



*always been*

# **MINE**

**ELIZABETH REYES**

# **ALWAYS BEEN MINE**

The Moreno Brothers #2

**By Elizabeth Reyes**

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## Prologue

Valerie still couldn't believe she'd actually stooped to spying. Even with everything Alex Moreno had put her through, she was furious it had come to this. She switched the channel on the car radio and glanced at her watch. 9:45 pm. Her fingers tapped the steering wheel. With a deep breath, she stared at his empty driveway. Where the hell was he?

For as long as she'd known Alex, their relationship had been complicated. This past month and a half had been the exception. They'd been inseparable and things finally began to feel serious. She'd practically lived at his place the past two weeks. A few times, she thought he hinted that she should.

When she finally returned home on Sunday, he stopped calling and returning her calls. Just like all the other times, he disappeared on her again. An entire month of calls just before bed, then first thing in the morning, then two weeks of, "Don't go, stay with me." Then *nothing* for four days? Was he kidding?

All the other times he'd done this, she'd let it go. He'd always reappear eventually with some lame excuse, and like a sick little puppy she was so ready to jump back in his arms. Well, not anymore.

She should have done this a long time ago. Valerie fidgeted in her seat, rubbing her hands over her thighs. Her head told her she'd better be ready. The truth was coming out tonight one way or another. The truth she'd known all along but she couldn't bring herself to face. Deep inside she'd always known Alex Moreno was not a one woman man. She'd lusted over him all through high school. Even then she'd known he was way out of her league. As the gorgeous high school jock he had girls all over him. He'd gone out with her just for fun and she was okay with that. As the years passed, he stayed in her life off and on. But he never stuck around for too long.

She accepted it. All this time she told herself it was because she was too busy with her education and career to get too caught up in anything too serious. The real reason was always in the back of her mind. Just the thought of pushing too hard and losing what little relationship she did have with him scared her more than she'd ever admit. She tried many times in the past to make a clean break from him but she was never strong enough to stick with it.

Well, she had to be strong now. She couldn't take it anymore. Not after the month and a half they'd just had. The pain of wondering where he was and who he was with finally outweighed the fear of learning the truth and ending things for good. She owed it to herself to find out once and for all, if his heart was as invested in this as hers or if this was all just a game, a game he'd continue to play for as long as she'd allow it.

Even with her head telling her to expect the worst, that she would finally get the closure she needed to walk away for good, her heart was still holding out hope that there was a compelling explanation. That he did feel for her what she'd always felt for him.

Valerie glanced around the dash of her roommate's car. They'd swapped cars all week so that he wouldn't recognize her sitting up the street. All week she chickened

out in hopes that she'd hear from him and she wouldn't have to go through with this. It was Thursday now, and all she'd got so far was a couple of pity texts saying he was crazy busy and he'd call her soon.

Headlights brightened the dark street. Valerie sunk in her seat. Alex's truck drove by the car where she hunched down undetected. She sunk so low she wasn't able to see if he was alone or not.

Scooting up just high enough so her eyes were over the dash she saw him walking around his truck and toward his front door. *Alone.*

A glimmer of hope danced in her heart. Maybe he *was* just busy. She sat up once he'd gone inside and stared at her phone. He was home now, done for the day. So, why wasn't he calling her? Could these past six weeks really have been all in her head? Had she just imagined his increased affection? She couldn't be *that* delusional. *Could she?*

He said he cared for her. That he couldn't stop thinking about her. How could he go four whole days without so much as calling her? Didn't he miss her, damn it?

The street lit up again as another car drove closer. It slowed as it passed her and then stopped in front of Alex's house. Valerie held her breath. The door opened and out came a pair of long legs. Attached to the legs, a girl in her early twenties in short shorts and a snug tank that read UCSD climbed out. Valerie watched as the girl opened the trunk and pulled out what was too big to be a purse.

Her breath hitched. Every time she came over lately, Alex had been insistent that she bring an overnight bag. *The bastard!*

Valerie could feel her blood pressure spike, her chest constrict. This was it, proof of what she'd known all along and no two ways around it. She watched as the girl swung her long dark hair over her shoulder and made her way up Alex's walk. Valerie's eyes stayed glued to her. Her pulse throbbed in her ears. She blinked away the tears that blurred her vision.

Alex was at the door before the girl even got there. He was waiting for her! Valerie felt her heart shatter. She'd known it all along and yet she was in no way prepared for the acute sting of it. She squeezed her eyes just as Alex placed his hand on the girl's shoulder. She couldn't bear to watch.

