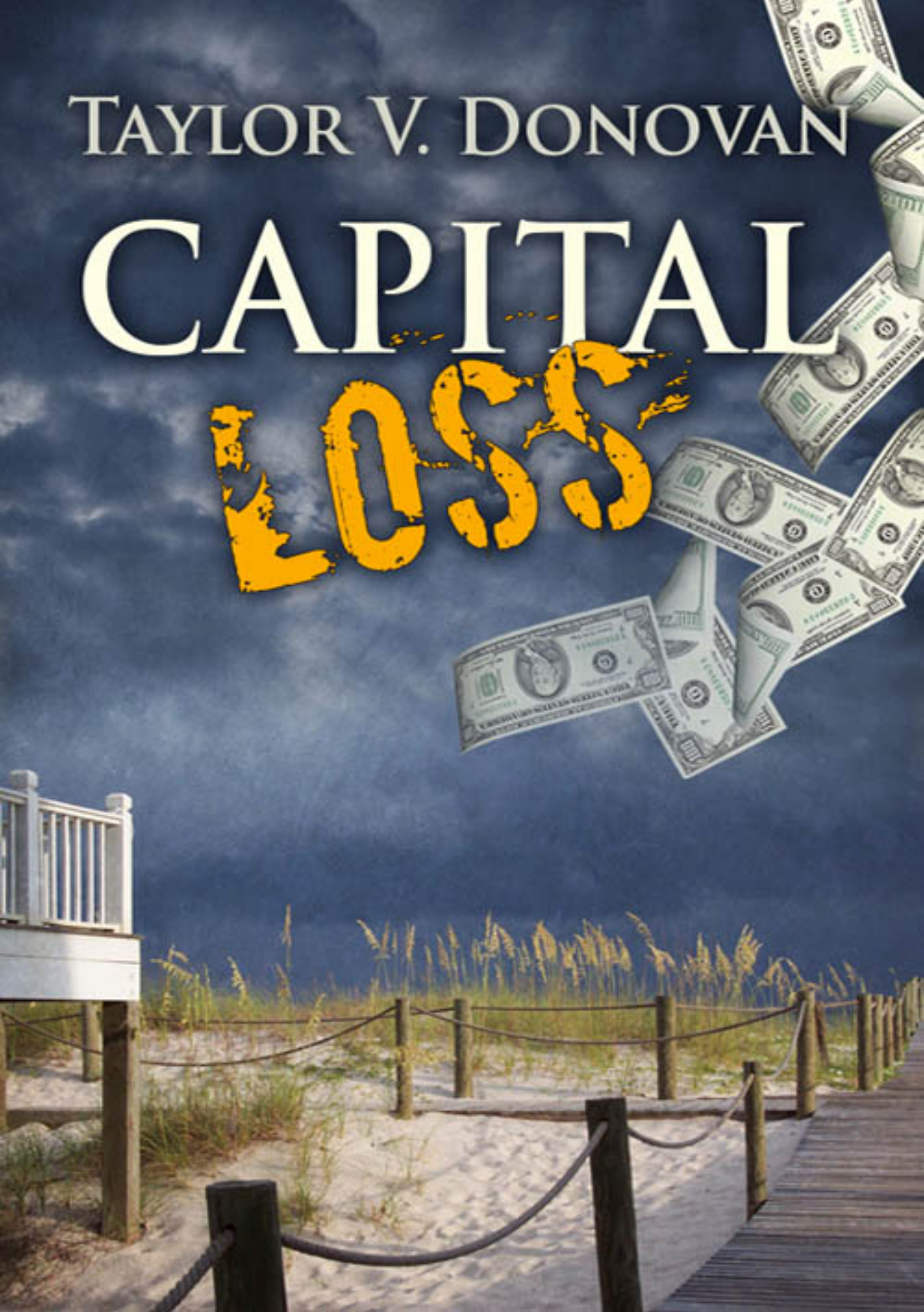


TAYLOR V. DONOVAN

CAPITAL

LOSS



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Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

CAPITAL LOSS

By Taylor V. Donovan

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what they do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

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CAPITAL LOSS

By Taylor V. Donovan

Photo Description

A naked man kneeling and covering his face and head with his arms, his body language hinting desperation and emotional distress.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

How did things get so bad? I thought I had it all, a great job that I loved, a wonderful home by the beach and you. All of that is gone now. I found out the hard way all you wanted from me was my money. You left me the minute you found out I lost my job and lost the money when the financial bubble burst. Now I have nothing, I feel like I'm nowhere, no one. I don't feel like living anymore. Will anyone save me?

Sincerely,

Lily

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: gold digger, true love, Wall Street, banker

Word count: 16,933

CAPITAL LOSS

By Taylor V. Donovan

CHAPTER ONE

“Four, three, two, one, Happy New Year!”

The living room erupted in cheers, and Eduardo Acosta pulled his boyfriend into a tight embrace. “Happy New Year, babe,” he said against soft, lush lips. “May 2008 bring you everything your heart desires.”

“As far as I’m concerned, 2008 can take a break.” Cole’s smile was breathtaking as he looked at Eduardo from under long, thick lashes. “You’ve already given me everything I ever wished for, and then some.” He ran his fingers over Eduardo’s black buzz cut and wrapped one arm around his shoulders. “Happy New Year to you too, hot stuff.”

Eduardo didn’t say it out loud, but he didn’t believe Cole’s statement.

His boyfriend was used to having the best of everything. The designer clothes and luxury car Eduardo had given him in the eleven months they’d been together—not to mention their summer trip to the Maldives—cost a pretty penny, and their apartment in Battery Park City was nothing but luxurious, but it wasn’t enough. It didn’t compare to the Manhattan townhouse Cole gave up when he walked out on his sugar daddy, or the generous allowance he used to get from the guy every month.

The way Eduardo saw it, the moment he’d convinced Cole to relinquish his extremely rich—but married—lover was also the moment it’d become his responsibility to preserve Cole’s lifestyle. He knew that after years of living on the streets and even turning tricks to feed himself, his boyfriend needed a security blanket. That living paycheck to paycheck wasn’t an option, especially at a time when the financial climate was overcast.

Cole need not worry about getting laid off, either. If it came down to that, Eduardo would have his back. It was an unspoken agreement between the two.

But it wasn't the time to think about that. Not in the middle of a New Year's party, and not when his boyfriend was eagerly searching his mouth.

Cole's kiss was fiery and passionate. His raspy, wandering tongue scorching and insatiable, making Eduardo's toes curl in his Ferragamos. His nerves flared, his stomach tied into knots, and in a matter of seconds he turned into a shivering mass of lust.

Not giving a damn that their actions were more suited for the privacy of their bedroom than a room full of his mother's guests, he aligned their bodies, grasped Cole's trim waist, and took over. Eduardo was crazy in love with the man kissing him silly, and he didn't mind if the entire world knew it.

Cole sucked in a shaky breath, wound his arms tightly about Eduardo's neck, and hummed his approval. He didn't shy away from public displays of affection or hesitate to initiate sexual encounters, but he much preferred to follow Eduardo's lead and have the passive role in every aspect of their relationship.

Eduardo would forever be grateful for that.

He'd developed a huge crush on Cole five minutes after a mutual friend introduced them. By the time they'd gone their separate ways that night he'd been set on taking him on a date, and finding out the object of his affection was a top too would've put a serious damper on his intentions. But it turned out his lover would rather dress from Walmart than fuck another man, and Eduardo had the type of dominant personality Cole craved. They were a match made in heaven, complemented each other in every way and the sex—albeit less frequent every day—was insanely hot.

Just like their kiss.

His mind spinning and his pants growing tighter by the second, Eduardo gripped Cole's silky, brown hair with his hands. He got lost in what had promptly turned into a blatant simulation of a more intimate act.

Cole caressed his neck, shoulders, and back, spreading bone-melting heat wherever he touched. Eduardo plunged his tongue inside his boyfriend's mouth the way he wanted to plunge his dick in his ass, and had it not been for

Cole minding their surroundings and ending the kiss, Eduardo would've swallowed him whole.

"Fuck, pa," he panted against Cole's ear. "I want you so much."

"Think Dinora would get upset if we went home right after making the rounds?" Cole kissed his jaw and squeezed his ass. "I know you miss spending time with your family, but I don't get you all to myself as often as I'd like. Can we go?" he half moaned, half pleaded, using his blunt nails to graze one of Eduardo's nipples. "I want to put every second of your day off to good use."

Those words sent a shiver down Eduardo's spine. Cole sounded like he was ready to get naked and debauched, and damned if the world around him didn't go up in flames.

Eduardo closed his eyes and reminded himself they weren't alone, and it wasn't a good idea to drag Cole to the nearest empty room so that they could suck each other's cocks. It took several seconds, but he was able to bring the raging hunger consuming him down to a manageable level. He could wait a little longer.

He pulled away from Cole and stared into his shiny, honey-colored eyes. "I don't think Mom will mind if we leave." He gave his boyfriend an open-mouthed peck. "But it won't make a difference if she does. I want to be alone with you."

Cole lowered his head and stroked his tongue over the column of Eduardo's neck. "That's what I like to hear," he said in that breathy voice that never failed to make excitement, anticipation, and an almost uncontrollable sexual need crowd in on Eduardo.

A hum of pleasure escaped Eduardo as he moved his hands over Cole's narrow shoulders and discreetly rubbed his hard-on against Cole's hip. It had been over a week since they'd last made love. He was desperate to bury himself in Cole.

"I love you so much," he growled as he bit the shell of Cole's ear. "You know that, right?"

Cole's hot and heavy breath fanned over Eduardo's wet lips when he said, "Always, baby." His voice almost got lost beneath the noise in the living room, but Eduardo heard the words loud enough that they made his stomach clench and his chest hurt.

Always, baby.

After a whirlwind courtship, ten months living together and even numerous talks about a shared future, Cole still wouldn't say that he loved him. Eduardo couldn't help but feel slighted every time Cole didn't reciprocate the sentiment.

He knew there were reasons for it. Cole had been kicked out by his father when he came out to his family at seventeen, and later on was humiliated and painfully dumped by the first man he fell in love with. It was only natural he'd developed trust issues. He'd taken a chance on love and gotten hurt, and he'd become guarded as a result. But even though Eduardo understood Cole needed to be careful and had even been fine with it at the beginning of their relationship, the truth was the excessive wariness was getting old.

