



PROLOGUE

Lorenzo

Up until yesterday, I loved a good challenge. I *thrived* off them, but then Ana came along, calling my bluff when she threatened to go home tonight with another man should I not show up.

I knew it then that I lost the game, and after tonight, I'll lose her for good.

She was never yours to keep.

Ignoring the knot of unease growing in my chest, I slip my mask over my face and enter the crowded bar. I've never seen Last Call this packed before, the entire space full of people wearing a variety of costumes, all of which required far more effort than my plain black shirt, jeans, and light-up mask with neon blue stitching for the eyes and mouth.

I search the room full of people for the woman who has

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plagued my mind since she first messaged me. I've spent two months wondering if every woman I talk to is *her*.

Two months of overthinking. Of *denial*. Of me trying to distance myself from Ana, who was someone I had no business pursuing once I determined I would never choose her to be my fake fiancée.

I *couldn't*.

I tried to let her go, but I failed. Then I tried again, only to end up right where Ana wants me, searching the dance floor for a woman dressed in a pink, sparkly dress and matching cowboy hat.

I tell myself to stick to the perimeter. That if I don't find her in five minutes, I'll take it as a sign.

Fate must enjoy making a mockery of my life, because the moment I start the countdown, the crowd begins to part. It's as if someone drove an invisible wedge down the center of the dance floor, separating people to reveal Ana at the center, a glow from a random spotlight shining down on her.

Or should I call her *Liliana*.

My heart, which has been acting up ever since I walked into the bar, picks up speed, the bass from the loud music adding to the intense pulsing sensation in my ears.

I take a step back, and then another, only to stumble on my third when Lily locks eyes with me.

Everyone else fades away, as if they were banished into darkness as her bright, carefree smile grows, stretching her perfectly plump lips. I'm stunned, my useless body on standby as she heads over to me.

Her steps are confident as she walks in my direction, all

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while I stare, trying to make sense of the fact that my Ana is none other than Liliana Muñoz.

It must be a trick. It doesn't make sense that someone who attracts positive attention and exudes kindness with every interaction likes *me*. If it weren't for Lily clearly recognizing my mask, I would've thought her costume is only a coincidence.

In all the scenarios I've imagined, Ana wasn't the same ethereal woman whose smile dazzled me nearly a year ago when she slid into the empty seat beside me at church, her brown eyes warm and welcoming as they swept over me.

"So you're the one everyone is talking about this week," she says.

"I feel like I'm at a disadvantage because I have no idea who you are."

Her smile remains, somehow even brighter than before. "Lily Muñoz." She holds her hand out, and I hesitate to reach for it. I don't like to touch others unless necessary, but the longer her hand hangs in the air, the more inclined I am to grab it.

When I do, an excited current of unfamiliar energy shoots up my arm, zapping away all worried thoughts about physical contact.

"Lorenzo Vittori." My voice drops an octave.

"Nice to meet you, Lorenzo," she replies, my name sounding like pure sin from her luscious lips.

"So," I whisper. "I feel compelled to ask: What exactly are people saying about me?"

She laughs—a sound that makes me feel closer to heaven than any religious service or gospel. "I don't like to gossip."

"You just enjoy listening to it, then?"

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“Guilty as charged.” She winks, and all hell breaks loose in my stomach as—I can’t believe I’m saying this—butterflies take flight.

The memory shimmers away, but that same wild feeling in my stomach remains as my past and present blend together.

“Well, well. Look who decided to show up after all.” Lily traces a line up the center of my chest with her index finger, leaving a path of heated skin in her wake.

I stay quiet because I’m unsure if she’d be able to recognize my voice from all the mayoral ads showing on local TV.

“Are we playing the silent game?” She teases the bottom of my mask with her thumb while her pinky tickles my throat.

I shiver, the reaction far from subtle.

Her smile grows impossibly large. “Fine. It’s a good thing you don’t need to talk while dancing.”

She laces her fingers with mine and drags me onto the dance floor, making me forget all about my boundaries as I get lost in the music.

As I get lost in *her*.

I hand over my control for ten minutes. Ten all-too-short minutes that fly by before I’m promising myself another five. But then fifteen turns into thirty, and next thing I know, Lily is fully in charge of our ruin as she tows me through the crowd and down a back hallway.

All she needs to do is throw me a secretive smile from over her shoulder, and every previous reservation I had about taking this further disappears.

People don’t pay us much attention, either because they’re

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too busy hooking up or too distracted by their friends while they wait to use the restroom.

I have no idea where she is taking me, but we somehow end up outside. The emergency exit door slams shut behind us before she cages me against it.

Since when are you the type to relinquish control? The anxious voice bleeds into the moment, threatening to destroy it.

This isn't you, my instincts scream.

Run now before it's too late, the voice reminds me as Lily closes the gap between us until our chests touch.

There is a playful glint in her eyes as she slips her hand under my mask and teases my bottom lip with her thumb. A tingle erupts from a single pass, and before I think better of it, I nip at the pad of her thumb.

Her smile is captivating as she cups my chin and drops a kiss on my plastic mask, proving that she doesn't even need to touch my lips to send a zap shooting down my spine.

