



LAST STOP

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The Dead's Unfinished Business

Gloria Oliver

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The Dead's Unfinished Business

Book 01

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## CHAPTER 01

*¡Idiota, idiota, IDIOTA!* Why did I *ever* listen to Jay? My breath came in ragged, hot, painful gasps, the rain beating on me like wet admonitions as I ran for all I was worth.

Hot tears burned my cheeks, branding me with each step. Never trust a single source. Check and double-check all facts. But I hadn't! So running half-blind in this crazy storm on blasted high heels was my reward. I grimaced as a painful stitch complained in my side.

Everyone in the group was well aware that doing jobs not approved by the boss might come with blowback. But Jay had sworn his source was legit and that Pierson would never find out.

He couldn't have been more wrong! The moment I'd spotted Pierson amongst the partygoers, we were screwed. We might still have gotten out of there, no harm, no foul, if not for that smug-faced *pendejo*, Bobby.

I rounded a corner, the water collecting on the sidewalk from the deluge splashing my legs with every hurried step. The stitch stabbing my side grew more painful, but I didn't dare slow down.

There were bigger things to worry about than that traitor. I flinched as thunder battled against the dampening sound of the rain, my fear spiking. Every shadow or noise might be a harbinger of doom. I had no way to know if those searching for me were ahead of me or behind me. But I was one hundred percent sure that being caught would mean "The End."

I shivered, soaked through, the oppressive rain having already chilled my skin numb. Whether I was being hidden or hampered by the weather, I couldn't tell. Not that it mattered.

Pierson's information network spread like a web to catch unwary morsels of intel and spin them together for later consumption. His greedy fingers plucked at all levels of Miami and beyond. If he didn't have information on something, he knew how to find people who did—like the VIP whose party we'd crashed.

My life was over—there was nowhere I could run, nowhere I could hide that he wouldn't find me. The certainty of that fact hung like chains off my body, trying to freeze me in place. But I kept running, even as my heart tripped and lurched inside my chest. I couldn't bear letting it end like this. All we'd ever wanted was a chance to be free!

*Daniela la tonta.* A fool was exactly what I was.

One of my useless high heels caught in a crack. I gasped, struggling to retain my balance as it almost sent me flying face-first onto the wet concrete.

Breathless, the stitch in my side now a burning brand of agony, I leaned against a rough brick building for a second. At least the bullet graze on my arm was now clean and only lightly throbbing thanks to the cold rain. That minor wound was but a taste of what would happen if I got captured. Pierson wasn't typically the violent sort—not unless you crossed him. And not only had we inadvertently hampered our boss in

his dealings, but we had *embarrassed* him. Something he would never forgive.

Throat burning, hopelessness nipping at my heels, I pushed away from the rough wall to get moving again.

The distinctive flickering light and buzzing sound of a neon sign made me glance across the street through the falling curtain of water. Was someone still open at this time of night? The lights beckoned to me, and it surprised me how easily I could make out the words in the middle of this torrent. The warm, glowing letters spelled "Last Stop." I would have laughed at the irony, but I didn't have the breath or energy.

*Last Stop*—yes, if I stopped moving, it would be the final thing I ever did. Yet the sign promised somewhere dry and warm out of the down-pour. But as I took a wobbling half-step in that direction, I hesitated. If the business was open, rather than it being a case of some underpaid kid who forgot to turn off the sign, I might put those inside in danger just by being there. I got myself into this mess, so why dig my hole any deeper by bringing strangers into it?

A lightning bolt struck a transformer with a resounding boom. Sparks went flying everywhere.

*¡Ay bendito!* I swallowed a startled scream, throwing my arms up in a useless attempt to protect my head. The pungent stench of ozone crowded all around. Florida was the state with the most lightning deaths a year, and I positively did not want to become part of *that* statistic. My odds of survival were already zero. So why make them even lower? *Come on, Dani, get a move on!*

Still shaky from the transformer explosion and with my ears still ringing, I steered well clear of the still falling sparks as I crossed the now darker street. Though everything else around the area looked to have lost power, blanketing the zone in darkness, the place across the way was still

miraculously lit. The beckoning letters seemed to glow brighter, again promising safety, warmth, and, best of all, escape.

I had a vague idea of where I was despite my mad dash through the streets constantly looking over my shoulder to check for headlights or figures running in the dark. Yet I was sure I had never heard of this "Last Stop," which was odd. Pierson always kept us informed of all the venues opening in the area, as they might lead to new spots for the *wire mob*, our group of pickpockets, to ply our trade. Tourist traps were our bread and butter.

