

Redesigning Old Dreams

Dana Cavallon



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Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

REDESIGNING OLD DREAMS

By Dana Cavallon

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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Photo Description

Two men embrace, eyes tightly closed. Light gleams off their brown skin, highlighting solid muscles and prominent veins on strong arms. The man in the foreground is wearing a white tank-top, his face pressed against his shirtless lover's shoulder. A twilight-blue background contributes to the somber feeling of a poignant moment.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I can't stay. This city is no longer my home. I am constantly reminded of what has been lost. All I have left is him but I'm afraid he won't come with me. How do I ask... beg him to stay by my side? Will I be strong enough to walk away if the answer is no?

Sincerely,

Lexi

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: family drama, grief, established couples, friends to lovers, blue collar, Hispanic, romance, HFN

Content warnings: death of a parent

Word count: 14,007

Acknowledgments

Thank you to my wonderful (and wonderfully patient) betas, who helped make it a much stronger story; to Lexi Ander for the inspiring prompt that finally got me to complete a story; and to everyone who worked so hard to make this event possible.

REDESIGNING OLD DREAMS

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CHAPTER ONE

Mateo knocked loudly, determined to get an answer tonight. Something was clearly bothering Eddie, over and above having lost his mother a few months ago. That would be reason enough to worry about him, especially since he'd been taking care of her for years, but in the last week or so, something more seemed to be simmering. Mateo needed to know what it was so he could fix it.

Eddie had grown up as an only child, and Mateo was still teaching him that sharing applied to problems as well as toys. Actually, Eddie was really good at sharing the fun stuff. Mateo felt his cock, already half-erect with anticipation, harden a little more at the thought. It was always eager to see Eddie, but tonight it would have to wait. His top priority right now was to find out what was going on.

Eddie flung open the door. "Seven o'clock on the dot. Does Greenwich use you to track time for them? I swear I could set my watch by you."

Mateo rolled his eyes. "That'd be hard to do when you don't wear one." He stepped inside and kissed Eddie, still amazed that he had the right to do that whenever he wanted. Well, whenever he wanted and they were in private, but still. They'd always acted differently, more macho, in public than when they were alone, so that part was nothing new. The rest, though... It was even more satisfying when Mateo considered how he'd been hiding his feelings since they met in high school. Ten long years he'd stupidly believed he was the only one who wanted more. "Do you even own a watch?"

"I think so. I used to have one, but without kids to take care of, I don't need to keep track of time down to the minute like you do. It's probably around here, somewhere..." Eddie trailed off, like he'd forgotten what he was saying. That wasn't like him, and it increased Mateo's concern.

“You okay?” The question obviously startled Eddie back from wherever he’d gone. It was definitely time to find out what the problem was.

“Yeah. Especially now that you’re here.”

“That’s sappy. You don’t need to butter me up to get laid tonight.”

“But it’s true,” Eddie swore. “The world really is brighter, shinier, when you’re around. Since we’ve been dating, I’m suddenly understanding all those old love songs.” He started to sing one, so Mateo kissed him again. There was more than one advantage to being able to do that.

“You’ll never guess what I found.” Eddie looked pleased with himself, but sad too.

“What?” Mateo couldn’t imagine what would cause that sort of reaction.

“Guess.” But Eddie dragged Mateo into the dining room, where the table was covered with paper.

Mateo swallowed hard past a lump in his throat as he realized what they were. “This is the house you were going to build for your mama.”

“Yeah. It’s, like, every draft I ever drew. At least the ones I gave her.” He’d laid them out in order, from the roughest early versions to the nearly-professional more recent ones. Eddie’s talent was obvious, especially when seeing them all together like that. His love for his mama was too, shining in every line of the beautiful home he’d drawn for her.

“I’m not surprised she kept them, she was probably planning to show them in a gallery after you became a famous architect.”

Eddie ducked his head, looking uncomfortable.

Mateo glanced around, looking for something to change the subject. “Are those what I think they are?” He pointed to drawings of people on the other side of the table.

“That depends what you think they are,” Eddie teased.

Mateo walked around the table to look at them more closely. “I think they’re drawings of your mama and me.” He picked them up one at a time, his breath hitching a little at the memories. Eddie had drawn them cooking

together, watching television, spending time together in various ways over the years. Eddie's mama had taken Mateo under her wing, and he ached with how much he missed her.

"Then they're what you think they are. My two favorite human subjects."

"Your two favorite humans, you mean."

"That too." Eddie said shortly. He clearly didn't want to talk about it anymore. He kissed Mateo and it heated quickly, going from distraction to "fuck me now" in zero-point-three seconds. Eddie took charge and slammed Mateo against the wall as they devoured each other's mouths. *Oh yeah.* He sucked on Eddie's tongue, loving the way Eddie thrust his hips into him. They were almost the same height, so everything lined up perfectly.

Eddie released his mouth to kiss down his neck, and Mateo tilted his head back for better access. He'd meant for sex to wait until after he'd learned what was bothering his boyfriend, but Eddie was very persuasive, even when he wasn't trying. Just his presence was enough, especially when Mateo hadn't seen him for a few days. Besides, Eddie would be more relaxed after sex, and more likely to spill the beans.

Mateo gasped when Eddie bit the sensitive spot at the junction of his neck and shoulder. "Just how hungry are you?" Eddie murmured against his skin.

"Starved, but not for food." Mateo claimed Eddie's mouth again.

Now that he could have Eddie, even one day without him was too long. They had years of catching up to do. Grabbing Eddie's magnificent ass, he enjoyed his right to touch. That butt was a work of art, and felt even better than it looked. His hold on it enabled him to get more friction right where he wanted it. Win-win.

Eddie pulled away and spun Mateo around so his chest pressed against Mateo's back. "Bed," Eddie growled into his ear, lightly nipping the lobe and then licking it as he walked them a few steps in that direction.

"Mmmm hmmm," Mateo moaned, resting his head back against Eddie's shoulder. He knew Eddie didn't like to get naked in his mother's dining room.

It felt weird to Mateo, too, when she'd only died a few months ago. He still expected her to walk in any time.

He was ready to go—in more ways than one—when Eddie rubbed his erection against Mateo and slid one hand down his body to cup his straining cock. They both started panting as Mateo rocked back into Eddie's hard-on, feeling it press against his ass, then forward into Eddie's hand, increasing the pressure and friction on his own cock. A little harder, a little faster. *Oh God*. His breath sped up to keep time with his hips as Eddie urged him on.

Mateo groaned in frustration. So close, but he wanted *more*. He started to turn around, wanting to grind together until they came. Eddie stopped him, pinning his arms. Mateo's dick got even harder. He'd never been into bondage before, and still wasn't sure he'd ever want to do anything hard-core, but being with his best friend made all the difference. It was exciting when Eddie restrained him. Hot. Eddie pulled him to the bedroom, and Mateo's desire increased with every step.

“So... Hi.” Eddie smiled as he ran his fingers through Mateo's thick, black hair, enjoying the rumpled bed-head look, especially because he'd helped create it. They hadn't exactly gotten around to saying hello until now.

“Hi yourself, Wrigley. That's a helluva way to greet a guy.” Mateo mock-glared. “Do you welcome every man who comes through your front door like that? To make sure they come again? Or just the ones you want to distract?”

“Only you. I want to make you come again and again.” Eddie ran a teasing hand down Mateo's body. “And again, Fuente.” He'd started calling Mateo that in high school, after he'd spouted fruit punch out of his nose and mouth like a fountain. Mateo retaliated by calling him Wrigley because he chewed the gum all the time. It was silly, and hardly a nickname one might expect to make him go all tingly, but the names had become oddly affectionate over the years. And Mateo wasn't exactly the sort to use cutesy nicknames. Thank God. Even if it meant never telling him that Eddie privately called him *My Teo*, he would take “Wrigley” over “Snookums” any day. Reason 5,643 why he loved this man.

“Thank you for these.” Mateo ran a hand over his chest, where a few spots looked like they were going to bruise. “Are you finally starting to believe I like it when you use your teeth?”

“Believe, yes. Understand, no. I want to give you pleasure, not pain. Though with my oral fixation, I can hardly complain.”

