



No good deed goes unpunished.

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
BELLE AURORA

DIRTY

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DIRTY

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DEDICATION

*To those too weak to stand,
and to the unexpected heroes who help us back up.*

For Sali.

This book would not have been written without your ongoing support.

PROLOGUE

ALEJANDRA

I was confused.

At least, I *remember* being confused.

Being called away from school to join my father in the office is not a good thing. The office is where he conducts business. I have been there before, but it is no place for a girl like me, or so he says.

The hall somehow looks longer than it ever has before. I walk it not knowing what to expect, clutching my schoolbag to me tightly.

Have I done something wrong? Why did he sound so tense on the phone?

My feet shuffle forward. I swallow hard, looking down at my shoes. My shoelace is undone.

He won't like that.

I stop where I am to make sure my appearance is near perfect, running my fingers through my long, straight black hair and smoothing my hands over the skirt of my private school uniform. I take my time, pulling my white socks up to my knees and being careful not to mark them.

My father didn't raise a pack of animals. He raised ladies, and in my brother's case, a gentleman.

My siblings and I pride ourselves on being everything my father wished for. The only mob family with grace and humility, I'm sure.

At eighteen, I know my place. My place is to make my father happy. And I do.

At least, I think I do. So far, there have been no complaints.

I study hard to maintain an A average. I dress appropriately, never showing too much skin, and I watch over my younger sisters with love and care, molding them into the ladies they should be. Even I have to admit I'm a decent person, and I love my family.

There are six of us in total. In order of age, there's Miguel who is twenty-four, myself, Veronica who is sixteen, Carmen who is fifteen, Patricia who is thirteen, and Rosa who is only nine. She was the last of us, born only a year before Mama died. I know Rosa doesn't remember her. I also know it hurts her. She has photos like the rest of us do, but it's not enough.

My mother's name was Dorina, affectionately known as Dori to anyone she liked. She met my father when they were both just kids, running around, playing on the street. He threw dirt in her face. Instead of crying like the other girls had, she'd simply stood and shook the dirt off her. She walked home that day and told her mama about the silly boy who threw dirt at her. Her mother, my grandmother, laughed joyously and hugged her little girl. She explained, "Oh, gatito, boys are funny in the way they do things. And the worse they treat a girl usually means the more they like them."

Mama heard this and was set.

She was going to marry that boy.

Fourteen years later, Mama became Mrs. Eduardo Castillo. They lived happily for the length of my mother's life. She was the only woman in the world who could make my father laugh. He loved her so much that when she died, he mourned. And it scared the crap out of me.

My father is a reasonable man, but something changed during his mourning period. He became colder, more closed off. He started to shut us out.

The only person who can make him see reason is my brother, Miguel.

As I reach the office door, I knock lightly with a shaking hand.

"Come in," calls a familiar voice.

My brother? My body turns rigid. What is he doing here? He shouldn't be here.

Pushing the door open, I step inside and quietly close the door behind me. I walk to stand in front of the desk my father sits at, but look up at my brother, who stands emotionless behind my father. I haven't seen him in a year. He looks good. Papa holds a hand at his forehead. He has yet to acknowledge me. I spare a sweet smile for my brother. When he doesn't return it, my chest aches and Miguel catches my hurt. His eyes turn soft and apologetic.

He looks like he's about to cry.

It's here I'd like to note that the men in my family don't cry.

When my father lifts his face, my skin prickles at the look in his eyes. There is something there I haven't seen before. Something calculating.

I know Papa isn't a good man, but he is good to us. He's a family man. He would do anything for us.

He would kill for us.

In fact, I know he has.

I clear my throat and ask gently, "Papa? Is everything okay?"

Surprised at my own ability to hide the quiver in my voice, I stand taller, feigning my calm. My father looks me in the eye. I haven't noticed till now how much he's aged since Mama died. The lines in his tanned face have deepened so much that he looks ten years older than his fifty years. The dark skin under his eyes seems as though he mustn't have slept in months. But the laugh lines around his eyes... they're gone.

I suppose he doesn't use them as much as he used to. With my mother gone, he has no one to make him laugh.

"Alejandra." He motions to the chair opposite his. His rough voice commands, "Sit."

I don't want to sit.

I want to run.

I look to my brother for help. He shakes his head, eyeing the chair. I swallow hard, my heart pounding in time with my steps till I finally seat myself.

Papa sighs then stands. He paces. "I have called you here today to discuss something with you. Something of importance. I'm afraid we need to discuss this rather quickly. There isn't much time."

My brother's warm brown eyes darken a shade. I see him bite the inside of his cheek. His face turns a deep shade of red and the vein at his temple throbs. It looks as though he's about to snap.

The sight causes ice-cold fear to coil deep in my belly. Miguel doesn't lose his temper. He's a gentleman, patient and controlled.

My heart races. Something is very wrong here.

Not sure what to say, I nod once to let him know I'm listening. He continues, "Grave times we're in. It's not enough to be your own people anymore. There's safety in numbers." He pauses, planting his palms flat on his desk, leaning toward me. "There is a time in every person's life where sacrifices must be made for the sake of the greater good. Understand?"

I nod. I do understand. I understand that my father spends a lot of time away from home to maintain the good life we have. This is his sacrifice, and he makes it without complaint.

I appreciate what he does for us, not that I know for sure what he does. It's not my business. I'm just a woman.

His lips curve in what I'm sure is an attempt at a smile, but it comes off as a grimace. He mutters quietly, "Always a good girl. I'm so lucky to have you."

My heart beams as warmth spreads through me, melting away some of the frozen fear inside me. It warms me to my very toes. But my brother's fists ball so hard that his knuckles turn white. Miguel hisses behind my father, "Tell her."

Papa's feeble smile wanes, looking mildly irritated by the interruption. "Yes. Of course." Moving around the desk, my father sits on the edge of it and takes my hand in one of his, patting it gently with the other. As a girl, this was my everything. Looking up into my father's smiling eyes while he spoke about this and that, it never really mattered what he was talking about, only that his attention was warm and unwavering.

But then he drops a bomb. "You're going to marry Dino, son of Vito Gambino."

He says this without feeling, without reaction, without emotion.

My grip on his hand weakens, but he holds it firm. In support? I don't know. The blood drains from my face. My lips part and my breathing shallows.

My stomach is coiled tighter than a knot. It feels as though my body is attempting to strangle itself.

Licking my dry lips, I utter a quivering and hushed, "Why?"

My father takes a moment, never letting go of my hand, and he thinks carefully about what he is about to say. "The Gambinos aren't unlike us. The Italians are family people, but they have some issues amongst themselves. Can't trust each other. Each family has a different motive. Vito came to me seeking peace. And his offer was welcome. He treated me with respect and spoke to me about where he sees our families in ten years. And his vision"—he squeezes my hand—"is one I share."

The bridge of my nose aches and my eyes sting. "Papa, I'm only eighteen..."

I'm grasping at straws here. This statement makes no sense, even to me. Thankfully, my brother comes to my aid.

Miguel cuts in. "Raul has been courting Alejandra since they were sixteen, Papa. You gave your blessing. This is..." his anger gets the better of him when he spits, "this is madness. It's just not... It's just not done. Not in this day and age."

Yes! Oh, God, yes!

In the five minutes I've been here, I forgot about my boyfriend. He'll help me. I know he will.

My father stands and spins, facing Miguel. In a deathly calm, he utters, "You have a better idea? This is an alliance we need, mi hijo. Alejandra understands. Sacrifices must be made. She does this for the family." He turns to me, eyes full of pride. "It is an honor."

The first of my tears falls. My throat thick, I whisper, "I don't want to marry Dino. I want to marry Raul."

My father turns back to me, gazing at me with dead eyes. "I called Raul in this morning. In promising him Veronica's hand, he will give you up."

The words are a slap to my face. Over and over, the pain fills me, crushing me.

Closing my eyes, I don't even try to be graceful. I lift my hands to cover my face as my body jerks in harsh, unladylike sobs. "How... c-c-could... he?"

But rather than comfort me, my father just throws salt into the crevice my heart has been ripped from. "Do not be like that, Alejandra. His father wanted a connection to our family. It's a privilege." My father sniffs a laugh. "You didn't think he loved you, did you?"

I weep loudly, no longer able to control my emotions. Sobs are torn from my throat. My life is falling apart around me.

Miguel appears at my feet, kneeling down but looking up at me. He removes my hands from my tear-streaked face. "If there is a way out of this, I swear to you, Ana, I will find it. I swear it."

Papa rolls his eyes at the determination in my brother's voice. "It is marriage. Not murder. We have cause to rejoice, not mourn."

Right now, I'd prefer murder to marriage.

I can't seem to breathe properly. Every time I try to suck in a breath, my chest convulses as another sob is wrenched out of me.

My father looks at me with disdain before shaking his head, informing me, “Vito promises me that Dino is a good boy and he’ll treat you well. Like a princess. And you will be a princess in their family. Loved and respected by all, much like you are here. Now stop this nonsense. It’s done.” He sends a warning look to Miguel. “Nothing can be done. A deal has been made. The Castillos and the Gambinos united through marriage.” My father laughs. “We should be celebrating—” He places his fingers under my chin, lifting it to look up at him. “—not crying, gatito.” He wipes away my tears, kissing my cheek. “You will accompany me to dinner tonight. We meet with Vito and Dino.”

Immediately, Miguel bites out, “I’m coming too.”

My father looks down at his son. After a short while, he nods. “Yes. You should.”

Knowing Miguel will be there eases the tension in my body.

He won’t let anything happen to me.

He won’t.

Later that afternoon, we meet the Gambinos at one of their many restaurants.

I haven’t met them before, but I know who they are as soon as I see them. Men like my father, they have a certain air about them. Their character demands attention. They’re mesmerizing. Men want to be them, and women wish to warm their beds.

I never understood this. They never affected me the way they affected other people.

The older man stands a second before the younger man stands. They both smile over at us. A few feet away from the table, Vito holds out his arms to my father. “Eduardo.”

My father, void of expression, steps into Vito’s arms, they slap at each other’s backs in a comfortable man hug. “Vito. Thank you for having us.”

I peek up at the men. Both dressed in exquisite suits, I can’t help but notice how attractive the younger man is. Even for an older man, Vito is handsome, with smiling eyes and salt-and-pepper hair. I notice the younger man reach up, pulling at the tie around his neck, loosening it. The small gesture makes me realize I’m not alone in this situation. Dino is likely as pissed about this arrangement as I am.

Knowing this calms me somewhat.

Vito steps toward me, ushering his son forward. "This must be Alejandra." Vito reaches out to take my limp hand, kissing the back of it. He looks to his son. "Lei è così piccola."

Dino looks down at me, his hazel eyes dancing. He holds out his hand, waiting patiently for me to place my hand in his, unlike his father, who took the liberty on his own. Hesitantly, I place my hand in his, and his smile widens, dazzling me. "Please excuse my father. He doesn't mean to be rude. He was merely saying that you're so small. Petite."

I know this. My sisters and I all have my mother's build and coloring. Standing no taller than five feet one with thick, straight black hair worn to my waist and warm brown eyes, I realize many would consider me pretty. My mother told me that beauty was a gift and to never use my beauty to get what I want, that I must remain humble.

The closer Dino gets, the harder my stomach flutters.

He really is a beautiful man. Tall, with broad shoulders and a narrow waist, high cheekbones, a strong chin, full lips and smiling hazel eyes. His large hand cocoons mine, his lips descend, and as they gently touch my knuckles, my stomach is sent into an uproar.

As he lets me back, he mutters, "I can see why your father hides you away. The most precious gems are usually kept locked in a safe place."

I can almost hear Miguel scoff behind me. Holding out his hand, he introduces himself. Eyeing my brother, Dino smiles while shaking his hand. "You love your sister."

A statement.

Miguel, neither confirming nor denying this fact, pulls his hand away. Dino holds up his hands in a placating gesture. "I get it. I got two brothers myself." Dino looks down at me. "I'd do anything to keep them safe." Pausing a moment, he steps closer to Miguel and utters quietly, "Your sister will be safe with me." Side-eyeing me, he goes on, "Hell, maybe one day she'll even love me. And when we're married, you and I will be brothers. Which means you and your sisters will be included as such and will be placed under my protection. I'd give my life to keep you all safe."

As far as winning Miguel over, I think Dino claims first place in his opening argument.

We sit, and as my father and Vito chat away, Miguel—deciding he’s given Dino his blessing—talks business with Dino. I watch how Dino conducts himself, and I’m impressed. He’s equal parts serious and witty, throwing Miguel completely off-guard. Catching my brother laughing with Dino is unnerving.

This is really happening.

This is the man—the stranger—I’ll be marrying.

My chest squeezes.

I’m not sure I’m ready for this, not that anyone gives a fuck.

Standing suddenly, Dino turns to our fathers and announces, “Excuse me, gentlemen. I’d like a moment with Alejandra.” He turns to me, his lips curving. “I’ve neglected her far too long this evening.”

Miguel looks over at me and his eyes shout approval. My father smiles up at Dino as Vito nods in agreement. “Of course. But try not to be too long. We still have much to discuss.”

Not given much of a choice, I stand and smooth down my black dress. Taking my hand, Dino places it in the crook of his elbow, leading me away. We walk slowly, comfortable in our silence, and I’m surprised to find myself feeling completely safe walking next to this man, this dangerous man. As he opens the door for me, I step outside. He motions for me to sit at one of the outside tables, and I do as I’m told.

I always do as I’m told.

Dino sits and watches me closely. “You haven’t said a word. Not one.”

I shrug. What does he want me to say?

His eyes soften. “I know this isn’t easy. Believe me, I threw a shit fit when my father told me what he wanted me to do.” He scoffs. “I mean, c’mon, I’m only twenty-five. I don’t want to get married.” This makes my chest pang. “And for some reason, I don’t think you want to either.”

I find my voice. “I don’t.”

He smiles warmly. “Please, don’t spare my feelings or anything.”

I can’t help it. I dip my chin to hide my smile, but he catches it. “Would you look at that?” He chuckles before sobering. “You’re very pretty, Alejandra. Gorgeous, actually.”

My face heats quickly as my heart beats faster.

Dino reaches over the table, taking my hand. I look up into his eyes. He asks quietly, “Do you think you can give me a chance? I’d like to try.” He

pauses a moment. “We have to try.”

He’s right. We have to.

And it could be worse. I mean, he’s attractive and charming and funny, and he seems to like me.

Averting my eyes, I tangle my fingers through his and whisper, “Yes.” I swallow hard. “I-I want to try.”

Dino stands and wraps his arms around me, holding me tight. My sudden surprise is pushed aside as I realize I need the comfort as much as he does. I gently snake my arms around his middle, resting my head against his chest, clutching at him for support, finding security in the soft beating of his heart. He kisses the top of my head. “I know this isn’t an ideal situation, but I think we can make it work. We know how our families are. We know what they expect of us. I’d like to be your friend.” He pulls back. “I think—” He clears his throat. “I think I could love you. I think we could come to love each other.”

My throat thickens. I try to speak, but all that comes out is a pained grunt. Lowering my face, wetness trails my cheeks.

I’m scared.

I hate myself for crying. But Dino doesn’t.

Lifting my chin, he shushes me, kissing my cheek. “Bella, don’t cry. Please don’t cry.” Before I know what’s happening, his lips cover mine. As quickly as he kisses me, he pulls away, holding me once again. I grip at his shirt, crying. He mutters, “Don’t worry, Alejandra. I’ll keep you safe.”

His words calm me.

Like I said... It could be a lot worse.

Fast-forward six years...

My stomach presses into the mattress. Fingers dig into my hips, holding me down. I breathe rapidly through my nose, fighting the pain. Biting into the pillow to stop myself from crying out, I think back to my grandmother’s advice as my husband masturbates on the sofa, smirking at my tear-streaked face while watching his brother rape me.

The worse they treat a girl usually means the more they like them.

If that is the case, my husband must really love me.

He must love me to death.

ONE

JULIUS

Phoenix, Arizona.

“All I’m saying is that we’d be better off.”

I look over at Ling from the driver seat. My brow furrows. “What’s this we shit?”

She rolls her eyes, and it forces a smile out of me. It’s so easy to rile her. A look of irritation crosses her face. “We *are* partners, Jules.”

My lip curls. “Don’t call me Jules.”

It’s her turn to grin. “But it suits you so well.” I glare at her, and she chuckles. “All right. I won’t call you Jules anymore.”

“Or any of your stupid nicknames.”

She nods, but turns to hide her sultry smirk. “Or any of my stupid nicknames.”

We drive in silence a long while before Ling speaks through a yawn. I don’t blame her. We’ve been driving for two hours, after a thirteen-hour-long flight from Sydney, Australia. We’re officially running on fumes. She reaches up to cover her mouth as she drowses. “So where are we staying?”

Ling has worked with me now for four years.

Losing Twitch was hard on her. She was so lost beforehand that losing him pushed her over the edge. She wanted to be as far away from the warehouse as possible, as far away from reminders of Twitch as she possibly could be. Not to mention, she didn’t exactly see eye to eye with Lexi.

Within a year of Twitch’s passing, Happy and I shut the warehouse down. Not that we had a choice. After the asshole left us, business started failing. The feds were weighing in on us, watching us, and listening in, hiding behind every street corner. Twitch’s death brought unwanted attention our way. It just wasn’t worth the risk anymore.

The asshole. He fucked up everything we'd worked for. Luckily, the money we had stashed away was more than enough for us.

Fuck.

It was more than enough to support our children's children's *children*. Then Happy went and sold the mansion, and all traces of Twitch were gone. All traces, that is, except one.

Little AJ. Antonio Julius. Antonio *Junior*.