When I reached the safety of the shop's awning, I stared at the storefront, positive I had never seen it before. The entire façade was made of dark wood, with the entry door set to slide sideways rather than open in or out. The slats at the top third were interspersed with vertical strips of frosted glass. Well taken care of, but weathered and faded.

A two-foot statue of some kind of furred animal, sporting a white potbelly and wearing a straw hat, sat on the right side of the sliding door. The statue wore a gentle smile and had wide, dark eyes that gave the impression they saw everything—both the good and the bad—and that he'd gleefully tattle on you at the first opportunity.

By the door's opposite side sat a dark red lacquered umbrella stand. A couple of normal umbrellas were nestled in it, but there was also one made of bamboo and what had to be some kind of treated paper. Surprisingly, a typical red and white Help Wanted sign had been taped to the wall above the umbrella stand.

Not being pelted by the rain anymore felt great, but a sideways wind suddenly drove a blast of water beneath the awning. The cold, wet fingers of the rain reached for me, making me shiver. Turning, I realized that both ends of the storefront had lights tucked under the awning, though I hadn't noticed them before. Anyone glancing in this direction

would easily spot me standing there. ¡*Coño!* I needed to decide *this second* whether to go in or not, assuming it wasn't too late already.

"Welcome. Welcome."

My gaze snapped up as my heart jumped in my chest at the unexpected voice. I spotted a *crow*, of all things, staring at me from one of the awning's struts where it sheltered from the rain. I knew that they could mimic human speech, but hearing it firsthand was eerie.

Snippets of music whispered out from inside the place, though I had heard nothing coming through until that moment—"Stay" by Rihanna. Goosebumps peppered my arms. The weird statue's happy stare now seemed more pointed, which was *loco*. Hoping I wasn't making a big mistake, I slid the door open just enough to slip inside.

Blessed warmth hugged me like a long-lost *abuela*. My eyes closed of their own volition as I wallowed in it. The song I'd made out only seconds ago was gone now. Had I imagined it?

"Goodness," said an unexpected and scratchy female voice on my right. "You look like an escapee from a disaster movie."

My eyes snapped open as fear ate me from the inside, robbing me of breath. I spotted an elderly woman coming my way. Tuning out like that would get me killed.

Then I gasped in surprise, catching the reflection of my face in a round-framed mirror hanging from a wooden column near the end of a U-shaped counter. My bouncy, wavy brown hair lay flat, plastered to my head like limp spaghetti. The eye and face makeup I had so carefully applied for the evening's event was smudged or washed away, while the cheap mascara had left black trails down my face. My eyes widened, and my lips twisted as I realized I resembled something out of a nightmare.

The short, curve-hugging wine-red tube dress that had looked so good on me when I felt my apartment was soaked through and darkened into

a ruddy brown by the rain. The hem was askew and had ridden halfway up my thigh. A drowned rat would have looked better.

As it was, I was dripping water all over the polished wooden floor.

'*Ida, be a dear and go fetch some towels for the poor thing.*' The new voice was crisp and clear, but rang out all around me rather than coming from a specific direction.

"Okey dokey!" The elderly, slightly stooped woman shuffled away down the narrow hall on the right.

Forcing my gaze away from the nightmarish reflection in the mirror, I examined the odd place. The walls were a dark mustard stucco with reddish-brown wood used for the moldings, panels, sliding doors, and the U-shaped counter. Another umbrella stand was on the inside of the door, as well as a large coat rack with a built-in seat. Wooden, barrel-back stools ringed the counter, and I glimpsed low shelves on the inside of it, full of plates, glasses, and dispensers.

Narrow hallways ran on either side of the counter, but something that might be a kitchen lay recessed behind the U itself.

A dark blue partition curtain, hanging from the ceiling between columns and reaching only halfway to the floor, separated it off from the front. Five vertical slits that went from the bottom of the partition to almost the top split the stylized white-capped waves depicted on the dark cloth.

Everything was neat and clean, but it suffered from wear. The corners were smoother than the rest of the trim, and the colors were faded. An established, long-standing business, then. Which made no sense at all. My fingers twitched.