Valerie opened her eyes in time to see the door close behind the girl. She let out a shuddering breath. Her mind raced, considering the best way to handle this. The hot tears streamed down her cheeks. Even though she'd thought of the possibilities, she'd never actually planned what she'd do if she caught him so red-handed.

She picked up the phone and called him. Of course, the call went to voicemail. Hearing his voice in his greeting only enraged her further. Without giving it another thought, she shot out of the car, slamming the door behind her.

Brushing the tears away, she sucked in deep breaths to try to calm herself. She stalked toward his front door, trying desperately to compose herself. So many choice words came to mind that she wanted to scream at him. The two most blaring were *its over!* It really was, for good this time. Never in all the horrible scenarios she'd played out in her head over the years did she realize how unbearable the pain would be. The thought of him with someone else didn't even compare to actually seeing it.

She rang the doorbell, and then immediately knocked. After only seconds, she knocked again. The door opened and even though it had only been days since she'd

last seen him, she still had to take a moment to take him all in. The man was unreal. He stood there all six feet three of him. His dark, heavily lashed eyes stared at her, startled.

“Valerie, sweetheart. I wasn’t expecting you.”

“Of course not.” Her voice broke but she kept it together. “New houseguest *this* week?”

He shifted in the door way and she caught a glimpse of the bitch sitting at his dining room table. The table they’d eaten the breakfast they’d prepared together just that Sunday. The very table he’d reached across, over and over, claiming he couldn’t keep his hands off her.

Valerie felt her insides tearing apart. Something had ignited in her. Something terrible she’d never felt in her life. Alex stepped outside closing the door behind him. “No, babe. I know what you’re thinking, but I can explain.”

He tried to grab her hand and she jerked it away. “Go to hell, Alex! I’ve had enough of your lies.”

She stormed away, ready to go into hysterics. The image of the girl sitting at his table, of him kissing and doing things to her...

“Valerie, wait!”

Her high heels clicked loudly on the pavement as she picked up speed. He caught up, stumbling as his bare feet stepped on something that apparently hurt. The fact that he’d been so comfortably barefoot with the bitch only incensed her more. He took her hand but this time held on tight enough that she couldn’t pull it away.

“Baby, listen to me.” He spoke right into her face. “She’s a tutor.”

Valerie let out a sardonic laugh. “Wow, Alex, the lies wearing a little thin finally?”

“No, she really is.”

“Is that supposed to make it better, Alex? That you’re fucking a tutor?” Valerie screamed.

She’d lost it. She was moments from having a royal meltdown and she had to get out of there because it wouldn’t be pretty. She yanked her hand away and rushed to her car. Alex followed her.

“I mean she’s *my* tutor, Val. I didn’t want you to know.”

Of course he didn’t. He caught her again just as she got to the door of the car but her arms flung around like a crazy person. She didn’t want to feel any part of him on her ever again. “Get away from me!” Her high-pitched scream froze Alex momentarily. She must’ve looked as crazy as she felt because he stared at her without saying a word.

“Do you care about me at all, Alex?” The taste of salty tears and bitter mascara seeped into the side of her mouth. She could only imagine what a mess her face was. He still stared at her, wide-eyed. “Do you at all?!”

He took a step forward. His face as genuinely pained as all the other times he’d given her excuse after excuse. He began to reach for her again. “Baby, of course I do. I-”

She flung her hand up, slapping his hand away from her. “Then stay away from me! Don’t ever call me again.”

“Valerie don’t-”

“Please, Alex!” She opened the door to the car, got in and locked the door. The window was open and he stood in front of it. “Promise me, Alex. I don’t want you to call me ever again.”

His eyes darkened, his eyebrows pinched. “No.”

“I *need* you out of my life!” she cried. What she needed was her sanity and at the moment she felt robbed of it. Never in her life had she felt so incapable of controlling her emotions.

She struggled with the ignition as Alex began to try to explain his ridiculous tutor story again. Valerie pressed the button to close the window.

“Valerie listen to me-”

He was still talking when she began to pull away from the curb, nearly taking out his legs.

How she’d ever get over Alex was beyond her, but nothing was worth feeling this kind of pain again. *Nothing*. She drove away sobbing. Alex Moreno had shred her heart for the last time.

# CHAPTER 1

## A year later:

Alex Moreno had experienced anticipation many times, mostly after not having seen Valerie for more than one day. He'd always welcomed the excitement and it always rewarded his awkward feelings. But now, this anticipation was more than even Alex could stand. This anticipation had been building for weeks, if not months. Damn if it wasn't beginning to get annoying.