Eduardo was well acquainted with unrequited love and the emotional and psychological damage it could cause. He hated feeling vulnerable. He too feared rejection. But he hadn't let Cole's survivalist nature stop him from declaring his love.

He'd taken a risk.

He'd been patient.

He'd proved time and again he'd never hurt Cole on purpose.

He'd done everything in his power to earn his boyfriend's trust.

Cole *knew* there was nothing Eduardo wouldn't do to make him happy, thus he was already in a position to get whatever he wanted from Eduardo. So why hadn't he said the words?

When would Cole realize he had nothing to lose by saying "I love you too"?

What the hell was the hold up?

Not wanting to start 2008 frustrated and full of doubts, Eduardo swallowed his worries and disappointment, plastered a smile on his face, and said, “I’m going to get Mom so that we can get out of here.”

“You don’t have to go looking for her,” Cole announced with a big smile as he peeked over Eduardo’s shoulder. He seemed oblivious to Eduardo’s tumultuous thoughts. “She’s heading this way.”

Eduardo turned around just in time to see his boyfriend and mom share a bear hug.

“Happy New Year, you gorgeous woman,” Cole said after smooching her, prompting Dinora to blush like a schoolgirl, and Eduardo to fall deeper in love. It warmed his heart seeing his boyfriend get along so well with his mom.

“Right back at you, cracker,” his mom answered with her big smile and heavy Spanish accent. That Cole could take offense at a word many Latinos used to refer to white people never crossed her mind. It wasn’t said in a derogative way and Cole, more than anybody else, could sense that. “And make sure you put on some weight in 2008, you hear?” She eyed him up and down and chucked him under the chin. “Right now you’re skin and bones with a pretty face, and I wanna see you healthy and strong.”

Eduardo thought his boyfriend’s five-foot-eleven, one-hundred-fifty-pound body was perfect and most definitely healthy, but his mom thought Cole was too skinny. She was of the opinion there was nothing wrong with a little extra junk in the trunk—as evidenced by her ample bosom and round hips—and had been on a mission to fatten him up from the moment they first exchanged “nice meeting yous”. Good thing they didn’t see her too often, or they’d both be the size of a boat.

Cole grinned. “My trainer would totally disagree with you, and I’m sure he’d kill me if he heard me saying this, but I won’t turn down a small batch of your bread pudding. It’s delicious.”

“That’s what I like to hear.” She pinched Cole’s cheek, and pulled Eduardo into her arms.

“*Feliz Año Nuevo*, Ma,” he wished the amazing woman who had worked two jobs until he got his first big paycheck, and raised him on her own.

“Same to you, *mijo*,” she said, pulling him down and kissing him on the forehead at the same time she patted his cheek. “Same to you,” she repeated, sniffing delicately and wrapping her hands around his face. “I won’t say I hope 2008 is even better than 2007. To you that’d only mean making more money and I don’t want to see you work yourself to an early grave.”

“Come on, Ma.” Eduardo hugged her tightly and breathed in her familiar scent, something citrusy called Jean Naté. She’d been wearing the same body splash since he was a kid. “I don’t work that much.”

She snorted and swatted his shoulder. “Don’t lie to your mother.” She sighed and ran her hand over the dark gray cashmere sweater covering his chest. “I read the other day young Wall Street bankers are prone to suffer from Crohn’s Disease, eating disorders, and arthritis. I don’t want you getting an ulcer at twenty-eight.”

“I don’t have an eating disorder,” he assured his mother immediately. “I admit my weeks can be a little hectic but I promise you, I get some rest on Sundays.”

“Are you telling the truth?” She frowned and shifted her attention to Cole. “Is he telling the truth? Does he really get some rest, or is he too busy cruising to take care of himself?”

Eduardo gaped, and Cole dissolved into a fit of giggles.

“Ma, come *on*,” Eduardo sputtered. “Where the hell did you hear that word?”

She grinned. “Isn’t that what you gay boys do when you want to get laid?”

“Only the single ones, Dinora,” Cole clarified, his grin as wide as Eduardo’s mom’s. “We coupled-up gay boys stay home and have crazy, hot sex after watching porn.”

“Okay, that’s enough,” Eduardo jokingly scolded the two most important people in his life. Dinora was only forty-eight years old and totally open-

mindful, but she was his *mother*. She didn't need to know when or how he got it on. "Can we just go make the rounds and take care of things? Cole and I would like to head out."

"If that's okay with you, of course," Cole added. "It's a lovely party, but..."

"You guys want to spend time alone," Dinora finished for Cole when he lowered his eyes and cleared his throat. "I understand."

"Thanks, Ma." Eduardo smiled at his mother and winked at his boyfriend. "Come with us?"

Cole shook his head. "I remember you telling me about that little ritual you perform every year, and I don't want to get in the way."

"Don't be silly," Dinora said. "You gotta do it with us."

"It's a family tradition," Cole argued as his gaze bounced from place to place. "I'll just go and wish everyone a Happy New Year while I wait, okay?"

"They'll be busy doing the same as us," she added matter-of-factly. "You might as well come along."

"*Oh...*" Cole's cheeks turned a deep shade of red, but he still didn't say he'd join them.

"Come on, cracker," his mother cajoled. "It's for good luck."

"Leave it alone, Ma." Lips pressed tightly, Eduardo put his arm around her shoulders and turned toward the kitchen without looking at Cole. "Stop trying to talk him into doing something he doesn't want to do."

Cole grabbed his arm.

Eduardo shrugged him off.

Cole held onto him for dear life. "It's not that I don't want to," he clarified in a rush before Eduardo could take another step. "It's just that we haven't been together that long, and I feel like I don't belong yet."

“We *live* together,” Eduardo said under his breath as he turned around and faced his sheepish-looking boyfriend. He wanted to add that Cole’s argument was bullshit, but he’d rather not have that conversation in front of his mom.

Cole gulped and glanced at Dinora nervously before saying, “I know it doesn’t make sense.” He ran his fingers through his hair, bit his lower lip, and looked at Eduardo straight in the eye. “Just bear with me, please. Give me some time to—”

Eduardo interrupted Cole’s plea with a hard kiss. “You can take all the time you need to figure out if you want to be an integral part of my family or not.”

Cole narrowed his eyes. “I was going to say I need time to learn how to belong, and you need to give yourself time to really get to know me.”

Eduardo almost snorted. Instead, he flashed a reassuring smile. “Right... Of course...”

Cole looked like he wanted to argue, but he snapped his mouth shut and shook his head in that way that meant he was aggravated to no end.

Eduardo kissed him again, and he didn’t stop until he felt Cole relax. If anyone had a right to have his panties in a bunch, it wasn’t Cole, yet all of a sudden he seemed upset and unsure of only God knew what. Eduardo couldn’t understand the sorrow reflected in his boyfriend’s eyes, but he plastered a smile on his face and brushed it off. He wasn’t willing to demand answers he damned well knew he might not like.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can,” he said, then turned around and walked away with his mom.

He exchanged kisses and hugs with family members and childhood friends as they made their way through the packed living room. He smiled and joked, and all along he did his best not to think about the reasons why his boyfriend would refuse to participate in a ritual he knew was important to Eduardo and his mom.

“He’s right, you know? You haven’t been together very long, and he comes from a different background,” Dinora reminded him softly as soon as

they were alone in the kitchen. He wasn't surprised she'd picked up on his lousy mood and misgivings. "Some people need more time to integrate to a family unit than others and—"

He cut her off. "You don't need to justify his behavior to me."

Eduardo didn't want to hear his mom's reasoning of the situation. He didn't need to.

As much as his boyfriend liked Dinora and seemed to not regret choosing Eduardo over his rich lover, there was no missing Cole's reluctance to participate in anything that was too involved or remotely resembled family traditions.

But it wasn't because he needed time to integrate. It was because he had needs Eduardo had yet to meet, and the more distant he remained, the easier it'd be to walk away if things didn't change.

Or so Eduardo suspected anyway.

Not happening, he thought as he grabbed a bucket from under the sink. *I'll get him the moon if I have to, but I won't let him walk away from me.*

He took a deep breath and kissed his mom. He didn't want her to worry over things he had under control. "Let's do this, okay?"

She sighed. "*Mijo*—"

He glared at her in an attempt to dissuade her from saying whatever was on her mind. He failed.

"You're in such a hurry," she said. "Everything's a race to you. A race to make money... a race to be important and influential... You haven't stopped wanting more since you left for college, and now you're in a race for love, too."

"Ma—"

She covered his mouth with her hand. "It hasn't been a year since you met your boy, yet you're already living with him and have told me you want to buy him a house."

“By the beach,” Eduardo said. “It’s Cole’s dream.”

“And you’re an angel for wanting to give it to him, but must you do it all at once?”

Eduardo frowned.

“You’ve spent more money in three years than I’ve seen in my lifetime, but it is never enough,” she continued in a low voice. “And now you’re upset ’cause Cole’s not ready to adopt our traditions and scream his commitment to you.” She looked at him, and her worried expression twisted his heart. “Have you ever considered it might be too soon for so much? That nothing good will come out of pushing Cole in the direction you want him to go?”

Eduardo couldn’t answer.

His mom had been his biggest—and at times only—supporter his entire life. But now she was telling him to... to... what? Slow down? Not be so serious about Cole? What did she want him to do?

“What do you want me to do?” he asked. “I promised you when I was a kid you wouldn’t die poor, and now I’m in a position to make good on my word.” It was hard work, but Eduardo thrived in his dog-eat-dog world. It gave him a rush and made him hard like little else could. “And I didn’t force Cole to move in with me. He did it because he wanted to.” And because Cole didn’t have enough money to rent a nice place on his own after breaking things off with Sugar Daddy, but that’s not something Eduardo was willing to share with his mom. “He’s free to leave if he starts getting doubtful about us. I wouldn’t stop him.”

Bullshit.

Bullshit, bullshit, bullshit.

“Mijo...”

Eduardo turned away from her and finished filling up the buckets with water. His mom didn’t say another word. She knew the conversation was over.

Together they threw a bucket of water out the kitchen window to emancipate her new home from bad spirits, and ate twelve grapes to bring prosperity.

Even though his mother moved from the island in the mid-60s and Eduardo was born in New York, they observed Puerto Rican traditions. Considering they'd been dirt poor during his childhood it was safe to say the effectiveness of the rituals was questionable, but he looked forward to them every year. It strengthened the bond between him and his mother and kept him in touch with his Latin culture and heritage.

