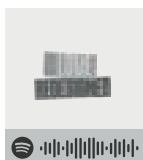


PLAYLISTS



Love Redesigned by Lauren Asher



Scan to listen



Love Redesigned

Playlist



Fuck Love Songs

Playlist



Stressed and Depressed

Playlist



Get Hammered

Playlist



Duke Brass: Greatest Hits

Album - Duke Brass



LAKE AURORA

FOUNDER'S HOUSE

JULIAN'S MANSION

TOPS LUXURY CONSTRUCTION SITE

LAKE WISTERIA

PARK PROMENADE

FAMILY SAND DUNES

LAKEFRONT PARKING

WOOD SHOP

LOVELL LAKE

MUNOZ HOUSE



*To those whose love language is words of affirmation.
Your praise kink is safe with me (and Julian Lopez).*



CHAPTER ONE

Julian

I'm about ten seconds away from losing my goddamn mind, and I have the painfully slow driver clogging up the only road into town to blame.

The sun set twenty minutes ago, giving me nothing to focus on but the illuminated California license plate caught in my headlights. I resist the urge to flash my high beams and honk my horn, although I nearly give in when the black Mercedes-Benz sedan weaves slightly to the side before correcting itself.

Cálmate. You only have five more miles left before hitting Main Street.

While I'm tempted to cut around the other driver so I can make it in time for my godson's talent show, I don't want to risk damaging my new McLaren by going off-road. I didn't spend the last few years of my life talking myself into buying my dream car

Cálmate: Calm down.

only to ruin the suspension a week after having it delivered.

The blast of my phone's ringtone startles me as my cousin's name flashes across the screen. I take a deep breath before stabbing the button on my steering wheel.

"Where the hell are you?" The sound of Rafael's harsh whisper fills the car.

"I'll be there in ten minutes."

A disapproving hum follows. "But the show starts in five."

"Don't worry. I'll make it before Nico takes the stage."

"Not sure how that's possible when he's in the opening act."

Mierda. "I had no clue."

"The program schedule got switched at the last minute after a few kids came down with a bug. I texted you this morning about it." He doesn't bother hiding his annoyance.

My hands clutch the smooth leather wheel. "The meeting in Lake Aurora took a lot longer than expected."

"Of course it did."

"Things should slow down soon."

"Sure they will." His rough tone only fuels my irritation.

Before his wife filed for divorce two years ago, people called Rafael the easygoing Lopez cousin, with him constantly going out of his way to put a smile on everyone's face.

Rafael's deep sigh cuts through the silence. "It's fine. Nico will understand."

My godson might be a mature eight-year-old kid, but he isn't *that* mature. And after everything he has been through with his parents' divorce, I refuse to add myself to his growing list of family disappointments.

Mierda: Shit.

“Your mom saved you a seat in the back of the auditorium in case you make it.”

“Rafa, I’ll be—”

He hangs up before hearing the rest of my sentence.

Pendejo.

Rafa and I have been butting heads more often than not lately, mostly due to his attitude and my busy schedule running my late father’s construction company. While I try my hardest to balance my personal life and Lopez Luxury expanding beyond my father’s wildest dreams, I keep falling short.

I scan the narrow space beside the road. The incline is muddy but still drivable for the handful of seconds I need to pass the car in front of me.

Stop overthinking and do it.

The rosary my mother hung from my rearview mirror spins as I turn my wheel toward the shoulder and slam my foot against the gas pedal. The engine revs as it switches gears, and my tires squeal.

My heart lodges itself in my throat as the other vehicle veers to the right and blocks my clear path.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck!

Time seems to speed up as our two cars collide. My headlight shatters and metal crunches as the front of my car smashes into the rear bumper of the other. I’m propelled forward, only to be shoved in the opposite direction as my seat belt locks in place.

Thankfully, the airbags don’t deploy, although my relief is short-lived as whatever spark of hope I had of making it to Nico’s show fizzles out, leaving me with nothing but a desire to yell at the reckless driver.

Pendejo: Dick.

Take five. The memory of my dad's voice pulls at the invisible strings wrapped around my heart until the tightness seems unbearable. I can picture him clearly as he helped me calm down from another night terror, one deep breath at a time.

