

*Me: Hey, I need an SOS call to get out of this dinner. Call me in five minutes?*

I breathed a sigh of relief when she answered almost immediately.

*Caroline: On it. Five minutes starting now.*

Thank God for Caroline. I smoothed a hand over my hair and made my way back to the table. Andrew was busy chatting away on his phone, glancing at me as I sat back down and mouthing “Sorry.”

As he wrapped up his conversation, I pushed the food around on my plate with my fork, not bothering to eat any of it.

“I’m sorry about that. Sometimes all this networking can be downright exhausting. Now, where were we? Ah, yes, we were talking about merging,” he said, drawing out the last word, and I smiled tightly, trying to hide my disgust.

I opened my mouth to speak, but before I could get a word out, my phone rang.

Thank you, Caroline.

“Excuse me ... You know how it is. I have to take this,” I said, slipping my phone from my clutch and stepping into the lobby. “Hello?”

“Hello, Ms. Carter, an emergency requires your attention. Now before you say anything, I need to know ... Are you okay getting rid of this guy on your own, or do I need to come down there with a crowbar? Be honest.”

I bit back a laugh. “That won’t be necessary, but I appreciate the concern.”

“Of course. What are friends for? I expect a full report when you get back, though.”

“You got it,” I promised before I hung up. I glanced up, and my eyes landed on the bar where Jaime was helping a guest. He looked up at that exact moment, and our eyes caught and held. After all this time, he could still make me weak in the knees.

A slow smile stretched across Jaime’s lips, and he winked. I smiled back like a teenager with a crush. He turned his attention back to his customer, and I immediately felt the loss of connection.

I walked back to the table, looking apologetic. “Andrew, I am so sorry, but there’s an emergency and ...”

“And you need to go,” he finished.

I nodded, forcing a sheepish expression, and Andrew nodded in understanding. “I get it—I always have a lot of fires to put out. I assume I’ll hear from you tomorrow to set up another time to meet?”

“Of course,” I promised, already dreading it. Andrew opened his arms for a hug, but I stuck out my hand. He laughed awkwardly and shook my hand before telling me goodnight and slinking out of the restaurant.

I hovered near the table until I was sure Andrew was out of sight, then escaped into the bar, relief pouring over me at the idea of being in Jaime’s presence.

I headed straight toward Jaime, who was grinning at me.

“What happened to your fancy business dinner?” he asked as I slipped my butt onto a stool.

I shrugged. “It was a bust, which is why I could use a Gin Fizz right about now.”

“Coming up,” he replied as he grabbed a shaker. “I would feel bad your dinner didn’t go well, but selfishly, I’m glad because you’re here earlier than I expected.”

I felt myself blush. “Well, those dinners are boring, and I’d rather spend my time talking to someone interesting.”

His eyebrows shot up. “And you think I’m interesting?”

I huffed out a laugh. “So modest. You know you’re usually the most interesting man in the room.”

He barked a laugh. “Isn’t that the guy in the Dos Equis commercial?”

“I’m just saying you could give him a run for his money.”

Jaime leaned closer—close enough I could smell his cologne. He smelled like cedar with a hint of bergamot and something uniquely Jaime.

That was when my stomach growled. Loud. I felt my face heat with embarrassment.

“Was that ...” he started.

I nodded. “Yes ... and that was totally embarrassing,” I lamented.

“Did you not eat at that fancy dinner tonight?” he asked with a raised eyebrow.

I shook my head. “Kind of lost my appetite having to deal with that blowhard ...” I began before stopping myself as Jaime listened with amusement. “I mean, having to deal with that promising investor,” I amended, slapping an exaggerated smile on my face.

He chuckled. “Well, I’ll tell you what. Why don’t you work on getting a little less gin and a little more water into your system, and I’ll go make you something to eat.”

I shook my head. “Oh no, Jaime, I couldn’t ask you to do that.”

“You didn’t, I’m offering,” he said with a grin before something caught his eye over my shoulder. I turned to find Caroline with a feline smile on her lips as she glanced between the two of us.

“Well, hello there,” she practically sang as she slipped onto the stool beside me, reaching her hand out to Jaime. “I’m Caroline, Emma’s best friend. You must be Jaime.”

Jaime shook her hand, his grin widening. “Hello, Caroline, it’s nice to meet you. I was just going to rustle up something to eat for my starving soldier here. You wouldn’t happen to be hungry, would you?”

Caroline’s eyes lit with amusement as she rested her chin on a fist. “Oh Jaime, that’s my eternal state of being.”

Jaime laughed, and the rich sound sent shivers down my spine. “Okay—two Jaime specials coming up,” he said, throwing a towel over his shoulder. “You two sit tight, and I’ll be back before you know it.”

As soon as he was out of sight, Caroline looked at me in wonder. “Oh. My. God,” she marveled. “He’s cooking for you already. I see why you’ve been pining after him for so long.”

“Caroline,” I hissed. “Keep your voice down. You have the subtlety of a freight train.”