Once they were done, he said goodbye to everyone, promised his mom he wouldn't let an entire month go without stopping by for dinner, and took his boyfriend home.

They didn't say much in the car, but they held hands all the way from Brooklyn to Manhattan, and their lovemaking that night was intense and lasted hours.

Because they wanted each other that much.

Because they were in their twenties and horny as hell.

Because feelings had been bruised.

Because Cole needed to make it up to him, and Eduardo needed to remind his boyfriend that he was everything Cole would ever need.

That although his financial worth was important, it'd been Eduardo's body and charm that Cole had noticed about him first.

That Cole had been a goner for Eduardo's personality and dark good looks by the end of their second date, and the first time they had sex sealed the deal for both of them.

And most importantly, that Eduardo's ability to make Cole writhe in pleasure and come undone in his arms had absolutely nothing to do with his bank account.

CHAPTER TWO

“Happy Valentine’s Day, hot stuff,” Cole said in his huskiest voice the second Eduardo answered his cell phone.

“Happy Valentine’s Day to you too,” he responded quietly to avoid being overheard by his colleague, but he couldn’t help the sappy, hard-to-miss smile that spread across his face. It wasn’t often that Cole called him at work. Cole knew time was money in the investment banking industry and, as busy as Eduardo was, trying to chitchat once he got to his office was a waste of time. But Valentine’s Day was a special occasion, and he was happy Cole had made an exception and decided to call.

“What time did you leave?”

A delicate yawn, the click of silverware against a ceramic mug, and the sound of running water followed Cole’s question. Eduardo could clearly picture him leaning against their kitchen sink, hair pointing every which way and blood-red silk pajama bottoms riding low on his hips as he took his first dose of caffeine.

He wished he could’ve gone home to take care of Cole’s morning wood.

He cleared his throat and said, “I left at quarter to six.”

Eduardo had been fortunate enough to land a good job right after graduating from college. At the beginning he’d slaved away for ninety grand a year plus bonus, but five years later, his base salary had quadrupled. He’d made enough money to buy a house for his mom, and also had the cash to shower Cole with expensive presents. He was on the fast track to the top, but it came with a price. He didn’t get to talk with or see his boyfriend as much as he would have liked.

“Why didn’t you wake me up?”

“It was too early.” Normally he didn’t leave home before seven o’clock, but today he was working on a special project.

“So?” Cole whined. “I wanted to start the day with a kiss from my boyfriend.”

Eduardo got up from his chair and walked out of the conference room where he’d been holed up with a colleague for the past two hours. “I’m sorry, pa,” he said as he leaned against the hallway wall. “I had an important meeting this morning, and I couldn’t risk getting distracted by your incredibly tempting ass and beauty.”

Cole giggled like a little girl. “Not even for half an hour?” he teased.

“Not even,” Eduardo answered softly. “I identified a great investment opportunity. The managing director’s very excited about it, and I had to finish my proposal.”

“That sounds promising.”

“It’s a done deal, and by the time they finish adding the numbers to those of my previous projects, I’ll come out with a million-dollar bonus,” he announced, his mouth dry at the thought of what would be his biggest bonus to date.

“One million?” Cole’s squeal almost punctured his eardrum. “Oh baby, that’s fantastic!”

Eduardo chuckled. “Am I forgiven for not waking you up?”

“Only if I can take a few bucks to book a vacation to an isolated place with no phones, internet service, or the Wall Street Journal.” Cole sighed. “I’d really like us to go away for a few days.”

Under different circumstances, Eduardo would’ve said yes; that they could go wherever Cole wanted to. But he had different plans, and needed every cent from that fat check. Vacation time would have to wait. Besides, Cole was about to be too busy to go anywhere.

“We’ll see if we can take time off, okay?” he said evasively.

Cole let out a deeper, louder sigh, the one that usually got Eduardo to agree with anything his boyfriend said.

He didn't fall for it this time.

"Thank you for the card and the flowers," Cole said in a sweet tone after a few seconds. "I'm a bit upset at you for not sticking to our agreement, but I really love them."

Weeks ago, Cole had decided he didn't want to exchange presents on Valentine's Day. He'd said having a quiet, intimate evening with his man was all he wanted, and, albeit surprised by the request, Eduardo had agreed to it. But how could he not get Cole anything? No way. It was Valentine's Day, and the orchids and sappy heart-shaped card he'd left for Cole on his side of their bed were inexpensive and perfect. Something he could get away with.

"I'm glad you liked them."

"But that's not it, right? It'd better not be," Cole said with a flirty laugh. "I want more than orchids on Valentine's."

Eduardo frowned. "I thought we weren't exchanging presents."

"What I really want doesn't cost a dime, and only you can give it to me, so you better get home at a decent time tonight. Your presence is crucial for what I have in mind."

Well, didn't *that* sound promising? The last time Cole was so adamant about Eduardo getting home early was on their anniversary. They'd given each other erotic rubs and tried five different positions from *The Gay Kama Sutra*. It'd been an amazing night. Eduardo could remember every detail as if it'd happened yesterday, even if more than a month had already passed.

Shit.

Has it really been that long since the last time we made love?

Not good.

"I'll be there at a decent time."

"Do you promise?"

"I promise, pa," he said as his colleague came outside and glared at him. "Eight o'clock," he added before ending the call.

There was nothing Eduardo wanted more than taking proper care of his boyfriend, and he really meant to leave work by seven-thirty. Making love to his significant other on the most romantic day of the year was imperative.

But his clients were demanding, selfish, entitled pricks that didn't care about anyone's needs but their own, and so it was almost midnight when he finally dragged his exhausted ass home.

Their fancy dining table caught his attention as he made his way to their bedroom.

Both he and Cole were always on the go and preferred to have their meals while reading the paper or magazines at the kitchen island. But tonight Cole had taken the time to set the table. Candles and the flowers Eduardo had given his boyfriend complemented the china they'd gotten from his mom as a housewarming present, and that was complemented by the silver cutlery Cole insisted was only for special occasions.

It was the first time Eduardo saw the prized silverware out of its storage.

"Shit," he whispered tiredly as he loosened his tie and looked around their apartment.

The light was off in the kitchen, but the pots and pans on the stove were still warm. No surprise there. No matter how many hours he worked, he could always count on a hot meal and a sexy, exquisitely toned and willing body when he came home. But this was obviously a special dinner, and he regretted missing it.

He uncovered one of the pots and smiled at its contents. "Beef stew..." He leaned in and inhaled the rich aroma. "He made my favorite."

Knowing he wouldn't be able to eat something so heavy this late at night, he put the food away in the fridge and rushed out of the kitchen. He wanted to apologize to Cole before he keeled over from exhaustion.

Cole looked up from the book he'd been reading the moment Eduardo stepped into their bedroom. "Hey," he greeted with a lazy smile. "I didn't hear the front door."

“I was being quiet in case you were asleep.” Eduardo hung his suit jacket on the door and toed his shoes off as he walked toward the bed.

“I thought you’d be here earlier.”

“A meeting with a client took longer than I expected,” Eduardo explained. “I couldn’t get away.”

“You should’ve called to let me know you wouldn’t be able to make it,” Cole stated in a casual tone.

His boyfriend’s recrimination cut deeply. Not because he already felt guilty enough as it was, but because even though Cole talked the talk, he genuinely looked and sounded like he didn’t give a shit Eduardo had missed dinner.

That was one of the things about Cole he didn’t understand and, quite honestly, also hated. Cole always tried to spend more time together, but never got upset when only a small fraction of his plans came to fruition. There was no hurt. No frustration. No matter how often Eduardo fucked up, or how many promises Eduardo broke, Cole never sounded like he cared.

Like tonight.

It was Valentine’s Day, and Cole had a right to be pissed. He’d cooked a romantic dinner and gotten stood up, yet he looked like it was all the same to him. It made Eduardo uncertain of the reasons why Cole stayed with him, and extremely nervous as to the foundation of their relationship. No. Scratch that. It made him feel Cole didn’t care if he saw Eduardo, as long as the money kept coming in.

Stop it, he ordered himself. The fact that he wanted a few financial guarantees before moving in with you doesn’t make him a gold digger, but even if he were, you love him. You gotta stop this insecurity bullshit.

Eduardo cleared his throat and said, “I know I should’ve called, but I really didn’t have time.”

“Are you hungry?” Cole removed the covers and got out of bed. “If you are I’ll throw something on and go make you a plate, but if not...” He walked

around the bed and stood in front of Eduardo, his smile feral and his eyes lustful.

“I’m not hungry,” Eduardo croaked, mesmerized by the sight of Cole in nothing but a pair of skimpy, black cage-sided briefs. Sexiest thing he’d ever seen.

“Good,” Cole whispered hotly against his lips, “because it feels like I’ve been waiting an eternity to unwrap my Valentine’s present.”

“Aren’t you mad at me?” Eduardo blurted.

“I’ve always known your job is stressful and time consuming, and making money is a priority.” Cole traced Eduardo’s lips with his tongue and unbuckled his belt. “I’ve long accepted that not seeing you all that much comes with the territory,” he added in that flat voice that never gave away his thoughts.

“And that’s great,” Eduardo agreed. “I really appreciate it...”

“But...” Cole arched an eyebrow and looked him in the eye. “I sense a *but* coming...”

“But I’ve got to be honest with you.” He pressed their foreheads together and brushed Cole’s smooth chin with his fingertips. “All this acceptance and understanding can be—”

“Can be what?”

“Unnerving,” Eduardo admitted.

Cole leaned back and stared at him in absolute silence for several seconds before asking, “You think I don’t care whether I see you or not?” It was the most serious he’d sounded in ages.

Eduardo considered his answer carefully. He was in desperate need of assurance, all because he’d whisked Cole away from another man, and now lived in constant fear of getting dumped if a better prospect happened to show up. He longed to hear his boyfriend say he put up with the crazy hours because that’s what smitten people did, or whatever. That there was nothing Cole liked more than being with him, but he refused to flat-out ask Cole if he loved him.

He wasn't that pathetic.

"Well, do you?" he finally asked.

Cole gulped.

Eduardo held his breath, and damned if he didn't find himself praying this would be the moment when Cole would finally admit to having feelings for him.

"I know the reasons behind your drive," was what Cole said when he finally spoke, "and I know you aim to be the sole bread winner in our relationship so that one day I can stay in our oceanfront home and raise our babies." He flashed a sweet smile. "Let's just say I'm totally on board with that plan, and I'm a very supportive boyfriend."