Though I had heard two distinct voices before the woman left, no one else was in the room—except for the largest cat I had ever seen. She lounged on a cushioned, wrap-around shelf set three feet from the

ceiling. The feline had deep green, emerald eyes and a gorgeous white and silver coat. The fur around her collar was so long and thick it looked like a stole. Stretched out, she had to be at least three to four feet long.

She was a *reina*—a pampered queen overlooking her kingdom. But how was she so big?

An answer came to my unvoiced question. '*A Maine Coon. Surely you've heard of the breed before?*

I blinked, my gaze darting around, but no one was there. I still couldn't tell what direction the voice came from, which made no sense. Wiping roughly at the water still dripping over my face, I blinked a few more times. Had I hit my head while running away? Or had I been hit by lightning after all? Was I currently dying in a ditch and just didn't realize it? Because this *chica* would be totally *loca* if I even thought of considering that the explanation had come from *the cat*.

"Here we are!" The old woman shuffled back into the room with several fluffy, folded towels cradled in her arms. She wore a muted pink housedress, a full white apron, bobby socks, and, of all things, bunny slippers. Her white and gray-streaked hair was pulled back into a bun, and a foot-long unlit Churchwarden pipe hung from the side of her mouth. Her thin face and prominent Romanesque nose hinted at beauty lost to time—much like the entire place. Yellowed teeth from too much tobacco showed in a pleasant enough smile, though her light brown eyes seemed unfocused as she stared at me.

"*Gracias.*" I took the offered towels, but kept my distance. Though I couldn't say why, there was something not quite right about the woman. Keeping half an eye on her, I used one of the towels to briskly dry my hair.

"I'm off to get a mop!" she said in a sing-song tone and did a quick little jig like a child. "Be right back. Don't go anywhere!" And off she went. *La vieja* might be a few cards short of a deck.

I checked that the sliding door was still closed as thunder boomed loudly outside, reminding me with a jolt that I couldn't let my guard down.

I quickly worked to dry the rest of me as best I could, stepping toward the corner and away from the vicinity of the door to stay out of direct line of sight if it opened again. If anyone came inside, I'd have a moment or two to throw a towel over their head and dash back outside in the ensuing confusion. I surreptitiously stared around the room some more—a skill I had some experience in.

The counter, the kitchen, and the rest made it clear that the place was a restaurant. But I saw no bill of fare board or an à la carte or du jour menu—nothing visible about what they served or how much it cost. I had seen menus without prices before—always a big hint that I couldn't afford to eat there—but I had never been in an eatery with nothing of any kind. It was super weird.

My skin prickled as a stab of nervousness turned my insides. Something about this place was off.

The curtain partition moved, and a twenty-something guy—close to my age—then came out with a tray holding a tall, black ceramic teacup painted with several stalks of leafy bamboo, like the kind you'd find in a Japanese restaurant. He was about my height, which was too bad for him since, even with the blasted heels, I was considered short. Being vertically challenged came from my Latina roots—*Boricua* girls mostly came in small packages—but he looked to be a mix of some kind.

He was lean and compact like someone from Japan, but his slightly slanted eyes were the dark gray of a Scandinavian's. His black hair was

styled in a smart cut that needed a trim. His black-rimmed eyeglasses had round lenses and were larger than usual, but suited him. The chef's outfit he wore was also black and appeared pristine, unlike the rest of the shop.

In my line of business, you learned to be observant and take cues from prospective targets. I didn't know if it was the fact that I was living on borrowed time or had been too damn close to the lightning strike or what, but nothing in this place was adding up.

The chef set the cup on the counter, gave a half nod in my direction and another at the cat, then silently returned to the kitchen.

My eyebrows bunched together. The guy hadn't said a word, moving with an economy of movement and silence that felt surreal. But hot steam rose from the cup, and that was all I needed to know before deciding to take it and bring it back to the corner.

Holding the mug was an almost carnal experience as glorious heat spread into my way-too-cold hands. I took a sip and shivered with delight as the heat ran down my throat and started thawing me from the inside. Being cold was not my thing. *Dios mío*, the warmth felt so good. I hugged the cup to my numb face and then finally took another sip. The flavor had a weird zing to it, so it wasn't green tea, but at the moment, I didn't care what kind it might be. All that mattered was that it was hot.

"Got the mop!" The woman called Ida shuffled back into view. "Got the robe too, like you wanted, Beauty." She held up and shook the mop in one hand, and waved a shiny, red, half-kimono robe with white flowers with the other. The long, unlit pipe still hung precariously from her lip.