“I’m not into pain in general, but that particular pain *is* pleasure,” Mateo insisted. “I love it when you mark me, you toothy bastard. It feels good when you do it, and I love seeing the marks later.”

“Yeah, your thrashing and moaning makes that clear. I’m always happy to use my mouth on you.” Eddie displayed his teeth in a shark-like grin, and Mateo shivered.

It still astonished Eddie that something as wonderful as them becoming lovers had come out of the devastation of losing Mama. Without grief to break down the barriers between them, would they ever have ended up in bed together? He still couldn’t believe they’d wanted each other all that time and never known the other felt the same, too afraid to risk the friendship. He could mourn the wasted years, but mostly he thanked God they were together at last.

That was great, amazing, but it also made it so much harder for Eddie to leave. He didn’t want to leave Mateo, couldn’t imagine life without him. If their roles were reversed and Mateo had the chance to realize a lifelong dream, Eddie would go anywhere in the world with him. But relationships were never perfectly balanced, he knew that.

“For some reason, I seem to have worked up an appetite.” Mateo’s teasing voice brought Eddie’s attention back from his worries about the future to this very nice present.

“I made dinner. You ready to eat it now?”

“Oh yeah.” Mateo grinned at him, then grimaced. “Wait, when you say you ‘made’ dinner, does that mean you cooked or did you get a pizza or something?”

“Just because I burned breakfast that one time...” Eddie stuck his bottom lip out as far as he could, giving Mateo his best pout.

“And the other time. And the one after that. We won’t even mention what you’ve done when you’ve attempted dinner. How Rosa Lopez’s son never learned to cook...” Mateo flinched, obviously debating whether that mention of Mama was okay or not.

Most of the time, hearing her name was fine. That’s what made it all the more disconcerting when, with no apparent rhyme or reason, the grief consumed him so completely that he thought he must surely burst. It seemed impossible that a measly human body, even one as big as his, could contain so much pain and survive.

Yeah, he was muscular after years of working construction, but what use were muscles when fighting grief? In an effort to demolish the pain, he’d been working out more and harder since Mama passed. The endorphins never lasted long, but Eddie figured it was better to seek temporary relief in a gym than a bottle.

“I got pizza,” he conceded, “but you wonder why I never learned to cook? Really? With you and Mama around, why would I even try?” Eddie didn’t want to make a production of it, but he wanted Teo to know he was fine hearing her name. At least right now, though post-coital bliss could have something to do with that.

He had cried in bed with Mateo once—God, could he ever live down the humiliation? Mama hadn’t even been mentioned that time, but it was right after she died and Eddie seemed to spontaneously cry for a while there. Teo had held him and stroked his back as he soaked Teo’s shoulder in snot and tears. And then, to Eddie’s everlasting gratitude, Mateo never mentioned it again.

“You flatter me. I can only dream of cooking as well as your mama someday.” Mateo rolled out of bed and slapped Eddie’s ass. “C’mon, slugabed, let’s eat.”

Eddie thought Mateo was a better cook than Mama, but didn’t waste his breath saying so again to a man who refused to believe him. He lay there a few minutes longer, appreciating the view as Mateo bent to pick up his jeans. His smooth, brown ass flexed, practically begging Eddie to bite one round cheek.

Of course, he just had, not more than an hour ago, but Teo's ass was made for biting. And nibbling, licking, and... Eddie groaned.

If he kept thinking along those lines he'd drag Mateo back to bed, and they really should eat first. He didn't have much interest in food since Mama died, not even when Mateo prepared it, which was quite a statement. So he tried to eat something healthy whenever he felt hungry. He realized Mateo was right, they'd worked up an appetite. Eddie was actually hungry now.

Mateo headed downstairs to take care of dinner while Eddie dressed. Even when it was something as basic as pizza, and Eddie's turn to provide the meal, Teo liked tinkering with it. He added herbs and spices, or combined ingredients Eddie would never have thought would taste good together, but always did. Mateo turned every meal into something special. Eddie hated that his talents were wasted in his dead-end job at the diner.

As Eddie put on his own jeans, he steeled himself to tell Teo his big news, and ask the all-important question, "Will you leave your family and come with me?" He'd submitted the college application at Mama's urging, in her last few months. She'd wanted to help him with it, to see him realize at least that much of his dream. At that point he'd still believed his love for his best friend was unrequited, so asking Mateo to go with him hadn't been a consideration.

Then their relationship changed, and the last thing he'd wanted to do was talk about leaving. Especially when he didn't know for sure if it would happen. He didn't want to discuss something so difficult when they were still so new. Why borrow trouble? He wanted time to enjoy it to the fullest, and to build a foundation. He hoped that if and when it became relevant, the relationship would be strong enough to withstand the upheaval of moving to another state.

He was about to find out how well he'd succeeded. Now that the house was sold, he had to move out anyway, so the time had come. No matter how much he dreaded this conversation, he needed to know the answer. He had to start looking for a new place to live, a thousand miles away, and Eddie didn't know whether he should look for himself alone or for both of them. If Teo decided to

go with him—*God, let him say yes*—he would need time to arrange for his own departure too.

Eddie needed to man up, stop procrastinating. Maybe after dinner...

Mateo could see Eddie gnawing on whatever was bothering him along with the pizza. He waited until he'd finished his own mouthful and then asked, "What?"

"What what?" Eddie looked confused. Mateo figured he had good reason, since they'd been eating in hungry silence, stuffing their faces.

"Talk to me."

"About what?"

"About whatever you're chewing on. You look like a cow with its cud. Spit it out."

"Gee, thanks. If I'm a cow, what does that make you, Farmer Johnson?" Eddie grumbled. "I'm chewing on pizza, and it's quite tasty. I'm trying to figure out what you did to it that makes it so good. I'd rather not spit it out. Why waste perfectly good pizza?" Eddie had a pretty good innocent-face, but Mateo wasn't buying it.

"Ha. Ha." Mateo winked as he said it, so Eddie would know he was teasing. Eddie sometimes took things the wrong way since *Señora Lopez* died. "Seriously, we're eating by candle light, which has happened exactly once before. That night, you told me you love me, but this doesn't feel romantic. This feels like..." He waved his hands and wished he was better with words. "It's like a spoonful of sugar to make the medicine go down. I'm getting indigestion worrying about what's on your mind."

"Do I look like Mary Poppins?"

Mateo cocked his head and didn't bother to answer that.

"Okay. Fine." Eddie's gaze dropped to the table, and stayed there. "I planned to tell you tonight anyway. I, um, I need to talk to you about... um..."

Mateo waited patiently. At least, he hoped he *looked* patient. Not that it mattered how he looked, with Eddie staring down at his plate as if he expected it to jump up and perform tricks. What was Eddie so scared to tell him? He must know that Mateo would be there anytime, shovel in hand and ready to bury any bodies necessary, literal or figurative. He'd do anything for Eddie, surely he knew that.

Eddie took a deep breath, then finally looked at Mateo. "I got an offer on the house yesterday. They met my asking price. I didn't think it would happen so fast."

"That's great! Well, rough too. I know I'll miss this place, so I can imagine how hard it is for you..." Mateo knew that couldn't have been what Eddie was so reluctant to tell him. He hesitated, then asked what he thought—hoped—was the cause of Eddie's nervousness, "Do you want to move in with me?"

Now it was Mateo's turn for nerves. It was a little soon, but with their long history, and how much they already loved each other, he thought moving in together was an obvious, natural next step. They'd only been dating a few months, but since Eddie had to move, why not do it now?

Eddie looked too shocked for that to be what he'd had in mind. Did he not want them to live together? At all, or just not yet?

Mateo still worried that he'd taken advantage of Eddie's grief that first time. That Eddie might have preferred to just stay friends. He hadn't been thinking of sex the night Eddie's mother died. He'd only meant to offer comfort when he wrapped his arms around Eddie, a physical reminder that even with his mama gone, Eddie wasn't alone in the world. Mateo was there for him, and always would be.

He was blown away when somewhere along the line it stopped being about comfort and turned sexual. Eddie had stopped crying but continued to hold onto Mateo like he never wanted to let go. Then he'd looked up and suddenly they were kissing. Mateo didn't know who started it, or if they both had. He just knew it was explosive, the realization of every fantasy he'd barely dared to dream since high school.

