

## CHAPTER ONE

Brooke stood at the window of her hotel in Madrid, Spain, looking out over the city as the sun began to set. She was only in Europe for a few more days, and she couldn't think of a better place to finish her trip than Madrid. Long before her first visit to the country, Brooke had fallen in love with the architecture of the Spanish capital. Once she became a photographer, it had always been her dream to document the buildings and designs that had first captured her imagination. Now she was wrapping up a tour across Europe, exploring great cities with her camera.

Brooke had spent the day taking photographs at the Almudena Cathedral, and she was excited to get back home to her little studio in America and see how the pictures turned out. It had taken her a while to figure out just how to capture the brilliant colors of the stained glass from inside the cathedral, but she had found a few great angles to really capture the dazzling plays of light as the afternoon sun streamed in. They might even be candidates for the cover of her book, a photographic celebration of European architecture.

Now, though, Brooke was done thinking about lighting and lenses. Polishing up her photographs of castles and cathedrals would be her primary focus once she got home, but this trip was about fun as much as it was about work. She wanted to experience Madrid's famous nightlife, to dance with the locals at a swanky club while sipping on freshly made sangria.

Brooke changed out of her day clothes and into an outfit better suited for Madrid's restaurants and dance halls, a sparkling black dress that looked great with the gold necklace she had picked out in an artisan market near Naples.

She clasped the necklace around her neck, turning back and forth in the mirror to see it shine. Brooke clipped her long dark curls back with a matching gold hairclip, then dabbed on some lip gloss and swept each eyelid with a soft black eyeliner before heading downstairs to the hotel lobby.

Brooke made her way toward the young, bored-looking concierge at the front desk. The kid was playing a game on his phone, tilting his whole body with each attempted move. "Excuse me," she asked, "are there any restaurants would you recommend nearby, maybe ones with live music?"

"One moment, please, Señorita," the concierge said, looking up from his phone briefly before leaning down to pick up a massive binder full of restaurant listings. He began to page through it slowly, running his finger down the glossy pages as he looked for the right place to send Brooke. "No, I don't think so. Maybe try on a weekend?"

"Thank you," she said, turning from the concierge desk with a disappointed sigh. She would only be here for one more day, so it looked like she might not get to go dancing in Madrid after all.

Brooke took a seat in the hotel lounge, wondering whether it had been a waste of time to get dressed up for a night out. She considered just ordering something from the hotel bar, and was perusing their cocktail menu when a stranger approached her. "Pardon me, miss, but I heard you asking about live music tonight?"

"Hm?" Brooke looked up from her menu to see a handsome man, dressed in a pinstriped blazer and dark jeans. His voice had a lilting accent that she couldn't quite place, despite the fact that she had been traveling around Europe for the last few weeks.

"I may know a place," he said, giving her a conspiratorial smile.

Brooke wasn't so sure about being invited out by a man she didn't know. At the same time, he was absolutely gorgeous, with green eyes and a delicately angled nose, and she had been wanting to meet more locals. "The concierge said there wasn't anywhere with music tonight," she said.

"Ah, yes. And it would be quite unusual for such a consummate professional to be wrong about something like that."

Brooke followed the man's gaze to the teenaged boy seated at the concierge desk. He was holding his phone high above his head and appeared to be taking selfies with his tongue out.

"Now that you mention it," Brook laughed, "he might not be the expert on Spanish society that I thought he was."

"To be fair to the young man, the club I have in mind isn't known to many. It's rather exclusive."

This piqued Brooke's interest even more. She set down the cocktail menu and stood up, extending her hand to the man. "I'm Brooke."

"Zacario. It is an absolute pleasure to meet you." Instead of taking her hand and shaking it, Zacario lifted it gently to his lips and gave her a soft kiss on the back of her hand. "So, may I have the honor of escorting you tonight?"

Excited to see where the night would lead, Brooke nodded. "Lead the way."

Brooke followed Zacario out onto the streets of Madrid, which were already starting to come alive in the cool night air. The sun had set, and the cafes and clubs all along the street were lighting up. Flashy neon signs, intended to attract a hip young crowd, stood out against the warm gold lights of the more old fashioned businesses that catered to anyone who wanted to bask in the romance of Madrid's storied past.

"This way." Zacario led Brooke down the sidewalk, his pace quick and confident. Soon, he ducked down a small side street that Brooke hadn't even noticed before, thinking it was some

kind of residential alleyway. But Zacario just kept walking, turning a few more corners, before stopping at a wooden door with two yellow rosebushes on either side. There was no sign hanging above it, and nothing to indicate that it was any type of establishment open to the public.

Zacario gave Brooke a grin and a wink before knocking three times on the door. Almost instantly, it opened, revealing a man in a crisp tuxedo.

“Ah, Señor Zacario,” the man said, smiling. “Will we be graced with your presence again tonight?”

