

FALLING FOR THE ENEMY

Chapter 1 - CHAPTER ONE: A TERRIFYING EVENT

"How many nights will it take to count the stars?"

That's the thought that swarmed through Maria's mind as she rode on her bike to Pablo De Olavide university. It was funny, in a way. She had six assignments due before Friday, seven projects to complete before Monday, and she needed to get an extra job to be able to keep up with the bills and not to mention a cancer-stricken mother to care for.

But no. What was she thinking about amidst all these tribulations? How many nights it would take to count the stars.

The eighteen-year-old had a lust for the impossible, always up for the challenge to prove her critics wrong.

She was stressed, no doubt. But not even that wasn't enough to take away her smile.

Her college was forty minutes away, but with her bike, it would take an hour. She couldn't afford the bus today. She ignored the ache in her legs and paddled faster, it was obvious she couldn't make it but it didn't stop her from trying.

The campus was a ghost town by the time she arrived, only a few people lingered around and those were the ones that didn't care about classes. The rich kids could pull any stunt and not get expelled.

Unfortunately, Maria wasn't privileged to be one of them. She couldn't afford to miss a single class with her dwindling grades, she had to work harder if she was ever going to be able to get a good job to provide for herself and her mother.

Thrusting her legs forward as fast and hard as possible, she broke off into a full sprint. As she barged into the theatre, her legs had practically given up on her. She was only able to catch a second of chatter before all went silent.

"Ms. Henshaw, you're an hour late to my class," came Professor Ivan's voice which was filled with annoyance and disdain. He stood atop the stage with his hand still raised, pointing at the projected slide. He was a tall man with a few

strands of grey and wrinkles above his brows. Nevertheless, it didn't fail to hide his elegance and charm.

"I'm sorry- I- I had a late shift and I- I had to take my mom," Maria said between pants but was rudely interrupted.

"_Dios Bueno!_ I don't care for your excuses. This isn't the first time this is happening and I doubt it would be the last. I'll see to it personally that this shows some effect on your report. Remember, your scholarship is at stake here. Now, sit down. I'd like to continue my lecture."

Maria parted her lips to speak but one dense glare from the professor had her slamming them shut. With slumped shoulders, she managed to drag her feet to the nearest available seat. Eyes of pity, concern and even humor followed her as she planted her butt on the stool. She ignored them, she ignored them all.

After all, she was yet to figure out how many nights it would take to count the stars.

The lecture lasted for another hour and by the time it was concluded it was safe to say that Maria couldn't feel her legs. Everyone else got up to leave, a few of them throwing a couple of worried glances at her. Normally, she didn't have time to get to know any of them in particular, but only one person did everything to get into her heart.

"_Ese Bastardo Ivan!_" Jane exclaimed, calling the lecturer Ivan a bastard, this caused those still left in the theatre to stare at her in shock. She was very outspoken and bold, her nonchalant attitude and influential family made her that way. Maria wasn't one to judge others by their dress but with Jane's low-cut purple hair, two nose rings, a tongue piercing, and tattoos, you could guess her character.

At first, it didn't make sense that she'd want to be friends with someone like Maria. They were of a different class, of a different league. It made Maria feel suspicious of her, she never saw a good reason why anyone would want to be friends with a commoner like herself. After all, the only reason why she was able to get into one of the most prestigious schools in Spain, was due to her intelligence and not money.

But with time, that suspicion faded and was replaced by an ever-growing love for Jane. Their friendship grew stronger by the day.

"Lower your voice, *_muchacha_*." Maria groaned, her head started to throb just as her stomach grumbled. She had forgotten to take breakfast.

Jane pulled a stool and sat in front of Maria's table. She took out a Ziploc filled with two sandwiches, an apple, and a juice box from her bag. "I knew you would need this," Jane chuckled before handing it to her.

"You're the best," her mouth was already drooling before she could finish her sentence. Viciously tearing open the Ziploc and shoving a sandwich in her mouth, she listened to Jane rant.

"Did you know James and I broke up last night?" Jane started.

"No, *_por que_*? What happened?" Maria inquired, her mouth filled with sandwiches making her cheeks look puffy. Jane picked up the apple and stuck it to Maria's lips.

"There. Now you look like pork on thanksgiving," Jane laughed hysterically. Maria rolled her eyes in response and waited for Jane to continue. "He caught Jackson and me going at it in the lobby."

"*_Dios Bueno_*, Jane! How could you?!"

"It wasn't my fault! You know how sexy Jackson is, I couldn't resist." Jane pouted and it almost looked like she was about to cry. But over what? It was more than obvious none of this mattered to her.

"Jane..." Maria exhaled tiredly. She loved her friend but one of her major problems was she couldn't keep her legs closed. "James was your boyfriend, he loved you and you agreed to be in a relationship with him. By doing so, you promised to remain loyal to him."

"I did? Ew! *_Eso es loco_*! You know I can't be loyal. If he did love me he should have accepted me for who I am." Jane countered.