The word choice was disappointing, but the look in Cole's eyes spoke of commitment, parenthood, and eternity together.

Eduardo allowed himself to relax. He could work with "supportive" for now.

He gripped his boyfriend's ass cheeks and pushed his tongue past Cole's lips. Cole opened Eduardo's zipper, sneaked a hand inside his boxers, and grabbed his rapidly hardening cock, and just like that, Eduardo's world went up in flames. He forgot about anything that didn't involve making love to his man before the end of Valentine's Day.

CHAPTER THREE

“Are we there yet?” Cole asked for the tenth time in the past hour. “Can you at least give me a clue as to where we’re going?”

“Good things come to those who wait.”

Cole snorted. “Says the man who hates waiting for anything.”

“It’s a surprise.”

“I hate surprises.”

Eduardo chuckled. “You *love* surprises.”

“Not on my birthday, I don’t.” Cole sounded equal parts petulant, worried, and excited as he shifted this way and that way on the seat of Eduardo’s BMW. “My imagination’s running amok right now, and I don’t know what I’ll do if—”

Cole didn’t finish his sentence, but Eduardo knew what he was thinking.

There was only one reason why Eduardo would take Wednesday off to visit Water Mill first thing in the morning, and Cole was afraid of getting his hopes up. He wouldn’t be able to deal with the disappointment.

He placed his hand on Cole’s knee and squeezed it softly, then smiled when Cole’s hand landed on top of his almost immediately.

“We’ll arrive at our destination soon enough,” Eduardo said without looking away from the road.

Less than five minutes if he remembered correctly, but he could be wrong. Even though he’d only been to Suffolk County a handful of times, he’d decided against using his car’s navigation system. Cole would’ve Googled the address in a heartbeat had he seen it, and that would’ve ruined Eduardo’s surprise.

“I really need to know where—oh my God...” He let go of Eduardo’s hand and plastered his face to his door’s window. “Oh my God...” he repeated

when Eduardo turned the car into a sand covered driveway leading to an oceanfront chalet with a “Sold” sign out front.

Eduardo stopped the car in front of the one-story house, unbuckled his seatbelt, and reached inside his pocket for the keys he’d been hiding for the past three weeks. He turned sideways in his seat. Whereas he’d been calm and collected before, now he felt like he was about to jump off a cliff. His heart pounded like a drum in his chest, and he was breathless, but he didn’t even blink. He’d worked hard to be able to make his boyfriend’s dream a reality, and he didn’t want to miss a second of Cole’s reaction to it.

Cole glanced at him and covered his mouth with a trembling hand. “Oh, baby,” he whimpered, “we said we wouldn’t for another three years. Please tell me you didn’t...”

His gaze locked on the man’s he wanted by his side for the rest of his life, Eduardo took Cole’s hand in his and brushed his lips across the delicate knuckles before wrapping Cole’s fingers around the keys.

“Happy Birthday, pa.” He leaned closer and pecked Cole on the lips. “Didn’t I tell you 2008 would be our year?”

Cole burst into tears.

Eduardo smiled and tried to hug him, but Cole surprised the shit out of him by pushing him away and getting out of the car.

“Cole!”

He didn’t stop. He didn’t even look in the direction of the house. He just ran toward the beach as if the hounds of hell were following him.

Eduardo shut off the engine and went after him. “Cole, wait!” He almost slipped and fell on his face. “Where are you going?” he yelled when Cole kept walking. “Can you please stay away from the water? You’ll get sick.”

It was late April, but not particularly warm or sunny. They’d had a rough winter with chilling temperatures, and some days were still pretty cold, especially so close to the ocean. Neither of them was properly dressed for it.

But Cole didn't seem to care about the nipping wind seeping through his Armani jacket. He slowed down, though. His hands were still fisted at his sides and his shoulders tense, but the initial sprint soon turned into a power walk.

Eduardo followed him in silence.

He had never seen Cole so upset before. He rarely got worked up over anything that didn't involve missing a sample sale at Barneys, and Eduardo needed a few minutes to figure out the problem and how to make it right. But for the life of him, he couldn't think of a fucking thing.

"What's the matter, pa?" he asked softly when Cole came to a sudden stop between the beach and the back deck of their new home. He waited a few seconds, but Cole wasn't forthcoming with his thoughts. Eduardo let out a heavy sigh before trying again. "You've got to tell me what's going through your mind because this isn't how I imagined you'd react to your birthday present." He chuckled nervously. "You're always watching interior design shows on TV and telling me about your favorite decorations and how you couldn't wait to start working on them... Don't you want to go check things out? I thought you'd run inside, take a look at the layout of the house, and insist we spend the rest of the morning christening every room."

Cole sobbed so hard he shook all over, but he turned around and plastered himself against Eduardo's body.

Eduardo slid his arms around him and pressed his lips to Cole's temple. "Talk to me, please," he begged, stroking his silky, brown hair and the nape of his slender neck. "I got you your dream house. Why aren't you happy?"

"What about our apartment?"

"I didn't renew the lease."

"*What?*"

Eduardo flinched, because that part was tricky. "We don't need it now that we have the house, so I thought I'd..."

"I'm listening."

"I signed a lease on a studio right over the Brooklyn Bridge," he announced. "It's small and nowhere near luxurious, but it's cheap, and I'll have a place to sleep when I have to stay in the city."

"*You* will have a place to sleep," Cole repeated in his monotone voice.

"I know I promised we'd sleep together every night—"

"And that's a promise I expect you to keep."

Eduardo sighed. "You know how my work is. Sometimes it'll be too late to drive here, and I can't ask you to stay in the studio with me."

"Why not?"

"Because it's a studio!"

"I don't mind cramped spaces." He hugged Eduardo tighter and buried his face in his neck. "I don't mind if you have to sleep on top of me all night as long as you don't break your promise."

"Why would you do that when you can be here in this gorgeous place?"

Cole sobbed quietly against his shoulder. "Why, indeed?" he mumbled.

"It's your dream house on the beach," Eduardo repeated.

"Y-you didn't ask me if I wanted to-to live in Water M-Mill." Cole thumped his back. "Why would you b-buy a place here?"

Eduardo was at a total loss. "You're always looking up the Hamptons on the internet." His explanation earned him a smack on the shoulder.

"I look up Monaco, too." Cole hiccupped. "Are you g-going to buy m-me a house there?"

"You'd love that, wouldn't you?" Eduardo snapped. The whole situation was ridiculous, and he was about fed up.

Cole froze in his arms. "What makes you say that?"

"It's beautiful and expensive as hell, just like everything you like," he answered without giving a second thought to his words.

Cole pulled away, and Eduardo dropped his arms. “What?” he asked when Cole did nothing but stare at him in complete silence.

Cole shrugged and wiped his face with the back of his hand. “There’s nothing wrong with liking pretty things.”

Eduardo rolled his eyes. “I know that.”

“What you don’t seem to realize is I never wanted to possess everything I like.”

He sounded so sad that Eduardo had to laugh. Sadness was completely out of character when it came to Cole.

“You aren’t seriously telling me you didn’t want this house, are you?” He ran his hands through his hair and scratched the side of his neck. “You haven’t talked about anything else since we met!”

Cole sniffled softly and wiped his face again. “How much did it cost?”

“What does it matter?” Eduardo barked.

“The purchase of a home is a major investment.” Cole bit his lower lip and straightened his shoulders. “Don’t you think we should’ve discussed it?”

“It’s a fucking birthday present.”

“It’s also a change in our lifestyle,” Cole pointed out. “We both work in Manhattan, and like you said, your schedule’s hectic enough already. What do you think will happen when you add a four-hour commute to our days? You’ll end up staying in your studio more often than not,” he spat. “I want everything to stay the way it is.”

“Isn’t this view and the possibility of starting a family sooner rather than later worth giving up your social life in the city?”

Cole rubbed his face tiredly. “How much did you pay?”

“Six-point-five.”

Cole’s eyes opened as big as saucers. “You took a six-point-five million-dollar mortgage on a bungalow in Water Mill without consulting me? We could’ve bought a four-family house in Brooklyn for half that amount,” he

shrieked. “And I don’t want to live in fucking Water Mill! Do we even have any money left after this?”

Eduardo almost yelled it was his money to spend as he saw fit. That he didn’t care for Cole’s attitude or the way in which he was incredibly indifferent to everything but their bank account.

But he couldn’t.

He clenched his jaw and tried not to let Cole’s words and appalled tone hurt him. He’d worked his ass off to earn the bonus he’d used for the down payment, and was ready to continue to do so to pay the astronomical mortgage. Cole could stand to be more appreciative.

“I know Water Mill isn’t the most expensive zip code in the country but it’s still pretty damn exclusive and the best I can afford right now,” he said through gritted teeth. “And it might not be a mansion, but it’s still an oceanfront property with four bedrooms, three bathrooms and a heated pool, so I wouldn’t call it a bungalow. There are plenty of luxurious rooms to entertain socialites if that’s how you decide to spend your time.”

Cole blanched. His cheeks literally lost all their color, and he recoiled as if Eduardo had hit him in the face. His lower lip trembled and his eyes shone with unshed tears. For a moment, he looked like he wanted to scream. Smash a few things and let it be known he didn’t appreciate getting something that didn’t meet his expectations. But he never broke down. He didn’t even utter a sound. He just cleared his throat and gave Eduardo one of his beautiful smiles.

He never looked so broken before.

Shit.

“What am I doing wrong?” He stepped forward and hugged Cole against his chest. “How am I hurting you so much when the only thing I ever wanted was to please you?”

Cole’s back was rigid, but he circled Eduardo’s waist with his arms and hugged him back just as tightly. Eduardo almost sobbed in relief when he felt a butterfly kiss on his jaw.

“The house looks beautiful,” Cole said in a trembling voice. “I’m really sorry for ruining everything... I can’t wait to explore it.”

“Don’t apologize for having honest reactions.”

“I’m not ready to be a daddy just yet,” he confessed. “There are things I need from you before we can move onto that stage.”

“What things?”

“This isn’t the time to talk about it.”

“Please,” he whispered in Cole’s ear. “Tell me what I’m missing.”

Cole leaned back, and their eyes met. “I could,” he said gently, cupping Eduardo’s cheek with a cool hand. “But I choose not to.”

“*Why?*”

“It’s something you need to realize by yourself, or it won’t mean a thing to me.”

Eduardo opened his mouth to demand a clearer answer, but Cole gripped his head and assaulted his mouth. They kissed hard. Their teeth were sharp and painful when they nibbled on each other’s lips, but their tongues laved both physical and emotional ache away.