She made a face. “Uh, I hate to break it to you, Emma, but there’s nothing subtle about this whole situation. I mean, when I walked in here, that man looked like he was two seconds away from devouring you.”

A happy warmth spread through me at her observation, but I didn’t say anything.

“Besides, you had to know I was going to come check on you after that SOS call. I’m assuming your associate had to have been behaving like a total creep to make you call me.”

I sighed. “Well, maybe not a total creep, but he was fast approaching,” I paused, turning to face Caroline. “It’s weird. Before I would have breezed through that dinner no matter how uncomfortable I was in order to get the deal done. But there’s something about being here ... I don’t know. I just didn’t have it in me to put up with it tonight.”

Caroline nodded sympathetically. “Maybe Mama Carter’s spirit is reminding you it’s not your job to take everybody’s shit.”

I laughed. “I can’t imagine my mother putting it like that, but maybe you’re right ... and based on our recent experiences, it would seem we both need to embrace that sentiment.”

Caroline grimaced. “Amen to that.”

It was then that Jaime returned with a tray in his arms. “Ladies, dinner is served,” he said, presenting us with two plates that each held a burger with all the fixings, a side of fries, and little cups filled with ketchup.

My eyes widened as the smell hit my nostrils and my empty stomach. “Is that ...” I started.

“Oh, it is, Mabel’s secret recipe,” Jaime announced with relish. “It’s been a long time, but I know that recipe like the back of my hand. I only wish I could get my hands on a couple of chocolate milkshakes, and then you could have the full experience.”

I couldn’t stop the grin that took over my mouth. “I can’t believe you went to all this trouble.”

Jaime shook his head. “Anything for you, Bella,” he said in a low voice, and prickles of pleasure raced down my spine at the mention of the nickname he’d given me when we were younger. I still remember the first time he’d called me that, explaining it meant beautiful.

Our eyes held for a long moment before Caroline’s moan interrupted. “Wow, you were not lying about this burger, Emma,” she mumbled around a mouthful of burger.

“Well, tell me if it still holds up,” Jaime said, gesturing toward my plate.

I picked up the hefty burger, my mouth watering from the smell, and when I took that first bite, a flood of memories assaulted my senses from the taste.

My eyes shut in rapture. It tasted heavenly, but knowing Jaime’s hands created it made it all the better.

I opened my eyes and met Jaime’s gaze as he watched me hungrily. I swallowed hard around the bite of food as a different appetite was awakened.

Caroline cleared her throat loudly. “You know, as fun as this has been and as much as I would like to get to know the legendary Jaime, I think it might be better to take this in a doggy bag.”

I looked sharply at Caroline, feeling the need to tell her, “You don’t need to do that.”

She winked at me before saying, “I assure you, no one needs to witness me consuming this burger—it’s about to get wild. So if you’ll excuse me, I think my burger and I need to be alone.”

Jaime had already pulled out a cardboard box and was helping Caroline pack up her food along with a complimentary cocktail for the road.

“Well, Jaime, it was lovely meeting you, and I hope we can talk more later, but right now, I have a date with this burger,” Caroline declared.

“Totally understand. It was nice to meet a friend of Emma’s.”

Caroline beamed at Jaime—my normally suspicious friend had been charmed. She rose from her stool and hugged me. “I’ll catch up with you later.”

“Enjoy that burger,” Jaime said, his sexy smile further crumbling my resolve. God, that smile used to make me feel all the things, and it had only magnified in power in the years we’d been apart.

It was then Joey rushed to the bar. “Jaime, I’m sorry to interrupt, but we have a situation with a guest.”

Jaime shot us both an apologetic look. "I'll be right back," he said before stepping around the bar and following Joey.

Caroline looked at me, eyebrows drawn up. "Emma," she exclaimed, "I thought you were being a little dramatic all these years, but girl, you definitely undersold him. And for the record, that man has plans for you."

I shook my head. "Would you calm down? We're old friends catching up on lost time. That's all," I said, unsure who I was trying to convince, Caroline or myself.

She huffed out a laugh. "You can tell yourself that all you want, but from my vantage point, you are two seconds away from doing it on this bar." She stopped cold, and a wicked grin stole over her mouth. "Now wouldn't that be a picture for old Daddy Moneybags?" she asked, using the nickname she'd given my father, a man she wasn't particularly fond of given how he'd been acting lately. "And as a token of my love and admiration," she continued, "I'm delaying the consumption of this burger to stop by the front desk and get my own room."

I felt a weird combination of panic and excitement threading through me at her suggestion. "Caroline, that's really not necessary. I seriously doubt ..."

She put up a hand to stop me. "Save your breath, Emma. All I'm asking is for you to keep an open mind, and this way, you can't use me crashing in your suite as an excuse. I refuse to be a cockblock."

I opened my mouth to protest, but Caroline just grinned, snatching up her to-go cocktail and box and giving me a wink before floating out of the bar and into the lobby.