When they'd talked about it the next day, and every time since, Eddie insisted this—Mateo—was what he wanted, what he'd always wanted. But Eddie was obviously destined for great things, was going to be somebody someday, and Mateo was... not. He was a decent cook, would always make an okay living, but he had no special abilities to deserve somebody like Eddie. Eddie must know that, and if he'd been in his right mind, would he have chosen to tie himself to Mateo?

“Yes, I want to live with you. I really want that.” Eddie's words pulled him from his grim thoughts and eased his fears, but before he could relax too much, Eddie continued, “But I don't want to move in with you. Well, I do, but—”

“You want me to move in with you? That doesn't make sense when you just said you're selling the house.”

“I want us to move in together. Somewhere else.” Eddie took a long drink of his beer, Adam's apple bobbing as he swallowed.

Mateo felt the tension that had knotted his shoulders release. “A new place for the two of us to start a new life together? I like that idea.” He smiled, to reassure Eddie and because it was true. “A lot.”

Eddie still looked anxious, so Mateo reached across the table to hold his hand.

“Yes, but...” Eddie paused again.

“Dodo-head. Spit it out already.”

“Dodo-head? Did you seriously just call me that? What are you, five?”

“Yes, I did. And no, I'm not. You're the one acting twenty years younger than we are. Stop stalling and just tell me what you're thinking.” Mateo could hear the frustration in his own voice, so he tried to soften it as he said, “I love you. Talk to me, Wrigley.”

He hoped the reminder, and especially that nickname, would help Eddie relax and fucking *talk* to him. The name was almost more intimate than “I love you” because it was unique to them.

“I love you, too.” Then Eddie stuck his tongue out. “Fuente.”

“Don’t stick it out if you don’t intend to use it.” Mateo leered. They’d had countless similar exchanges since high school, but it was even better now that the taunt could be—and sometimes was—backed up with pleasurable action.

“You know how I’ve always wanted to be an architect?”

Was Eddie changing the subject or was that a real question?

Either way, Mateo went along with it. “Of course. You’ve only talked about it eleventy-billion times since I met you. Plus, we had to clear your drawings off the table before we could eat, remember?”

All in a rush, Eddie said, “Well, I finally applied to schools last winter because Mama insisted I do it while she was still around. One of my top choices accepted me, and even gave me a scholarship. A generous one that will cover most of my expenses.”

The words ran together enough that it took Mateo a moment to be sure he’d understood. “Congratulations! Of course they accepted you, they’d be crazy not to. And a scholarship too—that’s awesome!”

He lifted his bottle, and then held it there, waiting. Eddie didn’t move, and Mateo was about to set his beer down, or take a drink to cover his embarrassment, when Eddie finally lifted his own bottle to clink them together.

Mateo considered how nervous Eddie was. This seemed like it should have been a straightforward, celebratory conversation. There must be more to it, something big he hadn’t said yet. “Wait. Where are you going to school?”

He had a funny feeling the answer was somewhere other than “here,” or even anywhere in New Mexico. He gritted his teeth to avoid saying anything more until he’d heard Eddie out.

“Um. California. San Francisco, actually. It’s a five-year professional program, which means I should be able to get a job without having to do graduate school after the Bachelor’s. I’ve already waited so long, I hate to spend any more time in school than I have to. You know patience has never been one of my virtues.”

Eddie laughed at himself, a little uncomfortably. “It seems like I’ve been waiting forever, and now that I have a chance, I can’t not go. Schoolwork will give me a new focus, help me stop missing Mama all the time. Everything is the same, except she’s gone. I’m not sure I can handle being around to see someone else living in Mama’s house, but I have to sell it to pay her medical bills. It will be good for me to start fresh somewhere new.”

Eddie finally paused for a breath, but raced on before Mateo could think of how to respond. “San Francisco seems like a good place to live, which is why it was one of my top choices. Talk about gay-friendly! We can be really ‘out’ there, even walk down the street holding hands or do other ‘out’, couple-y things. Definitely in The Castro. Maybe even all of San Francisco, and Berkeley, too. I’m not sure.”

Eddie looked at Mateo with big, pleading puppy-dog eyes as he continued, “I know there’s a real foodie community in the Bay Area. Which means lots of great farmer’s markets. Fresh ingredients of all kinds for you to play with in the kitchen. In our kitchen, the place we’ll live together. The weather is temperate pretty much all year round, and—”

The other shoe dropped as Mateo realized that Eddie was pitching San Francisco to him like some used-city salesman. “Move in together, in San Francisco?”

“Yeah, if we can afford it. We might have to get a place with roommates, or in one of the nearby cities and commute if—”

“Okay, maybe not San Francisco, fine.” Mateo waved that off impatiently. “But in California, yes?”

Eddie nodded. “Yes. Please. I know it will be hard to leave your family, but—”

“Leave my family?” Mateo was horrified.

“Well. Yeah, but don’t you think maybe the little ones are old enough now that it’d be okay?”

“Be okay?” Mateo sounded like a parrot, but he couldn’t help it.

“You could still send money home to them, that part wouldn’t even have to change. I have the scholarship, and I’m sure we could both find work there. There are lots of construction jobs because they’re always building more homes and offices all over the Bay Area. And there are tons of restaurants, so maybe you could even be head chef somewhere nice and get to design your own menus and whatnot.”

Eddie kept talking, but Mateo heard it as a buzzing in his ears rather than distinct words.

“You really think I could walk in and get that kind of job in a foodie area when I can’t find one here?” Mateo was stunned, though he shouldn’t have been. Eddie was an optimist, always seeing the bright side or silver lining in every situation.

“Well—”

“Never mind. That’s not the point,” Mateo heard himself say harshly. “How could you think I’d leave my brother and sisters when they need me?”

“I wouldn’t.” Eddie protested. “You wouldn’t. We both put family first, even when it means hardly having lives of our own. That’s how it should be, but I want us to have a life together too. I think this could be good for your siblings, to have a little more independence. Dolores has flown the nest, Angelia is about to, and the other two are in high school.”

“Rafe’s not. He’s only thirteen.” There didn’t seem to be enough air in the room, and Mateo felt close to passing out. “He doesn’t start high school for another year.”

“I’ve always wondered why your aunt never helped more, but maybe she could now?” Eddie sounded so hopeful. Did he really think it was that easy?

“They’re *mine*. My family, my responsibility. *Tia* Isabella can barely take care of herself. No way would I trust my brother and sisters to her care.”

“Still, they need you less than they used to.”

Mateo felt like Eddie had kicked him in the chest. Almost his whole life had been devoted to caring for his family. Ever since he was eleven and his own mama died after giving birth to Rafael and his father fell apart.

Mateo didn't understand how his mother gave birth to four kids with no problems but then the fifth one killed her. The *how* wasn't what mattered. Mateo had long since stopped asking *how* or *why* and simply accepted his responsibility. His dad couldn't or wouldn't take care of them all on his own. With no other capable family nearby to help, it was for Mateo to do. And he had. He did. He closed his eyes and tried to stop hyperventilating.

“Teo, are you okay? What just happened here?”

No, he wasn't fucking okay.

Having Eddie as his best friend all these years, and now his boyfriend, was the best thing that had ever happened to him. With Eddie he could be himself, could have fun, let go. He didn't have to know all the answers or make all the decisions with Eddie. Much as he loved his family, he'd treasured those moments of escape.

Now Eddie wanted him to leave them entirely? Abandon them for his own desires?

“I—” Mateo stumbled to his feet. “I need to go.”

CHAPTER TWO

Oh, that went well. Not.

Eddie threw his beer across the room. The sound of the bottle hitting the wall was darkly satisfying. Even knowing he was going to have to clean it up, he liked the spray of beer foam on the wall. To hell with it.

Mateo had left. Just got up and walked out the door, as if he didn't even see Eddie trying to stop him. Trying to apologize. To do something—anything—to make it better. Eddie had known telling him wouldn't be easy, but it had gone far worse than he'd ever imagined.

He eventually cleaned up the mess, and it felt good to have something to do. He forced himself not to call, to give Mateo as much time and space as he needed. He sent a text though: *I'm sorry. I love you.*

Mateo texted back a few minutes later: *Luv u 2. Need some time. Talk soon.*

So Eddie waited.