A smile slowly spreads across my face as I think about him.

When we found out Lexi was pregnant, it shocked us. Twitch was never that careless, and although we liked Lexi, honestly, I never thought she'd let something like that happen. She seemed so in control, not at all reckless.

Then again, Twitch had a way of disarming even the most composed of people. It was his gift.

Ling hated Lexi for a long time. She didn't have to say the words out loud, but we all knew that Ling wanted that baby, felt she deserved that baby. Three months into the pregnancy, Lexi was rushed to hospital.

I'd immediately thought the worst.

Happy called me and told me to get my ass down there. So I did. I boarded the next plane to Sydney, and when I arrived, what I saw before me will haunt me for the rest of my life.

Lexi was almost skeletal. She looked as if she hadn't eaten in months.

Nikki sat beside her hospital bed, holding her hand and pleading with her to eat something, tears flowing down her cheeks, petrified for her friend.

We all were.

Happy turned to me then, and he whispered, "The baby's gonna die."

A statement. No question. His words were a declaration.

I'm sure we all thought it, but hearing them out loud was something different. Something real. It did something to me, urged me on. I wasn't about to let that happen.

That baby was the last trace of my best friend.

So I stayed. I sat by the hospital bed for an entire month, leaving only to shower and change clothes. In that time, I spoke of Twitch, and although Lexi's eyes remained dead, I knew I had her attention. A week of the nurses threatening her with an intravenous feeding tube and my non-stop chatter, Lexi started to eat again.

The following week, Lexi spoke. She turned to me, her gaunt face causing immeasurable amounts of pain in my soul. Her voice hoarse, she placed a hand on her belly, and asked, "Did you ever meet his mom?"

I shook my head. "No, baby. She wasn't a good mother. I'm glad I never met her."

Her throat moved as she blinked through tears. She clutched at her belly harder, her fingers curling around the material of her nightgown. "I'm not a good mother either."

I watched the tears trail her cheeks with a heavy heart. "Do you want this baby?"

Her mouth opened, but no words formed. After trying again and again, she finally managed, "I don't know."

There was a sure way I'd know if she wanted this baby. It was cruel, but I had to do it. I had to know. I sighed quietly. "Okay. I know a guy. I'll talk to him."

Lexi blinked. "What?"

I shrugged. "I'm not judging, Lexi. I know you're past the recommended termination date, but, like I said, I know I guy." I touched her hand. "It'll be like the baby never existed."

She pulled away as though my words physically burned her. Her chest heaved, face furious, eyes wild, and she whispered in a deadly calm, "Like the baby never existed?"

I could've smiled then. I wanted to, but I didn't. Instead, I raised a brow. "Or adoption. Whichever."

Hugging herself tight, she'd let out a hoarse, "No." Then louder, "No! This is *my* baby." Then quieter, and a thousand times more pained, "This is my baby. *Our* baby. This is all I have left of him."

Enough was enough. I reached forward and lifted her chin till her eyes met mine. "If you want this baby, prove it." Her eyes changed then, turned softer, and I saw fear. But as far as I was concerned, fear was better than resignation. I shook her chin lightly. "You gotta live now. If not for yourself, then for your baby. This baby is a gift, but you gotta earn it, Lex. I know Twitch isn't around, but your baby needs you." At the mention of my best friend, Lexi lost whatever small amount of strength she'd stockpiled. Sobbing quietly, her body turned weak under my touch. I pushed a little harder. "Your baby doesn't have a daddy. It needs its momma." I released

her then, and she fell back into the pillows on the sterile, uncomfortable hospital bed. Her soft, keening cry was a knife to my gut, mainly because I knew she hadn't the energy to cry harder. I took hold of her small, cold hand and held it between mine. I rubbed it, trying desperately to warm her. "Can you do that, Lex? Can you look after yourself, make sure your baby has someone he can depend on?"

Suddenly, she lifted her gaze to mine, blinking sluggishly, before asking a hushed, "Do you think it's a boy?" Her free hand started to move over her small baby bump. "I think it's a boy, too. I have from the second I found out."

I took this as a good sign. No woman who wanted to abort a pregnancy wanted to talk about the smaller things. I smiled softly, warmly. "I do, baby. I think you got a little man in there." My smile turned into a grin. "And knowing Twitch and his hard-ass way, he'll look just like him. Poor boy won't have a choice."

A wisp of a smile lit Lexi's face. "And if it's a girl?"

I clicked my tongue. "A plague on you, woman. If you have a little girl in there, looking half as pretty as its momma..." I leaned back in my chair and blew out a long, hard breath while shaking my head. "Shit. It's enough to give a man nightmares. Lucky Twitch won't be around to witness her first date."

The second those words left my mouth, I wanted to take them back. To consume them while they were still in the air. My stomach clenched as anxiety filled me. I felt like a grade-A moron.

But to my surprise, Lexi's half smile flourished into a smile I hadn't seen since before Twitch had gone. She laughed through her nose a second before letting out a sigh. "It's nice to talk about him. Everyone is so scared to talk about him. Sometimes I think he was just a figment of my imagination."

I pursed my lips. "There's nothing wrong with speaking of the dead."

She reached for me with a shaking hand. I met her halfway, taking it eagerly, basking in her sudden contact. We stayed in the position a while before her fingers tightened in mine. "Julius?"

My voice scratchy from exhaustion, I blinked, then asked, "What is it, baby?"

Her whispered words sounded more like a plea than a question. “Will you make sure the baby knows about him? The good things?”

That was the exact moment I knew Lexi would be okay. Relief flowed through me. “Yeah, Lex. I can do that.”

“Earth to Julius. Uh, hello? Anyone in there?” Ling’s voice brings me back to the present.

“What?”

Her perfectly shaped brow rises into an arch. “Are you feeling okay? Maybe we should find a closer motel for the night.”

I shake my head. “No, I’m good. Just got caught up in my head.”

Sarcasm laces her voice. “A dangerous place to be.”

I huff out a laugh. “You have no idea, girl.”

Concentrating on the road when you’re tired is hard. What’s harder is concentrating while feeling perfectly manicured nails trail up your leg. My voice low in warning, I growl, “Ling.”

She replies a sullen, pouting, “I’m hungry.”

Taking her hand and placing it on her own leg, I utter, “Nothin’ to eat where you’re looking.”

I hear her smile when she speaks low and sultry. “I can think of something that might satisfy me.”

My only response is to sigh and shake my head, hoping to God she doesn’t notice the tightness behind the zipper of my jeans.

Whether I like it or not, Ling is a beautiful woman. Fucked up as they come, but beautiful.

Sighing herself, she looks out the window, and complains quietly, “You never want to play with me.”

A startled laugh escapes me. “Four years later, and you still haven’t figured that out. I don’t shit where I sleep, Ling Ling.” I chance a look over at her. “Besides, I don’t play your particular variety of games.”

Her almond-shaped brown eyes find mine, and although she doesn’t smile, her eyes do. “What? You never ached to put your hands on a woman? Make her feel just how much you want it? That even if she didn’t want to give it to you, you’d take it by force?”

As we stop at a red light, I fight to roll my eyes at the naïve words from an equally naïve woman. I make as though I’m thinking hard. “That sounds

a little like... hmmm... what's the word?" My face sobers as I go on. "Oh, yeah. *Rape*."

She waves a hand at me, her shoulder-length black hair swishing as she does, and makes a noise that suggests I'm being silly. "Oh, please. It's completely consensual, and you know it."

The light turns green, and we're off once more. "What kills you more? That I'm not into it, or that I'm just not the bad guy you think every guy is?"

"Julius," she starts, "it's not about being a bad guy." Her voice is soft. "I can make any good guy bad for the evening."

This is not gloating or pride. This sounds weary and worn on the lips of a dangerous woman. A predator. And she sounds tired of her own game.

It's not very often I feel sorry for Ling, but right now is one of those times.

We drive on in silence, stopping at a gas station for necessities before reaching our stopover. The motel is quiet, as it should be at almost 3:00 a.m. As we make our way inside, a young man appears at the sound of the bell attached to the door. "Help y'all?"

A slow, greedy smile spreads across Ling's lips, and her eyes flash excitedly. "My, oh-my. They sure make 'em big out here."

The young man doesn't take his eyes off Ling, but he swallows hard, his Adam's apple bobbing awkwardly as he does. She only makes it worse when she makes a show of licking her cherry red lips. From the way the man-boy follows her tongue, I know he's wondering if she tastes as good as she looks.

She does.

Ling and I have never made it to the bedroom, but there have been instances where her lips have coaxed mine.

She's cherry-flavored. I can vouch for that.

I slap my wallet down on the counter, and the young man jumps back, looking up at me in shock. I take my time looking him over. Nearly as tall as myself, Ling was right. He is a big one. "You got vacancy?"

The boy immediately knows his place. "Yes, sir." But he can't resist the walking, talking Aphrodite at my side. He sneaks one quick look her way. "One room?"

At the very moment I answer "Yes," Ling answers, "No."

I pause to glance at her. "One room."

Her brows rise in a way that tells me she doesn't like my tone. She looks back at the young man and smiles an all too welcoming smile. "Two rooms please, honey."

But the boy remembers me, if not a second too late. "Sir?"

I look over at Ling once more. Her eyes narrow dangerously. I glare at her a moment before I turn to the clerk. "Two rooms. But you make sure they're next to each other, son."

He swallows again, his Adam's apple jumping. His voice squeaks just a little bit. "Yes, sir. How will you be making payment?"

"Cash."

"I need to see some identification."

I nod. "Sure thing." I open my wallet, but rather than taking out my driver's license, I pull out a hundred and slide it over the counter. "You'll put down Mr. and Mrs. Sonny Jones. The reason we're staying in separate rooms is because we're not speaking right now, as my wife—" I gesture to Ling. "—Laura, is pissed at me for checking out a waitress at the local diner." I pause a moment to let that sink in. "You get me?"

Without skipping a beat, he pockets the cash, nods, and then answers, "Got it."

I take hold of my bag and reach for Ling's, but she snatches the handle out of my grasp. She turns to the clerk. "Can you help me with my bag, uh...?"

He takes the bait. "Yes, I can. And I'm Cory, but you can call me Chip."

Ling's low laughter sounds. "Oh, of course you are, darling. How old did you say you are?"

I walk ahead and smother my laughter, as Chip responds, "I'm eighteen, just finished my senior year."

Ling walks to my side. "Well, congratulations, Chip. That's wonderful." Under her breath, she mutters, "Just how I like 'em."

I utter quietly out the side of my mouth, "Behave yourself."

She snorts, before responding, "Now where's the fun in that?"

We stop at our assigned rooms, and I let myself in just in time to hear Ling ask Chip, "Can you bring it inside for me, sweetie? I just had a manicure. I'd hate to ruin it so soon."

Not wasting any time, I shower quickly before climbing into the stale-smelling bed.

An hour later, and I'm listening to a concerto. Cries of passion and pain emanate from the room next to mine. I fall asleep to the raw sounds of sex as Ling turns Chip bad for the evening.

TWO

ALEJANDRA

My marriage wasn't always this way. In the beginning, it was everything I could have hoped for. In fact, I had secretly wished for a husband like Dino. He held me together. He was supportive and patient and kind. Dino swiftly became my rock.

Having dated for six months before our wedding, I quickly learned Dino Gambino was a sweet, funny man. I loved that he was possessive and kept me in arm's reach, always touching me, seeking comfort and warmth. It was nice to be needed by someone for once in my life.

What I hadn't expected was the bond we had formed in the short time we had known each other. It was the two of us against the world. Comrades. And soon enough, he became my best friend, the person I called when I just needed to vent about my father or hear a familiar voice. He always made me smile and laugh. His happy-go-lucky attitude was contagious. Dino could always pull me out of one of my dark moods.

The day we married, I looked up into the eyes of my best friend and said "I do" without hesitation.

I considered myself lucky. How many people could say they had married their best friend?

My sisters watched us in awe, amazed that two people in an arranged marriage could be so happy. It gave them hope.

As the ceremony completed and we shared our first kiss as man and wife, Dino dipped me, and I clutched at him as we laughed into each other's mouth. Both families erupted in a roar of applause and catcalls.

We truly were united, then and forever.

Till death do us part.

That night, Dino took me to our new home. That's when it got awkward, for me anyway. I was a virgin. During one of our late night conversations, I

had confessed this, my face warming with a harsh blush. I smacked my palm to my forehead in the deafening silence that followed.

Duh! I was an eighteen-year-old daughter of a mob boss. Of course I was a virgin.

But Dino just chuckled, and the rough sound washed over me like a safety blanket. “I know, Bella. Don’t worry about that right now. We’ll talk about it when we need to.”

He just made it so easy for me to be me, and I appreciated that to no end.

Regardless of how awkward I was, Dino took me in his arms and kissed me. We had shared kisses before, but they were nothing like this one.

This one was slower, deeper, much more precise, and I felt something stir inside of me.

Sure, Dino was my friend, but he was also my husband, not to mention stunning. This was his husbandly right. I believed in living marriage in every sense of the word. I wanted children, and there was only one way to achieve that goal.

As he pulled away and his lips left mine, I felt the loss deep inside me. He looked down into my eyes. “Is this okay?”

I nodded immediately, enthusiastically, and he huffed out a laugh before his lips were on mine once more. He touched me in all the right places, and for a moment, I was appalled at my body’s reaction to him. It was only after Dino explained that everything that was happening was a good thing that I began to relax.

With no mother or aunts to tell me what to expect, all I could do was rely on Dino and trust him.

Who else could I ask about sex? My father? My brother?

I don’t think so.

He undressed me with such care and kissed me in places I had never been kissed before. I was lost to myself. I willingly placed my body in Dino’s care.

As he began to undress, I watched in silence. The more clothes he removed, the higher I drew the sheet, hiding behind it. When the final piece of clothing was removed to reveal the one part of a man I had never seen before, I dropped the sheet, blinking in shock.

That was it?

How the hell was that going to fit where it needed to fit?

I was no doctor, but I quickly deduced that the only way that would fit inside of me was with major surgery.

He stepped closer to me. I drew back.

Sensing my hesitation, he asked what was wrong. Swallowing and blinking, I made no effort to hide my curiosity. After a short while, I opened my mouth, my voice a mere hush. "This is going to hurt."

Dino's smiling face fell then softened, and to my surprise—and disappointment—so did the part of him I was so interested in. My stomach twisted in a flurry of conflicting emotions. I was part relieved, part saddened.

He climbed into the bed and pulled me into his side. I was naked, but I didn't hesitate; I held onto him like I had a hundred times before. This was my husband, and I would not be ashamed in front of him. It was obvious the thought of hurting me was enough to put him out of the mood. I took this as a good sign.

"Yes, this is going to hurt." When my body went rigid in his arms, he gently ran his fingers down my back, soothing me. "But it won't last long. And it's only the first time. I promise. It's the price you pay for the ultimate pleasure."

I nearly pouted. Nearly. "I don't see it hurting you."

His body shook underneath me in silent laughter. "You wound me, Alejandra." I felt his lips on my forehead. "I've been in constant pain for six months straight."

I lifted my face to look into his eyes. I was confused. "Why?"

He searched my face then gently cupped my cheek. "Been hard, baby." He emphasized this by pressing his hips to mine, his hard length burning hot at my stomach.

My eyes widened in surprise.

He had been like this for *six months*?

Poor Dino.

I couldn't, and wouldn't, let my husband suffer a day longer.

Pasting on a smile, I leaned down and pressed a soft kiss to his warm lips. I kissed him invitingly. Needing no further encouragement, his arms came around me, pulling me closer. We spent hours exploring each other, and I was shocked but pleasantly surprised at the experience of my very first orgasm.

Dino was right.

It hurt.

But he was right a second time.

The pain passed.

As Dino found his release, I lay in his arms and found myself wondering when he would want to do it again. I established rather quickly that Dino wanted to do it whenever our schedules allowed it, and at times, even when they didn't.

I wasn't exactly displeased by this. I liked sex. More importantly, I liked sex with my husband.

For five months, our relationship was amazing.

Then one night, Dino confessed he was in love with me.

To say I was stunned was putting it mildly. I was dumbfounded.

Dino was a smart man. We both came into this marriage knowing what it was. I was happy with the idea of having a strong friendship with my husband, and, of course, I had a deep regard for him. I didn't want to see him unhappy. But I didn't love him. And I couldn't understand why he would complicate our relationship with flowery emotions.

I responded with, "Thank you."

This was not the response Dino had expected. He pulled away from me. I watched his hurt quickly morph into anger. He asked me if I loved him too, and I was honest.

A lesson for the future: Honesty is *not* the best policy.

Before my eyes, the man I had married, my best friend, had transformed into something dark. Something scary.

Part of me had always known Dino was a dangerous man, but I had yet to see that side of him.

Then I did something stupid. I told Dino I cared about him very much, that he was my best friend.

This only caused his anger to spike.

Dino left that night. He picked up his keys, left his wallet and drove away from me. Frantic with worry, I called his cell and sent him countless texts asking him to come home. Exhausted and saddened by this turn of events, I fell asleep in our marital bed.

Waking in the middle of the night and hearing Dino's voice sent relief coursing through my veins. Dressing in a robe, I made my way downstairs,

determined to end this fight before it got any worse. As far as first fights go, this was a doozy.

Stepping into the family room, I reached forward and turned on the light. The image that greeted me would forever be seared into my mind's eye.

Dino sat back on the sofa—the sofa we had chosen together a week before our wedding—while a young woman sucked his dick with great enthusiasm.

I stood there, glued to the spot, watching.

The woman's head bobbed as she worked my husband's cock. Then Dino opened his eyes. They were bloodshot. He blinked slowly then his gaze landed on me. And he smiled. He smiled that dazzling smile I loved.