What he was feeling now made no sense. For the third time, he wiped his sweaty palms with a napkin and threw it in the trash. He just didn't get it. Of course, he expected to be excited to see her again. He hadn't seen her in more than a year. But he couldn't understand why his nerves were tricking him in every way. What the hell did Alex Moreno have to be nervous about? It was Valerie. So, what, he told himself. He'd never been nervous about seeing her before.

As the maid of honor and cousin of the bride, Valerie Zuniga was obligated to be at all these family events. Alex had had plenty of time to mentally prepare, and he thought he was. Sure, it had been more than a year since he last seen or spoken to her. It still shouldn't be that big a deal. He'd see her, they'd catch up, and that would be the end of it.

He strolled around his parents' backyard. The knot in his stomach gripping his gut and wrenching tighter from the moment he woke. He tried to concentrate on the final touches, there before him, the backyard transformed by tables and chairs set out under the massive canopy that blocked the hot California sun from almost every spot in the yard. He knew how much this little party was costing his parents. Professionally decorated tables with expensive, elaborate flower centerpieces sprawled out through out the yard. His parents didn't mess around when they threw a party. To them, this was huge.

His younger brother, Angel, would be the first of the siblings to get married. The Morenos were going all out and sparing no expense. This was only the wedding shower. The wedding was still months away.

Alex glanced around. Everything was pretty much set. Angel's two best friends, Romero and Eric, were setting up the bar. Alex figured since they were Angel's best men in the wedding, he'd let them handle one big thing at this party. What could be more fitting than the bar for those two?

Angel stuck his head out the back door. "You guys ready? We have people arriving."

Eric gave him the thumbs up while Romero continued to obsess over the way the kegs were placed.

Alex walked over to them. “That’s enough, Ramon. What are you doing?”

Romero always used only his last name. Alex only called him by his first, Ramon, when he wanted to annoy him.

“You don’t know about this.” Romero didn’t even look up as he kept shifting the keg in the barrel of ice until he got it just right.

“I run a restaurant with a bar. You’re a bouncer.”

Romero stood up. “I own a security firm.”

Alex loved ribbing Romero. He was the only one of them that skipped college. Instead, he worked as a bouncer at several bars, and was doing private investigating for a few agencies, all while saving up to start up his own security firm. He’d actually done well for himself. At twenty-two, he already owned his own business. Even Alex admitted he was impressed, but he’d never tell Romero. It was too much fun clowning him.

“You have two employees.” Alex tried not to smirk.

“There’s four now, ass. And I’m looking to hire more in case you’re interested. I’m gettin’ real busy.”

“Really?” Eric asked. “I didn’t know business was that good.”

“Yeah, and I’m branching out now. I just got my PI license. You’re looking at Private I, Romero.”

“No shit?” Eric smiled, impressed. “So, you get to spy on people and stuff?”

Alex rolled his eyes. Leave it to Eric to ruin his fun. Romero started telling Eric about all the gadgets he’d recently bought to track people, and Alex lost interest. He turned to see people entering the backyard from the kitchen door. Alex frowned. They were supposed to come through the side gate. He glanced at the side gate. That’s when he saw her.

He felt the air sucked out of him. His heart did a wild gallop and he swallowed hard, trying to remain composed. It amazed him how different she looked from a year ago. She was still the same Valerie he’d known since high school. Delicately petite and blonde, yet there was something different. As small as she is, her entrance was enormous.

Alex thought of how busy she’d been a year ago, working on getting her real estate license. She spent most of her time studying for the state exam in tattered jeans or shorts and wearing t-shirts. *His* t-shirts. He remembered her honey-blonde hair, constantly in a ponytail.

Now she stood there in a sexy little ivory skirt suit, the only color to her outfit a soft pink-laced camisole under the jacket. Her golden locks were in glamorous up do, with strands falling perfectly around her face. The wisps of hair accentuating her high cheekbones. Then she smiled with those full lips he’d never been able to get quite enough of. *Beautiful.*

She wore her signature high heels. He watched in awe as she walked across the yard to greet Angel and his fiancée, Sarah. It always amazed Alex, that not only could she walk in those big heels, but that she did it with such elegance.

Valerie’s posture was as perfect as ever. She’d always exuded confidence. That was just one the qualities that first attracted him to her so many years ago.

He was aware that he hadn’t taken his eyes off her since she walked through the gate. Fully aware, and he didn’t care. His eyes roamed her body freely, from top to

bottom and back up again. He'd expected it would be pleasant to see her again. Pleasant didn't even begin to describe what he was feeling now.

