



BONUS CONTENT

A selection of scenes from *THE SPANISH LOVE DECEPTION*
from Aaron Blackford's POV

InTech Quarters, Manhattan, New York

An excerpt of Chapter One



Aaron

"I'll be your date to the wedding."

The words left my mouth before I could do anything about it. This wasn't like me. This hardly ever happened.

I watched her shoulder blades tense, the back of her head and neck stiffening.

Ah fuck. This wasn't part of the plan. Not that there had ever been one. Where Catalina was concerned, the course of action had always been to take whatever she'd give me. So far that hadn't been friendship, or even a working camaraderie. Far from it, but that was okay. It was the price to pay for my idiocy. My stupidity.

And now it looked like I'd also take something she wasn't even offering.

I don't have anyone, Rosie. No one.

Hearing those words, off her lips, was as satisfying as it was maddening. How could someone like her have nobody in her life? How was it possible that in the almost two years we'd been working together, I'd never seen any man pick her up from the office or come to a work event as her plus one?

A woman like her, with nobody to take her to that wedding she was telling Rosie about. It seemed impossible. But she needed someone, desperately, she'd said, and an intrinsically basic side of me clearly wanted to rebel and step in. Take this issue off her hands.

"I'll do it if you need someone that badly," I repeated to the back of her head.

God, what was I doing?

"Rosie ..." She started, and although I couldn't see her face, I could picture every single one of her features perfectly. Full lips parted. Beautiful brown eyes wide open. Soft skin flushed. "Is he really there? Can you see him? Or did someone spike my coffee without me noticing?"

The shit that left this ridiculous, beautiful woman's mouth. I should have burst out laughing at that, but I didn't. It wasn't part of this. Of what we did. How we were around each other.

Rosie murmured something, then peeked around her and met my gaze. "Hi. Good morning!" She returned her attention to Catalina and lowered her voice, "Right behind you."

I waited a few seconds, but Catalina said nothing.

Patience was my blessing and my curse these days. Days that had turned into the longest twenty months of my life. At times, I'd be so hungry for our interactions, I'd come up with ways to create one, to get on her nerves, to make that red hot emotion spark in her eyes. And at the same time, I'd be content to simply wait, day after day, week after week and month after month, settling for whatever this was between us. It was excruciating. Gratifying. Exhausting.

"Should I repeat that a third time?" I asked curtly.

Nothing came from her. But I knew this woman more than she'd probably ever fathomed. Catalina was as determined as she was stubborn, but she was also brave and blunt. Outspoken. She was a woman who didn't put up with anyone's shit. Much less, mine. And that gave me an advantage.

"All right, fine." I sighed, exaggerating the sound. Making sure her buttons were pushed. Securing a reaction. Turn, so I see your face. "You can take me," I paused. "To your sister's wedding."

Her body tensed further.

My bravado failed me, and for an instant I wanted to take my words back.

Catalina snorted. Loudly.

I arched my eyebrows. "What's so funny?"

She snickered this time, still not turning, as if this was all a joke. A game. And I knew it then. The answer to my earlier question.

Determination like I'd never known solidified in my mind. It settled in my gut. My chest. All while every little moment between the day I'd first seen her and now flashed behind my eyes. When I'd woken up this morning, I couldn't have predicted this, this shift I'd just undertaken. This certainty I'd just found, but I knew now. Twenty months had been enough. I was done.

I was offering to take her to that wedding, and she'd immediately assumed I was joking. Playing.

No. I no longer wanted to be that man for her. That colleague she hated and hardly tolerated.

She believed she needed someone to attend that wedding? Well, that someone would be me. I'd burn down New York goddamn City before letting any other man take her.

"I'm completely serious," I said. And I was. In fact, I didn't think I'd ever been more serious about something in my life.

A rooftop on Park Avenue, New York City

An excerpt of Chapter Nine



Aaron

"Dance with me."

I offered her my hand, bridging the small space between our bodies.

Catalina gaped at it. Another moment, and I would beg her to take it.

"Is this part of the deal?" She asked.

I frowned, taken aback by the question.