I would never be affected by that smile again. That smile was dead to me.

Reaching down, he fisted the woman's blonde hair and pushed her down harder, forcing her to work harder. And she did, gagging but moaning all the while.

Shame on me. I stupidly forgot how people reacted to men like Dino. And secretly, somewhere deep inside, I wished I was affected by him the way this woman was. But I wasn't.

And now, I never would be.

His words slurred, he uttered a cold, "Hey, baby. Wanna join us?"

The woman turned to face me, and I lifted a hand to my mouth. She was no older than me. Her brows furrowed, and she asked, "Who's that?"

Dino and I responded in unison. "My wife." "His wife."

Heart aching at the betrayal of my husband and friend, I forced a smile and managed to get out, "Have fun," before turning and walking away. I heard Dino grate out, "Get the fuck out of here," followed by a feminine gasp and light thud as he pushed her to the floor.

It would be the first of many identical incidents.

The front door opened then closed as the woman let herself out. Footsteps followed me down the hall. As my foot landed on the first step, a strong hand grasped my elbow and pulled me back harshly. Not used to this kind of treatment, I shouted an outraged, "Hey!" Then I was up against the wall with a threatening hand laced around my throat.

The hand rested there in warning and Dino's eyes blazed. "Jealous?"

Jealous? No. Feeling betrayed and angry? Yes.

I swallowed hard at the look in his eye, and whispered, "No."

The impact of his palm across my cheek had me letting out a surprised yelp.

I looked up at Dino Gambino and quickly realized I was in trouble, and I didn't know my husband at all. I tried again, "Dino, what is this?"

The hand around my neck tightened slightly. Leaning into my face till we were nose to nose, he growled, "You were meant to love me." He kissed me then. He tasted of whiskey and lemon candy. Before this night, I liked that taste. Today, I was petrified. Against my lips, he asked, "Do you love me?"

I didn't answer, that being my answer.

Dino's non-verbal response was a slap across my face, harder than the last.

A surprised gasp tore through me. Throat tight, I blinked through my tears and tried desperately to get a grasp on this rapidly declining situation. Struggling to breathe, my chest heaved as my heart beat out of my chest.

I was in deep trouble, and no one was coming to save me.

"Do you love me, Alejandra?"

I would have told him I did that time, if I had been given time to answer. Opening my mouth a second too late, the impact of a different kind of blow shook me.

Dino had punched me. He punched me right in the mouth.

I had never been punched before that night. The overwhelming amount of pain radiating from my throbbing face was also new. There had been the odd occasional fight with my sisters when I had been hit in a moment of anger, but those times were always followed by immediate remorse from the person responsible. I had never experienced anger like this. I was visibly shaken. I couldn't think of anything other than, *who is this man?*

Thrown to the cold, hard floor, the metallic taste of blood flooded my mouth. My lip tingled and began to swell, and my teeth felt loose. I tried to swallow, but his hand tightened around my neck, lifting me by it. Stars exploded before my eyes as Dino slammed my head back against the wall. There was no way out of this.

I had given my vows. This would be my life until Dino decided to take it for his own.

The realization that only I could change how this went down hit me with a force like no other.

Dino asked me a third and final time, "Do you love me, Bella?"

This time, I answered with no hint of hesitation. My body trembled. Breathing rapidly through my bleeding nose, I lied on a fearful whisper, "Yes, Dino. I love you."

Pausing, he laughed then, a cold sound. Loosening his hold on me, but never letting go, I heard relief line his voice. "I knew you did." His lips descended, and he kissed me hard. I shuttered my wince. I was still frightened of Dino, but some of the gentleness I'd known had returned. He nipped at my bleeding lip, pulling back to look me in the eye. He stared unblinking before confessing a desperate, "I love you, too, baby."

His hand brushed my bruised cheek, and his knuckles passed over my split lip, forcing a hiss out of me. Looking somewhat concerned, Dino placed his arm around my shoulders and walked me upstairs. He took me into the bathroom and, gently as possible, wet a cloth and cleaned me up. Lacing his fingers through mine, he attempted to escort me to bed. I hesitated. Dino's eyes met mine, brow raised in question.

The monster inside currently leashed, I strained a small smile that didn't reach my eyes and looked over to the toilet. He got the hint and, with a swift kiss on my swollen lips, left me to relieve myself in peace. When I closed the bathroom door, the floodgates opened. I held myself tightly around my middle, collapsing on the floor in silent sobs.

I don't know how long passed before Dino knocked on the bathroom door asking if everything was okay. Flushing the toilet, I washed my tearstained face and made my way out to sleep in my marital bed with a man who had laid his hands on me.

My husband made love to me that night. He loved me so sweet and gentle that after he had fallen asleep, I cried silently into my pillow in relief. He held me throughout the night, his arms familiar and his body warm.

When I woke in the morning, I found Dino sitting at the foot of our bed, naked, cradling his head in his hands. My movements alerting him to my newly awoken state, he looked up at me. Still unsure, I pulled the sheet up to my chin and attempted to lick my lip, but as my tongue passed over the split, I winced. I wouldn't see what he saw in my face until later that day, but his reaction said it all. I was a mess. And he was remorseful.

He stood up, looking down at my face, unblinking. His hands balled at his sides, his jaw locked, I saw many emotions pass through his eyes. Pain,

sympathy, fury, shame. Placing his hands on his hips, he dipped his chin and I waited.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, his voice shaking.

Hope ignited somewhere inside of me. A small flame I fanned at furiously, desperately, refusing to let it fade to black.

Black was not an option.

I refused to believe I had married a monster. I was sure the night before had been a one-off situation.

I was wrong.

THREE

JULIUS

Tired, frustrated, and hungry, I sit on the edge of the too soft motel bed as I slide on my shoes then tie them.

I tell myself to be cool, but Ling and her prom date, Chip, kept me up last night. I'm not feeling very forgiving. I swear to God, if I hear her mutter a word of complaint about being tired today, I will kick her skinny, Gucci-covered ass.

Making my way to the bathroom, I run a hand over my hair, brush my teeth and wash my face. The bags under my eyes are not a good look, especially when a meeting has been scheduled. Shaking my head lightly at my reflection, I sigh then mutter under my breath, "Fucking Ling."

The woman is a serious pain in my ass.

I run my hands over my suit jacket then head out, picking up my bag on the way. I slide on my sunglasses then approach Ling's door. I knock hard, once. When she doesn't answer immediately, I bite the inside of my cheek in annoyance. As I lift my hand to knock again, she opens the door.

My eyes drift over her. She's dressed, made up, primped and ready to go. Her cherry red lips curve up into a smile, and when I see not a single glimpse of exhaustion on her face, it pisses me off tenfold.

But then she does something that reminds me of why I keep her around.

"Good morning, sunshine." Beaming, she holds out a paper bag and a takeaway coffee cup in the largest size available. Extra points to Ling as I notice the paper bag has grease stains on it.

With a grunt, I take the bag and coffee in one hand then reach down to lift Ling's duffle then mine with the other. Making my way to the car, I hear her soft laughter behind me. "What crawled up your ass this morning?" As she passes me to stand by the passenger side, her smile turns sly. "If you ask nicely, I'll tell you all about what crawled up mine last night."

My lip curls as I unlock the car and step inside, throwing our bags into the back seat. Hearing more feminine laughter only fuels my bad mood.

I take a much-needed sip of coffee. It's lukewarm but strong. Shit, it could be ice fucking cold, and I would still treat it like a lover. Opening the bag, I peer inside, and my stomach growls loudly. Whatever is in there smells good. I reach in and, without stopping to inspect it, unwrap half of the sandwich and take a monstrous bite. The taste hits me, and I groan. Swallowing, I take another bite of the egg and bacon burger, barely chewing before taking another bite.

I feel eyes on me. Still chewing furiously, I turn to Ling and pause midchew. Mouth full, I garble, "What?"

Her lip curls in revulsion as her brow rises. "I will never get used to the way you eat. You're a pig." She mock-shudders. "Disgusting."

Throwing the last quarter of the burger into my mouth, I speak around it. "Old habits." I pick up the coffee and sip it. "If you'd ever been to prison, you'd get it."

Ling eyes me in disbelief before turning to look out the window. "I know lots of people who were in prison. Fucked 'em too." She pins me with a stare. "And they don't eat like pigs."

I start the car and answer quietly, "Sure they do. In private."

In prison, all you had between you and your food was the amount of time you could get it into your mouth before someone bigger and stronger came along and decided they needed it more than you did. If you didn't eat fast, you didn't eat at all. In my first week of juvie, I was lucky if I managed to eat half my meals before they were taken from me. I quickly came to know the pecking order, and I didn't like it.

So I changed it.

One afternoon, an older, bigger, meaner guy slid my tray out from underneath me. By this point, I'd had enough. I was already cold and lonely in the concrete hellhole I'd call home for the next few years, so if I could stop myself from being hungry, then I was going to do it.

I quickly realized that if I wanted that food, I was going to have to fight for it.

Juvie is less like a prison and more like a zoo. Show your size and dominance, and others will leave you be. Hunger does things to people. It feeds anger and irritation. That anger and irritation soon becomes raw fury,

and before you know it, you're sticking a makeshift shiv in the gut of a guy you were playing basketball with the week before. It can make even the most agreeable of people do things they hadn't imagined possible.

I remember lifting a tray over my head and bringing it down onto the other guy's head, the unsuspecting attack leaving him sprawled on the dirty floor. I remember lifting that sticky, thick, rectangular piece of plastic and throwing it down, again and again, the jerk of his body bringing me a sick sense of satisfaction. I remember the deafening roar of blood rushing through my ears and the other guy bleeding on the floor, unmoving. I also remember reaching down and picking bits of food off of the floor, managing to eat some of it before I was taken down by officers. I remember the look on the other boys' faces as I was escorted to the hole.

No one took my food again. Sure, I wasn't the biggest or strongest, but I made my stand. They now knew there would be consequences for their actions when it came to me.

It wasn't my last fight in juvie, but it took a lot to make me fight again. The only thing I found solace in was being able to keep my cool for longer than most. My control near unwavering, the boys started to come to me for advice or an ear. That first fight would cement my role in juvie. I had earned it without even knowing I was fighting for it. I was fucking good at it though, and as the years went on, an unspoken level of respect amongst my peers was won. Again, I hadn't known I wanted it, but having it gave me an inch of power I hadn't had before. Funnily enough, it would lead me to my current role in life.

A taste of power is sweet on the tongue.

Draining the last of my coffee, I throw the empty cup into the paper bag and hand it to Ling. She takes it without question, and I pull out of the parking lot, driving west, making it a short way before I lower the volume on the radio to ask, "Details?"

Ling shuffles around a moment before locating her Oroton compendium. She turns to the first page, and reads aloud, "Dispute between the Castillo and Gambino families. Castillo has his hands all over. Weapons, dirty money, women. Gambino is a classic case. Drugs, protection, bribery. Castillo's only son, Miguel, is the contact. A few years back, Castillo and Gambino called a truce. Gambino's eldest son, Dino, married Castillo's eldest daughter, Alejandra."

Without a trace of emotion, I mutter a cold, "How sweet."

Ling snorts a laugh. "Anyway, you're going to love this." Tapping the page with a perfectly manicured nail, she announces in glee, "The Gambinos... they don't know we're coming."

Well, that's just fucking dandy. "Please tell me this is a minor dispute."

"Of course." I can practically hear her smile. "Just murder."

Taking a deep breath, I mutter a hushed, "*Fuck.*"

Holding her hands up, the asshole does all she can to hide her smile, but she can't quite do it. "What? It's not like we haven't done this before."

My eyes slide over to her, my expression caught somewhere between *you have lost your fucking mind* and *I will beat your ass, woman*. "Yeah. Only those other times? I was fucking prepared and so were they."

She slides back into her chair, leaning her head back and sighing. Eyes closed, she mutters a distant, "Jesus, you're hot when you're pissed."

And all I can do is look heavenward and pray.

Dear Lord, Jesus, I'm a patient man, but I'm no fucking saint.

Giving myself a moment to calm down, I drive in silence. A short while up the road, Ling asks, "Wanna fuck?"

Sometimes, I wonder about this woman.

Turning slowly, I remove my sunglasses. My glare shouts that she's pushing her luck. Her practiced wide-eyed innocence makes my blood curdle. I continue to glare as she bursts into laughter, then states, "It was a joke!"

I face the road, and mumble, "Ha-ha, motherfucker."

Her dainty hand invades my space. It rubs at my shoulder. "Oh, c'mon. It was a joke. I'm joking. Totally joking." Her hand stills and she admits, "Unless you're into it." Anger bubbles in my gut, as she concedes laughingly, "Kidding!"

I gotta admit. I like Ling. When Twitch had her, I thought she was crazy. In fact, more than once, I told him to get rid of her. Now, I'm not saying she's not crazy, but she's not a bad person. In the four years we've shared together, a friendship grew. One night after a bender, a drunken Ling admitted that I was her first friend, and she didn't know what to do with that. My unwillingness to have sex with her somehow won me her respect. Knowing I had brought a part out of her that other people rarely saw... it

was pleasant. No one else got to see Ling the comedian or Ling the caring. Other people got to see Ling the bitch and, more frequently, Ling the ho.

But she likes it that way. That is her protective cover. Her security blanket.

There is so much more to Ling than meets the eye. Four years later, and I still don't know her. She has layers, and even with those I've peeled away, I'm not even close to the center. Hell, I've barely skimmed the surface.

"Why don't you want to fuck me? You know it wouldn't affect our work. Lots of men think I'm beautiful." Although the question sounds vain, she looks at me thoughtfully.

"You are beautiful." I spare her a glance. "I think snakes are beautiful, too. Doesn't mean I want one sucking my dick."

Her small hand hitting my shoulder pulls a smile from me. "You're a jerk." But I hear the smile in her voice. "You want the rest of the file, or you just want to wing it?"

"Give it to me."

She reads to herself, then murmurs, "Oh, and the plot thickens."

Great. I don't bother sugarcoating my frustration. "You wanna share? Maybe sometime this year?"

"The dead guy, Raul Mendoza, was Alejandra Castillo's high school sweetheart. And get this... he married Alejandra's younger sister, Veronica. Dino Gambino is the accused murderer."

My brows rise. What kind of shit-storm am I walking into? "Alejandra and Raul were having an affair?"

Ling shakes her head. "Not according to this. Alejandra is the model wife and is loyal to her husband. She loves Dino. They're, according to sources, happily married."

I think a short while, before asking her, "And what do you think?"

Without hesitation, Ling responds, "I think the way to the truth is through the wife."

Bingo.

I smile to myself while wondering how I'm going to make this wife betray her husband.

An hour of driving and we arrive at our destination. We pull up to the residence of Eduardo Castillo. Approaching the intercom, I press the button,

and announce, “Julius Carter and Ling Nguyen, as requested by Miguel Castillo.”

The buzzer clicks over before the wide cast-iron gates slowly open. Slowly, I make my way down the gravel drive, spying perfectly shaped hedges and artful statues lining the entrance. The mansion looks every bit as I imagined. The exterior demands attention, and without even looking inside, I would say the interior will be just as demanding.

As I approach the entrance, a well-dressed man wearing glasses, an earpiece and a black suit jacket with a golden cursive C on the pocket advances to the car. Opening the door, he holds out his hand. I step out of the vehicle and hand him the keys, and walking around the car, I open the door for Ling and escort her out. We walk up the steps to be greeted by a man close to my age. His features are hard beyond his years. Tall and built, his brown eyes wander over Ling. His eyes flash. He runs a hand through his messy black hair. Holding out a hand, we shake as he introduces himself. “Mr. Carter. I am Miguel Castillo. Thank you for coming. I did not know you would be bringing a”—his eyes rest on Ling’s full lips—“a guest.”

Ling smiles. “Hello, Mr. Castillo. My name is Ling. I’m Mr. Carter’s personal assistant. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Miguel immediately warms to her. Taking her hand, he kisses her knuckles. “I apologize, Ling. I hadn’t meant to be rude. Please, you must call me Miguel.” As he looks up at me, he loses his smile. “Come. I’ll fill you in on everything you need to know. The Gambinos will be here in an hour. We have no time to lose.” Miguel guides us into the hall. “I apologize in advance, but I must ask that you remove any weapons you may have on your person. My father would take it as a direct insult.”

The message is clear.

Do not insult Eduardo Castillo.

With a nod, I remove my sweetheart from the holster inside my jacket. A custom engraved .45-caliber pistol Twitch had made for me for my thirtieth birthday. The guy hadn’t a sentimental bone in his body, but this gift is something I will treasure forever. I allow Miguel to place it in a safe under the staircase. Ling reaches inside her jacket, pulling out a dagger, a can of mace and a small .22-caliber pistol. Miguel begins to take them when Ling coughs, regaining his attention. She reaches down to the hem of her skirt,

eyes trained on Miguel, slowly raising it high up her thigh. From places I don't even want to think about, she pulls out another .22-caliber pistol and another switchback knife.

Miguel and I both watch her, and while Miguel watches her in awe, my eyes smile down at my pet viper.

Our moment of staring is over when Ling shrugs slowly, seductively. "That's it."

Miguel smiles then, surprised, before turning to me. "Personal assistant, huh? What would it cost me to have an assistant like that?"

Ling walks to my side, daintily placing her arm in the crook of my elbow. A sly grin crosses her, making her look more dangerous than usual. "Your life."

Walking Ling forward, I fight my smile as I hear Miguel mutter a gravely, "I definitely need one of those."