It was exactly what they needed.

Everything was fine again.

“Come on, now.” Cole grabbed his hand and pulled him toward the house. “I want to be carried over the threshold and made love to in our brand new home for the first time.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Eduardo placed his keys and phone on the small kitchen table, and grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge. He took off his shoes while he chugged it down and considered making himself a PB&J sandwich. He decided against it. He hadn't had anything to eat since lunch, but, at the moment, he was more tired than he was hungry. He'd rather get some sleep and order a full breakfast delivered to his office in the morning.

He unbuttoned his shirt, and almost jumped three feet in the air when he turned around and saw Cole lying on his bed.

"Fuck, pa. You scared the shit out of me." He crossed the few feet separating the kitchenette from the mostly dark sleeping area and knelt on the bed. "When did you get here?" he asked, noticing Cole still had on the same outfit he'd worn to the office. He leaned forward and kissed Cole's pouty lips. "Is everything okay? How come you didn't tell me you were coming when we talked earlier?"

It wouldn't be the first time in the past month.

To Eduardo's surprise—and delight—Cole insisted on stopping by the studio every week to make sure Eduardo had everything he needed. Basic groceries, clean bed sheets and towels, toiletries... Eduardo didn't have to worry about anything, because Cole took care of it.

The Water Mill house fiasco was in the past. Cole had fallen in love with the place the moment he calmed down enough to explore it. He claimed to be too tired after work and the long commute to do any decorating just yet, but he'd been talking about it. And several times, when Eduardo had known early enough he wouldn't be able to drive to Water Mill that night, they'd stayed together in the studio that was smaller than their master bathroom back home.

But Cole had never shown up unannounced.

He reached out to turn on the lamp, but Cole stopped him. He took Eduardo's hand and kissed his palm before pulling him down on the bed.

Eduardo stretched out next to his boyfriend and studied his face. His eyes, nose and cheeks were extremely red. “Why are you crying?” he asked alarmed.

Cole took a shuddering breath before saying, “I got laid off today.”

“Shit, pa...” He brushed Cole’s hair back off his forehead and pressed a kiss between his brows. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m not surprised...” Cole sniffled delicately and burrowed closer. He wrapped his leg around Eduardo’s hip. “I mean, the economy’s bad. You know my company has been downsizing, and I haven’t felt secure in my position for months, but...” He bit his lip, but couldn’t contain the tears that welled up in his eyes. “I need my job,” he sobbed.

His anguish didn’t surprise Eduardo. If there was anything that could drive Cole to a nervous breakdown, it was not having a steady paycheck. The fact that Cole wanted a security blanket didn’t mean he was a kept man, and he needed to have his own cash as much as he needed to breathe. He refused to depend on somebody else’s money.

“I know you do,” Eduardo crooned. He lay back and pulled Cole half across his body, then wrapped both arms around his boyfriend’s slim waist. “And I know it’s scary to lose your job in this economy, but you’ll find another one soon enough.”

“What if I d-don’t?”

“You will.” He caressed Cole’s spine up and down in a repetitive motion. “It might take a while, but we’ve got savings.” He cradled Cole’s wet cheek in his palm and traced the tracks of his tears with his thumb. “You’ll be fine.”

“I can’t stay home all day doing nothing while you’re here working sixty hours a week,” Cole whispered in anguish.

“You’ll be updating your resume and going to interviews.” He tilted Cole’s head and looked him in the eye. “And you can also decorate our house before you get a new job.” He smile at Cole encouragingly and kissed his wet eyelids. “Wouldn’t you like that?”

Cole gave a brief nod.

“We could use this as a trial run.”

Cole wiped his face with the back of his hand and lifted his torso. “Trial run?” he repeated, looking at Eduardo with an intrigued expression in his eyes.

“I know you want to wait a few more years before we start a family, but we already know you’d like to be a full time daddy. This is a fantastic opportunity to play housewife and see if you’ll be okay with that, or if we should plan for a nanny’s salary as well as the surrogate’s cost.”

“Househusband,” Cole corrected him in a shaky voice.

Eduardo grinned, relieved that he seemed to be getting through to Cole. “Househusband it is.”

Cole opened his hand and used a tissue Eduardo hadn’t noticed before to blow his nose. Then he lifted himself completely and straddled Eduardo’s hips.

His eyes were puffy, his cheeks blotchy, and his nose and lips swollen after only God knew how much crying. He looked a mess, yet he still looked better than most men Eduardo had ever met.

Cole threw the tissue on the bedside table, and splayed his hands over Eduardo’s chest. “I like your suggestion,” he said, a hint of a smile on his face. “I want to make sure I can be a good daddy to our kids, and I *have* to do something with our house. It looks dreadfully Spartan.”

“I agree.” Interior design wasn’t Eduardo’s thing, but even he could tell they needed color, more furniture, and maybe some art for the walls. The pieces they’d taken from their apartment weren’t enough to fill the much bigger house. “And how about asking the neighbors over for dinner or something?” he rasped, more interested in rubbing his sudden erection against Cole’s ass than he’d ever be in throwing a party for the fucking president if he happened to live next door.

Cole, as usual, got on with the program.

“We can talk about money, work, and babies later.” He leaned down and licked Eduardo’s jawline. “Right now, I want you.”

Eduardo unbuckled Cole’s belt. “You know you can have me.”

Cole didn’t wait.

He got rid of their clothes in record time, and then lubed himself up, climbed on top, and took Eduardo’s cock inside his body.

Their lovemaking that night was quiet, quick, and achingly sweet, and once they’d cleaned up, Cole tucked his head under Eduardo’s chin, plastered their bodies together, and went to sleep.

CHAPTER FIVE

One-point-seven-billion dollars.

That was the second fiscal-quarter loss Eduardo's employer had just reported to its shareholders, and the reason why he might have a heart attack at twenty-nine.

Insides quivering and stomach churning, he blinked the dizziness away and focused on the spreadsheets covering his desk.

One-point-seven-billion fucking dollars.

It'd been a rocky road for a while, but Faltskog Brunn, one of the top five investment banks in the world, had managed to stay afloat and even raise a few billion dollars from investors in the previous fiscal quarter. But there was no denying its huge portfolio of mortgage securities made Faltskog vulnerable, and now it'd fallen victim to the continuing subprime mortgage crisis.

They were unable to sell its lower-rated bonds, and stock value was sliding down the drain as an immediate consequence. Hedge fund clients were pulling out, offices around the country were being shut down, and within a month, almost three thousand jobs would be lost.

Dios mío, he thought. I could be one of the people facing unemployment.

Not the kind of news a young Wall Street hedge fund management team associate wanted to hear. Not when he'd been steadily spending all his cash, had a significant debt, and his boyfriend was still out of work.

He grabbed the report and read Faltskog Brunn's plan to boost its liquidity pool and public confidence in the company. The CEO seemed confident they could weather the storm, but what if the efforts proved unsuccessful? What would happen if they were too late in reducing their exposure to commercial and residential mortgages?

He groaned.

He couldn't even think about it.

He'd have to work harder. Come up with more investment opportunities. Court his clients as much as he could in order to stop them from walking away. He'd do whatever he had to, because losing his income wasn't an option.

His happiness depended on it.

CHAPTER SIX

Eduardo silenced the ringer on his phone for the tenth time in the past thirty minutes, and continued preparing a financial model for one of his clients. He hated ignoring Cole's calls, but he'd hate losing this particular client even more.

He opened a research report on microeconomic conditions for the investment opportunity he was working on. His next bonus depended on that deal, and he was about to verify that he had all the information he needed when his private line at work went off.

"Eduardo Acosta," he answered, flipping through the pages.

"Are you screening my calls?"

Shit.

Eduardo grabbed his pen, and made a few notations on the front page of the report. "I'm just trying to get some work done."

"It's Friday."

"I work on Fridays."

"It's also the Fourth of July!"

Had he not been so worried, he would've taken the time to rejoice in Cole's belligerent tone.

Some of his colleagues resented that their wives and girlfriends nagged them about never showing their face, not even to important family events, but Eduardo wasn't like them. Sure work and money were important, but so was his boyfriend, and he loved when Cole got annoyed and demanding.

"You promised you'd go with me to the Rubins' barbecue," Cole complained, referring to their closest neighbors. "We've been living in Water Mill since early April and you've yet to meet them."

"You're going to have to go without me. Like I told you, I've got work to do."

“It’s a holiday.”

“It’s another opportunity to make money.”

“Can you please think about something else, at least for today?”

“Kind of hard, considering the bills I have to pay.”

“I haven’t seen you in five days!”

Eduardo sighed in an effort not to lose his patience. “I miss you too, but—”

“You aren’t a first year-analyst without a network of contacts,” Cole cut him off. “You shouldn’t have to kiss ass and work seventy hours a week anymore. I thought you were past that!”

“And so did I, but Wall Street’s a minefield and if you snooze, you lose, so what the hell do you expect me to do?”

“I expect you to remember I’m at home waiting for you,” Cole said in that indifferent tone that Eduardo hated.

“How can I forget when I have to hear you bitching at me constantly?”

He didn’t get a response. The white noise on the line told him Cole had ended the call.

“Fuck me, man!”

He got up, kicked his desk, and paced in front of it while he considered getting back to work and leaving Cole alone until he’d cooled off. But he knew he wouldn’t be able to focus.

The only reason why he was working himself to exhaustion and sacrificing his time with Cole in the process was to ensure he could preserve their lifestyle. He wanted to make Cole happy. Shower him with presents and provide everything he needed. So fighting with him was counterproductive.

Cole had yet to find a job, but he’d been busy running their house. He spent his days paying bills, doing grocery shopping, cleaning, cooking and decorating to his heart’s content, albeit at a very slow pace. He explored the village and socialized with some neighbors, and Eduardo loved that Cole seemed to have found his place in Water Mill.

He liked having Cole in the house. He liked that Cole kept them organized and was free to get in his car and drive into the city to spend a few hours together whenever Eduardo could make the time. And in order to keep things that way, Eduardo had to make enough money to satisfy their financial obligations on his own. Things weren't bad yet, but if Faltskog Brunn didn't recover from their second fiscal-quarter losses, the situation would change.

Eduardo had to do whatever he could to guarantee his company didn't bite the dust.

He sat down in his chair and dialed Cole's number. It took several tries, but his boyfriend finally deigned to answer.