I never thought I would be using the same strategy twenty-five years later, but here I am, with my eyes screwed shut as I force myself to count my breaths until the chest pain lessens and I'm no longer vibrating with rage.

I'm hit with an early October breeze as I walk toward the other car. The driver is hunched over the wheel, her dark, shoulder-length hair obstructing my view of her face.

I reach out to tap on the window, but a high-pitched shriek coming out of the car's speakers stops me. "Don't worry! I'm on my way!" The call cuts out after two beeps.

The woman's panicked breathing becomes more obvious with each rapid rise and fall of her back.

"Hey." I knock my fist against the window when she doesn't acknowledge me. "Are you okay?"

She lifts a trembling finger to the glass while keeping her head down. "One second." Her voice wavers.

My stomach muscles clench. "Do you need an ambulance?"

"No! I'm fine!" Her head snaps in my direction.

Vete a la chingada.

"*Julian?*" My name leaves Dahlia Muñoz's parted pink lips in a hoarse whisper.

It's been years since I heard Dahlia say my name in that soft voice of hers, and it hits harder than a sledgehammer to the chest.

The last time I saw her was at Nico's baptism eight years ago

Vete a la chingada: Get the fuck out of here.

when we became his godparents. We both put on a happy face for our families, but the tension and awkward silence between us nearly choked me, especially since we hadn't spoken since my dad's funeral a year and a half prior.

She stayed at Stanford all year round, including the summer break, while I kept my distance because I was a coward.

A coward who was blindsided when she showed up with Oliver, my ex-roommate and her new boyfriend. I didn't think they would become friends, let alone a couple, although it makes sense given Oliver's jabs about my crush on Dahlia and the way he looked at her despite knowing how I felt.

Since the baptism, we have both done an outstanding job of avoiding each other—or at least we *had* until she ruined all our efforts with tonight's surprise visit.

"Dahlia." An intense need to escape overwhelms me as her eyes slide over me.

I hide my shock as she exits the car with her head held high despite the mascara running down her cheeks and the slight trembling of her chin. Dahlia has only cried twice in the thirty years I've known her—once when she broke her arm trying to beat me in a tree-climbing contest and the other while at her father's funeral.

Like the tide with the moon, I'm unable to resist Dahlia's gravitational pull as my gaze follows the length of her body.

The plain white T-shirt she wears complements her golden skin and wavy brown hair, while her ripped jeans appear more fashionable than functional with how her knees pop out of the large, gaping holes. Her curves perfectly balance out her sharp cheekbones and pointed chin, creating the best combination of soft and sultry.

The base of my neck tingles, and I look up to find Dahlia's red, puffy eyes narrowed at me. Her ruined makeup doesn't detract from

her beauty, although the dark circles underneath her eyes have me speaking before my brain catches up.

“Your face is a mess.”

Pinche estúpido. Unlike my mom and cousin, I’m not a people person, and it clearly shows.

Dahlia’s golden rings glint in the moonlight as she wipes at her cheeks with a frown. “I had something in my eye.”

“Both of them?” I widen my stance as I cross my arms.

She dabs at the corners of her eyes with her two middle fingers. “A decent person wouldn’t call me out on that lie.”

“Since when are we decent to one another?”

“It’s never too late to start.”

Because of our slight height difference, she is forced to tilt her head back to get a good look at me. Her walnut-colored eyes remind me of long-ago late nights spent in the woodshop, meticulously obsessing over staining my latest carpentry project.

Whatever resolve I had quickly crumbles when she *sniffles*.

“Allergies.” Her defensive tone, paired with her twitching nose, makes my chest constrict in an act of ultimate betrayal.

What the hell is going on here, and how do I get it to stop?

I keep my facial expression neutral despite the rapid thumping of my heart against my rib cage. She doesn’t last long under my scrutiny before slumping against the door with a sigh.

I’m struck with a compulsion to say something, but words fail me.

My ringtone shatters the moment. “Shit!”

Her brows shoot toward her hairline. “What’s wrong?”

You. Always you.

Blaring sirens drown out my response. Every muscle in my body

Pinche estúpido: Fucking idiot.

goes rigid as a rush of vehicles makes its way around the bend in a single-file line. A fire truck and ambulance lead the safety brigade, followed by the sheriff, his deputies, and the Lake Wisteria trolley.

You've got to be kidding me.