Miguel leads us to a conference room, and after helping Ling sit, I seat myself. Miguel's expression has suddenly turned worrisome. "Raul Mendoza was my brother-in-law. My sister Veronica married him three years ago. Last Monday, Raul didn't come home."

"This was unusual for him?" asks Ling.

Miguel nods. "Oh, yes. He loved my sister. Always came home when he said he would, and if he was going to be late, he called. But he just... vanished."

Vanished? "Then how do you know he was murdered?"

A grim smile tugs at Miguel's lips. "Because someone delivered Raul home." He shoots me a look. "More accurately, delivered Raul's body into his marital bed while my sister slept."

A perfectly manicured brow rises as Ling questions, "Veronica didn't wake?"

Miguel shakes his head. "She woke in the morning next to her dead husband. After screaming and crying, she tried to get her phone and call our father, but she felt off-balance. It took her five minutes to dial the number. Her vision was blurry. She felt groggy and stomach sick."

Foul play. "Someone drugged her."

Miguel extends his arms out by his side. "Perhaps."

I think on this a moment. "And you think Dino Gambino did this. Why?"

Miguel sits back, eyes trained on the mahogany table, clearly thinking very carefully about his answer. “I have seen things, heard things, about my brother-in-law Dino that have made me wonder.”

It is critical that I have all the information I need here. “But your sister Alejandra is happy in her marriage, isn’t she?”

Miguel lifts a shoulder. “I am not sure you can fake happiness like that. If Alejandra is faking it, she deserves an award.” He sighs. “I see how Dino looks at her when he thinks no one is watching. The way he holds her arm too tight and the silent looks they give each other.”

Ling puts in. “All lovers have quarrels.”

Miguel’s eyes burn. “He is a jealous man. When he found out Raul and Alejandra had dated, he stood up in the middle of a family dinner, snatched up Alejandra by the arm and left. Not a word spoken.” His eyes turn glacial. “He disrespected my father, disrespected my family.” He pauses a moment. “The next week, Raul was dead.”

I can see the man feels strongly about this, but to accuse a man of murder at a family meeting with the information he has... “It’s not enough.”

A small part of Miguel’s fire deflates. “I know.”

With all due respect, I ask, “What would you have me do?”

Miguel’s eyes turn pleading. “Talk to Alejandra. In private. Ask her where Dino was that night. If he wasn’t home, then he’s guilty. He murdered Raul. I *know* it. I feel it in my bones.” At my hesitation, he speaks lower. “*Please*. I am paying for you to judge. So *judge*.”

Four years ago, I would’ve left with my money and never looked back, but things have changed. I turn to Ling. Her discreet nod is all I need.

With a firm nod, I stand and straighten my jacket. “Okay. I’ll talk to Alejandra.”

FOUR

TWITCH

One week earlier...

As I walk through the city street with my head down, my hoodie acting as camouflage, I sigh in irritation. Every second that passes reminds me I'm not home.

Instead, I'm here. On assignment.

Jesus fucking Christ, I hate the city. Bright lights, horns honking, a distinct smell of death in the air while people walk around with cell phones attached to their ears and sticks shoved up their asses.

As I approach the building, I make my way down the alley. I have to wait another fifteen minutes before I'm clear to enter.

I pull out my cell phone and write a quick text.

Me: About to have a meeting with No 1.

A minute passes before I get a response.

Happy: Make it a short visit. I need to talk to you.

My chest tightens. Before I can think, I dial and lift the phone to my ear. The second he answers, I ask a tight, "What's wrong?"

Happy places the phone down a moment before I hear footsteps. "Are you out of your mind? You can't just call like this, asshole. We have a procedure," he hisses down the line.

Fuck that shit. "Something's wrong. What's wrong?"

He sounds exasperated. "Nothing's wrong, man. Jesus, I just—"

In the background, I hear the voice of a small child. "Uncle Happy, you want ice cream?"

Shit. Fuck.

My breathing heavies; my voice turns hoarse. "That's him, isn't it?"

Completely ignoring me, Happy responds to my son, “Heck, yeah. Tell your mom I want lots of hot fudge on mine.” My eyes close in pain at the mention of Lexi. Then Happy’s back with a sigh. “You can’t just call like this, T.”

Devoid of emotion, I respond a hushed, “I know.”

“You’ll fuck everything up.”

“I know.”

A moment of silence, then Happy utters, “It’s his birthday next week.”

I know that. Does he fucking think I’d forget something like my own son’s birthday? The reason I’m out here is because of him. Because I fucking love him. My jaw clamps shut, and fighting the urge to grind my teeth together, I calm myself. “I know.”

Happy states, “I know you know, moron. I wanted to talk to you, because I wanted to give him something of yours, but I wanted your input.”

And just like that, my anger fizzles.

“That’s uh—” I cough. “That’s real nice. Thanks, man.”

“No problem. I was thinking your skull and crossbones cufflinks.”

Those were my favorite cufflinks. I smile. “I think that’s a good idea.”

I hear the smile in his voice. “All right then.” A moment’s hesitation before he asks, “How much longer you gonna be out there, T? He’s nearly four. He’s growin’ up without you, man.”

Not in the mood for a lecture, I respond a gruff, “As long as it takes.” Then I hang up.

I’ll stay out here forever if I need to. I’ll do whatever I have to do to keep my family safe.

Placing my phone back in my pocket, I check the time.

6:59 p.m.

Making my way out of the alley, I clip on my false ID, approach the intercom and press the buzzer.

“Yes?”

I mutter a bored, “Yo, I got an urgent delivery here for an Andrew Ivanon.”

The intercom hisses. “You mean Andrei Ivanov?”

“Yeah, sure. Him.”

“Okay. I’ll sign for it.”

I hiss a short breath through my lips then scratch my chin. “Uh, yeah, no can do. I need a signature from the man himself. Something about court papers or some crap.”

A slight pause, then, “Please wait a moment.” I stand by the door, whistling badly. When the intercom hisses a second time, the voice instructs, “Go to the side entrance. I’ll escort you up.”

Geez. They’re making this way too easy. Andrei should be disgusted.

I walk back down the alley and wait at the security door. When it opens, two armed security officers greet me with what I’m sure they think are intimidating expressions. In response, I hold up my UPS badge and raise my brows, “Any day now, boys. Once I deliver this letter, I’m off duty.”

The taller of the men hands me a book, and I sign myself in with no hesitation. The second man walks me to the elevator. When he steps inside with me, I fight a scowl. He keys in level three and, as to plan, my phone alarm starts to sing. Making a show of taking it out of my pocket, I sigh, “Sorry ‘bout that.” The alarm sings louder and louder till the elevator is booming with the sounds of birds tweeting and a soft piano song. I yell over the alarm, “I set it to remember to watch *Survivor*.”

The alarm finally off, the security guard allows a moment of silence, before uttering, “Pretty sure Missy’s going to win.”

I turn slowly, looking affronted. “You’re on crack, dude. Natalie’s got this in the bag. Missy will be lucky if she leaves with her dignity intact.”

The guard snorts a laugh. “No way. Missy broke her leg, and she cries a lot. People love that sappy shit.”

I beg to differ. “Not true. Nat’s ruthless, a back-stabbing she-devil.” A sly smile tilts my lips. “Everyone loves a villain.”

The elevator door pings, and as we step out, I discreetly press the activate button on the app on my phone. The security guard’s walkie-talkie bleats. Stopping midstep, he lifts the device to his ear and holds down the button. “Radio room, copy.”

Nothing.

“Sy? Do you read me?”

Once more, silence.

The guard sighs, “Shit.” Turning to me, he mutters, “You got to be quick. I need to get back down.”

So I make of show of juggling my phone, my satchel, and the letter. “Sure thing.”

Pressing the second button on the app, the guard’s walkie-talkie comes back to life, hissing and crackling, “Get down here, Johnson! Code red in the basement!”

With another click of a button, the walkie-talkie dies once more. Johnson, now panicked, shakes and hits the radio. “Hello? Sy, come in? *Shit.*” He looks up at me. “I’ve got to go down. You stay up here until I come get you.”

The guard is already running in the opposite direction when I call out, “But *Survivor*, man!”

The elevator starts to close as I see him shrug. Before the doors close, I shout, “Then hurry your ass up!”

And with a single press of a button, the app I had made powers down the building. With one guard stuck in the elevator and the other lost in the basement, I’m free to do as I please.

Reaching up, I pull the hoodie up over my head and make my way to the office at the end of the hall, the one where countless Russian cuss words are coming from. With only the safety lights shining, I knock on the office door. Andrei booms, “Enter,” but I’m already inside.

Andrei beats the side of his computer, as if that will somehow make it work again. While he does this, I walk over to the side of the office to retrieve the crystal decanter of vodka and two glasses.

As I set them down and open the decanter, Andrei notices I’m not security. A heavily accented, “Who are you?” comes out of his jowled mouth.

I pour in silence, placing a full glass of vodka in front of him. I reach for my phone and, a moment later, the room is illuminated by strong white light.

Ah, technology.

I lower my hood, wanting my reveal to be something of nightmares. When Andrei spots my face, he blanches a single moment. Then he tips his head back and wheezes with laughter. His eyes dance as he shakes his head in disbelief. “Dead man walking.”

Inclining my head, I pick up my glass and sip. The vodka is strong but smooth, no doubt something expensive. Andrei lifts his own glass and

downs the entire thing like it's water. Being a Russian and over the age of fifty, I'd like to think he washes his face with vodka in the morning.

Andrei sits and gestures to me. "Why would a dead man come to me?"

I stare him in the eye and then take another sip. He knows why I'm here.

He watches me closely, thinking. His smile falls then disappears completely. After a moment, he sighs. "I suppose there is no stopping you."

"It's just business, Andrei," I answer, steel determination in my voice.

He sits quietly before straightening. He nods. "Make it quick."

I reach into my satchel, pull out my stolen .36-caliber and remove the safety. I lift my arm and point the gun at his forehead, then lower it. It's his last night of living. I know I shouldn't bother, but I do. "How 'bout another drink?"

Andrei Ivanov smiles at me, and there is no malice in this smile. I don't understand it.

"Why you smiling, Andrei? In two seconds, your brains are gonna be splattered all over your whiteboard."

His shoulder jerks. "I am sick of living half a life, Twitch. My wife left me. My kids hate me. My business partners want my money. Everything I once lived for now wishes me dead. And I have no desire to live anymore." He stands, filling our glasses. Lifting his own, he salutes me. "*Na zdorov'ye.*"

To your health.

Oh, the irony.

My hand lifts with swiftness, and a second later, a bright flash accompanied by a loud bang echoes throughout the office, Andrei Ivanov falling backward on the floor in a bloody heap.

And for the first time in my life, I actually feel bad about having to kill someone.

Shaking my head, I walk over to the window and open it. Climbing out, I walk down the fire escape and type out a text.

Me: Meeting with Number 1 was short.

A moment later, I get a response.

Happy: Glad to hear it. Don't think you'll be so lucky with No 2.

Thanks, fucker.

Don't I know it.

But a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do.

FIVE

ALEJANDRA

Being the wife of Dino Gambino affords me some leniency. I get to do things other wives do not. But in saying that, I don't get the freedom those women get.

I get to attend family meetings. Something no other woman is allowed to attend. Of course, I am a mob princess married to a mob prince and heir, who will become king of the domain when his father passes.

I do not, however, get to do anything on my own. Whenever I step outside of the house, I have someone on my tail. That person is there to "protect" me, but I know that it's just another way for Dino to break my spirit. I understand the message he sends every time I'm blindsided.

I own you.

Any other woman in my position would make the most of their free days, go to a café with her friends, get her nails or hair done, or just go to lunch, and for a while, I did, but my friends got sick of the dogs on my ass, and without meaning any harm, they stopped reaching out. I shouldn't have been shocked by it, but I was. I was hurt and upset. I can't say I blame them. Dino did what he set out to do.

He alienated me from my friends and relatives.

I wasn't allowed to visit people without a reason. Not even my family.

I know what you're thinking. Why not just do it anyway?

Simple answer:

Because it isn't worth the price of broken ribs, or rape.

More complex answer:

I am afraid of my husband. And I am afraid that one day, he'll kill me without meaning to.

"I don't understand why you were there all day yesterday," Dino utters as he focuses on the road.

I fight a sigh as I attempt to answer without a note of sarcasm. “I was there because my sister just lost her husband, Dino. Veronica is heartbroken. She needs support.”

He huffs through his nose. “She’s got other brothers and sisters. She doesn’t need you there all day.”

I grit my teeth and try again. “Yes, but my other sisters are young and don’t understand what it would be like to lose a husband. She just needs someone to talk to.”

He turns to me, searching my face. “Would you be upset if I died?”

The question has a spark of excitement flair inside of me. I want to crow, “Fuck no!” but instead, I reach over and grip his hand, frowning, trying in vain to ignore the staccato beat of my rapidly beating heart. “You know I would. Don’t even joke about something like that.”

His eyes narrow at me, searching for any signs of insincerity, but he finds none. His hand tightens around mine as he mutters a gruff, “I love you, Ana.”

I smile, but it’s stretched thin, flat as a deflated balloon. “I know, baby.”

I spent an hour covering the bruise on my temple before we left. Dino’s brother Gio is rough in bed and usually used as a punishment to me when I do or say something Dino finds offensive. Gio is a large man, even bigger than Dino, and I’m a small woman. Gio is also emotionless. Heartless. Needless to say, the punishment works, because Gio enjoys it so much that he always takes it a step too far. Every time Dino calls on Gio, I’m left a broken shell of a person. Each time, a piece of that shell crumbles away. I worry that soon enough, there won’t be a shell left and I’ll just *be*, open and agreeable, with no part of Alejandra left inside of me. After Gio rapes me, Dino helps me shower, washing me with care, kissing every bruise, every scrape, normally ending making love to me gently while I cry, a broken woman. All the while, he croons, “See how good I am to you? You can have this all the time, baby.” He normally finishes with a whispered, “All you have to do is love me.”

Sometimes, days go by without me seeing the nasty side of Dino. Sometimes, things are so good that I’m transported back to when I was eighteen, when we laughed often and spoke for hours. In those rare times, I willingly give myself to Dino, knowing I won’t have my best friend back for long. And it never does. Last long, that is. Often, I’ll wake in the middle

of the night and look over at my husband. My chest will pang with sadness, because I know that the angelic-looking man sleeping by my side is nothing but a vicious monster.

And Lucifer was said to be the most beautiful angel in heaven.

I've become so good at pretending that sometimes, I confuse myself. At times, I get lost in my own act, and for a mere moment, I bask in false happiness.

Then I remember. And my soul crumbles away slowly, as waves of an ocean of unhappiness wash over me.

Pulling my hand to his mouth, Dino presses light kisses to my knuckles. And my stomach flutters. Not from lust, but fear.

I've seen this many times before.

This is the calm before the storm.

At any moment, Dino will snap. And I will be punished.

My heart races as my body trembles. The blood drains out of my face, and suddenly, I'm parched. I swallow, but my throat sticks. My hand tightens around his in an attempt to mask my fear.

The black tinted windows of the car begin to rise, and my tongue thickens. I bite the inside of my mouth. Resolve works its way through me as I realize the storm is coming early today.

This is new. I haven't been beaten in a car before.

My eyes close and I hold them closed, no matter how much my mind tells me to beg forgiveness for whatever it is I have done. My lightly shaking hands begin to tremble as I await the first blow.

The first knock is the most painful.

"It's warm out. You cold, *bella*?" I hear the confusion in his voice. I turn to him, jaw set, and open my eyes. His eyes, strangely warm, search me, looking for signs of trouble.

It hits me that the storm hasn't come. In fact, I had likely brewed it in my head.

Tears fill my eyes. I blink rapidly, shooing them away. My voice hoarse and strained, I respond and smile, but it shakes. "I'm not feeling the best today. Stomach ache."

This is my life. This is me. Living in fear.

A weak, pathetic woman with a violent and dangerous husband.

His brow creases. "Want me to take you home?"

Sniffing, I shake my head. “No, it’s fine. I’ll lie down at the house.” I turn to look out the window. “It’ll be nice to see my old room.”

We drive on, only a short while from my father’s house, when Dino comments, “You’ve lost weight.” He side-eyes me. “I don’t like it.”

It’s hard to eat when you no longer wish to live. I’ve contemplated suicide more in the past month than in the entire six years of my marriage. The more I think about ending my life, the more advantages I see in the course of action.

No Dino. No worries. Only freedom.

Who doesn’t want freedom?

This time, I can hear the concern in his voice. It fills me with relief. I can play on this. “I just need rest.”

He presses a hand to my forehead. “You’re clammy. How long you been feeling like this?”

I respond immediately. “A week or so.”

His nostrils flare in frustration as he scolds, “Why didn’t you say anything? It could be serious.”

I roll my eyes. “It’s not serious, Dino. It’s a stomach bug.”

“You don’t know that.” He pauses a moment, before declaring, “I’m calling Dr. Rossi as soon as we get to the house. I’ll have her come by tomorrow.”

Oh, thank God.

After so many years of unpredictability, I’m surprised he played into my hand so easily. This is exactly what I wanted. I need to talk to Dr. Rossi, privately. Dr. Manda Rossi is the daughter of one of Vito Gambino’s associates. She knows everything about me, every gory detail. On more than one occasion, Manda has attempted to coax me into escaping Dino. Every time she’s called to my bedside as I lie battered and bruised, unable to move, Manda cries for me, with me. She is one of my dearest friends. Maybe my only friend.

“I’m sure it’s nothing, but if it’ll make you feel better, okay,” I utter submissively.

Dino holds my hand during the remainder of the journey, watching me closely, worry in his eyes, as if I’m about to expire.

If only.