When I'd asked her to attend the fundraiser with me, when I'd bargained with this one thing she could do for me, she'd assumed that I'd meant for her to pretend. For her to come here as my fake date and play a role, just like she wanted me to for the wedding in Spain. But I had never planned for such a thing.

My intention had been to ask her on this date for real. The words had been ready to leave my lips then, but she'd never let me say them.

I realized now, that at some point tonight, I had forgotten that she believed we were pretending. She didn't know I wasn't, that I wished this was a date and not a charade for her too.

"Us dancing, I mean," she explained, bringing me back. "Just for show, right?"

"Right," I lied, letting my hand hang between us. "Just for show."

Reluctantly, she took my hand, and I had to keep the deep sense of relief from showing on my face. This was how much she affected me. How easily she managed to tie me up in knots, blind my judgement, with something as simple as taking my hand.

I pulled her behind me, gently but firmly, wrapping my fingers around hers, feeling how soft her skin was against mine. Determination to take from her as much as I could in that moment surged through me. When we reached the dance floor, I stopped and turned around, my eyes immediately zeroing in on her face. Her cheeks were flushed. Her big brown eyes sparkled with the same awareness I was feeling.

She's as affected as I am.

I swallowed, stepping closer and making sure I met her gaze when I draped my arms around her waist. The soft warmth of her body, her sweet scent, the feel of her under my palms, even through the fabric of her stunning midnight blue dress, it was almost too much. Too much for me to hold myself back. Too much to resist.

Catalina placed both hands on my chest, and I pushed my body against her two small palms, sneaking into her space. She tilted her head back, and only when she seemed to be holding her breath for so long I feared she might faint did I start to move. I led, swaying to the side, making sure to guide us through the soft beat of the song, trying my best not to think about how perfect she felt here, in my arms.

Catalina followed along, stiff, and quiet, so quiet I started to worry. I searched her face, hoping for a reaction, a word, one of her jokes. Hell, I'd even take a snarky comment about my clothes or my hair or the lack of a heart. But she was ... silent. Preoccupied with something. Was she counting her steps?

I spun her in a circle, catching her by surprise, and before I could do anything about it, her body was tipping sideways, slipping off my grasp. My arms closed around her immediately, tightly, bringing her into my chest. Into me.

Thighs, hips and chest flushed against mine.

The sensation was searing. Calming. Scorching. Soothing. That was Catalina for me. All powerful, beautiful, contradicting emotions.

"Thank you," she muttered. "And sorry."

There was something in her voice, so I tightened my arms around her body, instinct kicking in. *Head in the game, Blackford.* "Just for precaution."

She mumbled something I didn't catch, and God, she was so out of sorts that I wanted to laugh. Just like earlier tonight, when I hadn't been able to help myself. I was a goddamn live wire with her so close, and she still made me want to grin like an idiot. *Happiness?* Yes. This woman made me happy just by being here, in my arms, and she had no idea.

Her hands shifted as they rested on my chest, and a hum escaped my throat in response.

Jesus Christ, TJ had been right. I had it so bad. So fucking bad, I couldn't see past my infatuation.

Catalina tripped again, providing me with the perfect excuse to bring her even closer to me. To lean down and speak in her ear. "Aren't you supposed to be good at this, Catalina?"

"What do you mean?"





I dipped my head further, my mouth coming closer to her skin. "I thought you were supposed to carry the beat in your blood," I explained.

"Or was it the music in your veins?"

"This is not my style," she answered quickly. There was a shift in her voice.

"Or maybe it's my partner that's not the best fit."

A chuckle escaped my lips, and to my utter pleasure, her cheeks turned a darker shade of pink at the sound. She looked at me, a mix of surprise and curiosity entering her expression.

I returned my mouth to her ear, eager to get more of whatever that had been from her. "Was that you admitting something you are not good at? To me?"

"I never claimed to be a spectacular dancer. Plus, all that rhythm in your blood stuff is nothing more than a stereotype. There are more than a few hundred Spaniards who can't follow a beat to save their lives."

"I bet there are," I murmured, moving one of my hands to the small of her back. "I'll keep leading then." I let my thumb draw a circle there, noticing how my voice changed, turning thicker. "But just in case you belong to those few hundred."