"Damn, is that Valerie?" Romero asked.

Alex stiffened. Even after all this time, he didn't like anyone else looking at her that way, especially Romero's dumb ass.

"She brought a friend, Romero." Eric pointed out. "Maybe she'll put in a good word for you. You'll damn sure need it."

To his relief, the only person Valerie walked with was her roommate Isabel. After all this time, he'd actually lost sleep the last couple of nights over the possibility of her showing up with another guy. He wasn't even sure why. It had been so long it only made sense that she would be seeing someone now. It really shouldn't bother him. He was long over her.

Alex had only met Isabel a few times. She was much taller than Valerie and attractive in an exotic, yet inhibited way, but a bit too uptight for his taste.

Romero took one look at her. "Not my type."

Eric laughed. "Since when do you have standards?"

"I'm a businessman now, Eric. I have a reputation to uphold." Romero glanced back in Isabel's direction. "Plus she looks soft. I need a woman who can handle all this."

Romero pointed to himself with both hands from the top of his head to his feet and smugly smiled.

"You wouldn't be able to handle her. Trust me." Alex said, still staring at Valerie.

He couldn't take his eyes off of her, not that he was putting any effort into it. He watched as she and Sarah laughed about something. Angel left the girls and walked toward Alex.

"Shots all around," Romero pulled out a bottle of tequila and four shot glasses.

Angel laughed. "Are you crazy? It's not even three."

Alex finally unglued his eyes from Valerie. "None for me."

"Nah," Romero shook his head and continued to pour the shots. "This is horseshit. I had an entire weekend of Vegas planned. At least give me this."

Alex rolled his eyes. The moment Angel told those two knuckleheads that he wanted them to be his best men, they started planning the bachelor party. A week later Angel announced he didn't want a bachelor party and flat out refused to talk about why. Just said it wasn't happening, period. Romero was still bent about it.

"Dude, Angel has to be presentable at least for a few hours." Eric said.

Eric had always been the level headed one of Angel's two childhood best friends. A good thing, too, because he was now attached to Alex's little sister, Sofia. Not that anyone would ever be good enough for his younger sister. Still, he was glad that between the two friends Eric was the one Sofia had fallen for. It would've driven Alex crazy had it been crude and outspoken Romero.

Alex's dad stopped by making his rounds. Alex clapped him on the shoulder. His dad saw the shot glasses. "One more," He ordered.

Romero smiled. "Help me out here, Mr. Moreno, these two don't want any."

Alex's dad glanced at both Alex and Angel who were now both gazing in the girls' direction again. "Grow a pair!"

Romero and Eric both laughed. Alex and Angel exchanged discomfited glances. They were going to have to take at least one shot. Whatever their old man wanted, he got.

They all held their shot glasses up and toasted to Sarah and Angel. Alex grimaced, sucking on a lime slice, and turned just in time to see the girls walking toward them. Valerie looked so unbelievably good to him, it almost felt like he was watching her move in slow motion. She never once even glanced in his direction. Sofia was the first to address them. "Are you guys having fun?" She hugged her dad and he kissed her on the forehead.

"Keep your brothers in line, Sofie." Her dad walked away and immediately started a conversation with the group at the table nearest to the bar.

"What? My brothers are not behaving?" Sofia teased.

Alex could hardly concentrate. His eyes again roamed every inch of Valerie.

"Your brothers are being wusses." Romero stated, already setting up more shots.

"I'll take one," Valerie said.

Even her voice sounded more womanly than he remembered, *sultrier*.

"Valerie, no," Isabel warned.

Romero frowned. "Who brought the nark?"

"Pardon me?" Isabel glared at Romero.

Romero stopped pouring, backed up and did an elaborate bow bringing his arm over his head and down to his feet. "*Pardon me?*"

Normally Alex would have laughed along with everyone else but he was too distracted trying to figure out why Valerie was still avoiding his eyes.

Romero brought out another shot glass. "You in, Nark?"

Alex took his eyes off Valerie just long enough to glance at Isabel who seemed to be as annoyed as only Romero could annoy women. "Easy, Ramon."

Valerie smiled. "Yes, please pour her one."

Alex squeezed the edge of the bar. He had to get a hold of himself. This was the same Valerie he'd known all along. The Valerie with whom he'd carried on and laughed with such ease for years. The one he'd had earth shattering sex with many, many times. He gulped hard. *His Valerie*.

Romero looked pleased and pulled out another shot glass. "Coming right up."