“It’s your lucky day, Marius,” Zacario said, then gestured to Brooke. “Not just me, but this lovely lady. Brooke, welcome to La Cueva.”

Marius bowed low, drawing them both inside before closing the door behind them.

Brooke gasped, taking in the surroundings. La Cueva was small and intimate, but with tall, curved walls that gave the impression of much more space. The walls were raw stone, reminding Brooke of cathedral arches and catacombs. Brooke had never seen a place like it, and wished she could return with her camera.

The entire place was lit with candles, giving the whole place a soft, dim glow. Along one side of the room was a bar, its wooden surface upheld by intricate gold filigreed columns. A bartender in a tuxedo seemed to glide back and forth behind it, pouring cocktails from a variety of exotic liquors.

At the back of the room, a small band was playing, a half dozen men and women in elaborately embroidered costumes with a variety of brass and stringed instruments. The song was soft and romantic, making Brooke want to sway along to its slow but catchy melody. In front of the stage was a dance floor, and the rest of the room was taken up by round tables, each adorned with a bouquet of yellow flowers in a crystal vase. Tapered white candles flickered in matching crystal candlesticks, one pair for each table.

“I didn’t know this place existed,” Brooke said as Zacario led her to a table near the band and pulled out a chair for her.

“The owner does not like it listed in tourism guides,” Zacario explained, taking his own seat. “It is meant to be a bit of a secret, one that you must be told in order to know.”

“Well, thank you for telling me!” Brooke leaned forward and sniffed the flowers on the table, which smelled sweet and earthy. “How did you find out about it?”

Zacario pursed his lips in a mysterious smile. “A friend.”

Brooke was about to ask more about this friend, but was interrupted by a waitress coming by with a wine list. It was entirely in Spanish, so Zacario asked Brooke a few questions about her tastes and preferences before ordering for the both of them.

“So tell me,” he said, meeting Brooke’s eyes with his deep green ones, “what brings you to the lovely city of Madrid?”

“I’m finishing up a trip through Europe,” Brooke explained. “I’m a photographer, and I’ve been trying to take pictures of architecture all over the continent. What about you, where are you from?”

“Ah, there she is!” Instead of answering her question, Zacario turned to greet the waitress, who had returned with their bottle of wine. After letting both of them inspect the bottle, she poured it neatly into two glasses before leaving.

“So you are a photographer,” Zacario asked, swirling his wine glass. “I have always envied those who have an eye for the visual arts.”

“Oh, it’s easy enough to learn,” Brooke shrugged. “Everyone knows what beauty is - you just find something you like the look of, and figure out how to translate it through a lens.”

“I am not surprised that a woman like you would be an expert on beauty,” Zacario said, his voice low and smooth.

Brooke blushed, hoping the pinkness in her cheeks wasn’t so obvious in the dim light of the restaurant.

“To beauty,” Zacario said, raising his wine glass.

Brooke clinked her glass against his, noticing the way he smiled at her. It was very good wine, and when she took her first sip, she felt herself filling with a heady rush.

At least, she told herself it was the wine, and not the way Zacario was smiling at her, his green eyes sparkling in the candlelight.

The band struck up a new song, this one just as lovely but a bit faster, and Zacario’s face lit up. He rose from his seat and reached a hand out toward Brooke. “Would you dance with me?”

Thrilled, Brooke took his hand and together they stepped onto the dance floor. A few other couples were already dancing, but there was still plenty of room for Brooke and Zacario.

Zacario took the lead, guiding Brooke through steps that seemed complicated but felt so easy and natural for Brooke to follow. The music seemed to surround her, wrapping around her body like a summer breeze. Zacario’s arms were steady as he held her, twirled her, and even dipped

her close to the floor. Brooke laughed as he pulled her up, a swift but gentle motion that made her like she was floating.

She had never danced with anyone like this before. Zacario's hands were featherlight on her hips, but strong and powerful as they seemed to lift her around the dance floor. This close, she could smell his cologne, masculine and complex, with notes of juniper and fresh snow. Brooke closed her eyes and let herself be taken in by the music, moving along with it as it rose and fell, feeling every note.

When the song ended and Brooke opened her eyes, Zacario was gazing down at her with a breathless intensity. She realized that she, too, needed to catch her breath.

"You are an incredible dancer," Brooke whispered.

"You make an incredible partner," Zacario replied, leaning down to murmur into Brooke's ear. She could feel his warm breath against her cheek, pressed in close. "May I kiss you?"

"Yes," Brooke breathed, turning her face to meet his. He gave her a chaste kiss, a soft brush of his lips against hers.

"Have you ever seen the Madrid skyline at night?"

"No," Brooke replied.

"There is a lovely view from my hotel balcony," she heard him say. "I would very much like to share it with you."

Brooke nodded, grinning as she let Zacario take her by the hand and lead her off the dance floor and into the cool night air.