And paced.

And waited.

He tried not to throw more shit, but it was tempting. He picked up a vase he'd never liked and considered how it would shatter. One less thing to pack or donate... He reluctantly set it down and made himself walk away.

It was reassuring that Mateo still loved him, and Eddie clung to that. He also knew that love wasn't enough, and that terrified him. People who loved each other broke up all the time, for many reasons. Eddie had never dreamed they might break up. Not that he was sure that had happened. But he also couldn't be sure it hadn't.

Probably they weren't over. Mateo just needed some time, like he said. Then they'd talk and figure out a way to make it work. Probably.

Eddie decided to try being productive instead of destructive. Pack vases instead of break them. But he had trouble concentrating, and realized how useless his efforts were when he went to the refrigerator to get another beer

and discovered one of Mama's favorite necklaces lying next to the milk. Then he spent ten frustrating minutes ransacking the kitchen in search of the bottle opener. He and Mateo had used it a couple of hours ago, so he knew it was there somewhere. He finally gave up and opened his beer on the edge of the counter.

He found the missing bottle opener when he returned the necklace to Mama's jewelry case. What had he been thinking when he pulled that odd switcheroo? Unless the house had suddenly acquired a poltergeist with a strange sense of humor, it was obvious that Eddie wasn't even close to thinking straight.

He gave up and went to the gym.

Mateo drove around after he left Eddie's house. Turned left here. Another left. Right turn there. No rhyme or reason. Just the need to keep moving.

It wasn't the safest thing, to drive in that state of mind, but he did it anyway. It was one of the best ways for him to think. Growing up with a houseful of kids, the car was sometimes the only place he could grab time for himself. He made sure he didn't hit anything or run over anyone. He spared that much attention for the road. Most of his focus was inward. His conversation with Eddie replayed on a constant loop in his head. Eddie had asked him to move to California. It was a big commitment. Eddie had often talked about them growing old together. This was a strong statement that he meant it. That was the good news, and it was excellent. Mateo tried to focus on that for a moment.

The problem was the rest of it. How could Mateo choose between the family who'd needed him since he was eleven and the man he'd loved since he was fourteen? Talk about "damned if you do, damned if you don't." If it were anyone but Eddie, there would be no question—he'd have laughed in their face and blown it off. Eddie was different. Special. He couldn't blow Eddie off. Blow him... Oh yeah, he could definitely blow Eddie. Often, and with great pleasure. Not that this was about sex. Except that it kind of was. If they were still platonic friends, he wouldn't even consider moving to California with

Eddie. Once sex was involved, it changed everything. Suddenly, one plus one became a whole lot more than two.

Glowing eyes and a dark shape appeared in the road ahead.

Mateo slammed on his brakes. Adrenaline flooded his system. The car screeched to a stop as the deer ran off.

The silence that followed seemed loud, filled with the rapid beats of his heart as it tried to pound out of his chest. Mateo slumped in relief, and waited for his pulse to settle down. There was no one else around, so he took his time. That could have been really bad. He should be paying more attention to the road. He took a deep breath and counted to ten before continuing on.

God. How could he even think about leaving his family? They depended on him. Rafe more than the girls, because he was the youngest and because he needed Mateo to show him how to be a good man. Was abandoning his family to run off with his lover the sort of example he wanted to set for his baby brother? Their father had essentially abandoned them when their mother died, despite being physically present. Could Mateo somehow do the opposite, and be physically absent but still there for them?

Eddie was much more productive on Saturday. Faced with a choice to keep busy or go bonkers, he made more progress on the house in one day than he had in two weeks previously. That was good, but it didn't stop him from missing Teo.

The house was filled with almost as many memories of Mateo as of Mama. The big stain on the carpet in front of the television was the origin of their nicknames. Eddie just happened to say something funny right as Mateo took a big gulp of fruit punch. That was his story and he stuck to it. He certainly hadn't expected Mateo to spray red stuff out of his nose and mouth like a demented fountain. It made a huge mess and stained quickly, as they discovered when trying frantically to clean up before Mama saw it.

There was no way she wouldn't notice it, so Eddie had nervously confessed when she got home. He was afraid she'd ground him until he was

thirty, but instead she'd said something about knowing better than to worry about unimportant things like carpets. Then she asked for details, and laughed when he described Mateo-the-fountain, thereafter known as Fuente. Eddie's "punishment" had been to take over doing the laundry, now that he'd learned something about how fabric stained.

Eddie caught himself standing there, staring at the carpet and remembering happier days. He shook it off and got back to work.

At least some decisions were easy, like getting rid of the mountain of old *TV Guides*. He'd never understood why Mama insisted on keeping them. But when he saw how empty the living room looked after they were gone, he was tempted to pull them back out of the recycling bin. He stood there indecisively, then forced himself to walk away.

He went through the pantry next, finding and tossing cans and bottles that had gone bad years ago. That included a jar of his favorite pickles, with an expiration date of February, 2005. A bottle of olive oil that expired in June, 2003. What a waste. Those weren't even the oldest things he found. All the way at the back corner of the bottom shelf he found a can of Cream of Mushroom soup. It had a date he couldn't quite read but seemed to be sometime in the 1990s. He wondered why Mama had bought that in the first place, since neither of them liked mushrooms. He set the can in the trash gingerly, afraid it might explode.

A few minutes later, Eddie stumbled across a cardboard box that brought his frenetic momentum to an abrupt halt. The word "Decorations" in Mama's elegant writing was surrounded with designs drawn by his own childish hand. He vividly recalled the day he'd put them there.

He'd been seven years old and wanted to contribute his own decorations as Mama worked on a cake for a holiday party. She'd given him markers, then praised his artistic ability. He hadn't known about architecture yet, but that was the first time Eddie could remember planning to have a career that involved drawing, and Mama encouraging him to pursue it. Between that and all the special occasions it had been used for, the box held a lot of good memories.

He set it reverently on a counter, unwilling to pack it away yet with the other stuff to keep. He decided that was a good time to take a break and go for a run. He didn't want to empty Mama's house too quickly. The more he did, the less it looked like her home. He needed to get away for a while. It was unlikely, but maybe this time he'd finally succeed in outrunning the grief.

Eddie returned home feeling refreshed enough to tackle the house again. He took a shower and decided to clear out the file cabinets. That was a way to do something useful without altering the appearance of the house. He expected it to be brainless busywork, but quickly discovered it required making decisions. Did he need to keep these papers or not? What about those? If they were important, what exactly did he need to do with them? Mateo was so much better with real-world things like that, Eddie ached anew at his absence. He wished Mateo were there to offer advice, but a hug would have been nice too. Even disposable papers required another decision, whether to toss them in recycling or shred them. What sort of personal information did you have to protect for someone who was dead? Eddie cringed at even thinking that word in connection with Mama.

He made a start sorting her clothes a few times before he managed to stick with it. He felt guilty, like he was invading her privacy. It was also the most painful task, because her closet smelled like her. He buried his face in her favorite sweater and hugged it close, aching with the knowledge that he'd never feel her arms around him again. He finally made himself fold the sweater and put it in a box, but his eyes kept straying to its bright colors. He decided he wasn't ready to pack it away just yet, so he set it on the dresser where he could see it easily. He could also pet it there when he walked by, feeling the soft fuzziness under his hand, so familiar from the million times she'd worn it.

Eddie stopped again when he found a scarf Mateo had given Mama for Mother's Day the year they were fifteen. Eddie had helped him pick it out, after Teo said he wanted to do something to thank her for her kindness to him. She'd given him more parental love than he'd gotten since his own mama died. Eddie stroked it between his fingers, enjoying the silkiness of it and remembering how Mama had treasured that scarf. He thought Mateo would

probably want to keep it, so he set it aside in the growing pile to ask him about. He knew Teo missed her too, maybe almost as much as he missed Teo.

He was discovering a sentimental attachment to all sorts of ridiculous things. He added a few bent hair pins to the “keep” box, along with slips of paper Mama had used as bookmarks, stashed in a pile on her bedside table. When in doubt, he kept stuff. Better to err on the side of keeping too much, even if it meant moving things he’d eventually decide he didn’t want. He might have to rent some storage space for what seemed like junk, but it was worth it. He could always get rid of things later, but there’d be no getting back anything he threw away or donated now.