Alex was determined to not take his eyes off her until she looked at him and then the mariachis walked in. Everyone turned to watch the ensemble stroll in, playing loud and proud.

For a moment, his eyes met Valerie's and he thought he saw something in them. Maybe he was searching too hard, but for a split second, he thought he saw alarm in her big dark eyes. Just when he'd not only finally made eye contact but was getting some kind of emotion out of her, she turned away to face the musicians.

\*

Valerie concentrated hard on not wavering and stared at the mariachi band. She

could feel Alex's eyes on her and her body heated. Her heart hadn't stopped hammering from the moment she walked in and spotted him. She'd expected some excitement when she saw him but this was a bit much. She'd been happy he was busy with the guys at the bar because she couldn't bear to even make eye contact. She thought the shot of tequila might help settle her nerves. It hadn't.

How was it that every time she saw him he seemed even bigger than the last? He was without a doubt the most devastating man she'd ever met. What he did to her without so much as saying a word, even after all this, time was absurd. She wasn't even facing him now, and she could still feel his incredible presence weighing heavily on her back.

People began clinking their glasses. Valerie clutched her small purse and forced a smile when Sarah and Angel kissed.

She almost jumped when she felt his face at her ear and his hot body against her back. "You gonna say hello, Z?"

The suggestive murmur in such an otherwise ordinary question infuriated her as much as it spiked her senses. He'd only ever referred to her as Z when he was agitated with her for whatever reason. It was a football thing. They all called each other by their last names on the team and he'd imposed it on her but only when he was mad. He didn't sound mad now. He sounded... *amused*?

That was just like him. He was probably enjoying seeing her squirm. She wouldn't let him have the upper hand. Closing her eyes for a moment, she took a deep breath and then turned to face him with a smile. "Hello, Alex."

"So, did I pour that for nothing?" Romero pointed at the shot he'd put out for Isabel.

Valerie took advantage to glance away from Alex's penetrating eyes. "Romero, this is my roommate Isabel. Isabel this is Romero."

Isabel softened her glare. "I thought it was Ramon?"

Valerie felt Alex's big hand slip into hers and his thumb caressed her knuckles. It took everything in her power not to tremble.

"It's Romero." He said flatly and pushed the shot glass toward Isabel.

Isabel gave Valerie an exasperated look but reached for the shot glass anyway. She would deal with getting scolded later. She had more blaring things to deal with now.

She licked her teeth to make sure no lipstick was on them before she spoke again, and felt Alex squeeze her hand. His eyes watched her every move.

Her full attention was back on Alex. He was incredible, as usual. His loose dress shirt did nothing to conceal his hard chest and bulging muscles. It was impossible not to take it all in, so she admitted, "You look good."

"Thank you. You look amazing." His dark eyes stroked over her. "I've missed you."

She gulped. Really? Was that all it took? Just hours ago she was convinced she was over him and she now felt ready to swoon over three little words. Could she be more pathetic?

His fingers were still playing with her hand and it completely unnerved her. She thought about what she and Isabel had gone over in the car all the way there. Play it cool. Indifference is the key. You're no longer interested, haven't been in over a year.

She'd laughed at Isabel's unnecessary worrying. Now she was irritated at herself for not having taken the preparation more seriously. Before she could recover from his remarks, he threw yet another nerve dagger at her.

"Have you missed me?" The intensity in his eyes was exactly as she remembered. It hadn't lessened at all. If anything, it was even more acute than ever.

He stood so close to her now she could smell the hint of tequila and lime on his breath, feel the tension in his body. Her phone rang. She couldn't have been more grateful for the timing. Alex was still waiting for a response. She reached for her purse and fished her phone out. It was Luke.

"I gotta take this. Luke?"

Alex's eyebrow shot up.

She began to walk away, when Alex's grip on her hand tightened.

"Valerie," Luke sounded a bit anxious. "I'm sorry to be calling. I know you said you'd be at a party today. I won't keep you long. I just need to know if you have a key to the Lemon Ridge property, the warehouse specifically. Trinity took my only spare and I can't find mine."

Valerie had a hell of a time focusing on what Luke was saying. He'd spoken much too fast and Alex's eyes had been on her, eyebrows slightly furrowed the entire time. She'd gotten the gist of what Luke had said and cleared her throat. "Yes, I do. You need them now?"

"No, tomorrow." She heard the relief in Luke's voice. "I can pick them up in the morning if you want. You don't have to come into the office."

"No, that's okay I was planning on going in for a few hours anyway."

Luke thanked her and as promised, didn't keep her on the phone. The moment she hung up Alex spoke up.