JULIUS

As I watch Miguel Castillo eye-fuck Ling, who seductively licks her lips his way, I wonder why the fuck I'm sitting in an empty conference room putting up with this.

Then I remember.

Money. Lots of money.

Money doesn't do anything for me. No doubt I like having it, but I can do without. The thing is, I have people who depend on me. More than half of my income is taken out of my many bank accounts before I've even had a chance to bask in my unseemly wealth, supporting my family.

My family is important to me. I love them unconditionally. And being the most successful of my uneducated kinfolk, I do what I can for them in whatever way they need it. Usually, they need financial assistance. And, thank the Lord above, I can help there.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. I pull it out and smile at the display.

Speak of the devil.

I turn to Miguel. "Is there anywhere I can speak privately?" I nod down to my phone. "This is important."

Miguel stands, holding his hand out to Ling. "I would be happy to take Miss Ling for a tour of the house." Smiling like a kid in a candy store, Ling takes his hand and moves to his side. Miguel looks over at me. "The house is large. The shortened tour will take at least fifteen minutes."

I nod my appreciation. "Perfect."

Once I'm left alone, I answer. "I was wondering when you'd call."

The irate woman on the line yells a rushed, "Are you out of your *damn* mind, Julius?"

It's so good to hear from her I don't even bother admonishing her for cussing at me. Instead, I smile. "I take it you got the delivery."

"The delivery?" I hear the astonishment in her voice. "The *delivery*?" She pauses a moment before shouting, "A delivery is a bunch of flowers or-or-or a new DVD player. A fruit basket is a delivery, Julius. This is not a delivery. This was freight. Cargo! A goddamn shipment, Julius!"

Chuckling through my nose, I divert attention away from me. “Are you gonna yell at me all day, or are you gonna let me speak to my niece?”

“A car, Julius. It was a *car*.”

My smile dampens. “Why do you keep saying *was*?” After a moment of silence, I close my eyes, and grit out, “Tonya, tell me you didn’t send it back.”

A sigh, then a defeated, “No, I didn’t send it back. But I should’ve. And if she hadn’t seen it, I *would* have.” My sister sounds tired as she tries to argue with me. “You can’t do things like that, Jules. You aren’t responsible for us. You need to stop buying things for us—things we don’t need, mind you—because you have guilt. *Unwarranted* guilt.” Her voice softens. “You’re not responsible, sweetheart. You never were.”

My chest tightens at her softly spoken words. “You saying she isn’t going to need a car?” Silence. “She’s sixteen now. Any day now, you’re going to take her, and she’s going to get her license. And before you argue, she *will* get her license. She’s smart. Like her mama.”

She growls and I know I have her. “But a Mercedes? What sixteen-year-old needs a Mercedes? Sixteen-year-olds need a bomb. A rust bucket. Not a fifty-seven thousand dollar car.”

I grin. “You went on the damn website, didn’t you? You probably calculating how many budget dinners you could afford with that money.”

She doesn’t laugh, but I hear her smile on her whispered reply. “Nine thousand one hundred and twenty-five.”

Laughing, I shake my head. “You’re not on a budget anymore, Tonya. You can live a little. Buy clothes, visit a spa, get your hair done, go see a movie without smuggling in premade popcorn.”

Sniffles. Then more sniffles. “I love you. You know that, don’t you?”

I sober immediately. If there is one thing I would never question, it would be my sister’s love for me. “I know it. I *feel* it. And I love you more, tater tot. Now let me speak to her. Gotta wish my girl a happy birthday.”

A quick shuffle of the phone sounds through the speaker before my niece, Keera, comes online, screeching, “*Oh, my God! Oh, sweet baby Jesus! LORD JESUS! Like, oh my God! I can’t believe it! It’s amazing! I don’t believe it! Oh, Lord!*”

Quelling my laughter, I try sounding like a father figure should. “You best stop using the Lord’s name in vain, Keke. Birthday or not, you hush

now.”

Using her inside voice, she still rushes out her words, but uses a milder tone. “The delivery guy asked for me. *By name*. And Miosha was over at the time. My stars, Uncle Jay, she was pea green with envy. Like, *super green*. Before I’d even signed my name, the entire school knew about my new car. Popular people I’d never spoken to at school suddenly started saying hi to me. Boys are trying to talk to me, too. You have no idea what this has done for my popularity.” She adds a whispered, high-pitched, “*Epic*.”

Boys?

My brow dips into a frown. “Boys? You tell those boys your Uncle Julius knows people that’ll put ‘em on a blacklist for life, girl.”

She laughs softly. “I remember the rules, Uncle Jay. No dating till after high school. And I’m totally okay with that.” I hear the smile in her voice. “But it’s nice to have the attention.”

My heart swells with pride.

I love Keera like she’s my own. And Tonya was right. I do feel responsible for the both of them, but not in a burdened way. I would lay down my life for the two of them.

Keera’s a smart girl. She’s going to do great things in life. I can feel it.

Now, Tonya is smart too, but Keera was unplanned, and Tonya had her young. Keeping her meant there was no time for studying. My sister was thrust into work with a toddler by the age of sixteen.

Shit.

Now that I think about Keera being sixteen, and looking at how young she is... I don’t know how my sister did it.

“Happy birthday, baby girl. I hope you like your present. I know you’re going to be responsible with it, but I have to warn you it comes with conditions.”

Keera sighs. “They always do. Lay it on me.”

“Number one: you listen to your mama.”

I can almost hear the roll of her eyes. “I always do.”

“Number two: no boys.”

“I thought we just went through this.”

“Number three: be smart, baby girl. Use your head. Trust your gut.”

A moment's pause before a hushed response. "I will. Thank you, Uncle Julius. You're the best. I love you."

I lean over the table, pinching the bridge of my nose. I utter a rough, "I love you, too, Keke. I gotta go. Work. Talk to you soon."

"Bye, Uncle Jay."

As the line disconnects, I stare into nothing, absently tapping my finger on the table.

I don't know how long passes before Miguel enters the room looking wound up. "They're here."

I stand and advance.

Showtime.

SIX

JULIUS

Ling and I wait just outside the conference room as I watch the exchange between Miguel and the people who have just arrived.

A man enters first and, seeing Miguel, he reaches out to shake his hand. Miguel hesitates a moment before taking it. He's a big guy. Not as tall as me, but tall enough. He's built too.

By my side, Ling whispers out the side of her mouth, "*Meow*. That man is *fine*."

Ignoring her, I watch a small woman come in behind him. She looks frail and haggard. She hides it well behind a black designer dress, black heels, and oversized sunglasses, but as soon as she sees Miguel, her face changes. She removes the sunglasses and smiles.

And that smile has me. Locked in.

This woman is beautiful.

No. Beautiful is too weak a word for her.

She is stunning.

With black hair piled up on top of her head into a neat, classy up-style, a single strand is left falling free down the side of her face. I can't see what color eyes she has from here, but the smile aimed at her brother brings out a dimple in her cheek.

Alejandra Gambino takes a step forward, opens her too-thin arms and waits for her brother to make his way over to her. Miguel smiles hard, steps forward and embraces Alejandra in a bear hug. He envelops her. Cooons her in a nest of safety, and she falls into him. Stepping up on her tiptoes, she clutches her brother tightly.

They have a lot of love for each other, that's plain to see. I understand it. I have that with my sister.

As soon as they separate, Dino steps forward and claims Alejandra, cinching an arm around her bony waist.

She looks ill next to him.

Her cheeks are sunken and pale. Her collarbone is much too pronounced. Her eyes look too big for her face; dark circles lay under them. Her ankles are stick thin. And from the way Miguel eyes her with worry then places a hand on her forehead, I can see something isn't right.

Alejandra rolls her eyes, reaches up and removes her brother's hand from her forehead before squeezing his hand and smiling at him. But this smile is different from the first. It's forced.

But then she turns to her husband, looks him in the eye and smiles up at him. He reaches up to cup her cheeks, brushing his thumbs over the apples of them, speaking softly to her. Her hands cover his, and she closes her eyes, taking in the words. Leaning down, he captures her lips in a soft kiss, and she lifts herself into it.

It's clear this is a couple in love.

And I feel as though I'm intruding on a private moment.

Well. This makes my job harder.

How am I going to get this woman to talk to me?

A loyal woman can be unwavering. If Dino Gambino is guilty of murder, I doubt Alejandra Gambino will be the person to confirm it. But I have to try.

Miguel looks over to where Ling and I stand, motioning us over. Ling slides her arm through mine, and we make our way over to the accused. Dino eyes me on the way over.

I know this game. I fucking invented this game.

Intimidation tactics don't work on me, boy.

I level him with my gaze, pulling the same maneuver. *First one to look away is a rotten egg.* My lip twitches at his glare, but I catch it. Miguel clears his throat. "Dino. Alejandra. This is Julius Carter and Ling Nguyen. They're guests of mine. They'll be joining our meeting."

Alejandra speaks, but I keep my eyes on Dino, who suddenly looks confused. "Nice to meet you. Both of you."

Dino's gaze flickers to Ling, hovering over her full, red lips. Ling smiles, revealing her white teeth. "You too, Mrs. Gambino." Ling flutters her lashes, throwing what looks to be a shy smile to Dino, her sights locked on him. His lips lift into a small teasing grin.

Oh, shit.

I fight the roll of my eyes.

Goddamn it, Ling.

I'm sure Alejandra has noticed the way Ling and Dino are looking at each other. I sneak a look down to her and what I see makes my body still.

Alejandra Gambino, daughter of the ruthless Eduardo Castillo, wife of accused murderer Dino Gambino, looks up at me wide-eyed, a soft pink blush covering her cheeks. All I can do is watch as her lips part slightly. Blinking, her blush sharpens as her eyes fly to my chest. "I'm sorry. Have we met?"

Those words snap Dino and Ling's bubble. Dino glowers at me. "You two have met before?"

Brown. Her eyes are a soft brown. Doe eyes. It figures. Soft, like the rest of her, the lilt of her voice and her shiny hair.

"No." It pains me to do it, but I pull my gaze away from her to look up at her husband. "We haven't."

Her voice trembles. "You look so familiar."

My eyes never leaving Dino, I smile tauntingly. "I guess I just have one of those faces."

There's something about a guy who tries so hard to be threatening that makes him just the opposite.

I don't fear men like Dino. I put bullets in them.

Miguel cuts in with, "We're still waiting on Mendoza and Di Marco. Please, join me for a drink." Holding out his arm, Ling takes it eagerly while Alejandra politely declines. "Please excuse me. I'm a little out of sorts today. I think I'd like to rest." Looking up at her husband, she adds, "I'll be in my room if you need me."

Dino's brow creases as he looks at his wife in obvious concern. "You want me to come up?"

She waves him off. "I'll be better after I've slept." Stepping closer, she stands on her tiptoes and kisses his cheek. "Don't worry. I'm fine."

Alejandra looks up at Dino so lovingly that my chest aches, and I have to fight the urge to kick him in the balls. As Alejandra makes her way up the stairs, Ling removes herself from Miguel's arm and attaches herself to Dino. "Tell me about yourself, Mr. Gambino."

Wife forgotten, Dino lowers his voice and utters, "I'm more interested in you, Ms. Nguyen." As they move toward the bar, Dino suddenly notices

that neither Miguel nor I are following. “Coming?”

Miguel nods. “I need to speak with Julius privately.” He looks down at the woman by Dino’s side. “Would you mind entertaining Ling for a few minutes?”

A slow smile spreads across Dino’s face. “No problem.”

As soon as they’re out of hearing distance, Miguel turns to me, and whispers, “Now’s your only chance. Up the stairs, third door on the right. Alejandra’s room. Make it quick. Dino will check on her soon.”

Looking past Miguel to where Ling and Dino stand, I notice Ling’s hand resting on Dino’s chest as she speaks to him. “Ling can hold him off.”

Miguel turns to face them, scowling, and mutters, “And here I thought we had something special.”

I like this man. Fighting my smile, I slap him on the shoulder. “It’s nothing personal, Miguel.”

Ling moves closer to Dino. Standing almost flush to his body, her lips move slowly, seductively, and Dino can’t tear his eyes off them. Sometimes, I wonder what she says to men to get them to look at her like that, but then I remember that it’s probably best that I don’t know. As I back away toward the stairs, I hear Miguel sigh. “I definitely need one of those.”

Taking the stairs two at a time, I find myself standing in front of Alejandra Gambino’s childhood bedroom. Before my mind can wander down places it shouldn’t, I knock. Shuffling on the other side of the door lets me know she’s awake. Opening the door, she mutters, “Dino, I can’t rest when you check up on me every two sec—” A look of surprise crosses her face when she realizes I am indeed not the asshole she calls a husband. “Oh. Hello. Are you lost?”

It’s official business now. Game face on. “Mrs. Gambino, I’ve been called here today because of the death of Raul Mendoza.”

Her guarded expression fails her, and sadness seeps through, showing immediate understanding. “Of course.” She shrugs lightly. “But how can I help you? You’re better off speaking to my sister Veronica.”

She smiles regretfully as she attempts to close the door in my face. But I’m quicker than her. I push my foot into the gap in the door and nudge it open, letting myself into her room. She makes an indignant noise before placing her hands on her hips. “I’m going to have to ask you to leave now, Mr. Carter. I already told you I don’t know anything.”

I choose to ignore the soft voice. Instead, I walk the length of her room, touching things as I go. From her pure white bed sheets, now a little rumpled from having her lie on them, to the aged white-and-gold furniture, it suits her. The tall bookcase stocked with well-read classics. They'd have to be well read. The spines of them are disintegrating. Interestingly enough, newer paperback copies of the falling apart hardbacks sit on a bottom shelf. I turn to her, pointing to the books. "Why do you have two sets of each?"

Startled by the question, she answers quietly, "The originals were my mother's. I inherited them when she died. She'd read them so much. I didn't want to destroy them, so I read the other copies."

Makes sense. Smart, sensible girl.

The question seems to disarm Alejandra. Her body relaxes, and I preen inwardly. This is a tactic I use often. Get to know the person you're questioning. "Your mom died when you were young?"

She doesn't move. Blinking, her face turns morose. She tries to answer, but instead, mouths, "Yes."

I pick up one of the older books and gently flick through, taking all the care possible. "Me too." As I place the book down, I ask a question she isn't expecting. "You dated Raul Mendoza in high school, right?"

Her brows rise. "Yes. Before I met Dino."

I move the two steps toward her and gently take hold of her arm. "Please, sit. You look exhausted."

She takes a step toward the bed before hesitating, shooting wide-eyed looks at the door. Pulling away, she lowers her voice in clear panic. "You need to leave, Mr. Carter."

"Julius," I prompt.

"Okay. You need to leave, Julius. Now." When I make no move to leave, she steps forward and tries to pull me to the door. And I smile.

This little sparrow thinks she can move me?

She pulls and pulls and... nothing. Then she tries another tactic. Moving behind me, she places her small hands at the base of my back and pushes with all her might. Panting, she whispers a frantic, "If Dino finds you in here, he won't be pleased. It'll cause problems for me."

I see.

Turning, I grab both her hands in one of my own and look down at her pointedly. "Dino won't come up. Not until my partner Ling lets him go."

Her face voids of expression, the fight knocked out of her. She mutters a tired, resolute, "Of course." Letting go, she moves back toward her bed and sits in the middle of it, cross-legged, pulling a soft teddy bear into her lap. Stroking the fur of the bear, she looks down at it and asks a bored, "What do you want to know, Julius?"

I wait a moment, trying to find the words, but this little woman has my mind reeling. As I lean against the wall, I decide a straightforward question will get me a straightforward answer. "Did Dino murder Raul Mendoza?"

Her hand stroking the teddy stills. Slowly lifting her face to me, she asks a shocked, "I beg your pardon?"

My eyes narrow. She's good. Not as good as me, but good. "I asked you if your husband killed Raul Mendoza."

Her voice just above a whisper, she blanches. "Why would you ask me that?"

I refuse to play this game. I'd rather keep quiet and let her mind reel. After a moment's silence, her brows furrow. "Is that what people think? That Dino did this?" I simply cross my arms over my chest. Hugging the bear close, she mutters, "No. It wasn't him. It couldn't be."

"Your brother seems to think otherwise."

At that, she looks up at me, eyes wide as saucers. "*Miguel* thinks Dino did this?"

"Isn't it true that when Dino found out about you dating Raul, he made a scene at a family dinner?"

"Well, yes, but—"

"And that he started to show aggression toward Raul, a man he once liked?"

"Yes, that's true but—"

"Where was your husband that night, Alejandra?"

Lost for words, she shakes her head. "No. He didn't do this. Raul was my brother-in-law. Veronica and Raul loved each other very much. There's no way Dino would kill him for such a weak reason." Her response is feeble and sounds pathetic.

"I asked you a question, Alejandra." Her eyes meet mine, and she swallows hard. I try again. "Where was Dino that night?"

Pulling the bear under her chin, she absently looks to the wall. She looks so childlike that I have to remind myself not to comfort her. We remain

quiet in each other's company until she utters a shaky, "He didn't do it." Then she swallows hard and whispers, "But what would happen if he did?"

Progress. Finally getting somewhere.

I huff out a breath. "It wouldn't be pretty, Alejandra. I'm not the police. I just police the laws of the underground. If Dino was found guilty of murdering one of your father's men unprovoked"—I look her in the eye and sock it to her—"he'd be killed."

A noise leaves her, part choked, part sob. Lifting her shaking fingers to her lips, she utters, "An eye for an eye." Eyes bright, she looks up at me. "And if... If I were to... What would happen if I—?"

I pin her with a stare. Unblinking, I respond, "If you were to lie to help your husband, I'd find out." Her gaze intense, I add a cold, "And I'd kill you both."