After a sleepless night, Mateo got up early Saturday morning and went for a run. It felt good to move his body, to feel his arms and legs and lungs all pumping together, moving him forward. His thoughts pounded in rhythm with his feet on the hard-packed dirt. His feet took him somewhere, but his thoughts made no more progress than a hamster on a wheel.

He’d hoped a run would clear his head, but he only came up with more questions and confusion. He finally gave up and went home to shower, then tried driving around some more. Wasn’t there a television show or something with a tag-line about the answers being out there? Maybe he’d find some if he drove around long enough.

Hours later, Mateo found himself in front of his sister’s place. Dolores had been Mateo’s closest friend until he met Eddie. He still shared a lot with her, so it wasn’t surprising that random driving-while-thinking would end up here. But he wasn’t sure he wanted to talk to her about this. Did he want his sister to know he’d even considered leaving them? And, worse, that he was still considering it. Hanging out with her would be a good distraction though, if they talked about other things. That decided, he got out of the car and knocked on her door.

He realized it wasn’t going to work out like he’d planned when Dolores took one look at him and led him straight to the kitchen. She started making tea without saying a word. It was what she did when she thought any of her

siblings needed taking care of. They'd all learned to shut up and drink it, whether they wanted it or not. Dolores was bossy and hardheaded, and a hot beverage wasn't worth fighting about, not even on a day as warm as this one.

"Do you miss the ivory tower at all?" Mateo asked as he sat at her tiny table. He wouldn't argue about the drink, but that didn't mean he couldn't try to distract her.

"Nope, I like the real world. Making money is nice." She stopped what she was doing to look at him. "That wasn't a half-bad attempt to change the subject, but it won't work."

"Hey," he protested, "That's a valid question. I thought you might want to go to graduate school. You could be regretting that you hadn't. Or maybe thinking of going after all. Are you?"

"Uh-huh. It is a valid question, but it's also one we talked about a few days ago." Dolores arched an eyebrow at him.

Oh. Right. No way now to convince her he didn't have something major on his mind. It'd take something big—like Eddie's bombshell—for Mateo to have forgotten her telling him how much she loved her new job, loved making money. And, oh yeah, was glad to be done with school.

Dolores sat at the other side of the table and set a mug in front of each of them. "What happened, honey?" If she was calling him "honey", Mateo must look a lot worse than he thought.

She wouldn't back off until he told her, so he might as well get it over with. It was easier on his pride to think of it that way, rather than admit he went to his little sister when something upset him.

"Eddie is moving." His voice broke on the last word, so he took a gulp of tea. Big mistake. It scalded his mouth and throat. Duh. Of course it was hot. But the physical pain almost felt good in contrast to what he'd been feeling since running out of Eddie's house.

"I'm not surprised Eddie is moving. The big 'For Sale' sign in front of his house was kind of a clue. Since you have your own place now, tiny as it is, I thought he'd move in with you, actually. Oh, no!" Dolores dropped the

sarcasm as her eyes widened and she brought her hand to her mouth in the classic gesture of horror. “Did you ask and he said no?”

“No. Well, yeah. No. Sort of.” Mateo fumbled to a stop, realizing he was making no sense. He took a deep breath, like Eddie always did, and tried again. “Yes, I asked him to move in. He didn’t exactly say no but he also didn’t exactly say yes. He...”

This was where it got hard to explain, probably because Mateo didn’t understand it himself. “Eddie is going away to college. In California. He wants me to move there with him.” It sounded simple when he said it like that, and yet it was anything but.

“He wants you to move to California? Now?” Dolores was as shocked as Mateo.

“Yeah. Well, soon. After he packs up the house, I guess.”

“What’d you say when he asked?”

“I left.” That sounded bad. “I just... I didn’t know what to say. What to think. So I left. Drove around for a while. Went for a run this morning. Drove around some more, and now I’m sitting at your table drinking tea. I still don’t know what to think.”

Mateo pounded his fist on the table hard enough to make his sister, and the tea mugs, jump. “Dammit. Dammit, dammit, dammit.” He pounded the table in time with the words.

“He’s supposed to be my best friend. To love me. How can he not know what a question like that does to me? If he does know, how could he ask it?” His chest ached, and his heart felt like it was in little pieces. With sharp edges.

“Hmmm...” Dolores twisted her long, black braid, running it through her fingers and wrapping it around her hand. Playing with her hair was one of her tells, a sign she was thinking deeply. Mateo hoped she’d come up with something amazing, some way to avoid breaking Eddie’s heart along with his own, because he was stumped.

“Eddie loves you, there’s no question of that. And he knows you better than anyone. Even me, I think, and I don’t say that easily. So he must

know...” She trailed off and they considered that for a moment. Dolores continued twirling her hair and Mateo resisted—barely—the urge to pound the table again.

“Then—”

“Eddie loves you,” she repeated, interrupting him. “So naturally he wants you to go with him. That makes sense, actually. If you didn’t have a family to look after, it would be easy. Obvious. Of course he’d ask, and of course you’d go with him.”

“Yeah, that would be awesome. Plus, I’d love to live in a foodie area like California. I wouldn’t mind the opportunity to try for a great job there, even though I don’t have Eddie’s faith that I would actually get one. But I *do* have a family to look after.” He’d always thought Dolores was the smart one, but now he had to wonder. The family wasn’t exactly a minor detail.

“Yeaaaaah...” she said slowly. “I’m finally done with school and making some decent money. Angelia’s basically done with high school, and I’m pretty sure she’s planning to get a job rather than go to college. So it’s really just Elena and Rafael to consider.” She took a sip of her tea and seemed to collect her thoughts. “You know, Rafe is older now than you were when you started taking care of us.”

Mateo hadn’t thought about it that way before, and it made everything look different. He felt a sudden spark of hope, a lightbulb going off over his head. “Would you...” He trailed off, unsure how to put such a radical thought into words.

She waited a few beats, then prompted him. “Would I what?”

“Maybe...” He tried again. “I don’t want to ask any more of you than you can comfortably do, but... The kids are older, like you said. They don’t need as much supervision as they used to, and you have more time now that you’re just working, and not going to school too...”

Mateo took a deep breath and tried to decide if he was really going to ask the question, the incredible possibility that had occurred to him.

“I wish it wasn’t so hard for you to ask for help.” Dolores shook her head, but she was smiling. “That was my point, that it’s not all on you. You’re not the only *responsible* adult in the family anymore. Let the rest of us help.”

“Really?” Mateo felt like he’d just fallen down the rabbit hole and everything was topsy-turvy. Could it really be that easy? “Do you think the others would want to? Enough to make a difference? I’m not about to drop it all in your lap.”

He realized he’d overlooked some important things in his excitement. “No. I can’t go. I didn’t have a choice about losing my childhood, but I don’t want to take Rafe’s away. I wouldn’t feel right making the kids grow up sooner than they have to just because I want to play house with Eddie. And you deserve some time to be carefree after finishing school. You should be out having fun, not taking care of your siblings.” Mateo was supposed to take care of them, not let them take care of him.

“And what have you been doing all these years, hmm? Also, you wouldn’t be ‘playing house’ with Eddie. Don’t diminish it like that, when anyone can see you two are the real deal.” Dolores poked him in the chest. “You know how you have that really annoying tendency to feel guilty about all sorts of stupid things you shouldn’t even remotely feel guilty about?”

“Um...” He mulled that over, but came up with no response. She wasn’t expecting one, was she?

Dolores rolled her eyes. “I’m just saying that I know you won’t drop it all on me. On anyone. That’s not who you are, but I wish you’d share at least a little of it. I’ve wanted to help more for years and you’ve been so busy being Macho Protector that you haven’t let me. I’m not sure you’ve even heard me asking.”

“You’ve asked? What? When? How did I miss it? Are you sure?”

“Ha. I *knew* you hadn’t heard me, and you just admitted it. You owe me, and it’ll be a doozy. Big Bro, have you ever known me *not* to ask for something I wanted?”