At first, it is a pleasant tingle, but soon the sensation transforms into a full-blown paralyzing shock as I process how I want to rip my mask off and crush my mouth to hers, devouring her in a way that leaves her desperate for relief.

A relief I desperately need as well.

An image of her in my bed, wrapped up in my sheets, wearing nothing but my marks on her neck brings my fantasies to a screeching halt.

A fake relationship can't work between two people who desire each other. Too many lines would be blurred, and every limit I've set would be challenged.

Maybe even destroyed.

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So, no, I can't pursue a real relationship. I don't *want* to, even if I tricked myself into thinking it was a possibility for the last couple of months.

Not even with someone as incredible as Lily.

Especially not with her.

I'm about to put a stop to all this, but then she traces a path of kisses down the column of my throat, stealing my breath and the words right from my mouth.

Pathetic, the same voice returns, louder than before.

My hands find her hips, not to keep her at a distance like I originally intended, but to drag her closer.

She smiles against my pebbled skin. "Are you going to hide behind a mask all night, or are you going to finally show me who I've been dreaming of for two months?"

Fuck. Me.

Her body molds to mine as she wraps her arms around my neck, teasing the strap keeping my mask in place. "Because as much as I'd love to explore this new mask kink of mine, I have a different idea about how I want tonight to go for us."

"Like?"

"I'd rather show you." Her eyes are so bright, so full of hope as she lifts my mask up. I don't have a chance to stop her, or maybe I didn't make enough effort to as Lily finally comes face-to-face with *Laurence*.

Her eyes widen, and her lips part with a gasp.

"Lo—"

I crush my mouth to hers.

One kiss to remember her by, I promise myself, embracing

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the rush of energy coursing through my body as she single-handedly ruins every future kiss for me.

She might as well be my first and my last because no one from my past compares, and there won't be a single person who ever will.

It's the least I deserve for the pain I'm about to cause her. Because the man she has spent months *dreaming of*... The one she wants for a thirty-year plan... I'm not him.

I hope you never forgive me for hurting you, I think to myself when she returns my kiss with equal enthusiasm. She tastes of passion fruit and sweet temptation, a forbidden combination that I could become addicted to.

I hope you find every reason to hate me and hold on to it, I silently add as I slide my hands through her hair and tilt her head back so I can better plunder her mouth.

And I hope that one day, I'll stop hating myself for letting you go.

When I break away, I know it won't be possible because I don't *just* hate myself.

I *despise* the weak person I am and the anxiety I struggle with. The same anxiety that demands for me to push Lily away, not because she deserves better, but because I won't *be* better.

I don't know how. Don't want to figure it out either, in part because I'm scared. I'm selfish. I'm too damn focused on my goal to get distracted by some fantasy that was never mine.

I gently spin Lily around so she has her back to the door before I release my hold on her waist and take a step away.

And another.

My third is smaller thanks to the crushed look on her face, but I manage a fourth and a fifth without tripping.

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“Where are you going?” Her voice gives her distress away, making my stomach churn.

“This was a terrible idea.” I keep my tone flat. Emotionless. No room for misinterpretation about where I stand on the asshole spectrum.

“What?”

“You. Me... We were a mistake.”

She flinches, adding to the dark cloud of hatred following me everywhere I go.

A feeling of self-loathing that I’m all too familiar with, and one that will eat away at me until all I’m left with are a bunch of regrets, but none as big as this one.

I can feel it from the very first step I take.



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ANA

Are we going to talk about last night?

ANA

Or the fact that you're Lorenzo
fucking Vittori?

Laurence is offline

ANA

Don't be an asshole. Talk to me.

Ana is offline

ANA

Seriously? You're going to keep reading my
messages and ignoring me after talking to
each other every single day?

Laurence is offline

ANA

Are you pushing me away because of Julian
and Rafa? They're overbearing at times
but completely harmless. Trust me. They
stopped getting involved in my love life
long ago.

Ana is offline

ANA

I could pull you aside in public and force you
to talk to me about all this, but I'm afraid of
what you might say. I hate to admit it, but
it's true.

Ana is offline

ANA

When you saw me at the animal shelter and
acted like you'd never met me before in front



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of the volunteer team, it felt like you took my heart and smashed it into a thousand pieces to match yours.

ANA

If you want to pretend we're strangers, fine.
I'll be sure to do the same.

Ana is offline

Ana is offline

Ana is offline

November

ANA

It's been a while since I sent a message,
but I'm a little drunk.

ANA

By a little, I mean wastedddd.

ANA

Sloshed. Hammered. Borracha.

Ana is offline

ANA

My sister tried to take my phone away but I'm
back and here to say I miss you.

ANA

I just...

Ana is offline



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ANA

My phone died. Whoo0pps.

ANA

I didn't want to pretend anymore. Just like I don't want to pretend now. I don't care if you're Lorenzo or Laurence. I like you despite all the reasons I shouldn't, and it makes me hate myself.

Ana is offline

ANA

Well, talk about embarrassing, but not nearly as bad as how I looked when you walked into my shop and asked me to make you a bouquet for another woman.

ANA

I finally realized that I was a challenge rather than the endgame.

Ana has deactivated her account