

Chapter 1

Luis

Being the youngest of three boys definitely has its advantages. I 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 five 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 without a safety harness. 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 sayin’ 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 a 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 half way to the summit, I’ve got one 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.

Díos mio. 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 almost everything is completely flat, except for the skyscrapers. Looking over at the Colorado landscape is like no other place on earth. 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 onto 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 bit by something.

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 bit 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 immediately I 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-soloed it,” Jack yells 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 fucking legs, so how was I supposed to think there’d be one hiding in the face of a damn rock that’s ten feet below the summit?”

“Do you feel, like, normal?” Brooke asks.

“I just got bit by a snake, Brooke,” I say as I head back down slowly. It might be my imagination, but I think the hand that got bit is starting to get numb. “Of course I don’t feel normal.”

“Get a ranger with antivenom!” Jack yells to the rest of them. But none of us have our licenses yet, so we’re screwed. Actually, I’m the only one that’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 hand on something solid. It’s no use.

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

Chapter 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 might 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 Marco, 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 look over at Marco. *Okay, I said I love you. Your turn to say it back, like when you whispered it 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 cold in Illinois yet, but 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 just don't want to hear it 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. He did write a song for me in Spanish and played it on his guitar one random Sunday, and I think the word *amor* was in it, but I'm not sure. I didn't understand most of the song, but I didn't care. Many nights, I lie alone in my bed and think about how our love will last forever.

Every day we meet by my locker, and he walks me to class with his arm draped around my shoulders. 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.

Today's the last day 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.

Marco 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.”

“*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, but they moved to the US after they got married when my dad did his residency at Chicago Memorial.

“The gang is more important than us?”

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 run 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 made a baby together. But if I’m not pregnant, am I just prolonging the inevitable?

“I just don’t want you to give me shit for being affiliated with the 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, 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 back forty football field 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. Don’t do it. You could get arrested.”

“You see, this is what I don’t need.”

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. 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 it and clean up his life, then we’ll talk.

I look up at Marco and give him a small smile. “Why don’t you leave? I’ll be fine.”

He smiles back. Oh, he shouldn’t have done that. That smile made me focus on his beautiful lips that I know are so soft and gentle. I guess in reality I’m not independent. Our relationship *did* define me, and I liked it that way.

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. 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 something.”

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 the small waves wash the 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, remembering 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.