A soft puff of air left her mouth, and I felt it on my skin, even through the layers of fabric covering my chest. "If you must," she said, but her words were now rocky, distracted. And they told me what I needed to know. It was me, my arms around her, the closeness between our bodies, what had made her trip. My blood swirled.

When she spoke again, it was barely a whisper. "I didn't know you danced."

I swallowed, doing my best to keep my composure, trying not to tell her what was in my mind. *You could know every single thing about me, if you'll let me show you.* "There are a few things you don't know about me, Catalina."

Somewhere in the north of Spain...

An excerpt of Chapter Nineteen



Aaron

Catalina jerked the dresser drawer open. She was standing there, wearing her pajamas, holding her discarded clothes under her arm, and staring at the contents of the drawer without moving.

After a few seconds, she closed it.

I suppressed a sigh.

She was spooked, and I knew her well enough to know why. It wasn't my presence in the cramped room, or the fact we had to share a bed. What caused this was something else entirely.

Now I knew better. Deep down, Catalina trusted me to be here with her. She knew she was safe with me, that she wouldn't be safer anywhere else, with anybody else, as much as she didn't want to admit it. I could see it in her face when I touched her, or in the way her body reacted when I came close. It was clear as goddamn day that a part of her had already surrendered her trust to me – and dear God, that made me want to roar at the sky with triumph. It made me want to throw her over my shoulder and run fast and far away from everything and everyone. That's what she did to me. But I couldn't. Wouldn't, when there was something tugging her back every time we took a step forward. There was still something she was keeping from me that I bet had everything to do with her ex. That's why she held back when she delved too much into how I made her feel. Into how good we felt together.

Unable to help myself, I moved behind her, and when I was within reach, I brushed my fingers against the back of her arm.

She inhaled sharply at my touch. Electricity pulsed through my hand.

"What's wrong?" I asked, just so she would get out of her head. And unstoppable, my fingers trailed up and down her arm. "You're fidgeting."

"Nothing's wrong. I'm okay," she answered. But I knew that to be a lie. "I'm ... cool."

Another lie.

I waited one, two, three, ten seconds, wishing, hoping, she'd open up, exercising that patience I'd practiced in the past long months. But nothing had really prepared me for this beautiful, complex woman I wanted so badly it hurt. So when she didn't turn, when she didn't even look at me, I removed my hand and stepped back.

"I'll sleep on the floor," I said to the back of her head, pushing all emotion out of my voice.

I started walking away but before I could really move, Catalina turned around, her hand going straight for my arm. My heart cheered and tripped as her fingers wrapped around my wrist. That goddamn electricity surged through me again, more powerful, as I looked at that small hand, feeling my pulse going wild beneath her touch, just like it always did. When I glanced at her, I made sure to meet those warm brown eyes, hoping to find there what I craved from her.

"Don't," she whispered, and I could hear it in her voice. The fear. The need. A spark of the courage of this brave girl that had already made me hers. "I told you, you don't have to. We will sleep on the bed. Both of us." She swallowed. And I remained quiet, waiting for her to continue. Hoping that she would. "That's not what I'm worried about. I'm just ..."

She trailed off, shaking her head.

I know, baby, I wanted to tell her. I know you're scared, but you don't have to.

But sometimes words didn't suffice. Actions did.

Her eyelids fluttered shut, as if she needed a moment, and when they lifted back up again, there was no trace of her hesitation. There was only need.

Sweet and warm surprised surged through me.

Catalina wanted this, me, but she didn't know how to tell me. How to get there.

This was it, I thought. One of those moments in life where the road split in two. I could step away and leave her to her thoughts, leave those words at the tip of her tongue unsaid and continue to wait. Or I could do the opposite. Come closer, push for whatever she couldn't bring herself to say.

It took me only a second to decide.

"Tell me what's going on inside your head; you can trust me," I said. Stepping closer. Needing to touch her, I cupped her face in my palm. "Let me show you that you can trust me."

She kept staring into my eyes, and I saw it right there, in her face, radiant, glimmering, that trust that made me feel invincible.