"I'm sorry for snapping at you," he apologized. "I didn't mean to."

"You're an ass."

"I'm a bit tense, pa." Eduardo tilted his head back and rubbed his eyes. "Please cut me some slack."

Cole remained quiet for so long Eduardo thought he'd been hung up on again, but just when he was about to dial again, Cole said, "I'll be there on time to go see fireworks. Make sure you're free by six. I'll bring food."

Eduardo's face broke into a cheek-splitting grin. "I love you, gorgeous."

"Always, baby."

CHAPTER SEVEN

In September, Cole hosted a wine and cheese tasting party for twenty people and was adamant Eduardo attended. According to his boyfriend, it was time they introduced themselves to their community.

Eduardo couldn't have cared less about meeting their neighbors. He didn't want to hang out with the owner of the multi-million-dollar property a mile away from their much smaller house or shake hands with a dude who'd just purchased a business conglomerate. And who could blame him? Rubbing shoulders with so much opulence when his livelihood was on the line was almost nauseating. Not to mention it was also a lost opportunity to expand his contact network. He couldn't talk business with their guests. They'd probably laugh in his face if he suggested they consider his company's investment options.

At work, things had gone from bad to worse, and the chances of Faltskog Brunn making it through another fiscal year were slim to none.

A staggering amount of hedge fund clients had pulled out in a matter of days. Their short-term creditors were cutting their credit lines, and the bank's credit ratings were being investigated by a private firm, leading to a plunge in the stock by the close of the Dow Jones.

The rumors had been deafening by the time Eduardo left the office earlier that day.

The attempt to sell shares and part of Faltskog Brunn's assets had fallen through. Overtures to potential business partners were unsuccessful, and hopes that a European investment bank would take a stake in the company's interest had been squashed. The international powerhouse that was Faltskog Brunn had overcome plenty of challenges for over a hundred years, including the Great Depression, but its future had never looked as grim as it did right now. Everything indicated Faltskog would yield to the collapse of the US housing market, and if it came down to that, Eduardo would be back on square one.

No six-figure salary.

No bonuses.

Not enough money to pay for his and Cole's cars, let alone a fourteen-thousand-dollar monthly mortgage.

No means to take care of his mom and lover. Not the way they deserved. Not like Eduardo had promised he would.

Yet here he was, eating a piece of stinky cheese that he could no longer afford and trying to hide how very scared he was of losing Cole.

He downed a glass of wine, poured himself another, and glanced at his watch.

According to Cole, wine and cheese tasting parties never lasted more than three hours. That meant Eduardo would be free of boring conversations and unwanted company in forty minutes, but he couldn't wait. He wanted out of the room immediately. It'd been too long since he last checked his phone, and he needed to see if there was any news from his colleagues. Some of them had stayed in the office to keep an eye on things, and they'd been sending periodic updates. Eduardo would go crazy if he didn't read his emails and text messages.

Thankfully, the guys he'd been talking to were entirely too fond of listening to their own voices, and barely noticed when Eduardo excused himself. He walked outside the kitchen door without being intercepted by anyone, and, once on the back deck, he fished his phone out of his pocket and read his most recent message.

Takeover deal's off the table. Company assets devaluated. No bailout from the government either. FB is going down. Looks like bankruptcy by Monday morning.

Eduardo squeezed his eyes shut after reading the news he'd been dreading for months, and slammed his fist against the wall.

"Jesús, María y José, me he quedado sin trabajo..."

He took deep breaths and managed to choke back the bile burning his throat, but his blood ran cold in his veins.

No takeover meant no acquisition; at least not immediately. In turn, no acquisition meant not working for the new owners—providing he got to stay on board—and also the plummeting of the stock value. Come Monday morning, the US was bound to get hit by the onset of a financial crisis that would most likely bring the nation to its knees, and there'd be no easy way out of it.

He rubbed the back of his neck. “What the hell am I going to do?”

What if he didn't get another job right away? They had some savings, but the bulk of his money had gone into purchasing the house. That left a few investments, and there was no telling how much those stocks would be worth in a week.

“Jesus...”

Cole was out of work, and now Eduardo would be, too.

No big check every week. No pretty house on the beach, designer clothes, vacations, or—

Shit.

How long before I lose him too? He put the phone in his pocket and wrapped his arms around himself. He was shaking, but the chilling current freezing his bones had absolutely nothing to do with the early September weather. *No. He'll stay. He might not talk about it, but I know he has feelings for me... He does...*

Eduardo rubbed his churning stomach and paced around the deck.

Whether Cole loved him or not, Eduardo would go crazy if his boyfriend walked away from their relationship. So what if living with a man who'd always been more concerned about finances than anything else made Eduardo a loser? He was in love. He could be patient. The rest was irrelevant.

Or so he hoped.

“Is everything okay?”

Eduardo looked over his shoulder and tried to smile. He'd been so deep inside his head he failed to notice Cole standing by the door.

"What are you doing here?" he croaked. "You should be entertaining your guests."

Cole pulled his jacket tighter around him and leaned against the glass door frame. "They'll be fine on their own for a while," he answered. "You, on the other hand, look like you're about to have a heart attack."

"Go back inside." Eduardo's tone was harsher than he'd intended, but damn it, he needed time alone to organize his thoughts. "Go back inside, please," he repeated in a softer voice. "I'll join you in a few minutes."

"Are you sick?"

"No, but I wouldn't be surprised if that fucking cheese gives me indigestion."

Cole studied him in eerie silence before he said, "I told everyone I had a 'boost the economy' theme and went with domestic wines and organic cheeses from local makers. Putting this soiree together cost a small fraction of not even half the money you think I spent."

Thank you, God.

"It doesn't matter how much it cost," he said, not ready to admit he'd failed in keeping his promise and they were in bad shape.

"Oh, it matters," Cole argued. "I was hoping you knew I'd never pay a fortune to entertain temporary neighbors, but obviously you don't."

"What do you mean by temporary neighbors?"

"Is there something going on?" Cole asked. "You've been checking your phone all night."

"What do you mean by temporary neighbors?" Eduardo repeated loudly.

Cole stepped outside and closed the door behind him. "I had a feeling we wouldn't live in Water Mill too long."

"And why's that?"

“For one, I don’t like the place.”

Eduardo crossed his arms over his chest and lifted his chin. “Only a privately-owned island would get better than this town.”

A tentative smile spread across Cole’s face. “Can we get that instead?”

Eduardo should’ve answered that Cole could have anything he wanted; just like he’d been doing since they first met.

He should’ve suggested they sell the house and lease an apartment in the city for the next twenty years while Eduardo saved enough money to buy Cole a fucking country.

He should’ve taken the opportunity to walk away with his pride intact from mortgage payments he wouldn’t be able to make.

Instead, he said, “I know the house is on the small side, but we can expand until you have the biggest mansion on the block. There’s no reason why the nerd billionaire and the oil heir drinking our wine can’t be our permanent neighbors.”

He knew it was crazy to say such a thing considering the current circumstances, but he couldn’t lose Cole.

He *couldn’t*.

He’d promise anything... Do anything...

He’d find a way to provide for Cole and keep him in his life.

“Come on.” Cole shook his head and rested his arms on the deck. “You know this is the first and last time we’ll see any of those people.”

“I think we can have a good friendship with some of them.”

Cole snorted softly. “Get real.”

Get real about what? his mind screamed. *What are you hinting at?*

Did Cole know about the situation at the bank?

No way. It was all internal information at the moment. There was no way Cole could’ve found out so soon.

Unless...

No. No, no, no... A fucking million times no!

Out loud he said, "I kind of like the pro golfer and his wife." There. He sounded calm. As if his life wasn't falling apart.

"I don't think they like us very much."

"What makes you say that?"

"The people inside accepted my invitation so that they could check us out and see if we belong here." Cole shrugged delicately. "Now they know we don't."

"And why's that?" Eduardo snapped. "Because we're gay or because the only Latinos allowed around these parts are the ones hired to clean their houses and raise their kids?"

Cole turned around and looked him in the eye. "Because they know you work for Faltskog Brunn," he said in a broken voice. "And we're about to be poor."

Eduardo's breath caught in his throat, and the muscle in his right eye ticced frantically.

Cole knew.

Cole knew.

"When did you talk to him?" he rasped. "When did you talk to the man you left for me?"

Cole didn't look away when he whispered, "Larry called me earlier today." He gulped and rubbed his face. "He said he was in a meeting at the Fed with other CEOs of investment firms in the country discussing Faltskog's fate and—" He pursed his lips and wrung his hands.

"What else did he say?" Eduardo prompted him to go on, even though he already knew what would come next.

"That Faltskog's insolvent, and the Federal Reserve Bank of New York won't make a loan without collateral support."

Eduardo nodded slowly.

Lawrence Stern, Cole's former sugar daddy, was also the CEO of the world's largest brokerage firm. If there was someone who'd know for sure what was going on, it was him... and if there was ever a time when he'd try to get Cole back, this was it.

"Have you been in touch with him all this time?" Eduardo's voice sounded unrecognizable to his own ears. It was too rough. Too desperate. He sounded one hundred percent broken. He cleared his throat. "Have you been talking to him behind my back?"

Visibility out in the deck wasn't the best, yet Eduardo didn't miss that Cole's pulse skipped a beat in his long neck, and his eyes shadowed.

Goddammit.

"You wouldn't tell me anything," Cole explained quickly. He took a step forward and grasped Eduardo's shirt. He pulled at it twice, and then thumped his head against Eduardo's chest before looking up again. "I watch the news. I know the bank has been in deep shit for a while, but you wouldn't tell me anything. I called Larry two months ago, and he's kept me posted ever since." Cole released the shirt and fisted his hands at his sides. "I needed to know."

"Is that the reason why you never bothered to buy more furniture for the house?" Eduardo brushed Cole's hair back from his forehead and cupped his cheek with a slightly trembling hand. "Why you *had a feeling* we wouldn't live in Water Mill too long?" He chuckled humorlessly. "You've had insider information about Faltskog Brunn all along."

"You wouldn't tell me anything," Cole repeated vehemently, as if trying to justify his conversations with a man he knew damn well Eduardo felt threatened by.

As far as Eduardo was concerned, there was no forgiving something like that. He was possessive. He didn't share what was his. But he loved Cole so much he'd have gotten over it. He would've put the transgression behind them, and moved on with their life. Sadly, their relationship was contingent on

Eduardo's liquidity ratio, and he doubted his magnanimity would change a thing.

