people would hate me if they knew who I am and why I'm here? But if they knew how similar we are, trapped in houses in

the middle of nowhere, trapped in relationships drained of their joy, trapped by familial responsibilities, maybe they wouldn't. When I was young, a part of me thought that by being gay, I would escape the prison of domesticity. But it comes for you no matter what.

I turn onto Main Street, the lights of the mall the only source of illumination. I pull into the parking lot of the Cinephile. Two movies are on the marquee: *Love Is Blind*, a Katherine Heigl rom-com about a woman who falls in love with a blind man, and *Ramsey & Robot*, a futuristic buddy-cop movie. I buy a ticket for *Love Is Blind* and check my phone to see if Miguel has texted me. He hasn't.

I choose a seat in the back row, one in from the end, and drape my jacket over the seat next to me like I'm waiting for someone. Women wearing pastel capri pants and bedazzled T-shirts sit in small clusters, each with her own large bucket of popcorn. A teenage guy sits dutifully next to his girlfriend, holding her hand with one hand, scrolling through his phone with the other. A young mother shushes her toddler as he screeches joyfully, his mouth full of neon candy. From the opposite end of the back row, two women slide in and sit in the middle. One of them opens a bag of Sour Patch Kids and places an orange one on the other woman's knee. She walks the candy slowly up the woman's thigh until the other woman swats off her hand and places the Sour Patch Kid in her mouth. She looks around, as if to make sure no one saw. The women then get into a hushed argument that ends with a furtive yet ardent kiss. As the lights dim for the previews, I take out my phone to text Miguel, *Omg I'm sitting next to covert Big Burr lesbians*, before I remember we're in a fight.

I fall asleep during the movie, and when the lights come on at the end, I jolt awake to a man sitting next to me, staring at me. Not kindly. His face is four inches from mine. My heart beats wildly. My sphincter tightens. The man's black pupils move from my face to my chest, where the Acceptance Across America rainbow logo arcs across my T-shirt. Fuck. I left in such a rush, I forgot what I was wearing.

The end credits roll as Stevie Wonder's "Signed, Sealed, Delivered I'm Yours" blares. The two women who were sitting near me have already left, and the remaining patrons stream down the two aisles at either end of the room. This man could beat me up, strangle me, or stab me, and no one would notice. I try to imagine myself fighting back, unprepared and weaponless, but know there's little I could do.

I want to stand up and follow everyone else out of the theater, but the man's dark eyes pin me to the chair. My limbs feel cemented, like one of those terrible dreams where you're trying to run but can't. Warm air from his nostrils blows onto my cheek. Dark stubble covers his jaw like splinters half-stuck under skin. A drop of ice water trickles from the nape of my neck down my spine. He doesn't speak. What if this is how I go? Not after a long, healthy life, but in the middle of it, in the middle of a fight with Miguel, when I'm still a selfish schmuck who can't see anything.

Black seeps in from the edges of my vision. From the darkness, an image of Miguel takes shape. He's lying in the grass in Prospect Park, smiling at me lazily and happily: a look of uncomplicated love. It's an image that comes to me, unbidden, in times of great stress or fear. I blink, my sight suddenly returned. The man is gone. The theater is empty except for a Cinephile employee sweeping stray popcorn into a dustpan.

When I get home, Arturo is sitting on the living room couch. My presence doesn't register as I walk through the door. The dog lies beside him, his head on one of the striped throw pillows. Probably drooling all over it. They're watching *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, Miguel's favorite. It's the final standoff between the three men in the cemetery. I hang up my coat and peek in the kitchen.

"He went to bed," says Arturo.

I wonder if he knows that we fought. Are fighting. I glance up the stairs, but I'm still too shaken up by what happened at the movies to talk. I sit down on the other side of the couch. Clint Eastwood walks to the middle of a stone circle in a cemetery, sets down a square tan rock, and flips his poncho over

one shoulder. Miguel calls this “the most diva gesture ever.”

My stomach lets out a low whine. “Is there carne adovada left?”