"Luke?"

She smirked and lifted a shoulder, offering no explanation. Alex was never one to hide his possessiveness. Something that she wasn't ashamed to admit she'd found exciting at times. But she wasn't getting pulled back in. Not this time. She made her decision long ago when she decided to finally give up on Alex and move on with her life.

Alex didn't push, didn't say anything for a moment. His eyes were so piercing. Her stronger, more self-assured act was beginning to wane.

"I hear you're working on your broker's license now. Didn't you just get your real estate license?"

Valerie smiled, glad for the safe subject. "It's been almost a year, Alex. But I have to be an agent for at least two years. I have another year to go. You know me. I'm starting to get my ducks in a row so as soon as that two year mark hits, I'm on it."

"Yeah, I know you. And I've no doubt you'll get it and run with it."

He flashed that beautiful smile of his. The dimples alone should be illegal. The way his smile enhanced his already incredible features was just so unfair. Valerie stood firmly, not wanting him to see how just one smile from him nearly crushed her resolve. She cleared her throat again.

"So, how have you been? I hear the restaurant is doing great."

His eyes had been on her lips the entire time she spoke. She kept her chin up, pretending not to notice. Except her eyes betrayed her and she couldn't look away

when he licked his bottom lip. She gulped hard and glanced back at his eyes. He'd caught her looking and his lips slowly curved up on one side. The dimples appeared again, taunting her.

"Yeah, it keeps me busy. Not much time for anything else these days."

Valerie almost rolled her eyes and tried hard not to frown. She didn't want him to get the idea that she still cared. No matter how busy he got she knew he found time for all the female attention.

"So, what else have you been up to, besides real estate?" His thumb caressed the outside of her hand gently. Valerie nearly lost her train of thought. Somehow, she managed to stay poised. Alex had never even tried to disguise the hunger in his eyes when he gazed at her. She'd always loved that about him, but at the moment she wished he'd stop. She was trying so hard to remain collected.

She shrugged casually. "I work a lot, too. The market's been really hot lately. Writing up offers and showing properties takes up most of my time. It's a good thing I got into it when I did, because I had no choice but to learn fast. It's a piece of cake now, just time consuming."

Alex seemed to hang on her every word.

"I'm not surprised, Val. You've always been so determined." He glanced around "Can we talk somewhere more private?"

Her heart sped up. She'd thought about the possibility of Alex being his usual forward self. He certainly wasn't wasting time but even with all the preparing she'd done for this moment she didn't feel ready.

Apparently, it was a rhetorical question. Ready or not, Alex didn't wait for an answer. They were already moving through the crowd and he held her hand tightly in his. The moment they were around the corner and out of the canopy area, where they were keeping all the boxes of soda and water bottles, he pulled her to him and kissed her. At first gently, holding her face in his big hands, as his tongue traced her lips slowly.

Valerie's legs almost gave but she didn't resist. She couldn't. God, how she'd missed his kisses. She welcomed his tongue and kissed him back, to hell with the strong woman act.

When he felt her eagerness, he moaned and sucked her tongue with a hunger that matched what she'd seen in his eyes earlier. They kissed without restraint for a few lingering moments until Valerie managed to pull away long enough to catch her breath, her thoughts.

He gazed in her eyes, breathing hard. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. It's been too long. I just couldn't wait another moment."

For a fleeting moment, he'd managed to daze her, but Valerie regained her composure, her wits. This was what he always did. She couldn't start this all over again. She owed it to her mangled heart to stay away from Alex for good.

She pulled away from him and stepped back. "I can't do this, Alex."

"Do what?"

"Me and you."

His eyes furrowed again and he took a step forward. "Is there someone else?"

She stared at him wondering what he'd think about the fact that she couldn't even bring herself to sleep with someone else since she'd last been with him, let alone

start up a relationship. The kiss made her realize just how much he still affected her. One more sweetheart out of him and she'd be tangling in his sheets tonight for sure. She had to stop this now.

“Actually, yes.”

Alex stopped cold. “There is?”

She nodded, holding her chin up, doing her best to appear convincing. Her only attempt to be with someone else had turned out to be such a disaster. But Alex didn't have to know that.

“How long?” His expression was a mixture of anger and disappointment. He worked his chiseled jaw as he waited for her response.

She knew whatever attraction he had for her, even if only physical, she probably just killed. She'd always known her involvement with another man would be the end for them. He'd never tolerate it. But it was for the best and she stood her ground. “Not very long, a couple weeks maybe.”