"Did he say he'd take you back?"

Cole's only answer was a nervous blink. "Why wouldn't you tell me?" he asked against Eduardo's lips. "Why would you pretend we were doing well? Why would you encourage my spending and give me expensive things when you knew damn well our lifestyle might not last?"

Eduardo closed his eyes, wrapped his arms around Cole's waist, then bent his head and kissed Cole hungrily. He needed to get his fill of his man. Breathed him in and memorize every detail in case...

Just in case.

Cole wasn't down with the plan, though.

He wrenched his mouth away and took a step back, and damn if there wasn't a storm brewing in the depths of his eyes. "Why didn't you tell me?" he demanded, his voice so loud Eduardo would've been surprised if their guests didn't hear him inside the house.

This was it then. The time to fess up had come.

Eduardo straightened his back and looked his boyfriend straight in the eye before he said, "Because I didn't want to lose you."

Cole made a sound somewhere between a sob and a whimper. "You thought I'd walk away if you shared your worries with me," he said, no emotion whatsoever in his tone.

The way in which he could look wrecked, as if he'd lost everything that was important to him, yet sound like he didn't give a shit was frightening. It made Eduardo want to throttle him, just to get a full reaction.

"I thought you'd walk away if you knew there was nothing secure about my finances," he confirmed. In a lower voice, he asked, "Was I wrong?"

Por favor, Dios mío... por favor...

Cole glared at him. “You should’ve never bought this house,” he said through gritted teeth. “We wouldn’t be in this situation had you not—”

“Had I not what?” Eduardo snapped, blinded by the pain caused by Cole’s refusal to reassure him. “I put myself in debt for *you*.”

“Don’t you fucking dare put this on me,” Cole growled, pointing at him. “This mess is all on you, hot stuff,” he mocked. “A beach house was my dream, yes, but I didn’t want it as much as you wanted to show the world how far you’ve come from your humble origins.”

Eduardo’s jaw almost hit the floor. “Are you fucking kidding me?” He pushed Cole’s fingers away from his face and crowded him. “You made it perfectly clear you needed a security blanket in order to stay with me.”

“That doesn’t mean—”

“You were with a married old geezer for over three years because he set you up with a town house and an unlimited credit card,” he snarled. “What the fuck was I supposed to think? That you’d stay with me because you love me?”

Cole shook his head, and covered his mouth with his hand. “I’m not a whore!”

“I never said you were!”

“But you treat me like one all the time!” Cole cried out. “You’re convinced my affection has a price!”

“You wanted financial guarantees,” Eduardo pointed out through clenched teeth, “and I’ve done everything I could to satisfy your needs.”

“No.” Cole shook his head emphatically. “You’ve done everything you could to show your father that you could make it on your own. That even though he didn’t recognize you as his son and was never interested in being a part of your life, you still managed to make it to the top and be successful in the investment banking industry.”

“Shut up,” Eduardo growled. “You’ve no right to talk about things you don’t know shit about.”

“I know more than you think,” Cole straightened his shoulders and lifted his chin. “Greed and pride are the real motivation behind your drive. The need to prove that a bastard Puerto Rican kid from a rundown neighborhood could go places other than jail is what had you working eighty hours a week. It was never about me.”

“That’s not true.” Eduardo walked over to his boyfriend and pushed his index finger into Cole’s chest. “You wanted—”

“Pretty things and financial security. I know,” Cole barked in a tone that was anything but casual or flat. “Yet you spent every cent you earned on cars and this stupid house that you haven’t been to more than a dozen times in the past two months. You didn’t want to save money for a rainy day, always thinking we could do that once you’ve bought every toy in the world, and now we’re screwed.” He shoved Eduardo’s hand away and got in his face. “So you tell me, hot stuff. If you’re doing all this for me, how come you didn’t make sure I had my fucking security blanket?”

Eduardo blinked. He opened his mouth to answer, but couldn’t come up with anything.

Cole was absolutely right.

He *had* a chip on his shoulder and a bone to pick with his dad. He’d grown up surrounded by violence and drugs. Kids from his neighborhood tended to drop out of school and weren’t expected to go far in life. Most of his childhood friends were either working backbreaking, minimum-wage jobs or doing time in jail, but Eduardo had refused to become a statistic. He’d always wanted more for himself... and a little more.

“There’s more to it than that,” he finally said, looking Cole in the eye. “It’s about more than wanting a better life.”

Cole crossed his arms over his chest and glared at him.

“I admit not having my father’s name on my birth certificate until I turned seventeen fucked me up in the head, but mostly I hated that asshole for making life so difficult for my mother. I still hate him for not taking responsibility and stepping up to the plate. That’s what real men do. My grandpa always told me

real men take care of their own. He told me to work hard and provide for my spouse, because that's how you show them how much you care about them. That's how you show them your love." He cleared his throat and looked in the direction of the beach. "We aren't legally married, but you've been my spouse since you moved in with me. That you wanted to be taken care of suited me perfectly."

But he'd failed.

He lowered his eyes and tried to get hold of himself.

"I disagree," Cole said softly. "I think you show them you care by paying close attention to them and listening to what's often left unsaid."

"Are you saying I didn't listen to you?" he rasped.

"You did not," Cole confirmed. "Had you listened, we wouldn't be going through this."

Eduardo wanted to ask Cole what he meant by "this". Was he referring to money problems? Was it tough times? Or was he alluding to the end of their fucking relationship?

"I'm not a mind reader, you know?" he snarled. "And why would you leave things unsaid? Why not fucking tell me whatever was going through your head?"

Cole's smile was so sad it broke Eduardo's heart. "I tried."

Eduardo paced the deck a few times before he stopped and smashed his fist against the side of the house. "Fuck!"

"Are you going to lose the house?" Cole asked evenly, silent tears running down his cheeks. "Is there something you can do?"

You, Eduardo thought. He asked if there's something I can do. Not if there's something we can do.

"What the fuck do you care?" Tears blurred his vision, but he refused to break down in front of Cole. "It isn't you who's about to lose everything."

"I care more than you ever realized."

“Why?” He snorted. “Doesn’t Lawrence have a sweet pad ready for you?”

Cole flinched and looked down, and Eduardo lost all hope.

“I need to get out of here.” He headed for the stairs leading to the beach without looking at Cole.

Cole grabbed his arm. “We need to talk.”

“Not now,” Eduardo refused, shrugging Cole’s hand off.

“What about our guests?”

“They can all go fuck themselves.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

The scene at Faltskog Brunn headquarters was surreal on Monday morning. It was only seven thirty A.M. but by now the entire financial world knew the bank had filed for bankruptcy and there would be no money when the stock market opened.

The phones were ringing off the hook in the office. A cacophony of sobs, laments, and curses could be heard up and down the hallways. Outside, on the street, news crews reported and filmed the massive exodus of former employees.

Eduardo concentrated on boxing his personal belongings. He was aware of the chaos but felt disconnected from it.

Shock, most likely.

He'd come straight to the office after leaving Cole Saturday night, hoping the reports were wrong. That the situation wasn't as bad as it looked. That the government would step in and save Faltskog Brunn, just like they had other banks at the beginning of the financial crisis. But no last minute takeover had saved his job, and now the time had come to face the music.

He placed his framed diplomas in the box, checked his desk drawers one more time to make sure they were empty, then sat in front of his computer and deleted his personal email account without reading the messages Cole had sent him.

He didn't dare; same as he hadn't dared read Cole's texts either. He'd always known Cole's presence in Eduardo's life was contingent on his financial worth. He knew what was coming, especially after finding out Cole had been talking to his ex. But he wasn't ready to get officially dumped just yet.

He grabbed his box and stepped out of his office. A few minutes later, he walked out of his building for the last time. No more showing up at seven in the morning and leaving after eight o'clock at night. No more having most of

his meals at his desk. No more sacrificing his relationship and keeping Cole waiting at home.

The job was gone, and so would be Cole.

It was the end of an era. The end of a time when he hadn't been the bastard son of a rich man, but a young, hotshot, Wall Street banker in his own right. A time when he'd had everything he had ever wanted: money, respect, and love.

He didn't pay attention to the microphones a couple of reporters shoved under his nose, nor did he stop to commiserate with his former colleagues in the parking garage. Faltskog Brunn was dead, end of story, and he didn't need a postmortem of the company. He had more important things on his mind.

He drove home on autopilot. Not much registered on the way to Long Island from Manhattan, but the closer he got to their house, the heavier his stomach felt. He almost threw up when he pulled into the driveway and didn't see Cole's car. He refused to believe. He refused to acknowledge anything as he opened the kitchen door and stepped inside the house, but what little hope he'd left of working things out disappeared when he saw the stack of boxes in the middle of the living room.

Eduardo didn't linger.

He didn't wonder how long Cole had been gone, or when he planned on getting the rest of his things. He didn't want to think. He just wanted to take a shower, wash away the resentment, and watch the pain go down the drain along with the regret. Then he would come to terms with the fact that he only had enough money to make two more mortgage payments, and that was only if he didn't pay anything else.

And at some point, he'd have to deal with his feelings, but not yet.

His throat constricted as he made his way to their bedroom. The faster he breathed, the harder it was to get air into his lungs. His head hurt, too, and he thought about smashing it against the wall, but his vision clouded and his ears pounded, and he had to stand still in the middle of the room.

There were boxes everywhere, as if nothing had been left unpacked. Either that, or Cole owned more shit than Eduardo had known.

His cell phone rang in his hand when he took it out of his pocket. Eduardo didn't look to see who was calling before he placed it on top of the dresser with his wallet and keys. It rang three more times while he got undressed, and by the time he stepped into the shower, the house phone had started ringing as well.

The hot water coming from three different showerheads didn't loosen up the tension in his shoulders. He closed his eyes and took deep, calming breaths, but the relaxation technique did nothing to sooth his nerves either. He couldn't handle the memories of the last time he and Cole had been together in this bathroom.

Three weeks had passed, if he remembered correctly. Cole had demanded he take the weekend off and come home to spend time together. Eduardo hadn't managed to get out of the office until Saturday night, but they'd spent Sunday lazing around and making love.

He could almost hear their combined moans and grunts when they started making out. He could feel Cole's weight in his arms as he picked him up and pinned him against the wall. He could still feel Cole's mouth on his; on his neck, and his stomach. His lips firmly wrapped around Eduardo's cock.

He could still feel the heat of Cole's tight ass and see the heat in his eyes before he threw his head back and came all over Eduardo's chest.