He had to laugh at that. “That would be a big, fat ‘no’, Sis.” He reached over and tugged her braid, but then sobered as he considered what that meant. “Okay, so ask me again? Slowly, in small words so I can understand. I promise I’m listening now.”

“I want to help out. I hate that you’ve taken the whole burden of caring for our family on yourself. When you were eleven and I was only nine, it made sense. But I’ve been asking you to let me help more since I hit my teens.”

She sighed. “You insisted I needed to go to college, and I’m grateful you made that possible for me. Because of that, I have a career I love. I don’t make a lot of money, but it’s enough. It’s my turn, Mateo. I don’t want you to lose the first real thing you’ve had for yourself. I hate how much you’ve always sacrificed, and that you wouldn’t let us help more.”

That... was possible, actually. When they were kids, he’d had to maintain tight control in order to keep the family safe. He’d been afraid one wrong move could make it collapse like a soufflé. It was sturdier now, more like a quiche, but he’d been so caught up in the details he’d missed the bigger picture.

“I...” Everything was changing so suddenly. It was making him a little dizzy. “I’m sorry. I thought I was doing the right thing.”

“I know you did, and it was, for years. We’re lucky to have you as a big brother. You *always* do the right thing.” Dolores spoke soothingly. “Or what you *think* is the right thing, which isn’t necessarily the same anymore.” She blew a raspberry at him.

He laughed, but couldn’t resist pointing out, “That’s hardly the best way to convince me you’re a mature adult.”

“Yeah, yeah. You’re listening to me now, right? And you’ll let me help.”

That last definitely wasn’t a question, but he answered it anyway. “Yes, I’ll let you help. Thank you. I’m sorry I was so...”

“Pig-headed? Macho? Annoyingly stubborn?” She offered helpfully, eyes innocently wide as she batted her lashes at him.

He sighed, and yanked her braid again. “Those weren’t the words I had in mind, but I guess I can’t argue with them. I think it’s time for a family meeting.”

Mateo wasn’t sure they could really make it work so he could go to California with Eddie. But even if he couldn’t go, he needed to hear his siblings out. He might even give them some of the control he’d held so tightly for so long. Clearly, it was time for some things to change.

CHAPTER THREE

Eddie called Dolores on Sunday afternoon. They'd never been as close to each other as they both were to Mateo, but she was a good friend. He needed that right now, and he wanted to talk to her about Mama's things. He wondered if Dolores had talked to her brother since Friday, but he was determined not to ask.

"Hey, Eddie. What's up?"

"Hi, Dolores. I, um, I've been going through Mama's clothes and stuff. I thought you and your sisters might like to see if there's anything you'd want to have. I sold the house, so I need to clear everything out."

"I heard. I'm not sure whether to say congratulations or I'm sorry. Both, I guess. And thanks, it's generous of you to offer. Have you already picked out what you want to keep? Do you want some company for that, or would you rather be alone? I'm pretty good at pretending not to notice men cry..." She trailed off, obviously afraid she'd offended him and unable to see his smile over the phone.

Eddie imagined her sitting with some sobbing guy, prattling on as she looked anywhere but at the man in tears. She'd make him some tea and give him time to pull himself together. Nice as that might be, Eddie would prefer not to be that guy.

"Nah, I'm good, but thank you. I'm keeping almost a full box of her clothes. Which is kind of insane, since it's not like I can wear them. Especially since some of it is stuff like that fluffy, garishly-colored sweater she wore all the time. It was her favorite, but I think it's hideous." Eddie laughed nervously.

"It's not crazy at all. It's good to keep some of her things, maybe even especially that sort of stuff. But I bet you never told your mama you thought her sweater was ugly."

"Oh, God no. I wouldn't have dared. She wore it all the time and I never said a word. Well, except to tell her she was beautiful."

“You lied to your mama, Eddie?” Dolores chided him. “Tsk tsk. You bad boy.”

“No lie. *She* was beautiful, even if the sweater distracted the eye from her beauty a little.”

“Oh, you charmer. Mateo is a lucky man.”

“Uh...” That caught him off guard. He asked, cautiously, “Have you, um, talked to your brother recently?”

“Yeah. We had a little ‘come to Jesus’ talk yesterday. I’ll let him tell you about it. Or not, I guess, but I think he probably will. He just needs some time to get a few things straight in his head.”

“Not too straight, I hope.” Eddie was relieved Dolores was so unconcerned. That made it easier for him to joke, and a little deflection helped him resist the temptation to pump her for information.

“Nope, Mateo is wonderfully bent. That’s what makes you two perfect for each other, you—” She choked, then giggled. “I was about to say ‘your kinks fit together’ but then I realized how else that could be interpreted. I really don’t want to know anything about my brother’s kinks. Or yours. Eww. Let’s just say you’re two pieces of a puzzle and leave it at that. I need some brain-bleach now, please.”

Eddie enjoyed Mateo’s kinks, but didn’t need Dolores thinking about them, or his own. “You’re the one with the Psych background, you should know, is brain-bleach even possible? So how’s work going, are you still enjoying it?”

“Well, people have a wonderful, terrible ability to block out things they’d rather not remember. So you could say that’s a form of brain-bleach. Let’s change the subject now, please, because while we’re talking about it I can’t forget what I want it for.”

She paused. “You dirty, sly boy, that’s why you’re still talking about it. You *like* thinking about Mateo’s kinks. Duh.”

“Wait a minute,” Eddie protested. “I asked a legitimate question because you brought it up and I was curious. Then I tried to change the subject by asking you how work is going. I’m totally innocent.”

Dolores laughed. “Innocent you’re not, but fair enough. *Mea culpa*. Work is going great, thanks. I love it. Hey, I need to get going now. Is it okay if the girls and I come by next weekend to look at your mama’s stuff? Is that soon enough? That works best for my schedule, and gives you more time to go through things again and see if there’s anything else you want to keep.”

“Sure, that’s fine. And, Dolores,” He cleared his throat. “Thanks.”

He hung up feeling a lot better than before he’d called. Dolores was almost as happy as they were when they got together. She said she’d been waiting years for them to figure it out. So if she’d talked to Mateo and wasn’t worried about them... It was no guarantee, but it gave Eddie some hope.

He still wasn’t quite ready to face more packing, so he went out to get more boxes and some groceries. He might not be a cook, but he was capable of putting peanut butter and jelly on bread, and he did so when he got home. That was perfect food for an iffy appetite because he could eat a few bites here and there. He’d eventually finish a whole sandwich that way. Though he realized he’d put too much jelly on this one when he took a bite and it squirted all over his chest. He grumbled to himself as he set the sandwich aside and stripped off the sticky shirt impatiently. He rinsed it off in the sink, flung it across the back of a chair to dry, and got back to work.

This whole horrible project would have been easier with Mateo’s help. Not easy, never that, but less difficult than doing it by himself. Eddie had thought—hoped—they’d be deciding together what to keep for their new home. He was romantic enough to have thought that love built on years of friendship, as theirs was, could overcome anything. That together they would build a future that worked for them. He’d thought Mateo felt the same way, wanted the same things Eddie did.

He really shouldn’t be doubting Mateo yet. He’d never seen him that mad, that’s all. Or gone a whole weekend without talking to him. That’s why he couldn’t help feeling worried despite his assurances to himself. Worried. Ha. What a pallid word to describe the dread twisting his intestines into heaving knots.

Looking around the kitchen made those knots twist tighter as he considered questions like whether he should keep Mama's waffle iron or not. Eddie certainly had no need for it by himself. With Mateo it was another story, as he could see them having decadent brunches on weekend mornings.

They'd walk to a farmer's market and pick up some fresh strawberries. Eddie would wash and prep them while Teo made waffles and worked his kitchen magic. Then they'd sit at a sunny table and feed each other bites messy with whipped cream...

A familiar, long-awaited knock at the door interrupted his fantasy. His pulse leaped and he almost jumped out of his own skin, but he managed not to drop the waffle iron. He set it carefully on the counter, then gave it a little pat for luck. *Please let that dream of brunch come true.* He didn't know about making wishes on kitchen appliances, but figured Aladdin hadn't expected a genie in a lamp either. What the hell, he rubbed it three times for good measure.