Ida draped the robe over the back of the stool nearest me before she half-tried to trip me as she started mopping the floor. My feet hurt from all the standing and running, so I quickly kicked off my ruined shoes, which dropped me six inches. Even slouching, Ida towered over me. I sidled away, dropping off my empty cup on the counter and snatching

the robe to put it on, before returning to my corner. My hands and feet felt alive again, tingling as they warmed up, and my core heated back toward normal.

"I'm really sorry about the mess," I said to no one in particular. My heart had calmed a little, though the flesh-rending fear still lurked close at hand, ready to take a bite at the slightest provocation. I might be out of the rain and dry, but no way was I safe. "I realize this will sound a little crazy, but with that storm outside and the lack of customers, would you mind locking up and turning off your sign and most of the lights for a bit? You'd truly be helping me out."

Gurgling like a five-year-old with amusement, Ida shuffled over to the entryway, turned the lock, and flipped a switch on the wall. The strips of frosted glass on the door turned dark on the other side. A trickle of relief had started to settle in my stomach when the lights outside came on again.

Shocked, my head swiveled back to the old woman. She looked at me over her shoulder, her face full of childish delight, her hand still on the switch. She turned it off, paused for a second or two for effect, then switched it on again, giggling under her breath the entire time.

The crazy vieja wasn't missing a few cards; she was missing half the deck! Flickering the lights off and on would only draw even more attention from anyone passing by. What was she playing at?

A flush of panic made me suddenly dizzy, and I started to reach out to drag her away from the switch if I had to. This addled woman would get me killed!

*Ida, enough!*

Like the lights, the old woman's face fell. Her lip stuck out like a petulant child's, but her hand dropped away from the switch.

As much as I dreaded going back out into the rain, staying here would be a major mistake. I reached for my emergency cash, which I kept tucked inside my strapless bra. "Can I buy one of the umbrellas?"

And why did they have so many? There was no one here besides the old woman, the cook, and the cat. So where had all the umbrellas come from? Was it some kind of marketing gimmick to make the place look busy and draw in customers, or something more sinister? Might I have unknowingly stumbled into some sort of human trafficking ring? My gaze was drawn to the odd-tasting cup of tea on the counter.

These people could have slipped anything into my drink, and I'd be none the wiser until much too late. And I had played right into their hands! *Dani, come on! What's the matter with you?*

If they'd drugged me, I wasn't feeling the effects yet. Well, this chica would not go down without a fight! The kitchen would have knives, and I could easily trip up the cook if he got in my way. Surely there was a back way out from there to the alley.

*Calm yourself. You are safe here.* The giant cat leaped from the padded shelf to the counter and sat, all in one graceful move. Her too-bright, alien green eyes never left my face. *'If you wish to leave, we will not stop you.'* The words didn't fall into my ears, which was why I hadn't known which direction they came from. Instead, they rang directly inside my head.

*'But be aware that if you do, you'll be rushing straight into death's embrace.'*

Loco or not, there was no longer any way for me to deny that the Maine Coon had been talking to me all along.



## CHAPTER 02

"¡No! No lo creo." I shook my head in utter denial. "It's not possible."

'*Not believing in something will not make it any less real, Daniela Maria Martinez Colón.*' The cat raised her right front paw and daintily licked her pink toe beans.

It took me a second to realize it, but when I did, all the warmth I had regained left me again. My name. It had said my *full name*. But I had never mentioned who I was. My right hand rose of its own volition and made the sign of the cross, something I hadn't done since my abuela passed when I was seven.

"I'm dead already, aren't I?" What else would explain all this craziness? But if I were dead, this was like no Heaven or Hell I ever imagined. My legs turned suddenly into melting wax. If I'd still been wearing my heels, I would have toppled over and broken something. As it was, I had to brace my back against the corner to remain upright.

The cat sighed.

They could *do* that?

*'You are not dead, Daniela.'*

If *they* hadn't drugged me, maybe someone slipped me something at the party? But I didn't drink when I was working. Had somebody sneaked a designer drug skin patch on me? All this loco shit would suddenly make sense if they had.

*'You are not drugged, either.'*

I flinched. Was the freaking cat reading my mind? Its inhuman eyes seemed to grow bigger the longer I stared at them. The feline quit licking its toe beans and brought out its claws as if to check a manicure.

*'I also did not read your mind.'* It glanced my way, and I could have sworn it looked amused. *'I've done this a time or two, and the conversations usually run much the same as this one.'*

The room felt stiflingly hot, and my throat hurt as I struggled to get enough air.