Dahlia curses up to the stars. "*Dios, dame paciencia con mi mamá.*"

My gaze cuts into her. "That's who you were talking to?"

"Unfortunately."

Leave it to Lake Wisteria to turn a fender bender into a community crisis.

It's not the cars they're concerned about. It's her.

Dahlia is more than my childhood rival. She's Lake Wisteria's Strawberry Sweetheart who is finally returning home after years spent away living out her California dream.

And you're the cabrón who nearly drove her into a ditch.

I rub at my throbbing temple.

"Do you think we can escape before they get here?" Dahlia's gaze flicks from me to my car.

"This is all your fault." The words slip out.

A few minutes in Dahlia's presence already have me slipping back into the bad habit of speaking without thinking.

Add it to the long list of reasons you should avoid her.

She pops a hand on her hip. "*My fault?* We wouldn't be in this mess if you hadn't tried to cut me off."

"I had somewhere to be."

She throws her arms up. "Well, I was..."

Usually I crave silence, but something about Dahlia shutting down at the first sign of opposition frustrates me.

Dios, dame paciencia con mi mamá: God, give me patience with my mom.

Cabrón: Bastard.

Bright flashing lights cast us in shades of red, white, and blue as a few of the firefighters hop out of the truck to assess the scene while two medics quickly determine both Dahlia and I are fine.

The older fire chief pulls Dahlia in for a hug. “Your mom made it sound like you were dying.”

Her eyes roll. “You know how overprotective she can be.”

The fire chief ruffles Dahlia’s hair. “She comes from a good place.”

“Lucifer said the same thing about hell.” Dahlia fixes her appearance with a pinched expression.

“Dahlia!” Rosa hops out of the trolley and runs toward her daughter with a rosary clutched in one hand and a bottle of holy water in the other. My own mom exits the trolley with a group of people trailing behind her, turning our car accident into a town reunion.

“*Mami*.” Dahlia checks out the crowd forming behind the deputy’s line. “Did you need to involve everyone?”

“Don’t start with me. ¿*Qué pasó?*” Rosa scans her daughter from head to toe before ripping the cap off the holy water.

For the first time tonight, Dahlia’s eyes twinkle brighter than the stars above us. “Julian crashed into me.”

That little brat.

Rosa stares at me as if I committed a felony.

I bristle at my mom’s voice as she storms over to us. “Julian? Tell me that’s not true.”

“Ma.”

She snatches the bottle of holy water from Rosa’s hands and gives me a swift blessing before sprinkling me with it. “What were you thinking by trying to run Dahlia off the road?”

“That it’s a shame I failed.”

¿Qué pasó?: What happened.

The fire chief covers up his laugh with a cough.

Dahlia's heated glare threatens to burn a hole in the side of my face. "Don't tell me you've spent all these years plotting my murder only to fail now?"

"Trust me. I won't make the same mistake again."

She flips me off.

"Dahlia Isabella Muñoz!" Rosa tugs at her daughter's hand while my mother whisper-shouts, "Luis Julian Lopez Junior!"

My mom only uses my official first name on rare—and very pissed-off—occasions, so I better rein myself in before she loses her cool.

Dahlia and I sigh at the same time, and our gazes collide, scattering my thoughts until I'm left with only one.

Her.

The sheriff approaches the scene, saving me from embarrassing myself any further. Thankfully, the deputy with a personal vendetta against me stays far away, a blessing in itself given my bad luck today.

Knowing Dahlia, she would befriend him to spite me.

The older sheriff drags Dahlia into a quick bear hug. "So, what happened here?"

"You should arrest Julian for attempted murder." Dahlia's wicked grin sets off a blaring alarm in my head. Memories I spent years erasing surge to the forefront of my mind, flashing before me like a haunted movie reel.

The way her smile grew wider whenever I got flustered and spoke out of turn.

Her sparkling eyes looking up at me as we—no, *I* stiffly moved us around the dance floor during her quinceañera.

How she had a similar expression during her valedictorian speech as she thanked me, the salutatorian, for putting up a good fight throughout high school.

It's pathetic how one smile from her can stir up countless memories, all of which are best left in the past, along with any feelings I once had for her.

Truth is, I'm not sure why Dahlia Muñoz is back, but nothing good can come of it.

Nothing good at all.