Liar.

This is not true.

No shit.

I'd have Ling kill her.

I never could hurt a woman. It's just not in my nature.

A breathless, "Oh," escapes her. Pupils like pinpricks, I see her fear as beads of sweat accumulate on her forehead.

But I see something more there. Her mind is working a mile a minute. The way her eyes dart side to side and she grips the bear impossibly tight, something's gotta give.

Finally, after what seems like forever, she gives me an in. Her lip trembles as she relays something I have already heard from Miguel. "Dino is different." And although her eyes fill with tears, she continues with a steady voice, "He loves me."

If I had doubt of this, the display downstairs would've clued me in.

She looks up at me, her expression worn. "He loves me." Only this time when she says it, despair laces her voice. The way she says it is as if it's not a thing of beauty, but of misery.

A single tear trails her cheek, but she doesn't give in to emotion. She lifts a hand and wipes it away. And I have to say I'm impressed. This small woman carries a fuckload of strength inside of her. A blind person could see that.

Knowing I only have moments before Dino comes to check on her, I step forward, close but still giving her space, and ask once more, “Where was Dino that night?”

ALEJANDRA

The gods have finally heard my prayers.

I fight the urge to laugh hysterically and jump on my bed in pure joy.

The tears I shed are very real. But perhaps not for the reason Julius Carter believes.

I am so tired of this life.

Twenty-four-year-olds are not meant to feel like I do. They are meant to be carefree, happy and even careless.

Oh, what I would give to be a regular twenty-four-year-old.

What I would give, indeed.

I want that life. I want it so bad that I can feel the freedom on my tongue the very moment I say, “Dino did it.”

Julius pins me with a look of disbelief, but I don’t waver.

One small step closer to freedom.

I hold my bear tighter and whisper, “Dino killed Raul.”

And may God have mercy on my soul.

SEVEN

JULIUS

“We’ve got a situation.”

Ling looks up at me from her place by Dino’s side, her sticky toffee-apple smile dying a slow death. “Right.” Looking from me to Dino, she places an overly familiar hand on his forearm. “Would you excuse me? Business calls.”

His eyes devour her. “You never did get around to telling me why you’re here.”

She grins up at him as she walks away. “All in good time, Mr. Gambino.”

Catching up to me, she mumbles, “Slimy motherfucker.”

The statement catches me off-guard. There are few men Ling doesn’t like, for obvious reasons. That reason being they have a dick. And Ling likes dick. Ling likes dick very much.

As soon as we enter Miguel’s office, he looks up from his seated position. “Well?”

There’s no easy way to say it. “Spoke to your sister. She’s not okay. That woman needs help. I don’t know what’s gone down, but something’s weighing on her.”

Miguel’s face turns pained only a moment before anger surges through him. He stands and barks, “I know this. I fucking *know*.” Calming himself with a deep breath, he asks through a sigh, “What did she tell you?”

Again, no easy way to say it. “Says Dino killed Raul.”

At that, Miguel deflates, almost literally. With shock written all over his face, he slides back into his desk chair and pinches the bridge of his nose tight. “Fuck. *No bueno*.” Removing his hand from his nose, his eyes widen before he looks up at me, jaw clenched. He growls a venomous, “What did you *do*?”

At this, Ling steps forward and utters a severe, “I don’t like your tone.”

How did this turn on me? Everyone needs to fucking chill. I place my hand on Ling's shoulder and look Miguel in the eye. "I don't roll like that. Never had to force myself on a woman before in my life, and I didn't start today." Needing him to get me, I tell him, "Got a sister myself, man."

He looks like he wants to believe me but can't do it. "So she just came out and said he did it? Just like that?"

Oh, I know what he means, and if I were him, I'd be questioning it too. I was surprised as he is. "Exactly like that."

Ling speaks up, sounding more the voice of reason than I've ever heard before. "A woman like that doesn't turn on her man, one she obviously loves, for no reason. There's something more here. Something vital that we're missing."

"And whatever it is," I add, "she's not letting anyone in."

Miguel stands once more, walking around his desk and out the door. "Follow me."

Miguel leads us up the stairs, past Alejandra's room, to the end of the hall. Miguel knocks once, firmly. A deep voice calls out, "*Adelante.*"

He opens the door, leading us inside what I quickly realize is Eduardo Castillo's private study. This is not an office. An office is not a personal haven or getaway. An office implies only work is done there, and with one look of this room... this is far from an office.

The large, intricately carved mahogany desk at the back of the room shouts wealth, and the throne that would double as a desk chair screams power. The room has an obvious color theme, with all the burgundy and heritage green flowing through it. I would say the color theme is royalty.

I would laugh were it not a member of underground royalty hosting this scheme.

Having made a call to Happy at a pit stop, I learned a few things about Eduardo Castillo. He comes from a long line of dirty motherfuckers. He has a reputation for being a fair man, good to his family. And finally, you do not want to fuck with him or his. Happy told me about the few who had. None of them have been seen since, but wreaths had been sent to the families of the missing. Anonymously, of course, but the unspoken message said enough.

Those people were not coming back.

So I am in the lion's den, bringing forth a shit-storm.

Eduardo Castillo, sitting on the sofa, playing a solo game of chess, looks over his guests, before asking, “*Problema?*”

Miguel walks forward to speak to his father, leaving Ling and I where we are. The first rule of respect in the underground: Do not sit unless invited.

Eduardo watches Miguel closely as he speaks rapid-fire Spanish, only pausing to look over Ling and me before turning back to his son. A minute of Miguel’s explanation, before we’re cloaked in silence. Eduardo stands and, walking over to me, holds out his hand. “Eduardo Castillo.”

“Julius Carter.” Releasing his hand, I motion to the slip of a woman by my side. “Ling Nguyen.” As Eduardo takes her hand and leans down to kiss it, I mutter, “Careful. She bites.”

Eduardo cracks a smile, albeit a small one, but it’s progress. “Please sit.”

Ling and I sit on the sofa opposite the one Miguel and Eduardo sit on. Having dealt with people like Eduardo hundreds of times before, I wait for him to speak first.

His voice, tired and gravelly, he states a heavily accented, “So. We have a problem.” He points to me. “And you will help me fix it.”

No hesitation. “I will.”

“Good.” He sighs through his nose, aging ten years before my eyes. “Raul Mendoza was a good man, a loyal soldier, and trustworthy man. When Vito Gambino introduced me to his son Dino, I thought he was just like Raul. I saw the way he treated my Alejandra, and it was a relief to me, to know he would look after her and treat her well. I was promised loyalty from Gambino’s men. Raul considered Dino a friend, considered him kin.” He lowers his face and sighs before returning his gaze to mine. “This will not do. An example must be made.” His face turns feral as he grits out, “I want him dead. Today. Now.”

Ling speaks, but she does so quietly. “I wish it were that simple, Mr. Castillo, but Alejandra’s word is not enough.”

Hate to say it, but she’s right.

Eduardo’s murderous eyes shoot to Ling’s. “You think she lies?”

Ling realizes immediately that she’s insulted a mob boss and stands her ground. “Absolutely not. I believe Alejandra. Lord knows, a woman who loves her husband would not out him like that without reason.” She softens her tone and states, “We need more information. If Dino insists he’s innocent, he needs an alibi. If he can’t provide one, then we’ll proceed.”

Eduardo looks to me. “You let her speak for you?”

I know he means it as an insult, but I don’t rise to the bait. I simply repeat, “Like I said... she bites.”

Eduardo doesn’t smile, but his eyes do.

My turn. “I’m convinced that Alejandra believes Dino did this. I watched her fight herself, and I saw the exact moment she lost that fight. She asked all the right questions, and I watched the reactions to the answers she received. She was terrified of giving him up.” I state confidently, “I believe her. I believe Dino did it.”

Those words being all Eduardo needs to hear, he stands, straightening his tie. “I want to see this fucker buried.”

We make our way downstairs and enter the main room. There are some new faces there, and I guess them to be Gambino’s men and his sons. The moment we enter, Eduardo walks to the center of the room and stands silently in front of the men. I notice Alejandra is absent, but we won’t need her right now. Not ten seconds of standing before Eduardo has the attention of the men and complete silence. He looks to the ground before looking at the men in the room. “First item on the agenda.” His eyes turn to Dino. “Would you please stand, Dino?”

Dino looks at his father-in-law and, knowing his place, stands.

Eduardo looks to Miguel. Miguel comes forward, glaring at Dino, and he says loud enough for all to hear, “I, Miguel Castillo, accuse you, Dino Gambino, of murdering our brother Raul Mendoza.”

And that’s when all hell breaks loose.

ALEJANDRA

“Oh, God,” I whisper as I stand by the door, listening to the chorus of angry men as furniture screeches here and there.

Shit.

I’m in so much trouble.

Oh, shit.

There’s no way they’ll let me live.

I’m a dead girl walking.

JULIUS

“I didn’t kill no one!” Dino screams, his face now red and distorted with rage as he tries to make his way to Miguel. The expression on his face less *let’s hug* and more *I will bleed you dry*.

Moving Miguel behind my back, I stand tall. No fucker’s gonna lay a hand on me. It would be the ultimate disrespect to Eduardo to see a guest harmed in his home. No way would Dino hit me.

At least, that’s what I think until I see Dino advance on me, and I quickly realize that he is just that fucking stupid. An arm’s length away from me, he raises his fist and rears it back then... stops in his tracks.

A slim, delicate hand, holding an open switchblade pressed to Dino’s jugular appears, while another strokes his lax cheek. Her normally seductive voice lethal, Ling utters clinically, “Do you know that the jugular pumps the greatest amount of blood flow to the heart than any other vein? Piercing it would almost definitely lead to fatality. I say almost, because it’s all about *how* you pierce it. For instance...” She changes the position of the blade, pressing the tip directly to his neck at exactly the right point. I spot Dino’s flinch a moment before I see the small amount of blood pool at the point of the blade.

I fight the urge to smile. The wild bitch pierced him.

With the men in the room now watching the deadly viper at work, she continues, “If you insert the blade as so—” She presses harder on it, forcing a small trickle of blood down the side of his neck. “—you would need to press it the entire length in”—she makes as if to turn the blade in a circular motion—“and twist. Death would be inevitable. But it wouldn’t come quick. Oh no. You’d bleed out slowly, over the course of minutes. You would feel the blood leave your body, with every beat of your heart, turning you cold and lifeless until finally, you took you last breath.”

Dino stands with his arms out, somehow knowing that Ling isn’t bluffing. Watching Miguel with a look of betrayal, he bites out, “I didn’t kill Raul.”

But Ling's got her mind on other things. Standing on her tiptoes, she places her cherry red lips at the side of Dino's throat by her blade. Her tongue darts out and licks upward, through the blood at Dino's neck. And she wonders why people think she's crazy. She cements that opinion in every mind here, when she mutters, "Don't push me, honey. You have no idea how much the idea of killing you turns me on."

At that, I do smile. That's my girl.

An older man steps forward. "Now, let's not do anything rash." I see the resemblance between this handsome older man and his son immediately. This is Vito Gambino. Hands raised in a placating gesture, he asks, "What is the meaning of this?"

Miguel steps forward and nearly shouts, "This *hijo de puta sucia* killed my friend. The husband of my sister. *Family*." And then he does shout, "*He killed my brother!*"

Dino grits his teeth, nostrils flaring, and growls, "I didn't do it! *Fuck!*"

Ignoring his son's theatrics, Vito looks to Eduardo. "I assume you wouldn't allow this to be brought to attention without proof."

Eduardo remains silent. It's Miguel who speaks. "We have word from someone we trust."

Vito asks, "From who?"

A small voice by the door gains attention when it echoes into the silence. "Me."

ALEJANDRA

This is not a good idea.

Why did I think this would be a good idea?

My body trembling with fear, I hold my knees together, hoping to God that no one hears them knock together. "Me."

The entire room turns its gaze to me, including that of my husband, looking stunned and deceived. I quickly avoid his eyes but hear his plea. "Ana. What are you doing?"

Rather than answer him, I step into the room to stand by my father, addressing everyone inside, "I, Alejandra Gambino, stand before you all

today with a heavy heart. My husband, Dino, confessed to me that he killed Raul Mendoza in cold blood.” I turn to Vito and look him in the eye. “The Dino who stands before you is not the man I married.” I look up at Dino. “I don’t know this man. His jealousy over my previous relationship with Raul escalated on the night of Raul’s murder. He asked me questions and, not wanting to have secrets between us, I answered them. Needless to say, Dino did not like the responses to the questions he asked. The next thing I knew, Dino was throwing things in a rage before disappearing.” I look to Raul’s father, tears in my eyes. “He didn’t come back till morning, and when he returned, his clothes were rumpled and bloodstained.”

Dino lets out a humorless laugh. “*What?*” He looks around to the faces crowding him. “You’re not fucking buying this shit, are you?”

The somber looks on the men’s faces say they do.

Looking around the room, Dino turns to me, losing his fight. He whispers, “Why are you doing this?”

This time, I look him in the eye and lie, “I would defend you to the death, Dino. But things are different now.” I raise a hand to my belly protectively and utter a hushed, “I have a child to protect.”

His eyes lower to the hand on my stomach. “You’re pregnant.” An awe-filled statement.

Lowering my eyes in a show of surrender, I whisper, “I’m pregnant.”

I am going to hell.

As I keep my face to the ground, Dino speaks. “I can change.” He says this as a statement, but it comes out a plea.

When I look up at him, I shake my head. “No. You can’t.”

Julius steps in. “Anyone here that can vouch for Dino’s whereabouts that night?”

At this point, Dino’s face turns to panic. “I was at home, in bed with my wife!” He turns to his brothers. His youngest brother, Luciano, looks at Dino in disgust, while Gio smirks, shaking his head at me. Dino pleads, “Luc? Gio? *Say something!*”

My heart races. I can’t believe they won’t vouch for him. I expected that to be my one obstacle.

Dino blinks rapidly, turning to Vito. “Pops. *Please.*”

Vito speaks softly, but the silence in the room ensures he’s heard. “After the funeral, you called him *feccia*.” Vito looks up at his son, disappointment

clear in his eyes. “You called him *scum*.”

An audible sob comes from Raul’s father, and in a show of solidarity, one of Gambino’s men comes to stand by him, holding him up while a grown man cries for his son.

The disbelief on Dino’s face would make me laugh if it weren’t so tragic.

Dino croaks, “Papa.”

That’s the exact moment that Vito Gambino cracks. Stalking forward, he stands foot-to-foot with Dino and, raising a hand, slaps him as hard as he can, so hard, Dino’s head snaps to the side.

The ultimate insult.

Leaning forward, Vito hisses, “*You are not my son!*”

Vito Gambino stands tall, straightening his suit jacket. He moves to stand in front of me, and taking me by the shoulders, he kisses both my cheeks in a fatherly gesture of support. Lightly touching the hand held protectively at my belly, he mutters a gruff, “*Felicitazioni, bella*.”

Vito approaches my father and they hug, then he leads the way out, followed by Luciano and Gio, while Dino falls to his knees and sobs. “*Papa!*”

Without further adieu, Julius says, “If anyone would like to speak on Dino’s behalf, now would be the time.”

Dino looks around the room, wide-eyed with hope, looking up at the scowling men from his knees. I’d bet my life that he wishes he were nicer to most of the men in this room.

As expected, no one speaks on Dino’s behalf. And not a moment later, Julius announces, “Dino Gambino, you are hereby found guilty of the murder of Raul Mendoza. Your sentence...” Julius mutters a cold, “Death.”

Dino suddenly stands and tries to make a run for me. I stand there watching him ascend, his lip curled, his voice raw. “You fucking bitch! I’ll fucking kill you!”

As his arms reach out to curl around my neck, fear holds me immobile. A loud bang sounds and Dino stills.

He clutches at his heart, looking up at me with tears in his eyes. Breathing heavily through his nose, he collapses in a heap at my feet, blood pouring out from under the hand at his heart.

I look to Julius to find him shaking his head at the sight of a fallen Dino, no longer moving.

My gaze finds hers and gun in hand, as the small Asian woman declares sassily, “Case closed, motherfucker.”

My eyes find Dino’s. Still eerily open, I look deep in his eyes and mutter to myself, “I’m free.”

As if suddenly realizing my dead husband is lying on the floor, bleeding at my black Louboutins, I gasp, clutching a hand to my mouth. Within seconds, my father and brother are by my side. My father states, “It’s okay, Alejandra. We have you.”

Miguel holds me tight, walking me away from Dino. Away from my old life. He kisses my temple and coos, “I’m so sorry, Ana. So sorry.”

As we reach my bedroom door, I mutter, “I need time. Please... just give me time.”

Miguel nods, closing the door behind me.

On my own and no longer afraid, I grab my purse and take the long hall to the kitchen. I walk out the back door, make my way to the car and drive home.

The moment I walk through the door, I make my way upstairs. Once inside my bedroom, I pace. “Oh my God,” I whisper.

“Oh my God. Oh my *God*.”

Gathering some sense, I get down on my knees beside the bed and reach under to pull out Dino’s emergency duffle. Unzipping it, I check the contents. Money, guns, false passports. Opening the passports, I find one with my photo but a different name.

Perfect.

Taking the duffle across the room to the walk-in closet, I shift the clothes on the hangers to reveal the safe. I open it in record time and unceremoniously throw stacks of hundreds into the bag. Quickly walking to the drawers, I grab piles of clothes and throw them in beside the money.

This is it.

My life in one bag.

Sad.

That is so sad.

But I won’t dwell on the past. I’m going to leave the past where it belongs.

Behind me.