Angel walked around the canopy area and stopped when he saw them facing off.

“Sorry, I just need to grab one of these.” He pointed at the boxes of bottled water. “I'll get it and leave you two-”

“Nah, were done here.” Alex's grave eyes never looked away from Valerie. “I'm happy for you, Val.” She took in his wonderfully masculine scent one last time as he walked by her toward Angel. “Need anything else?”

Angel picked up the box of waters and glanced around. “Yeah, grab one of those crates of champagne, will ya?”

Valerie stood there even after both Alex and Angel had walked back into the party. The hot tears burned in her eyes but she brushed them away, knowing she'd done the right thing. Letting Alex Moreno and the heartache that inevitably followed back in her life was the last thing she needed right now.

She dreaded walking back in the party and having to see him all night. Turned out her apprehension was for nothing. He'd apparently left and never came back. Valerie tried to enjoy the rest of the shower.

She couldn't believe it was finally over. Valerie had been in love with this man since she was in high school. She'd only admitted it to herself a couple years ago, though. It suddenly made sense why no matter how long he disappeared, or how lame his excuses were, she was always so willing to work things out. He always had a way of melting her heart, and she craved him like she'd never craved another man in her life. But seeing him with another woman had done something to her. It broke her in a way she never wanted to be broken again.

Coming here today, she never imagined she'd leave feeling a hollowness in her heart that topped all the heartaches in her past. She was proud of herself for not falling for him all over again, but something had died inside her today. Seeing him again had been the final test and she'd done it. Finally, she killed that frail but stubborn, bit of hope that lingered for years. She just never figured doing so would hurt so damn much.



## CHAPTER 2

The next morning, Valerie woke up with a raging fever. She'd been that way as long as she could remember. It went as far back as when she was a little girl. The most memorable time being when a dog had killed her cat and she cried all night. Her dad rushed her to urgent care the next morning because her fever was so high. The doctors attributed it to dehydration. Valerie knew that this time, the tequila added to it. She had more than a few more shots after Alex left the party last night.

Luke had already come by and picked up the keys to the property he was showing that day. She called early to let him know she wasn't feeling well.

Valerie sat on the sofa sipping her Gatorade. She put up a front at the party last night after Alex left. Originally she planned on not admitting to Isabel just what a mess she'd actually been. But Isabel knew all about her crying herself sick from her past heartaches. There was no way to hide the embarrassing fact that she'd cried herself to sleep last night. So, she fessed up and let Isabel in on how pitiful she was.

There was very little she kept from Isabel anyway. Isabel wasn't just her roommate, she was her best friend. They met in college their freshman year and were forced to share a dorm. At first they hated each other. They were polar opposites. Valerie a tiny, messy, blonde, party girl and Isabel was tall, brunette, as anal as they came, and all about hitting the books.

It wasn't until one of the first times Alex broke Valerie's heart that they bonded. That night Isabel had been the only one around to console her. After talking almost all night Valerie decided to help Isabel come out of her shell and live a little. Isabel wasn't unattractive, just a little too simple in her taste in clothes and make up. Valerie always told her she had the sexiest eyes. Once done up, she was actually pretty hot. Unfortunately, most of the time Isabel chose to go with simple.

In return Isabel helped Valerie bring her grades up and stick with school. There were a few times she'd come close to giving up and just taking the state exam, but Isabel convinced her to at least get her associates degree before getting her real estate license. In Isabel's family degrees were everything.

They kept in touch even after Valerie got her AA and ran with it, moving back in with her dad. By the time Isabel graduated with her bachelors in teaching, they were best friends, and now shared an apartment. After living in the same dorm room with Isabel for two years, Valerie knew there was no getting around her meticulous ways. She learned long ago to just go with the flow rather than fight it.

"Let's check again." Isabel handed her the thermometer.

Valerie took it and smiled. Isabel was going to be such a great mom someday. She sure knew how to baby you and boy did she know how to nag.

She'd been so busy last night playing the strong woman part and secretly wishing Alex would come back to the party. Valerie hadn't really paid attention to Isabel. Not that Isabel had been neglected. She got plenty attention from Romero. For someone that seemed as put off by his first impression of Isabel, Romero sure stuck by

her the whole night.

“So, how’d it go with Romero last night?”

“Don’t talk with that thing in your mouth. It won’t register correctly.” Isabel plopped down on the sofa across from her. “He’s...different. And good Lord, he loves to debate.”

Valerie smiled but followed her orders and didn’t speak. Isabel went on. “I mean he even admits he loves it. You know what he told me?”