“Plenty,” Arturo says, grasping his walker and pulling himself up. “I’ll fix you a plate.”

I protest, but he holds his hand in front of me, like you do when telling a dog to stay. “My way is the best way.”

I don’t know whether he’s being nice or implying that I’m incapable of warming up food, but I stay put as Arturo shuffles into the kitchen. A gas burner clicks and then whooshes as it lights. A knife whaps against a cutting board, the sound fast and rhythmic. Arturo seems much more spry than he did this morning, and I wonder if he was just playing the victim. Next to me, the dog twitches in his sleep, his paws clenching and unclenching and his mouth making wet, lapping sounds. I pull the pillow out from under his head, and he jerks upright and blinks at me. When he realizes Arturo isn’t on the couch anymore, he stands on the edge and lets out a long, trembling whine. In his old age, he probably can’t jump down. I pick him up and place him on the floor, and he runs into the kitchen. I sniff the pillow his head was on. It smells sweet and metallic, like raw meat that’s been left out too long. I remind myself to wash it the next day.

Arturo shuffles back into the room, a plate and two bottles of beer sitting on the tray of his walker. He sets the plate in my lap and one beer on the coffee table in front of me. He keeps the other beer for himself. He’s arranged the carne adovada in three corn tortillas, covered in white onions, cilantro, and queso fresco. He watches me as I take a bite. It tastes different than Miguel’s usual carne adovada—there’s a deeper, brighter flavor, but I can’t put my finger on what it is.

“Did Miguel do something different?” I ask.

Arturo shakes his head and smiles mischievously. “I added my secret ingredients.”

I take another bite. Maybe I do like carne adovada, after all. “Miguel doesn’t know what they are?”

“No. I make him leave the room.”

“Are you going to tell him before . . .” I cut myself off.

“Don’t worry. I won’t be around much longer.” He takes a long drink of his beer and holds my stare for five full seconds. “Raisins, and frozen orange juice concentrate.”

“What?” I think maybe he’s having another stroke. I look at his face, checking to see if one side is drooping.

“My secret ingredients.”

I swallow my bite of carne adovada. “Why are you telling me?”

He shrugs. “Miguel wants us to get along. This will make him happy.”

After I finish my tacos, I walk upstairs. Miguel lies in bed facing the wall, his back rising and falling in sleep or pretend sleep. I sit down and lay my hand on his side, pressing my fingertips into the depressions between his ribs.

“Why do you stay with me?” I ask.

He takes a deep breath. Air fills the space where my fingertips rest, pushing them up. They fall back down as he breathes out. “Good question.” His voice is quiet and croaky.

I wait for him to give a real answer, but after a long silence, he still hasn’t said anything. My heart speeds up, and I pull on his shoulder. “Miguel?”

He turns over and looks at me with vacant eyes. “Was it good?”

“The adovada? Yeah, very tasty.”

“Not the adovada, the *sex*.” He snarls the word.

I reach out my hand, but he jerks away. “I went to the movies, Miguel.”

He crosses his arms. “What did you see?”

“Some Katherine Heigl rom-com called *Love Is Blind*. Can you guess the plot?”

I see his wheels turning, wondering if he should believe me. “How does it end?”

“I don’t know. It was so boring I fell asleep.” I want to tell him about the man, about how sure I was that something terrible would happen, and how Miguel’s image came to me and kept me safe, but I wouldn’t be able to

describe it. “Baby, I know I can be an ass, but I’m not a liar.”

His crossed arms unfurl. “You do tend to fall asleep at the movies.”

I bring his hand to my lips. I kiss his knuckles one by one. He pulls me down next to him. We kiss, and it zips through my body. His fingers grasp the hair at the nape of my neck. Our torsos come together, and I feel Miguel’s heat through his thin T-shirt. I tug it off.

He leans away. “But my dad is right downstairs.”

“It’s okay.” I take a deep breath, and the air flows freely. My lungs expand to a satisfied fullness. I pull Miguel to me.