Without a backward glance, I walk out of my house, leaving the front door wide open, and get into my car. Once I start driving, I open the window and throw my wedding ring into oncoming traffic.

And as I do that, I laugh.

EIGHT

TWITCH

Living on the streets could be worse.

When I say it could be worse, I mean I could be doing worse things than sharing a blunt with a homeless guy, Joseph, down his alley. And when I say his alley, I fucking mean it. From the discarded, torn brown sofa to the small chest of drawers with his few items of clothes in it, this alley is his home.

Happened to meet Joseph when an older homeless guy, Wilbur, kindly offered me a tin metal hat spouting all kinds of shit about government conspiracies and microchips inserted into the brains of unknowing citizens. According to Wilbur, if you want to scramble the chip, you gotta wear the hat. Joseph came out of his alley, wearing one of those stupid fucking hats, and looked to me, smirking. “Sorry about that. Wilbur,” he called to the crazy dude, “come on down here and tell me one of your stories.”

But Wilbur had other ideas. “No. I’m making a friend, Joe.”

Joseph looked at me with pity and amusement. “No gettin’ away now. He’s claimed you.”

It had been a long time since I had spoken to anyone. The company—for once—was welcome. Kept me from thoughts I shouldn’t have been thinking anyway. “No problem.”

Don’t ask me how it happened, but not five minutes later, down Joseph’s alley, while we wore tin foil hats, Wilbur told us about the time he won a hand of cards against Elvis.

After Wilbur told us about the time he dated Marilyn Monroe, he called it a night, and I was left with Joseph. I could tell immediately that this guy was a good guy. Gave off a distinct vibe that yelled *safe*. I introduced myself, and he shook my hand, nice and firm. And for the life of me, I couldn’t understand why the fuck this dude was homeless. I pried, but all he told me was, “I’m better off here than I was working.”

We shot the breeze for an hour then I took off. Joe offered his couch for the night if I had nowhere to stay, and although I had nowhere else to go, I declined.

Now, a week later, here I sit on the moldy-smelling couch, playing puff-puff-pass with my new friend.

Comfortable in the silence, we watch people walk by in a rush. They're always in a rush. Five years ago, I was in a rush. Five years ago, I was one of those people. Now, I've got all the time in the world.

Looking up at the starless night sky, I gaze over at my companion. "You ever miss it?"

Joseph doesn't need me to break it down. He gets me. "No."

"Not even a bit?" I push. "You don't miss having a nice car and a roof over your head? You don't miss women?"

"Okay, I miss women." He exaggeratedly shakes his head sadly and sighs. "No chick wants to fuck a homeless guy. It's just not sexy."

High as a fucking kite, I laugh. I laugh because it's true. I laugh and laugh till the memory of her smiling face makes my gut churn. Inhaling the smoke, I then exhale and admit out loud for the first time ever, "I miss my woman. And my son. I'd give anything to be with them tonight."

Joe plucks the blunt from my fingers, inhaling. As he exhales, he prods, "And that's not an option?"

I shake my head, looking out into the street. "Not until I take care of business."

A heavy hand slaps me on the back. "Then take care of business, bro."

Leaning back on the ripped brown sofa, I place my hands behind my head, close my eyes and sigh. "Yeah. Working on it."

I didn't realize I'd fallen asleep till I woke up on Joe's couch with Joe nowhere to be found. I felt like an asshole taking his bed from him, forcing him somewhere else for the night.

The night before, I'd said too much. I wouldn't be seeing Joseph again. Ever.

As I stood and stretched, I reached into my jacket pocket, pulled out a bundle of notes and put it under the trash can, where I'd seen Joe hide the little money he had. It was the least I could do to offer him a bit of comfort and know he'll be eating well, even if for a little while.

I placed my hands in my pockets and walked out of the alley.
Joe had good things coming his way.
I could feel it.

There aren't many things I appreciate in life. Strange, I know, coming from my background. Guess I always felt the things I did appreciate could go at any time. No appreciation equals no feelings of loss when that thing went away. And now, in this world I created around myself, I don't have a lot of friends, but the friends I have, I appreciate.

I walk up the steps to the front door of the house. I can hear talking and laughing coming from the inside.

Nothing fancy. White picket fence, dirty SUV in the drive, a small garden filled with white flowers.

It's nice.

Nothing I would pick for myself, but nice.

Raising a hand, I knock. Not a minute later, a pretty, slim redhead answers the door. She has bright green eyes and a smatter of light freckles across her nose. Her smile falls as she takes in my tattooed hands and exposed neck. Her haunches rise as she asks a cautious, "Can I help you?"

I mentally smile. She doesn't like me. "I was in the neighborhood. I'm looking for Nox. You must be Lily."

A look of confusion crosses her face. "That's right. And you are?"

"I'm Twitch."

Her smile returns full force and, before I know it, she launches herself at me. She wraps her arms around me and squeezes. "Well, why didn't you say so? I've heard so much about you. Nice to meet you!"

And I just stand here, body stiff, face twisted into a grimace. I don't know what to do here. I raise my hand to pat her shoulder awkwardly. When I hear chuckles from the doorway, I see Nox leaning against the frame, grinning wide. "She's a hugger."

I glare.

No shit, Captain Obvious.

I pat her again. "Nice to meet you, Lily." *Please let go of me.*

Pulling back, I'm thrown by the transformation a simple smile does to her face. She's beautiful. Not Lexi beautiful, but still. Placing her hand in the crook of my arm, she tugs me into the house. "It's not often I get to meet Nox's friends. You could say I get a little excited." Looking Nox in the face, she mock whispers out the side of her mouth to me, "I need ammo. If you got any humiliating stories about my husband, I need to know them, like, yesterday."

My lips twitch. "I'll see what I can do. I might have one or two stored away."

Nox shakes his head at the woman by my side. She all but drags me into the kitchen. "I'll pay you handsomely, of course. Say, a nice home-cooked dinner and dessert?"

As if on cue, my stomach growls. I turn to Nox. "Can she cook?"

Nox pats his stomach, obviously still glowing in the memory of his last cooked meal. "She can cook."

I look down at Lily, wondering how much I can get out of this. "You throw in a batch homemade cookies, and we got a deal."

Her eyes narrow at me a moment before she nods. "Peanut butter chocolate chip okay?"

I turn to Nox. "Dude."

He sighs dreamily, looking down at his wife lovingly. "I know."

Lily pulls out a chair at the kitchen table and ushers me into a seated position. "What are you having? Coffee, juice, soda?"

"A soda would be great, thanks."

Nox sits opposite me. "Never thought I'd see you down my neck of the woods."

I shoot him a look. "Need to talk."

His eyes narrow at the look on my face. "You came all the way from Australia to talk? A phone call would've been a fuckload cheaper, T."

My eyes shoot back to Lily. I turn back to Nox and whisper, "Need help."

Nox rubs a hand over his face. "I'm out. I'm a family man now. I'm a father. I drive my kids to school. I'm a part of the PTA. Fuck, I *volunteer*, Twitch. Whatever you need, I can't get you."

Damn. That fucking blows.

I can't fault the man. If I were in his position, I'd be doing exactly what he is. Enjoying my family.

Lily walks over, glasses of soda in hand. “So, you’re in the neighborhood. Where are you staying?”

I scratch at my temple. “Uh, I hadn’t gotten that far yet.”

Lily looks over at Nox. They have a silent conversation. She looks back to me and smiles. “Well, that settles it. You’ll stay here with us.” I open my mouth to protest, but she cuts me off with a swipe of her hand. “No. I insist.” Standing, she walks over to the living room, picking up toys and books as she goes. “It’s not much, but we have a spare room with a single bed in it. It’s either that or the fold out. And you don’t want the fold out.” She turns to me and makes a face. “It smells like sour milk.”

I look over at Nox. “Dude.”

He gently shakes his head, smiling at the ridiculous face his wife is making. “I know.”

Although I declined more times than I can count, Nox wouldn’t accept it. So I placed my backpack in the spare room and promised I’d only stay the night. While Lily started on dinner, Nox and I went out the back and talked.

Handing me a beer, we sat on the deck, staring out into the yard. Sipping my beer, I heard his chair creak as he adjusted himself. He was rubbing at his thigh, a pained expression gripping him. I jerked my chin toward his leg. “Still hurts?”

Massaging his thigh, digging his thumbs deep into the skin, he replies, “Yeah. It’s not quite pain though. It’s something else. Sometimes I can still feel my leg.” Lifting his pants leg, I take in the aluminum prosthetic.

How times have changed.

I’m a man. And being a man, I don’t feel comfortable with the emotions coursing through me. So I do what any other man would do. I change the subject. “So, you’re a father, huh?”

Nox grins, puffing out his chest. “Three times over. I got a little boy, Rocco. He’s six. Then came our first girl, Angie. She’s four. And finally, our second girl, Mia. She’s three.”

My chest squeezes. “Congrats, man.” I sip my beer and squint as I look to the sky and try to keep the pain out of my voice. “Got a boy. AJ. He’s four tomorrow.”

“I know.”

My head snaps toward him. “You keeping tabs?”

He searches my face and, ignoring my question, asks, “What are you doing here, Twitch?”

“Keeping my family safe.”

He immediately returns, “By bringing flaming piles of shit to my doorstep?”

This was a bad idea. I move to stand. “Thanks for the beer.”

“Sit your ass down. Lily’s making dinner. If you leave now, you’ll hurt her feelings.”

I glare at him. That was a low blow. After meeting Lily, I kind of like her. I don’t want to upset her. The asshole just grins. “Sit down. Let’s talk. That’s why you came here, after all. Lay it on me. Give it to me straight.”

I shouldn’t sit. I should leave. Instead, I lay it down. “I got five houses on my list. Each of those houses got a king.” I pause a moment, before stressing, “It’s in my best interest for those kings to retire. So that’s what I’m doing. Forcing each king into early retirement. ” I jerk my chin. “*Permanent* retirement.”

Nox doesn’t blink. “Why?”

I sit. “Did business with these men. That business went sour. I...” I cough. “...I didn’t handle it well. Made some bad decisions. Left scars. Happy’s been listening out for things. These men all sent condolences to Lexi when I died.” I lay a pointed stare at him. “To her *home*.”

He nods. “Right.”

“What do you think’s gonna happen if I decide to go home?”

“They know where she lives. She and your boy become walking targets.”

Bingo.

Suddenly, he stills. “You planning on going home?” I don’t respond, just sip at my beer. He continues, “I help you fake your death, use up all my contacts, all my fucking markers, and now you wanna go home?” His eyes blaze. “Are you out of your motherfucking mind? The cops will be on you before you can say boo.”

“That’s why I’m here.”

His brow rises slightly. “What? I told you, I’m out. I don’t do this shit anymore.”

I nod. “I know.”

“Then what the fuck *do* you want, Twitch?” He sounds exhausted.

I run my fingers down the condensation on my beer bottle. Turning to my friend, I look him in the eye as I relay my request. “I want you to turn me in.”

NINE

JULIUS

I don't believe this shit.

Never in my life have I been more angry or embarrassed. This is not how I conduct my work. I'm a professional. I don't mess up. I never get it wrong.

I can't let this get out. If it gets out, everything I have worked for is over. My career will be over.

Let's rewind.

An hour after the untimely death of Dino Gambino, an express courier came to the door, delivering a package to Eduardo Castillo. Leaving his men to clean up the mess that was Dino, Eduardo excused himself to his private quarters.

Cleaning was never my thing. I didn't much like the thought of blood on my hands.

I decided to go upstairs and check on Alejandra. Miguel said she needed time alone, and normally, there would be nothing wrong with that, but here was a pregnant woman, upstairs, alone, thinkin' way too hard on things. On the death of the man she loved.

I never could stand to see a woman suffer.

I felt the need to offer her my condolences. I also felt the need to spare a few words for her, letting her know that she made the right decision. The protection of her child should come first, now and always. No one would hold that against her. I approached the door with caution, but when I placed my knuckle to the door, with a slight creak, it opened; a frown marred my face. Pushing the door open all the way, eyeing the rumpled state of the bed, I searched the room through narrowed brows.

Where was she?

There was no time to think on this. A second after I stepped back into the hall, a pale-faced Eduardo stood at the open doorway of his quarters. I

opened my mouth to ask him what was wrong, but he cut me off with, “I need you to find Miguel. Find him and come back to me.” He blinked as sweat formed on his brow. He spoke quietly. “Find him. *Now.*”

Wanting to maintain an air of respect for this man, I did as I was told. I found Miguel and Ling in the kitchen, and not a minute later, we were ushered into Eduardo Castillo’s safe haven, having the door locked behind us.

Miguel was the first to ask, “Papa? What’s wrong?”

Without a response, Eduardo motioned for us to sit then held the remote up to the TV.

The soundless, black-and-white footage played on the massive screen. We watched in complete silence. We watched wide-eyed. I watched seemingly in slow motion, every beat of my heart turning into a weak, dull thud in my chest.

We were in trouble.

As the Russian mobster, and known psychopath, Maxim Nikulin, pierced Raul Mendoza’s heart for the last time, he knelt over his body in the bar’s parking lot, laughing.

Dino Gambino didn’t kill Raul.

Maxim Nikulin killed Raul.

This was not a jealousy-fuelled hate killing.

It was a less convoluted loss of a soldier in a turf war.

Lives have been lost for less. Which only meant one thing.

In my present state, anger bubbled up from a place stored deep inside of me, from the place I told myself didn’t exist. The truth was, I prided myself for being cool, calm and collected, but when something set me off, I could do damage. Granted, it took a lot to set me off. And right now... I was set off.

Standing, I ball my hands into fists, turn to face Miguel and hiss, “*Where is she?*”

It’s time for damage control.

I’d never needed to do so before. You can say I’m feeling sore about it.

Miguel turns to Eduardo, and utters, “What now?”

Eduardo, rubbing his hands down his face, looks at his son. “We call Vito, show him the video.” Sighing, he stands, walking over to his desk. “Show him that his son has been vindicated. An hour after his death. I’m

sure Vito will understand.” He nods absently. “I’m sure he will understand that his son, his firstborn, was put to death”—his voice rises—“because of a false accusation—” face turning red, he roars—“put forth by my *son and daughter, Dino’s own wife!*” Slamming his hand down on his desk, with one clean swipe, papers, ornaments and office supplies are sent careening to the ground with a crash and clatter. Turning to face us, he blasts sarcastically, “Yes. I’m sure with a simple explanation, all will be well.”

Ling flinches but says nothing.

Miguel blanches. “Papa, I had every reason to believe Dino did it. If Alejandra hadn’t—”

Cutting him off midsentence, Eduardo dips his chin. “This is the end of an alliance. A good alliance. A *great* alliance. And I want to know why.” Closing his eyes, he utters a hoarse, “Bring me Alejandra.” Sighing through his nostrils, he pinches the bridge of his nose. “Bring me my daughter.”

Searching for the better part of an hour brought forth the conclusion that Alejandra had fled. Miguel had called her cell over twenty times, left countless messages on her voice mail telling her he wasn’t angry at her, that he just wanted to know why she did it and he wanted to know if she was okay.

Fuck that.

I *was* angry. I *demand*ed to know why she lied. And I did *not* give a flying fuck about her wellbeing. Not right now, anyway.

Vito had arrived shortly after with his sons. His face lowered in shame, Miguel walked them upstairs. Eduardo motioned for the men to sit, and before they started to watch, I wedged myself between the Castillos and Gambinos. Although it would be warranted, violence would not be solving the problems right now.

The video played, and I watched closely as Vito Gambino broke down and cried. The youngest son, Luc, placed his arm around his father and consoled him. The reaction of the middle son, Gio, now the oldest, I suppose, had me puzzled.

He watched Raul Mendoza be slaughtered in cold blood with a smirk on his face.

Vito Gambino stood, guns blazing. “My son!” He looked from Eduardo to Miguel, and snarled, “My son is dead, because of your *vermin!*”

I expected Eduardo to snap back, to respond snarkily. I hid my surprise as Eduardo came forward, face apologetic, placing one hand on Vito's shaking shoulder. "I know." As Vito dipped his chin to cry, Eduardo embraced him like a brother and held him as he mourned, offering him solace and strength in his time of need. "I know. And I cannot express how sorry I am, Vito." Patting his back, he uttered a firm, "I will fix this."

It was my turn to speak. "No, you won't."

At that moment, every face in the room turned to blink at me. I spoke again, "It was my job to judge. I judged wrong. I'll fix this." I added I low oath. "I'll find her."

Vito shakes his head, wiping tears away from his sleeve. "No. I don't know you. And I don't trust you." He turned to his youngest son. "Luc. You'll find her."

Before Luc could answer, Gio was there. "No, Pops. Let me do it. Let me find her."

Vito looked at his son, searching his face. "You never liked Alejandra. I could never understand why. But maybe you saw something in her that I did not." A moment's pause then he agreed, "Yes. You will find her."

Gio responded, "It's not that I don't like her." He turned to Miguel and Eduardo, smirking, striking where it hurt the most. "I just don't care about her."

Eduardo shook his head. "I want Julius to find her."

I glared at Gio. "I *will* find her."

Gio looked at me then, sizing me up. His lip curled as he looked at me like I was nothing but a bug. A bug that needed to be stepped on. "Well, then. I guess it's a matter of who gets to her first."

Eduardo, clearly panicked, muttered, "Please. I want her brought home."

Vito's head snapped around. "I want her *dead*."

Eduardo stated, "She's pregnant. She holds the heir of our movements inside of her."

Vito boomed and pounded on his chest with a closed fist, "*Then she will suffer the loss of a child as I have!*" Nostrils flaring, he promised, "As you will."

Eduardo didn't say a word, but I saw his jaw tic.