*'My name is Beauty, by the way.'*

I scrunched down and put my head between my legs, dizzy and breathless, trying to calm myself before I passed out and made everything worse. A surreptitious glance toward the door showed me that Ida had moved on with her mop, leaving the way clear. The lock on the door was a simple deadbolt, so I could easily let myself out. So what "Beauty" had mentioned earlier seemed to be true. I could leave if I wanted to, but... "What did you mean when you said I would be 'rushing straight into death's embrace'?"

*'You're currently running for your life, are you not?' Beauty asked.*

How did she *know* that?

"Miss, your food is ready."

I almost jumped out of my skin, I was so startled by the voice coming from above me. It was the cook. I hadn't heard him come back in.

Rising shakily to my feet, I turned toward the counter to look. I hadn't ordered anything. The smell hit me first, almost as if someone had used a fan to send it to me: garlic and olive oil with a faint hint of banana. My mouth watered, recognizing what the scents meant, while my brain refused to process what it saw on the plate.

"*Mofongo?* You made *mofongo?*" Eyes wide, I glanced at the cook.

He flashed a faint smile before he nodded.

A yellow mound of fried, mashed, unripe plantains, garlic, olive oil, and—were those bits of *chicharron* mixed in as well? There was even a small cup of broth on the side and an open bottle of *malta* next to it. Since it was non-alcoholic, the malted barley drink was typically considered a child's drink, but I never had mofongo without it. It always reminded me of my abuela.

I took a shaky step toward the counter, still not believing what was there. My stomach growled at me to hurry on over, as I'd had little to eat before this mess started and I'd been running for who knew how long.

Still, there was no way on this Earth these people could know what I liked—yet there it sat. If I were ever asked what I wanted for a last meal before I died, this would be it. I reached for the fork with a trembling hand and took a bite. Tears instantly sprang to my eyes as the starchy, salty flavor flooded my tongue. I half-parked myself on the stool and took a sip of malta, and I was back at the worn Formica table in Abuela's kitchen.

A tear escaped to roll warmly down my cheek, the loss of my grandmother fresher than it had been in years. Yet the familiar flavors were also a balm for my fear-shredded nerves. A second bite clinched it—this was her recipe. But that was impossible!

My hungry, gurgling stomach didn't care. All it wanted was more food. So, after making the sign of the cross again, just in case, I blocked

out everything around me and ate, drank, and enjoyed it. For all I knew, this *was* my last meal.

By the time I finished, my tears had dried, but my eyes prickled again when I saw what the cook brought me next.

"Are those what I think they are?" I asked, my voice not exactly steady.

He inclined his head as he switched my empty plate for a smaller one holding two pastries. "*Pastelitos de guayaba*," he said. The pronunciation was perfect.

I drank half the glass of water he had also brought, and using that as a distraction, placed my other arm on the counter so I could palm the knife that had come with the utensils. I hid it in the sleeve of the short kimono: if they pulled anything, I planned to be ready. Once it was safely tucked away, I reached out for the dessert: a puff pastry filled with guava paste and cream cheese, the top covered with powdered sugar—another Puerto Rican specialty.

I stuffed my face like a little pig, feeling calmer than I had since the moment before I'd spotted Pierson at the lucrative party. "Dios mío. You're a damn good cook."

The tiniest hint of a smile came and went again. "Glad you liked it." He refilled my water, then took charge of the first set of dirty dishes. His brow ticked up for half a second, but if he noticed that the knife was missing, he kept it to himself. No way to tell if that was good or bad. He headed back toward the kitchen.

*'If you're feeling better, I'd like to have a little chat.'*

Gooseflesh covered my arms and neck as the voice rang inside my head again.

¡Coño! The food had distracted me from the fact that this place had a telepathic cat.

Ida had also disappeared when I wasn't looking. But the front door still stood utterly unguarded. If I grabbed one of the umbrellas outside, I doubted they would ever realize it was gone. Yet I hesitated to leave all the same. I was good at reading people—it came with the job—and all that talk about running straight into death's embrace felt spot on. So what was the feline's angle? Everyone had one, even when they didn't realize it. I was positive they hadn't let me stay here and fed me out of the goodness of their hearts.

"Sure," I said, trying to sound more confident than I felt. I turned the stool so I could face the cat, though I would have preferred not to. "What did you want to talk about?"