Catalina tilted her head, leaning into my touch, and I would never know how I held back and didn't take her mouth right there and then.

"I don't know how," she whispered.

Perhaps it was that powerful urge, the desire to place my mouth on hers, the thought of the kiss I'd burn down cities for, but something shifted inside of me. *Actions. Show her.* Before I knew what I was doing, I was taking the clothes out of her hands and throwing them somewhere behind me. Before I knew what was happening, I was stepping into her space, invading it, making her mine.

"Close your eyes," I commanded. Unable to hide the urgency I felt.

Her eyes fell immediately shut, no hesitation, and that familiar rumble of satisfaction built in my throat.

I waited a few seconds just so I could keep myself in check. Just so I wouldn't throw caution completely out the window and mess everything up too soon. "Once, I told you I was patient," I said more for my own ears than hers. "That I wasn't scared to work hard for what I wanted."

No part of our bodies touched and it took all my restraint to keep my mouth so close without resting my lips to the soft shell of her ear.

I spoke again, just so I wouldn't lose focus. "I might not have been completely honest."

Catalina leaned forward, gravitating towards me, her lips parting, the air in her lungs coming out ragged, and I knew, I just knew, that if I didn't touch her, she would close the distance.

I moved, my lips finally coming into contact with the warm skin beneath her ear. A shiver wracked her head to toes, filling me with pride. Privilege.

"It's becoming really hard to make myself wait," I confessed, another pass of my lips over the same patch of skin as she remained with her eyes closed. "You are very close to driving me out of my mind."

A whimper left her, and I knew she hadn't even noticed making a sound.

Coming even closer, I chuckled, even though there was nothing funny about this. About how lost I was to this woman. How ... helpless she made me.

"But I am a man of my word," I said, pressing my lips against her neck.

Catalina's breath hitched and my fingers trailed up her arm, reaching the other side of her cheek and cupping her face, just like I'd done earlier.

"Do you want me to step away?" I asked her, my thumb grazing her jaw slowly, my touch begging her to say no.

A shake of her head.

I hummed deep in my throat. "You want my touch then."

She didn't answer this time, but she didn't need to. I read this woman like an open book.

"Good."

My fingers trickled down her throat, powerless, incapable not to touch her, everywhere I could. I only stopped when I reached the neckline of her pajama top.

"Aaron," she whispered.

I hear you, baby. I told her with my touch, brushing my fingertips against her skin. Enough to drive us both a little crazier, but not to spiral into madness together. I wanted to take my time. I drew a circle with my thumb on her collarbone, my head coming closer to her neck.

"Aaron," Catalina repeated.

And there was something in her voice that made me come to a stop, hold my breath.

"What are we doing?" She asked before releasing a long, uneven breath.

I froze, turned to stone. *Don't do this, Catalina.*



But she said, "Is this ... still pretending? Is this just for practice?"

And all the air seemed to leave me in a silent hiss.

Pretending. Practice. She wasn't ready. Not yet. And the realization seemed to have taken my heart and run with it, but I also understood. And I had more time. I'd make more time as much as every second would break me.

"Would that make you feel better?" I asked her. "I'll pretend a little longer if that's what you need."

I'll give you anything.

"Yes," she rushed out, and there it was again.

The need. The encouragement I didn't want when I was making myself wait.

I let my lips fall on her skin, resuming what I had started. A deep sigh left her, and my pulse turned wild, reckless, bringing me closer, encouraging my mouth to skim along her jaw, wanting more from her. Wanting everything.

"I don't think I'd be able to deny you a single thing if you asked, Catalina," I said, the thought escaping me before I could stop it.

She whimpered softly, the sound decadent as her restraint broke. I stopped at her neck, kissed her skin, and her eyelids fluttered.

"No," I commanded. "Don't open them yet."

She didn't.

"Good girl," I heard myself say in a voice I didn't recognize. "Keep them closed." I brushed another open-mouthed kiss as a reward. "We'll play this game a little longer."

Her body came alive at my words, unravelling something inside of me.

"For practice purposes," I continued, the hand that was cupping her head trailing down, greedy, over her clothes. I stopped at her waist. Tightened my grip. "I can show you exactly what it would be like."