"That's toxic."

"*_Sì señor_*!" Jane replied, saying 'yes sir'.

Maria facepalmed herself and knew this conversation wouldn't go anywhere. She could only feel bad for the poor guy that got his heart crushed. She hoped more than anything that her best friend would change. That one day,

someday, she'd meet that special someone that she couldn't even imagine cheating on.

Once Maria was done eating, the two separated and went to their various classes. The next four hours went by in a flash for Maria and by the end of the school hour, she could proudly say she had two more assignments added to her workload. Fun.

It was three in the afternoon and Maria still had a four-hour shift before she could get home. On her way out of the school premises, she pulled out her phone and dialed her favorite person's number.

The name MOM appeared on her screen as she waited for her to pick up. She didn't. Maria called again.

And again.

And again.

She looked at her phone with a frown and decided to leave a voicemail. "Hello, mom. I'm on my way to the cafe now, please remember to take your drugs. I left them on your dressing mirror and if you're hungry I left some rice in the fridge. Please call me back when you get this. I love you."

After sending the voicemail she stared at her phone for a few more seconds. Her mother hardly ever missed her calls. Maria kept making up possible reasons to keep herself calm.

'She's probably asleep and left her phone on silent.

'Or perhaps she's using the bathroom'.

'Maybe she's misplaced her phone again, she has always been such a careless woman'.

After a few more self reassurances, Maria hopped on her bike and paddled her way to the cafe she worked at. It was just five minutes away from campus so thankfully she hadn't put much strain on her legs like earlier.

As she entered the cafe, the scent of coffee and margarita hit her nostrils. She caught the attention of many customers, mainly because the majority of them were married perverts that just couldn't keep to themselves. Maria was

beautiful, no doubt about that, with dark wavy hair that cascaded down her back like a waterfall and forest green eyes that poets would love to write about.

At the counter, she gave a quick wave to her boss, Angel, who only responded with a nod. He was a man of little words.

After packing her hair in a messy bun and changing into her uniform, Maria got started by clearing out the tables customers had used, earning a few gropes here and there from God knows how many men. She dared not complain, not after what happened the last time. She needed this job more than anything, losing it was not an option.

It wasn't like she was exactly selling herself, she wasn't some prostitute on the streets. She had her reservations and self-respect. Besides, what harm would a few gropings do? Was it enough to lose her job? It certainly wasn't.

Maria found herself occasionally checking her phone for any texts or calls from her mother. There was none.

That was when she was shot with panic. She quickly rushed over to Angel.

"Sir? May I please be excused today?"

"No" came his cold response. He didn't even bother to spare her a glance as he stabbed his calculator with his fingers.

"Please, sir. I think there's something wrong-"

"I don't care what your thoughts are. If you walk out that door before your shift is up, don't bother coming back." With that said, he turned his back on her and began to walk away.

Tears ran down her rosy cheeks as she began to sob quietly. She couldn't help but wonder why life was so cruel to her? Her blessings were few but she was still grateful nonetheless. But sometimes, her misfortunes could be blinding.

She waited anxiously for her shift to be over, time seemed slower than usual, like it was mocking her as she waited desperately.

The second the hands of time declared that her shift was officially over, she bolted toward the exit earning an eye roll from Angel and the attention of a few customers. She had completely forgotten to change back to her normal clothes but she couldn't care less at that moment.

No matter how hard she paddled, she felt she wasn't fast enough. She could hear the beating of her own heart as she was filled with much adrenaline. The sky had already darkened and by the time she caught a glimpse of her house bile had risen in her throat.

Not a single light had been turned on.

'lo que en el Mundo ha pasado?'

What I'm the world has happened?

Her bike was still in motion as she jumped off and raced towards her front door. With shaky hands, she hurriedly took out her keys and unlocked the door.

"Mamà?! Mamà, I'm here! What's wrong? Why haven't you been answering my calls?" She called out as she searched the whole house. She had searched the living room, kitchen, her mom's bedroom, and bathroom. But her mother was nowhere in sight.

The house was still engulfed in darkness as Maria realized there was one place she hadn't checked. Her very own room.

Fear gripped her heart as deafening silence pierced her ears. She had been filled with much adrenaline earlier but now she found it hard to move. Her room was at the far end of the hall, her mother hardly ever went there.

The hall felt longer than usual as she approached the door. Her fingers made contact with the cold handle causing a shiver to go up to her spine. She wasn't prepared for what she would face beyond that door. As she stepped into the room, the first thing her eyes met was the shattered picture frame she had treasured of herself and her mother smiling.

Her heart froze at the heartbreaking sight. But as her eyes went further, they clashed with the cold, lifeless brown eyes of her mother. That was when her heart shattered into a million pieces. A scream broke forth from Maria's lips, alerting all nearby neighbors.

Ashley Henshaw laid pale and immobile on the floor a few inches away from the shattered picture, her arm outstretched as if reaching for it. That was the last thing she wanted before she left. Her daughter.