Taking a deep, calming breath, he forced himself to walk slowly—so difficult when he wanted to run—to the door. Another breath, and then he opened it to see Mateo on his doorstep. At last. This was only Sunday night, but it felt like an eternity had passed since he was here on Friday.

He was a gorgeous sight, despite looking like he hadn't gotten any more sleep the past two nights than Eddie had. His cheekbones were even more pronounced than usual and, tightened with tension, his lips and jaw appeared more chiseled.

They stood there looking at each other in a silent stand-off.

Mateo stayed outside and made no move to come in. Did he think Eddie wouldn't let him in, or did he not want to enter? If he didn't want to come in, was he here to break up rather than work things out?

Then Eddie realized that he was standing defensively in the doorway, blocking it. He opened the door wider and stepped aside, in an unspoken invitation.

Mateo came in and shut the door, but he stood awkwardly in the foyer rather than kissing or embracing Eddie as usual.

“I’m sorry.” They spoke in unison, breaking the strained silence.

Eddie saw a small smile on Mateo’s face, the corner of his mouth quirking up slightly, and felt his own face mirror the expression.

Then Mateo said, “I shouldn’t have walked out on you. I overreacted when you suggested moving so far from my family. It’s no excuse. I heard you say they didn’t need me, and I just... just lost it, I guess.”

“Mateo, no. I didn’t say your family didn’t need—”

“I know you didn’t. That’s what I heard, though. It took me a few days to realize the difference. I kept wondering how you could possibly say such a thing. Of course, you hadn’t. You wouldn’t. I’m stupid, and it takes me a while, but—”

“Teo, stop. Just stop. You’re not stupid. I hate it when you say you are. And you know I feel the same way about family that you do. I could never have left Mama,” Eddie’s voice caught and he had to swallow around the lump in his throat before continuing, “when she needed me.”

“I do know that, and I walked out on you anyway. That *was* stupid. I finally figured it out, but it took so long and I was afraid I’d lost you. I—”

“You didn’t lose me. You’re stuck with me. And it wasn’t that long, it only felt like it because you weren’t talking to me. Dumbass.”

“I know you are, but what am I?” Mateo sing-songed, playing along with Eddie’s attempt to lighten the discussion. He grinned, as Eddie had intended him to, but it faded quickly. “Seriously, can you forgive me, Wrigley? I should at least have talked to you instead of running out like that.”

“You’re right, you should have.”

“Should I apologize again? I am sorry.”

“I know you need time to think things through, but it sucked not hearing from you for so long. Please don’t do that again.” Eddie didn’t like how desperate he sounded, but he let it stand.

“I’ll try not to. Sometimes I just need to get away, to drive and think for a bit.”

“I know, but try to talk to me first next time, okay? I’ll try to explain things better, but don’t shut me out if I screw up.”

“Eddie—”

“We’re better together. Without me around to encourage you to get out of your own head and take the damn leap once in a while, you’d sit around thinking all the time and never actually *do* anything.”

“Oh, nice, like you’re one to talk, Mr. Impulsive. You’d have gotten into a lot more trouble over the years if I didn’t make you look before you leap sometimes,” Mateo protested.

“I know, that’s my point. We complement each other, but it’s hard to do that if we’re not talking to each other. And yes, of course I forgive you, Fuente. It was my fault too.” With the ritual exchange of stupid nicknames completed, everything was okay again. Mostly, anyway. Eddie didn’t know exactly how it would work, only that it would. That was what mattered, the rest was just logistics.

It felt like he’d waited forever, but at last Mateo’s arms were around him again. Mateo squeezed almost too hard, but Eddie reveled in it. He buried his face into Teo’s neck and breathed in that beloved scent. *My Teo.*

Mateo held Eddie tight, half-afraid if he let go it would turn out to have been a dream. It had only been two days, but there was no “only” about it. If this was a dream, he wanted to enjoy it before he woke up. He kept his eyes closed as he pressed a kiss to Eddie’s bare chest and slid one hand up his ribcage. He stopped with his thumb just below Eddie’s nipple, teasing a little. Mateo didn’t know why Eddie had answered the door shirtless, but he was happy to take advantage of it now. Eddie caressed his back, and Mateo’s white tank top was suddenly in the way. He wanted it gone, and raised his head intending to remove it, but then they were kissing, messily, hungrily, trying to make up for lost time. Eddie started making needy little whimpering sounds

that turned Mateo on even more. He thought how much better that vibration would feel on his cock. The heat and slick wetness. The tight suction, and that thing Eddie did with his tongue... Mateo wanted that. Now. But not here.

He decided it was his turn to take charge for a change, so he wrapped his hands around Eddie's biceps and shoved him back a few inches. Mateo enjoyed Eddie's startled look. His eyes were wide, pupils dilated, and his breath came in short, panting gasps. His lips were parted and shiny, and Mateo couldn't resist licking them before spinning Eddie around so they both faced the stairs. As soon as they reached the bed, he pushed Eddie onto it and started pulling off his shirt even before Eddie landed. He wanted them naked, needed to feel Eddie's bare skin against his, so Mateo toed off his shoes, then knelt to remove Eddie's.

He looked up to see Eddie looking as desperate as Mateo felt. He was sitting at the edge of the bed with his belt open and hands shaking as he fumbled with his fly. That put his crotch at eye-level, pure temptation and no reason to resist. Mateo buried his face in it, inhaled deeply through his nose, and felt his dick get painfully hard at the musky smell of Eddie's arousal.

Mateo's mouth watered with the desire to feel Eddie's bare cock. He wanted to taste skin, not denim. To lick the satiny head, feel the heat against his tongue. He needed Eddie to fuck his mouth, filling him. To have Eddie's talented mouth on his own cock at the same time.

He started to rise off his knees to make that happen just as Eddie grabbed him and hauled upward. They were both startled and off balance, so romance quickly turned into slapstick. He ended up on top of Eddie, which was good. But they nearly landed on the floor in the process, saved only by a mad flailing of arms and legs which kept them, somehow, on the bed. Barely.

Balanced precariously at the edge, tangled together and shaking with laughter, they nearly fell onto the floor anyway. Eddie saved them just in time with a quick tug. He rolled them safely to the middle of the bed and straddled Mateo, pinning his arms above his head. That lined their cocks up nicely, and the laughter provided arrhythmic friction. Not what Mateo had intended, but he liked it.

“You want to wrestle? I had something else in mind.” Mateo thrust his hips up to make his point, then did it again because it felt good, as he arched his back to suck on Eddie’s bottom lip. It was difficult, because they were too aroused not to kiss, too amused not to laugh. Not a combination Mateo would have thought possible before, but with Eddie everything was different, better.

Sex with his best friend was the most incredible thing Mateo had ever experienced. All the joys of a new lover—the excitement, the nervousness, the thrill of discovery—combined with the deep love, ease, and tenderness that came only from many years together. Most people were lucky if they got one or the other. Mateo felt humbled and blessed to share both with this beautiful man.

Arousal overcame amusement as they kissed, tongues sliding together. Eddie’s hips ground down, Mateo’s pushed up, and they rocked against each other in a slow, steady buildup without the earlier urgency. Mateo still wanted their jeans off, wanted to feel skin against skin from head to toe, and knew Eddie wanted the same thing. But right here, right now, was too perfect to change.

A few times they’d spent hours doing nothing but kissing, lost in the textures of lips and teeth and tongues. After coming so close to losing each other, this seemed like a good time to do that again. Mateo wanted to take his time, to touch and taste every part of the man he loved.

Eddie clearly had other plans. “Naked wrestling could be fun.” He yanked open Mateo’s button fly as he spoke, making it difficult to focus on his words.

“Huh?”

“You asked if I wanted to wrestle. I’m answering your question.” Eddie was a man on a mission as he rose up a little to shove Mateo’s jeans down.

“Oh, right.” Mateo gasped as Eddie’s weight pressed back down on him, with a thrust of hips that pushed Eddie’s cloth-covered cock against Mateo’s nakedness. “I was thinking... Mmmm, yeah... Sixty-nine.”

“I like the way you think.” Eddie hurriedly shoved his own jeans out of the way.