Valerie’s lifted both eyebrows.

“He said when he goes to sports bar and his team is not playing, he figures out who the majority of the crowd is going for and he goes for the opposing team. Just so he can cheer when the other team scores.”

Valerie laughed and the thermometer beeped. She took it out of her mouth and read it: 102.4

“It’s going down.” She grinned tossing it at Isabel.

Isabel read it and frowned. “Valerie, this is still so high. You sure you don’t want to go to the doctor?”

Valerie shook her head and went to the fridge to get more ice for her Gatorade. “I’ll be fine.”

Although, this wasn’t the first time she’d woken up feverish because of Alex, it was by far the worst. It ranked right up there with the morning after she’d caught him that awful night. And here she thought because it’d been so long she was going to breeze through this like nothing. She actually expected to leave the party feeling like a brand new woman, one who’d finally conquered her demons. She frowned, putting the cold Gatorade bottle to her forehead. “I think you and Romero are cute together.”

“No way, Valerie. Don’t even start.”

“Why not?”

Romero wasn’t a bad looking guy at all. Like Alex and his brothers, he’d always worked real hard to stay in great shape. He had to. During his years as a bouncer, he needed to be strong and fit.

He wasn’t nearly as big as Alex but his build was impressive. He’d just always been the clown. Back in high school she’d been attracted enough to flirt with him and even let him kiss her once.

“Because he’s annoying and I find his lack of decorum appalling.”

“Decorum?” Valerie sat back down on the sofa. “Isabel, you are too much. You always said you have trouble finding taller men than you. Did you notice he’s much taller than you?”

Isabel peered at her over her glasses. “Yes, I noticed.”

“Well, then it’s settled.”

Isabel let out a sarcastic laugh. “Looks aren’t everything, missy. I think you know that better than anyone.”

Valerie pouted.

Isabel jumped off up and sat next to Valerie, putting her arm around her. “I’m sorry, honey. I shouldn’t have said that.”

Valerie shrugged. “I’ll get over him if it’s the last thing I do.”

Even as she heard her own words, after last night, she knew it would be a long time, if ever, before she got over Alex Moreno.

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It was almost impossible to concentrate on the payroll with Valerie on his mind again. The whole damn week Alex thought of Valerie constantly and how different it felt to kiss her now. He was still trying to figure out what bothered him more, that she moved on or the fact that he'd been so blown away by seeing her again. He'd figured as much about her moving on. What didn't make sense was why the hell it troubled him so much.

When he first met her, his freshman year of college, it was supposed to be just for fun. She was still a senior in high school and Angel had just started seeing Sarah. When she mentioned her cousin having a crush on him he was curious. After meeting her it had been just that, fun. Then his grades started plummeting and it almost cost him his scholarship.

In the very beginning, Valerie was all for a physical relationship, no strings attached. And though he didn't like the idea of her with anyone else, he pretended to go along. He needed to find the time to get some school work done, and still try to get his fill of her on his down time. But he never seemed to be able to. The more he was with her the more he wanted her.

Though their relationship had never been classified as a bona fide exclusive one, the time he'd spent with her was the closest he'd ever come to being in one. For a while she seemed content with their off and on rendezvous, some of which began to last longer and longer. But then he'd have to leave for road games and cram for tests and it was off again. Sometimes he disappeared on her for days without answering her calls. He never told her why. He couldn't, even though he knew she was thinking the worst.

Then after showing up and catching him with his tutor, it was over. The only time she'd bothered to answer her phone in the entire time since then was a few days after that night. That was only to warn him not to show up unannounced at her place in case *she* had company. She said she didn't want things getting ugly. Things sure as hell would've gotten ugly, and he was furious. But after calming down he knew it was his own fault.

At first he thought it was just like one of the many other times she'd cut him off. But he soon found out she meant it. After the one maddening call she answered, she never once picked up any of his calls or returned any of his texts again. He thought if he gave it some time she'd come around. But after months of not hearing from her he figured she'd moved on. Strangely, all this time he thought he was okay with it.

With everything going on in his life, he had little time to dwell, on his love life. After breaking his ankle pretty bad during one of his college football games, several surgeries later the doctors confirmed the worst. His playing days were over and just like that his scholarship was gone. Alex had fallen into a major self pity, damn-it-all-to-hell, funk.

His parents insisted on paying the rest of the way until he was done. Alex knew how expensive that would be, and as hard a time as he'd been having keeping his grades up, he wasn't going to waste their money. He dropped most of his classes, promising he'd finish up eventually. He was now down to one online class a semester,