*'Did you perchance notice the "help wanted" sign outside? Beauty asked. I would like to offer you the opportunity to work here.'*

*"¿Qué?" My mouth fell open.*

*'I want you to work for me.'*

My eye twitched. A telepathic cat was offering me a *job*? That lightning bolt earlier had to have hit me, and I was now burned and bleeding on the street, having a nightmare. Otherwise, how could any of this be real? "Um, what would that look like?"

And did that mean a cat was the boss here? How loco would that be? Beauty ignored my question.

*'Room and board would be included, of course,' Beauty said. 'And there are other perks. Staying alive would be but one of them.'*

Could a cat be smug? Because, at the moment, she sure looked like it—that jutting feline chin, the thrust-out fur-covered chest.

"So, I would need to stay in this place? Never go outside again?" I shook my head. "That would make this a *prison*. And eventually, some customer or other would rat me out, and then what? I would still wind up dead. And so would all of you."

I was arguing with a cat! Could this get any more insane?

*'I never said you couldn't go out,'* Beauty stated, blinking in slow motion. *'You'll be able to do so when the job calls for it and on your days off—if you've behaved yourself.'*

"But you said I would die if I went out," I countered. This chica wasn't born yesterday.

*'If you don't agree to work for me, that is correct.'* Beauty used a paw to sweep the fur over one ear.

How could taking the job make a difference? But then, how was this cat mentally talking to me in the first place? I shook my head. None of this was real. It couldn't be. I pinched myself, trying to see if it would wake me up or whatever—wasn't that how they always did it on TV?—but nothing changed.

"Let's say I believe you—which, to be honest, I'm not sure I can—what exactly would I be doing?" I asked. "You already have a fabulous cook and someone to clean the place. What do you need *me* for?"

Beauty got up on all fours and walked over on quiet feet, sashaying like some kind of feline supermodel. She rubbed up against me even as I tried to lean away, the urge to sneeze growing by the second. I loved cats, but my body didn't. As big as she was, I couldn't escape unless I were willing to fall over backward, stool and all.

But she sure was beautiful. Her white fur felt like the softest silk. This close, her green feline eyes glimmered like emeralds. She rubbed her head beneath my chin, and it was like being caressed by a lover.

My eyes started itching, and the sneeze was about to get the better of me when she pulled away. With a final swipe of her fluffy tail across my face, she moved down the counter and sat, coiling her tail around her in a circle.

I turned my face in the opposite direction, not able to hold back anymore. "Achoo!"

With her having put some distance between us, thankfully, the urge to sneeze didn't return. It would be a crime if I got snot on that gorgeous fur.

*'You have a unique set of talents, Daniela,'* Beauty said. *'Talents that I can use for a much loftier purpose.'* She gave me another of those slow, satisfied blinks.

Just how much did this cat know about me? And how? The food I'd eaten turned to rocks in my stomach. "And how exactly would you be using them?"

The smug look came back. *'To help troubled souls, of course,'* Beauty said. *'How else would they achieve peace and move on otherwise?'*

Then a loud knock came from the other side of the entry door.



## CHAPTER 03

My heart leaped into my throat, fear rolling off in waves. I twisted off the stool, bringing out the dinner knife I'd tucked away, almost diving back to the corner. They'd found me! Instead of running and trying to find a hole to hide in until I might skip town, I had been lured in by the warmth, the food, and the offer of a job, and stayed here too long. Had that been the loco cat's true purpose? To keep me here until my killers could catch up to me?

The knock wasn't repeated; the sliding door pushed open instead.

But it had been locked, and the lights turned off! Had they picked the bolt somehow? These people still might not have had anything to do with my being found. Their deaths would be on my head! A cold sweat broke out all over me.

If I rushed past the intruder and made it outside, my pursuers would run after me and forget about the people here. I hunkered down, ready to make a break for it. *Please let me do this one last thing before I die!*

"Is it okay to come in again? Did you have enough time?"

I froze at the familiar-sounding boyish voice—one I'd been sure I would never hear again.

*'Your timing is perfect,'* Beauty said. *'Come on in.'*

I swallowed hard, hesitating so I could catch a glance of him instead of running off or forcing my way out the front door. *Mirza*, I had to know!

A young man sheepishly stepped in through the open doorway. I couldn't breathe as I got a good look at him. There was no mistaking the side-swept fringe of his blond hair and the ever-present easy grin, which, with the open black shirt and creased pants, made him look like he'd just stepped off the cover of *GQ*. It was my best friend in the whole wide world.

