

The Spotlight

Under a snowy white sky, Femi approached the college apartment. Her snow boots left a trail of footprints up its steps. Her deep brown finger tapped its icy doorbell. Her heartbeat raced around her chest. She inhaled and exhaled to slow it down.

Her dark eyes noticed the twinkle of red, green, and white LEDs strung alongside the trees on the lawn. They reminded her of the big, bright lights she had helped coordinate during her college's production of *Cinderella*.

As a junior stage manager, she orchestrated the development of the show from the background. Because of her place in the shadows, she didn't have to perform lines or choreography. She only had to help the actors do so. Femi found the dark backstage comfortable even if the spotlight drew her gaze.

Then the door opened with a large swing. In between gasps, he muttered, "I'm sorry, I was just baking for..."

Mateo's black curls swayed over his olive face as his amber eyes focused. He slightly shivered. She noticed his dark t-shirt, gray shorts, and black sandals. Femi's lips fell open as she processed him.

"...never mind that! What can I do for you?" he asked.

Femi's cheeks heated and she averted her eyes.

"We need to talk about your crush."

Inside, Femi took her maroon beanie off and her black frizzy hair sprang out. Her palms quickly reached up to flatten it. When Mateo grabbed her coat, his fingers brushed her arm. A rich creamy scent swirled through the air.

“Who were you baking for?” she asked. His mouth slowly opened and red crept onto his cheeks.

Femi smiled and pursed her lips.

“Tsk... you’re really bad at this,” she said.

“Huh?” Mateo tilted his head.

“You need to try harder, Mateo. I can tell you really like Asha,” Femi said flatly. Mateo’s eyes squinted.

“You...can?” he asked. Femi snorted.

Asha was the play’s lead actress. When Femi needed the attention of the cast, Asha’s bright voice rang out and brought their chatter to a close. Outside class, they always had lunch together. It wasn’t long before they developed a complex handshake to officiate their friendship. Then, Femi noticed him.

Mateo was the play’s new lighting director. She appreciated the fact that he opened the door for her when they got to work early. He hardly spoke but his gaze softened when she asked for his attention.

But he only stayed after rehearsals to chat with Asha. Femi spied on them.

Stutters and avoidance of eye contact littered his conversation with the lead actress. His awkwardness pained Femi's heart. It was a matter of time before Asha rejected him. Fortunately for him, it was Femi's job to help her production crew.

"She isn't going to just fall into your arms. Asha, like most girls, expects you to show her you care. You have to do more than try to hold a conversation!" Femi said.

"Oh...How do I do that?" Mateo asked. Femi briskly picked up the cookie platter. The warm metal thawed her cold hands.

"Let's start with these cookies. Pretend I'm Asha," Femi said. She handed him the platter and turned around. Silence hung heavy between them.

"Tap me on the shoulders!" Femi said with a cough. Mateo rested his hand on her shoulder and cleared his throat. She turned to face him. Mateo's eyes remained shut.

Femi picked up his remaining hand by his side and stared up at him. He opened his dark eyes and for a faint moment, she noticed a small smile. Her heart skipped beats.

"I...uh...baked some cookies," he said.

Femi gestured for him to lean closer. "Continue...who are they for?" Femi whispered into his ear. "Take a deep breath and tell her the truth."

Mateo slowly inhaled and exhaled. "Well...I...uh...made them for you," Mateo muttered. Femi's heart fluttered.

"Awww...thank you, Mateo!" Femi said with a high-pitched voice that mimicked Asha's. She flashed a wide grin at Mateo and saw his faint smile disappear. *I wish I was Asha*, she thought. She bit her lip and shook the dream away. She worked better in the background.

“Well! Just do that for Asha. That should get y’all’s love story rolling,” she said promptly. She grabbed her coat and beanie.

Mateo replied, “Huh?” The door closed behind her.

Outside, the crisp wind tore at Femi’s face. Her pace quickened. The cold pricked her fingers as her mind focused on an image of Asha in Mateo’s embrace. She pulled her coat tighter. The wind pushed her eyelids open and stung her teary eyes. She neared her parked car.

“Wait Femi! Do you want a cookie?” a deep voice yelled from behind. Femi turned around. Mateo, still in his sandals, trudged through the snow. Before she could answer, a small chocolate treat flew from his hands. It landed straight into her palm. Her fingers enveloped its toasty, rough surface.

Femi took a bite and blinked. A dark chewy texture melted in her mouth. Her eyebrows shot up.

“Are these double-fudge—”

“-oatmeal cookies!” Mateo interjected. He walked closer to her. The wind whipped the black curls around his eyes as he stared at her.

“Why this flavor?” Femi asked.

“Asha told me to.” It made sense that Asha knew about her favorite flavor. Femi frequently shared homemade snacks with Asha during lunch. Double fudge oatmeal cookies were Femi’s favorite and lemon sugar cookies were Asha’s.

“But she likes—” Femi continued.

“They’re not for her,” he said. His eyebrows furrowed then relaxed. The corners of his eyes crinkled with his small smile. Femi’s eyes widened and her mind spun.

“Bu– But what about your chats after rehearsal!” Femi exclaimed. Mateo shook his head.

“I wasn’t sure if you liked me or not. So, I’ve been talking to her about how to ask you out since...I’m not the best with words.” Mateo said. His ears grew red as he began to close the space between them.

As he walked, rays of light brightened the color of his eyes. He stopped right in front of her. Though a chilly breeze passed by, his breath warmed her skin. He inhaled and exhaled.

“I made them for you,” Mateo said, steady and clear. He picked up her hands by her side and leaned closer to her.

“Femi...would you like to go on a date with me?” Mateo whispered. His brown eyes locked onto hers.

Femi hadn’t rehearsed her response at all. Her heart pounded and her breath quickened. The spotlight was on her. She stepped forward.

“I’d love that.”