He could still hear their laughter as they washed each other and their muted voices when they decided where to go for brunch.

He grabbed the soap and made quick work of it. He'd go crazy if he didn't get out of the shower.

Eduardo wiped his eyes and dried off with a thick towel before returning to the bedroom. He avoided looking at the bed, but out of the corner of his eye, he saw it was perfectly made.

Had Cole slept in it at all the past two nights, or had he gone back to Lawrence the second their neighbors went home? Had he known they were over before insisting Eduardo show up to that stupid wine tasting party, or had he made the decision after Eduardo refused to tell him what was going on at work?

He shook his head and opened his underwear drawer. It was empty, same as the other five. A quick inspection told him the walk-in closet was empty as well.

“What the hell?”

Eduardo didn’t understand why Cole would take time to pack his clothes, but he was too exhausted to figure it out. Besides, it was almost symbolic that he couldn’t find anything to wear, considering he was about to lose the shirt off his back.

He opened the bedroom’s French doors, stepped onto the deck, and took in the magnificent view of the ocean. That particular view had been a huge selling point the moment he saw the house. He’d been convinced Cole would love falling asleep with the doors open and the sound of the waves crashing on the shore. Too bad it’d only lasted a few months.

Then again, it was his fault.

Eduardo had been so anxious to turn that experience into something permanent for Cole that he’d made a reckless investment. Had he consulted the purchase with his boyfriend—like Cole said he should have—instead of rushing into spending millions of dollars just so that he could impress Cole—like he had—his circumstances wouldn’t be as dire as they were.

A thousand invisible needles prickled his skin when he descended the back deck stairs and walked the hundred feet separating the house from the beach. The sand was cold under his feet, and the gray clouds above his head promised rain. He knew he’d probably get sick from being outside naked, but he couldn’t talk himself into going back to the house. The stormy weather suited his mood, and it broke his heart to look at all the boxes lying around.

He lowered his head to protect his eyes from the wind and sand, and counted every step until the cold water lapped at his toes. He took a deep breath, and almost choked.

As recently as a month ago, the salt water and seaweed had smelt of success; of everything he'd been able to achieve. Now it had the putrid scent of failure. Eduardo could barely breathe through it, but he forced himself to stay put and face his current situation.

Almost broke.

Scared not to find another job soon enough.

Abandoned by the only man he'd ever loved. A man who, albeit unintentionally, Eduardo had been treating like a prostitute.

You're convinced my affection has a price!

There was no arguing Cole's assessment, but his boyfriend didn't have a right to sound as insulted as he had. Eduardo couldn't exactly call him a gold digger, but Cole *was* an opportunist, as proven by how fast he'd disappeared from his life.

Eduardo hunched over and wrapped his arms around his head in an attempt to block the recrimination and regret. Pointing fingers and taking part of the blame wouldn't change a thing, and it most definitely wouldn't make the headache go away.

He'd been incapable of building a financially secure future. He'd blown his chance to prove he could keep Cole well provided for, sexually satisfied, and happy, and now Cole was back with sugar daddy Lawrence, a man who had more money than God. The chances of Eduardo getting his boyfriend back were nonexistent, and he just didn't know what the hell he'd do with himself because, yes, he wanted Cole back more than anything else.

The wind swirled colder around him. The waves crashed harder. What used to be a soothing sound promptly morphed into a deafening roar in his ears, but he ignored it and concentrated on praying for strength. He needed to find a

way to cope with his emotional and capital loss before he could deal with anything else.

Eduardo got lost inside his head.

It took tremendous effort, but he managed to block all the stressors and breathe through his pain.

“You need to come inside.” he heard Cole say softly. “There’s a storm coming.”

Eduardo snorted and shook his head at the same time he squeezed his eyes shut.

A storm had already come, and the aftermath would be worse as days passed.

“Eduardo, please... Come inside.”

He rubbed his head and rocked his body back and forth. Wishful thinking had to *stop*.

Next thing he knew, a soft throw blanket landed over his shoulders. It smelled like his boyfriend’s cologne.

Eduardo clutched the edges and gulped. It wasn’t difficult to imagine urgent words or the whisper of fabric, but a blanket wouldn’t appear out of thin air. It was impossible.

He twisted his head and opened his eyes in time to see Cole offer him a coffee mug.

Eduardo shook his brain fuzziness off. He extended his arm and took the mug from Cole’s hand, and it wasn’t until his fingers touched that he allowed himself to believe he hadn’t gone crazy.

He saw Cole shudder and take a deep breath. Eduardo should’ve offered the blanket, but he couldn’t find his voice. He followed Cole’s every move with his eyes, though.

Why are you here?

What do you want from me?

I know you're leaving me, so there's no need to actually tell me.

Please, don't tell me...

He swallowed the lump in his throat and studied his boyfri—ex-boyfriend. Much like Eduardo, Cole looked the worse for wear. Dark circles under his eyes, pursed lips, pale skin... but why? Cole had to know he'd be fine. Lawrence would make sure he didn't want for anything, yet he had the appearance of someone carrying the world's weight on his shoulders. It made no sense.

"What are you doing here?" Eduardo blurted.

Cole lifted his eyebrows before he asked, "Where else would I be?"

"At the place Lawrence's setting up for you?" He took a quick look around the driveway. If Cole had brought his sugar daddy to their home he wouldn't be able to handle it.

"I listed the house with a realtor this morning."

Eduardo snapped his head around and gaped at Cole. "You did what?"

"I listed the house." Cole cleared his throat. "As you know, it is a buyer's market right now, and we don't have any equity to speak of, but the realtor says one of her investor clients may be interested and perhaps..." He trailed off, shifted his weight from one foot to the other, and eventually looked Eduardo in the eye. "Perhaps we'll get lucky and the bank won't foreclose on the house."

Understanding dawned on Eduardo.

Obviously, Cole expected to get part of whatever money they could get for the house. He might be walking away, but he wasn't doing it without the promised security blanket.

"I'm selling my car, too," Cole added. "You should look into trading yours for something more affordable."

"Guess you won't need it, wherever it is you're going."

“You got that right,” Cole confirmed. “I don’t have a problem taking the subway.”

Right.

Eduardo placed the coffee mug next to him and sat down, flinching when his bare ass and balls came in contact with the sand. He wrapped the blanket around himself before he said, “Are you expecting me to pay alimony too? Will you ask for half of my severance package if I get that much from Faltskog Brunn?” Eduardo meant to sound sarcastic, but his voice cracked and his eyes watered. He’d always known Cole needed financial security, but Jesus...

He couldn’t do this.

“I’m not expecting a damn thing,” Cole barked. “I’m just waiting for you to get your head out of your ass and take a close look at what’s right in front of you.” He shook his head and started pacing, looking extremely upset and frustrated.

There was no missing the fact he’d reached the end of his rope about something, but Eduardo had no idea what. It didn’t matter, though. Not anymore.

“Why did you box my clothes?” he asked tiredly. “You didn’t have to trouble yourself.”

“Like I said, I listed the house. The sooner I get it ready for showing, the better it’ll be for us.”

Eduardo snorted. “Us?”

Cole gave him the evil eye. “Ignoring my phone calls was really immature,” he said in his signature flat tone. “There are things we need to discuss.”

“What things?” He rubbed the back of his neck and rolled his shoulders. “What’s there to talk about other than who gets the furniture or the china? Take it all, Cole. I honestly don’t give a shit about it.”

“Things like the rent on the studio apartment,” Cole enunciated. “Can we afford it with both of us out of work, or should we move in with Dinora for a little while? I’m pretty sure she wouldn’t mind.”

Eduardo’s thoughts screeched to a halt.

“We?” he croaked.

Cole sniffled and bit his lower lip. “I should hate you for thinking so poorly of me,” he whispered, “but I realize I should’ve told you how I felt instead of waiting for you to figure it out. You can be an insensitive moron, and you’re a jerk.”

Cole’s words sent a jolt through Eduardo’s body. He tried not to get his hopes up, but it was impossible. He wasn’t that strong, and he was desperately in love.

“Tell me now,” he half begged, half ordered.

So what if he sounded like a pathetic loser? He needed to know.

Cole knelt in front of him and cupped Eduardo’s cheek with a suspiciously unsteady hand.

Oh, Lord, Eduardo thought. *Please. Please...*

“You were so focused on making us money that you couldn’t see being with you is the most important thing in the world to me.”

Eduardo covered Cole’s hand with his own. “Is that the real reason why you were so upset when I bought this house?” he asked in a trembling voice. “Because it is so far that we would have to spend time apart?”

“But you thought I was crying over the size of the house.” He flashed a sad smile. “I just wanted to put your big bonus in a savings account and eventually buy something close to Dinora. I’d like her to be around when we finally have babies.”

“Then why didn’t you slap some sense into me?”

“I was convinced you should’ve known.” Cole shrugged. “I did everything I could to show you.”

A series of memories flashed through Eduardo's mind. Of Cole cooking his favorite food and making sure Eduardo always had everything he could need. Of Cole driving to the city and staying with him in his matchbox-sized studio just so they could sleep in the same bed. Of Cole demanding Eduardo forget about making an extra dollar and just come home.

Shit.

He moved closer to Cole and slid his fingers over pale, high cheekbones and parted lips.

Cole didn't blink when he climbed on to his lap. "Larry offered, but I never considered going back with him," he said under his breath. "I could never be with another man. I haven't even looked from the moment I met you."

Eduardo pulled him closer and tightened the blanket around them. Foreheads pressed together, he said, "I've been an idiot."

Cole nuzzled his nose. "Agreed."

"I'll make it up to you."

"By spending more time with me."

"You got it." They kissed softly. "I love you, pa," he whispered against Cole's lips.

Cole smiled dreamily and gave him the most tender, adoring kiss. "I love you too, hot stuff."

Eduardo almost wept, but they smiled into each other's eyes.

"We'll get through this," Cole said. "We'll find a way."

"Together," Eduardo stated.

"Til the very end."

The Beginning...

Author Bio

Taylor V. Donovan is a compulsive reader and author of m/m romantic suspense. She is optimistically cynical about the world; lover of history, museums and all things '80s. She is crazy about fashion, passionate about civil rights and equality for all and shamelessly indulges in mind-numbing reality television.

When she is not making a living in the busiest city in the world or telling the stories of gorgeous men hot for one another, Taylor can be found raising her two daughters and two terribly misbehaved furry babies in the mountains she calls home.

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