"OMG! *Jay!*"

He turned my way, and our gazes met right before I plowed into him and squeezed him for all I was worth. "*Moron. ¡Pendejo!* I'm so happy to see you. I've been so worried!" Without my heels, he towered over me by a foot. I pulled back and shook him hard as if trying to shake fruit off a tree. "And now I'm going to *kill you*. You and your idiotic schemes!"

We might die at any second, but joy bubbled up and overflowed at the chance to see him again. After that night's debacle, I thought I'd lost him forever. My face hurt, I was smiling so hard.

But—

"Dani, I'm so, so sorry," Jay said, his eyes filling with tears. "They got you, too?"

All the happiness I'd felt at seeing him flowed out of me like water from a broken dam. "Wha—what are you talking about?" My hands dropped like heavy weights to my sides, and I took a trembling step back. "Di—didn't you escape like I did?"

I hadn't noticed it before, but Jay was dry, untouched by the heavy storm still raging loudly outside.

He shook his head, his hand rubbing the back of his neck as his ears turned beet red. "I got turned around. Took the wrong door," Jay said. "Got caught trying to find the right way again."

I could see it happening all too clearly in my mind. "Really, Jay?"

How many times had it been pounded into us to memorize the layout and always, always, *always* have a way out? And he'd gone and messed up the *one time* it really counted! It was so 'Jay' I would have laughed, except I might not be able to stop, even as it ripped me to shreds from the inside.

I was supposed to be the smart one. So why had I ever let him talk me into crashing that private party? But I knew why. Because I wanted out, and he'd sounded so sure. If only I had pressed and questioned it more, he wouldn't be... wouldn't be...

"I've disappointed you again, haven't I?" Jay looked at me like a kid caught poking holes in the wrapping of his Christmas presents to sneak a peek at what was inside.

Suddenly, his expression brightened, his eyes shining. "But at least you made it out alive. And I'm super glad about that!" Then his smile dimmed, and he looked away, kicking at an invisible rock on the floor. "Still... this disaster was all my fault."

We had become best friends almost from the moment Pierson "recruited" us into his group. With my flash-powder temper and his easy-going surfer boy manner, we had balanced each other out—not that any of that was important anymore. "Naw. We're good, *hermano*."

I gave him another back-breaking hug to show him I meant it. But if he was dead, how was I able to do that? He was totally *here*. He was solid! His warm breath caressed my neck. I could hear his heartbeat. How could he feel this alive if he were dead? Could it all be some giant, drug-aided, elaborate prank?

*'Last Stop is a waypoint between the land of the living and the realm of the dead for those who aren't ready to move on, amongst other things.'* Beauty's voice rang in my head in the lightest of purrs. *'The normal laws of other worlds do not apply here. We have our own set of rules in this in-between.'*

"Dani, do you smell that?" Jay asked, excitement suddenly lacing his voice.

I let him go, Beauty's words still echoing between my ears as I struggled to make sense of it all. The cook came through the odd curtains again with a new tray filled with steaming food.

"No way!" Jay virtually jumped over to the counter. "Are those fried alligator bites? And *ceviche*? Freakin' awesome. Thanks, dude!"

I threw a glance at the cook. How had he known Jay's favorite dishes? How had he known *mine*? Was that part of how the laws worked here? Was he dead, too, like Jay? *Was I?*

My head started to pound. Surely I could take that as a sign that I hadn't died yet. And Beauty had implied as much.

But then why would the dead be hungry? Or be able to taste anything? My head throbbed harder, and I was swept with the sudden need to sit down before I fell down.

I grabbed the stool next to Jay's.

"These are so friggin' good!" Jay said. Half of his alligator bites were already gone. That boy could always put away his food. "You want some?"

My eyes prickled. "I already ate, but thanks anyway."

I felt someone's gaze on me, but when I looked up, the cook was already returning to the kitchen. Ida was still nowhere in sight, and Beauty had gone back to her perch on the shelf along the wall. So I swallowed hard, and tucked the knife still in my hand back up my sleeve.

I watched Jay enjoy his last meal, trying to engrave his every move and sound into my memory, knowing that regardless of whatever was going on, this would be my last chance.

"Did I hear you say you had already been in here?" I asked him. This whole weird, crazy situation still made my head hurt, but he was the only one I trusted to tell it to me straight. Because deep inside, I knew darkness was coming. That this was but the briefest of reprieves before part of my soul got cut away.