While Eddie got naked, Mateo lifted his head to lick one nipple. Eddie didn't like teeth as much as he did, but the brown nub got firmer when he closed his teeth gently around it as he continued lashing with his tongue. Eddie pressed his chest into Mateo's face, silently asking for more. Then not so silently, as he made those needy noises again. Mateo wondered if he could make Eddie come like that. He made a mental note to try that another day as Eddie pulled back and turned around. His thick, gorgeous cock waved hello above Mateo's face.

Mateo moaned as he felt Eddie's hot breath on his own cock, teeth gently sliding the length of it. No actual biting, just the promise, the exciting possibility of it. Mateo's hips jerked, seeking more, and his breath sped up. Eddie's tongue swiped across the head of Mateo's cock, and then suddenly swallowed him down. Christ, that was good. His eyes closed as he lost himself in the heat of Eddie's mouth, until he felt something bump his nose. He looked up to see Eddie's cock begging for attention. Mateo was happy to oblige. He licked the head, savoring the slightly salty taste. Then he wrapped his lips around it and Eddie cried out as Mateo sucked for all he was worth. He put his hands on Eddie's hips and pulled down, encouraging Eddie to fuck his face.

With Eddie's cock in his mouth and his own in Eddie's, it was a perfect circuit of suction and pleasure, and he gave himself up to it. There was no beginning or end. No Eddie and Mateo. Just them, one being with one goal. Pleasure.

Eddie slowly came back to Earth. Mateo's head was on his shoulder, their legs twined together. It should have been a perfect, lazy moment. It had been until the post-orgasmic stupor wore off. Now, for as close as they were, awkwardness still lay between them. Sex was wonderful, especially make-up sex, but it didn't actually solve anything. Those pesky logistics were waiting to be addressed.

Mateo kissed his chest, then mumbled into it. "I guess we need to talk."

"Yeah," Eddie agreed, reluctantly. They hadn't done too well with the talking so far.

Mateo sat up against the headboard and crossed his arms. Eddie sat too, so they were still touching from shoulder to hip. He needed to keep Mateo close while he could.

“First of all, I don’t understand why you didn’t tell me about this a long time ago. You’ve obviously been planning this for months, and you’re the one who just said I should’ve talked to you sooner. Doesn’t that go both ways?” Mateo looked hurt and confused, and it made Eddie’s heart ache.

It was his turn to cross his arms, clamping his hands tightly over his ribs. Eddie needed a hug right now, if only from himself.

“Yes, of course it does. You’re right. I’m sorry. We both need to get better about that, so I guess this has been like a wake-up call.” Eddie smiled ruefully at Mateo. “I didn’t say anything because I didn’t know if they’d accept me, or if I could afford it. I know how much you love your family, how hard it would be for you to leave them. I didn’t want to tell you until I knew if it could really work, and I only found out for sure last week. Why upset you and risk *us* if it wasn’t going to happen anyway?” Eddie felt like he was pleading for his life. In a very real way, he was.

Mateo opened his mouth, but Eddie wanted to finish before he said anything, so he kept talking. “I looked into other options, like asking the school about delayed admission. They were willing, but said they couldn’t hold the scholarship, and I can’t do it without that. I wouldn’t have asked you to go if I saw another way. I knew it would be difficult, maybe even impossible.” Eddie’s voice broke on that word, because it was exactly what he feared. “Can you forgive me?”

Can you love me as much as your family? I didn’t want to make you choose between us, but if you have to and they could be okay without you, do you love me enough to leave them for me? That’s what he was really asking, but there was no way Eddie could say that out loud.

“Yeah.” Mateo uncrossed his arms, then pulled Eddie’s free to twine their fingers together. “I wish you’d talked to me from the start, but I understand. I want a life with you, want to go with you. You’re my future, but I can’t leave

until I know the kids are alright. I think I've figured out a way to go with you, eventually."

Eddie sagged against Mateo. He hadn't realized he was holding himself so rigidly until suddenly he wasn't. Mateo joining him in California later wasn't as good as them making the move together, but it was a whole lot better than Mateo not coming with him at all. It was a good compromise, and he'd take it gratefully.

Mateo grinned. "It took a couple of family meetings, but we came up with a plan. Dolores helped a lot. Each of them will start taking on a little more responsibility. Well, except our useless excuse for a father. He doesn't count."

It seemed like he should say something in response to that, but Eddie couldn't think of what. He was still speechless with relief, so he settled for squeezing Mateo's hand.

Mateo winked at him. "I think Rafe kind of liked the idea, it made him feel more grown up or something. I do see how it could be good for all of us. If all goes well, I'll try to join you right after Christmas. I can't promise that, though. It might be much longer. If it is, I'm sorry, I don't know how long it could be. I don't know if you want to wait for me. After all, you'll be in San Francisco with your choice of gorgeous gay men."

As closely as they were pressed together, Eddie could feel Teo holding his breath as he waited for Eddie's response.

"I'll miss you, but of course I'll wait for you. However long it takes. You're the one I want." That was the most important thing, so he said it first, wanting Mateo to start breathing again.

Eddie still needed to clarify a few things. "Other people make long-distance relationships work, we can too. I'd planned to say that the other night, but you left before I could get the words out. Maybe it won't even be for that long, if you can join me in January. And I don't have to leave right away, so if I can live with you—"

"Wait, what? Live at my place?" Mateo interrupted. "You said you want us to live together in California."

“I do, but school doesn’t start until August and this is only April,” Eddie reminded him. “I also said I’ll need to go this summer to find a place to live and get settled, but that’s still a few months I could be here with you and not having to do the long-distance thing. If you want.”

“If I want? Of course I want you to live with me. I asked you, didn’t I? When did you say you would? I think I’d remember something like that.”

“On Friday night, during dinner. I’m not surprised you don’t remember, I got the impression you stopped listening to me somewhere in there.” Eddie tried to sound matter-of-fact, because he understood, and it was at least half his fault for not saying it better.

Mateo looked abashed. “I’m such an idiot—”

“No.” Eddie spoke over him. “You’re not. I was so nervous, I totally screwed it up. I’m sorry. Us being together is awesome but it does make things more complicated. We will have to do the long-distance thing for a while, maybe five or six months. Even if it’s more than that, what matters is that it won’t be forever.”

“I’m sorry,” Mateo said again.

“It’s okay. It’s my fault too.” Eddie meant it, and if he hadn’t been so damn relieved, he’d have been frustrated that Teo couldn’t seem to understand that. “Just stop saying you’re sorry. I want to redesign my old dream together, make it work for both of us.”

“I’m sorr—” Teo cut himself off. He laughed, a little self-consciously, then snorted as he tried to contain it.

“You sound like a bull. *Olé!*” Eddie got on his knees to wave a pretend cape, then jumped off the bed and danced away as Mateo lunged for him.

“Who’s snickering like some cartoon villain?” Mateo taunted back, chasing him around the bedroom. Eddie realized it was true, that was exactly what he sounded like.

That had them both howling, and they finally gave up fighting it. Eddie knew it was stress release rather than real humor, but it felt good to laugh with Mateo. They staggered back to the bed, sitting down before they fell.

Long, long moments later, his laughter started to die down. Mateo seemed to be getting himself back under control, too. Until they made the mistake of making eye contact.

“*Olé,*” Eddie mouthed, and they started whooping with laughter again. Eddie’s stomach was starting to hurt, and he wrapped his arms around it. He realized his cheeks ached, as well, and his eyes were streaming.

Mateo stopped laughing abruptly, though his breaths were still quick and uneven. He wrapped one strong arm around Eddie’s shoulders, pulling him close again. His other hand was shaking as he wiped the tears of mirth, of relief, from Eddie’s face.

He was so gentle, for a second Eddie was afraid he was going to start crying for real. He kept it together, mostly, but a few new tears escaped his control. Mateo kissed them away without comment.

Then he slid his mouth from Eddie’s cheek to his lips, sharing a salty kiss that started tender and turned passionate. The love and relief they both felt was almost tangible. They were still together, and they’d find a way to stay that way.

THE END

Author Bio

Dana Cavallon is an aspiring author who loves to travel and will take any excuse to learn new languages and other ways of seeing and being in the world. Like most people reading this bio, she has always been a voracious reader. Books have opened up even more travel possibilities, unlimited by the constraints of physics or reality. Just as with physical travel, revisiting old favorites is as wonderful as finding new ones.

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