I clutched the fabric of the shirt in my fist, stopping myself before ripping it, then returned my palm to her waist.

"If you were really mine," I told her. "I'd do this all the time." I draped my hand around her hip and brought her against me. Our hips came into blissful, scorching contact. "If you were mine." I moved into her, bringing our bodies completely flush, out of pure desperation. "You'd crave this. You'd welcome this. You would want it."

Catalina's mouth parted, her cheeks flushed, her breathing now all over the place, and the sight of her like this broke another thread of my restraint.

In a quick motion, I was coming over her and shifting us, pushing her back against the wardrobe.

"If I were yours," I said in her ear, her smaller and softer body pressing beautifully against mine. "I would not be capable of functioning without touching you. I couldn't go a few minutes without doing this." My grip of her waist tightened, my thumb slipping under her shirt. Her skin was warm, soft, and my touch greedy, demanding. "Or something like this." I stepped further into her and pressed my hips against hers.

A whimper left her.

A groan got stuck in my throat.

She was so soft. So warm. So perfect.

Fuck.

Goddamn.

That thumb under her shirt trailed up her side, taking the fabric with it.

Twin exhales escaped our mouths, shakily, and I pressed my mouth against her temple just so I wouldn't kiss her.



But those lips, that mouth, beckoned me now.

My lips travelled along the side of her face, desperate, and when I reached her eyelids, I held myself above them. *These beautiful, smart eyes that tell me so much when she doesn't. I continued down, my mouth stopping at her nose. This button nose she unknowingly wrinkles when she sees or hears something stupid.* I moved to her right cheek. Her left. Cheeks that blush a soft shade of pink when I come too close. Her chin. The line of her jaw.

Just so I wouldn't kiss her, I brushed my lips over her flushed skin, wondering how it would taste, how that pink would feel under my tongue.

Until I reached her mouth.

My head held very still, and dear God, I knew with staggering certainty, that I would die if I didn't kiss Catalina. If I didn't make her mine. If I didn't show her how lost I was for her. How I was already hers. How good we were. How this wasn't practice. Or pretending. It was real.

As if compelled by the same thought, Catalina reached out, her hand wrapping around my arm, the contact turning me inside out.

She dug her nails into my skin and a guttural sound left me in a rush. Pure, unfiltered want moved me closer to her, my whole body throbbing, pulsing, pleading for her.

"Lina," I whispered. Begged her. Warned her. "I'm going to kiss you."

I leaned down, no thoughts in my head, only Catalina. I brushed my lips against hers, softly, and fireworks erupted inside of me, ripping me right open, making me short for breath.

Her lips moved against my mouth. "Please, Aar—"

A door slammed shut somewhere and I—

I pulled back, a wave of something cold and heavy washing over me. Common sense.

Her earlier words echoed in my head.

Is this pretending?

Did she still think that?

"You called me Lina," she whispered, and only then I noticed my head had fallen and my forehead was against hers. "You never do. You only have once."

My whole body still shook with need. But I didn't move. I couldn't. Not yet.



"Oh my God," she said after a few seconds. "What the hell was that noise?"

I lifted my head, my eyes searching her face. God, I wanted to kiss her so badly, but I wouldn't. Not when she could hide behind the charade we were playing. "Your cousin, I hope."

I stepped back, ripping myself off her, hating every second of walking away.

"I'll go check," I said as I turned around. But every step felt like my feet had been dipped in concrete. Strenuous. Impossible. I looked at her over my shoulder and I said her name, "Catalina." This was enough. No more games. "I'm glad I didn't kiss you."

Her eyes widened. "Why?"

And because she had cracked me open, nothing but the truth came out. "Because when I finally take those lips in mine, it will be the furthest thing from pretending. I will not be showing you what it would be like if you were mine. I'll show you what it is. And I sure as hell won't be showing how good I could make you feel if you called me yours. You'll already know that I am."

And because I wouldn't settle for halfways or half truths, because I'd waited enough and I wanted her wholly, completely, I added, "When I finally kiss you, there won't be any doubt in your mind that it is real."