Jay slipped me a sideways glance, as if he was acutely aware of the same thing. "Yeah. It was the weirdest thing," he said. "The place kind of called to me. And Beauty said she'd help."

"Help you do what?" I asked.

He stuffed his face rather than answer me. I couldn't gather the courage to repeat the question—at least not yet. When Jay was close to being finished, the cook showed up again. His timing was eerie. He had brought another tray, this one with two generous helpings of key lime pie.

"Key lime! *Yes*." Jay pumped his fist. "Dude, you are awesome!"

The almost non-existent smile made an appearance again. The cook set one plate before Jay and the other in front of me, then made off with the finished dishes.

Jay picked up his dessert fork and flashed an impish grin in my direction. I retrieved mine, and we crossed them like swords before a duel. Stuffed as I was already, my stomach churning and twisting with everything going on, I still ate the new dessert with relish because I was eating it with him.

"Holy moly!" Jay grinned, yellow filling showing on his teeth. "This isn't that condensed milk shit with a bucket of sugar thrown in. This is the real deal!"

I had to admit, the key lime was fabulous. Jay might be easygoing about most things, but he was a serious foodie about his pie. Whatever this place was, I was grateful they'd somehow managed to give him this before... whatever came next.

Jay bumped my shoulder with his. "I wouldn't have enjoyed this at all if I had gotten you killed, *hermana*. That wasn't what I wanted. You know that, right? I honestly thought I had good intel. That we'd clean house and finally get rid of your debt."

"I know." A forlorn sigh escaped before I could stop it. "You were pretty tight-lipped about where it came from. Was it Bobby?"

Jay glanced away. "Does it matter?"

I ground my teeth together. You would think being part of the same group *meant* something. The *cabrón* had only been with us for about a year, a "transfer" from out of state, from one of Pierson's friends' groups.

Not that I believed Pierson *had* friends. In his mind, everyone was a business associate, an asset, a mark, or beneath his notice. And though no one ever said, we were all pretty sure Bobby got into some deep shit with the law and had been dumped on us to get him out of the vicinity of the fire. The guy had skills, I'd give him that—which was the only reason they bothered to keep him from taking the heat, or why Pierson had taken him. Yeah, Bobby had been hot shit where he came from, but not here—and the prima donna hadn't liked that.

The pie turned to curdled lumps in my stomach.

The ungrateful ass had also put the moves on Jay to snag him off me. But though Jay had become smitten with the moron as planned, Bobby hadn't counted on Jay's deeply ingrained loyalty to me—he had remained my partner instead of switching. So I assumed this stunt had been Bobby's way of paying us back.

The flash of utter hatred at the *lambón* for having done this was so strong it left me gasping. I concentrated on the pain in my palms from the nails digging into them as my hands curled into tight fists on my lap. If I ever laid eyes on that cabrón again, he was a dead man.

"You warned me, and I knew better," Jay said, his voice barely above a whisper. "But I believed him anyway when he said he wanted to make up and play nice. He even helped with the research." He swallowed hard. "Bobby said that being in love was more important to him in the end than the pecking order."

He hung his head until I couldn't see his face. But there was no way to miss the wet drops falling on his legs. "I fucked up so hard, Dani. All I wanted was for you to be free of Pierson and get to live your life, be whoever you wanted. I would have helped Bobby fill in your spot and be number one. I'm really, really sorry."

I smacked my fiery loathing with the back of a shovel and buried it deep—for now. There were other things that needed to be taken care of before vengeance came into the picture. So I put Jay in a partial chokehold and rubbed a knuckle hard into his hair.

"Yeah, well, what else is new?" I shoved as much brightness into the words as I could. "Now, are you going to eat that pie or will I have to take it off your hands?"

He gave a half-hearted chuckle. "No way, man. That's mine."

Jay wiped his face on his sleeve and started eating again, his arm curled protectively around the plate. I pushed what was left of mine over so he could take it if he wanted. He chuckled again, this time sounding more like his usual joyful, carefree self before we got into a battle of elbows.

My eyes hurt and my throat closed tight, knowing this was the last time I would ever do this with him.

*'Do you understand now?' Beauty's words trickled into my mind. I glanced over, and the glittering emerald gaze locked with mine. 'Your life was spared only because of him. So he could move on. You are his unfinished business.'*