Vito calmed himself and then straightened his tie. "If you want this alliance, I want Alejandra's head."

Miguel watched in horror as Eduardo reluctantly conceded, “Agreed.”

And as this was happening, Ling whispered behind me the very words that were running through my mind.

“An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind.”

From the excited glint in Gio’s eyes, I knew one thing.

I had to find Alejandra first.

ALEJANDRA

As I drive on for what seems like hours, possibly because it *has* been hours, I think back to a documentary I saw on TV a few years ago. The documentary was about scientists being able to pinpoint a psychopath gene in people. Most people with this gene are coldhearted and clinical. They don’t react to violence as other do, and they don’t recoil at gruesome scenes. They revel in it.

And in a mere moment, I wonder whether I have that gene.

Surely, people aren’t meant to smile and sing along to the radio, tapping their feet only hours after the death of their spouse.

Maybe I am a psychopath.

I frown in thought. If I’m a psychopath, then Dino would have been one also. My mind travels a distance inside itself, trudging up memories I had long since locked away.

The first time Dino punched me and split my lip.

The first time Dino kicked me so hard that my ribs broke.

The first time Dino yanked me by my hair so hard that I needed to cover a bald patch for six months till new growth set in.

No.

I am not a psychopath.

I am merely a hardened woman tired of being some asshole’s punching bag.

I’m glad he’s dead. I’m glad he died feeling fear. I’m glad he felt wronged.

He deserved it all and more.

I suppose I’m too relieved to grieve.

I don't know where I am, but I do know I'm hungry, the constant knot of fear at the mere presence of my husband now gone. A quick glance at my fuel gauge tells me I need to fill my car with gas, especially if I'm going to be driving through the night. Pulling into a diner at the side of the road, I step out and hand my keys to the young attendant. I throw the duffle over my shoulder and hand him two hundreds. "Fill her up and clean the windshield. I'd also appreciate if you checked and topped up the oil and radiator fluid. Whatever is left over from the charge, you can consider a tip."

The Sunnyside Up Diner looks like a decent place to get some lunch. I don't have a lot of time to spare. I approach the counter and am greeted by a mature waitress with a wrinkly smile. "What can I get ya, sweetie?" she asks, her voice hoarse.

"Whatever is the quickest to go, please."

The waitress doesn't skip a beat. "Egg salad sandwich, coming right up."

Making my way over to the refrigerator, I pull out four bottles of water and a sports drink. I place them on the counter then skim the snacks by the cash register. I quickly add two packets of potato chips, sugar-free gum and a handful of Twizzlers. The waitress comes from the kitchen not a minute later with a brown, wrapped package and, looking at all the things I'm buying, reaches into the baked goods display and adds a small package of cookies to my things. As I'm about to argue, she rings up my total, and mutters, "I baked those myself, honey, and they're about to go bad. You see that you finish them by tomorrow, you hear? Besides, you look like you need some meat on your bones."

Smiling at her kindness, I pay the total, leaving a more than decent tip for my waitress, pack everything into the duffle and head out. When I see the young attendant looking over my car and chatting to a greasy-handed man in his fifties, my gut clenches. I call out, "Everything okay?"

The older man looks my way before his eyes slide over me. "When's the last time you had a service?"

I squint over at my Lexus. My car is immaculate. I don't allow people to eat in it for fear of crumbs getting into places where crumbs have no business being. The only people I allow to look under the hood are specialized mechanics, and for the longest time, I didn't drink anything in it. Not even water.

Opening the passenger door, I reach into the glove compartment and pull out the logbook. I hand it to the mechanic, and he smiles. "Good girl."

After flipping through it with a furrowed brow, he sighs and jerks his head in a decisive nod. Handing back the book, he states, "The mechanic you're using is fleecin' you. Bleeding you dry."

I try not to gape. "What?"

He nods. "He's adding work here and there that he hasn't actually done. It's all over the place. It's an old-school trick from way back when. Three months in a row, he's changed your fancy Lexus wiper blades, and by changed them, I mean he's written down that he has to accumulate enough on your invoice that he's hoping to God you don't check." My mouth slacks and he smiles a fatherly smile. "Which I guess you don't."

"You're serious?" I huff. "I've been going to him since I bought the car." I look to the man and add quietly, humiliated, "For five years."

The man's brows rise. "Ouch."

Yeah. Ouch.

I'm guessing my mechanic got a little more out of our relationship than I did. And when I say a little more, I mean tens of thousands.

Sighing, I lean my hip on the hood of my car and ask a tired, "What's wrong with the car?"

"Cracked radiator."

Absently rubbing at my neck, I ask, "Okay. If you can fix it for me in an hour, I'll pay you double."

"Not that simple, missy. I don't have the parts I need. I'd need to order them. I could probably get it fixed in five days, and that would be the very quickest."

Panic fills me, and I stutter, "I-I need to get out of here, sir. There has to be a way."

He shrugs. "I can patch it, but that's only a temporary fix. I can't guarantee you'd get far. I got a loaner you can have if you got places to go."

Anger rises, clenching my insides tight. "*Shit*. No, thank you. I need to go, as in I won't be coming back type of gone." Suddenly, an idea strikes me. "Your loaner, where is it?"

The mechanic points to a beat up old blue Cadillac complete with rust spots. It doesn't look like much, but I see so much more. A slow smile

crosses my face. “I’ll make you a deal. A trade, more accurately.” His brows rise to his hairline when I add, “My car for yours.”

He laughs, but there is no humor in it. I need to get out of here and quick, so I decide to use half-truths. Losing my smile, I swallow hard, and croak, “Please, sir. I need to get out of here as soon as possible. The last relationship I was in just ended, and it didn’t end well. My husband was possessive and dangerous. I’m going to be followed, and if I’m found...” I blink. “There’ll be trouble for me.”

He doesn’t respond a while, allowing what I’ve just told him to sink in. He nods solemnly, jerking his chin toward my temple. “He give you that bruise as a parting gift?”

Looks like my makeup doesn’t cover as much as I hoped it would. I don’t respond, just avert my eyes.

“Tell you what, missy. You can have my loaner. It’s not much, but I put a lot of work into it. It purrs like a kitten. But I can’t take your car.”

I didn’t notice I’m holding my breath until I start breathing again. I shake my head. “I don’t want it, really. The slips are in the glove compartment. If we do this, it’ll be a straight up trade. If you don’t want it, scrap it or use it for parts. I don’t care. I just don’t want it back.”

He holds out his hand. “Jimmy.”

Placing my small hand in his, we shake. “Ana.”

He smiles big. “Well then, let me get you the keys, and you can go ahead and drive off into the sunset, Miss Ana.”

As he walks inside, a thought makes me shudder.

People like me don’t drive off happily into the sunset.

We careen down jagged cliff sides.

TEN

ALEJANDRA

Jimmy the mechanic recommended a nearby motel for the night. He told me to mention his name, so when I arrive and make my way to reception, I'm not surprised to find a man who looks remarkably like Jimmy, only older, waiting for me at the counter.

I ignore the peeling off-white walls and dirty laminate floors. I also ignore the brownish-looking water stains on the ceiling and smile. "Hello."

Before I get another word in, the elderly man barks, "You Ana?"

At the booming sound of his voice, I jolt, clutching my hand to my chest. And he wheezes out a croaky laugh. "Sorry, sweetness. Lost most of my hearing in 'Nam. You the girl Jimmy was talkin' about?"

I simply nod while trying to calm my racing heart. Swallowing hard, I start, "Yes. I need a room for the night—" but am cut off with a barking order, "You'll stay here two, Miss Ana, no arguments. You look tired as hell, and lucky for you, any friend of my son's gets a two-for-one special, so tonight's on the house."

Oh. This must be Jimmy's father.

I try once more. "Thank you so much, but I really just need one—"

My body jolts again when the man booms, "Nope!"

Well, all right then. Knowing I'm not going to win this argument, I cave with a thin smile. "Two nights it is."

The man grins and it transforms his face. His sharp angles soften and he winks. "Knew you'd see reason. Besides, my Jimmy said you needed a place to lay low. So I'm gonna write you up in the book under Jane Smith. No one will ever know you were here." Blinking in surprise at the kindness of this man and his son, I dip my wobbling chin and nod, wiping away stray tears.

The man coos, albeit loudly, "Hey now." Stepping forward, he takes my hand in his and pats it softly. "None of that. You're safe here." As I look up,

he pins me with an almost glare. “No one’s ever gonna hurt you again.”

And it sounds so much like a vow that I find myself believing it.

I soon find out the man’s name is Duane. After he shows me to my room, I can’t help but wonder if he’s given me a nicer one or if they’re all as nice as mine. Sure, the reception area looked a little worse for wear, but the rooms are pretty. A sandy yellow patterned wallpaper covers the walls, giving the effect of light when there is none. The queen-sized bed wears a duvet of pale yellow and white flowers. The bathroom is white tiled and clean, with a strong trace of disinfectant in the air. And that’s okay. It’s fresh. I love that smell. The tan carpets have no stains and feel plush under my bare feet. All in all, the motel is more than I could’ve hoped for.

I expected roaches the size of small dogs. Instead, I got a vase full of yellow and white silk flowers.

The sun begins to set and I yawn. I stand from my sitting position on the bed and walk over to the crisp yellow curtains. Chancing a peek outside, I see the world continuing to live around me. I close the curtains then make my way over to my duffle. I unload all the water bottles and chew on a Twizzler while working on the rest.

The taste of tangy raspberries and sugar linger in my mouth, and I suck on the licorice while checking my new passport.

Maria Gambirella.

That is who I am from now on. Knowing Dino and his trust issues, no one else knows about this passport, about this name. I am officially a new person.

I check the gun, making sure the clip is loaded and check the safety. I then transfer it into my purse. It’s a little large, but all I really need it for is the fear factor. I would never shoot a person, not unless my life depends on it. And you better believe if I had to choose between me and you, you’d lose, every day of the week.

A beeping noise sounds from my purse. My brows furrow as I dig inside. I quickly find the source of the beeping.

My cell phone. And it has a low battery.

Shit.

Finding a piece of paper and a pen, I quickly write down the few phone numbers I need to know, then walk out of my room. Standing over the railing, I rear back and throw down as hard as I can. I watch my cell phone

sail through the air a few seconds before it hits the ground with an impact so hard that pieces of plastic and metal ricochet all over.

I head back inside and sit on the edge of the bed by the nightstand. Taking the piece of paper, I hold it up and dial from the phone in my room. It rings four times before the line clicks over. “You’ve reached Doctor Manda Rossi. I’m currently unavailable at this time. If this is regarding a medical emergency and you’re unsure what to do, please visit your local general practitioner or hospital. Remember, it’s better to be safe than sorry. Leave your name and contact information, and I will return your call as soon as I can.” *Beep.*

I hold the phone in my shaking hands, my heart pounding in my chest. I open my mouth to speak, but then close it. Shaking my head, I try again. “I-uh.” Nothing. I can’t think of anything to say. “Manda, it’s Ana.” What can I possibly say that she doesn’t already know? I try anyway. “By now, you probably know about Dino.” I grip the phone tight. “I just called to let you know I’m okay. I’m safe.” I blink as my racing heart eases. “I’m finally free, Manda.” I breathe a laugh. “I’m free.”

And with that, I gently lay the handset on the hook, disconnecting the call.

I wonder if that will be the last time Manda will hear my voice. I suddenly wish I had said more, something meaningful, something heartfelt. I wish I had told her how much her friendship meant to me and that I wouldn’t have survived as long without her.

I sit on the edge of the bed and ponder some more.

Something tells me that the price of my freedom is going to be high, and I will likely pay with my life.

JULIUS

It’s not bad having friends in high places.

I’ve dealt with a lot of people in my life. I’ve also helped a lot of those people. You could say I’m a decent guy, or if you knew me better, you’d say I knew how to roll.

Do a favor, gain a marker. That’s how people roll in my world.

So I place a call to an old friend, a cop. Casper Quaid isn't surprised I've called. "I was wondering when you'd call it in."

I fight a grin. "It's not as bad as you think."

Casper scoffs. "Is it something I could lose my job over?"

I don't answer. That being my answer.

Casper sighs. "What am I doing, Julius?"

I respond a bored, "Just triangulating a cell phone."

I knew Casper thought it would be worse. I know this, because as soon as I tell him what I need, he agrees hastily and calls me back within a half hour. "The cell isn't moving. Your guy is somewhere between these coordinates." He rattles off the coordinates and I write them down, handing them to Ling. I thank him, and Casper quickly clarifies, "That's it. We're done. You don't call me for favors anymore, right?"

Then, I do smile. "That's it, man. We're done. Have a nice life."

Casper immediately sounds relieved. "Likewise."

As we drive, we look out for places of interest at the side of the road. The sunlight is starting to fade, and with it, our time. I rub the back of my neck as I drive. Tension causes my neck to stiffen. I can feel Ling's eyes on me when she pledges, "Hey. We're going to fix this. Everything's going to be okay. Okay?"

I rub my neck harder and look on. "Yeah." My answer comes out hoarse, and neither one of us believes that everything will be okay. How could it? We have one innocent man dead and are currently hunting a woman who will meet the same fate.

No. This is not okay.

Not even close.

Before we left, I had Miguel print out two recent photographs of Alejandra, one of her fresh-faced and smiling, the other with her wearing an oversized pair of sunglasses.

Ling, looking out her side of the road, utters, "Diner."

I pull over and we step out. Checking my back pocket, I slip out and we walk inside. The plump waitress smiles at us and greets, "Hi, there. We've got burgers on the menu tonight. If you're interested, ask for Deb's special."

Approaching the counter, I look the woman in the eye and force a smile. "Ma'am, I'm Detective Jay. Hoping you could help us. We're looking for

this woman.”

I hand the printed photographs of Alejandra to the woman and see recognition the moment her eyes settle on Alejandra’s face.

She hesitates. “She in trouble?”

I shake my head. “Depends on your version of trouble. But to ensure her safety, I need to get to her as soon as possible.”

Her eyes narrow at me. “You got a badge I can see?”

Reaching into my back pocket, I pull out my immaculate fake police badge and ID and hand it to her. She sighs. “Yeah. She was in here earlier today.”

Ling cuts in, “How long ago?”

The waitress shrugs. “Around two.”

Fuck. That’s over four hours ago. She’s long gone by now.

Ling whispers, “Damn.”

The waitress brightens. “Y’all need to talk to Jimmy. I think she had car trouble, so she left her car with him. I saw her take his loaner.”

Praying my thanks to the car trouble gods, I ask patiently, “Loaner, huh? What type of car?”

“A blue Cadillac. A classic.” Looking out past me, she points, “There he is right now. If you want to catch him, you better run. He won’t be back till morning.”

A big, burly guy with a beard and grease-covered overalls steps into his truck, already heading out. I call out to the waitress, “Thanks for your help. Much appreciated. Oh, and if anyone else comes through looking for her, don’t give them any information. For her safety. You understand.”

I pick up pace as the engine starts, breaking out in a dead run. I bolt to the truck, and just as it starts to take off, I stop in front of it. The breaks squeal and the truck jolts. Jimmy’s out of the car and yelling in a second flat, “You lost your fucking mind, son, or you just got a death wish?”

Breathing deeply, I shake my head, lifting my police ID and the photos of Alejandra. “You seen this woman?”

But Jimmy doesn’t even look to the pages. He glares at me, lip curling. “Nope.”

Oh, yeah. Jimmy really doesn’t like me.

I hold the photos out and try once more. “You sure?”

He doesn’t flinch. “Sorry. Can’t help you.”

My jaw tightens. I'm about to set this man on his ass when a soft, feminine voice sounds by my side. "Excuse me, sir. Any information you have on Alejandra Gambino's whereabouts would be much appreciated. We know she was here. We know she had car trouble. We know she spoke to you, sir."

I look down at Ling, shocked and surprised that she can pull off sweet so well, when sour is her specialty. Jimmy looks down at Ling's soft face and mutters, "She had car trouble. She's gone."

Ling steps forward. "Where? Where'd she go?"

Jimmy looks torn.

I help make his decision. "There are people coming after her. They *will* find her. If we find her first, we've got a chance of keeping her safe."

Jimmy bites the inside of his cheek, at war with himself. Ling places a hand on his forearm and implores, "Please. Help us help her."

Placing his hands on his head, he blows out a breath, answering on an exhale, "She's at the Sunflower Inn a block away. It's my dad's place. She's in room three, under Jane Smith. She won't answer to anyone who doesn't know that name. That was the deal."

Relief. Pure relief courses through me. I hold out my hand to him. "Thank you, sir."

Jimmy shakes my hand and pins me with a stare. "Keep her safe."

Ling smiles at Jimmy before we turn and make our way to the car. Ling already has the address for the Sunflower Inn on her phone. "Yep. Just a block away."

A block away.

I don't know whether I feel elated or dismal.

Maybe I feel a little of both.

ALEJANDRA

The warm spray washes over me as I cry. Leaning my head on the cool tile, I sob quietly.

What am I going to do now?

I've never had to think about myself. Someone else has always done it for me. First, my mother, then my father, lastly Dino. The only thing I really needed to do myself was make sure I was well behaved, a good daughter, a humble wife.

Who am I?

Alejandra Castillo Gambino is dead.

Not that she ever really lived.

Maria Gambirella. Who is she? What is she like? Is she funny and sweet? Maybe she's smart and sassy. This is my chance to be someone else, someone I would want to be.

I sniffle and lift my face into the spray, washing my distress down the drain along with the sudsy water. Wiping my hands down my face, I turn off the water and wring out my hair, wrapping the long length in a towel turban and drying off. I dress quickly in my only bra, a white, delicate silky blouse, and black yoga pants.

In my haste to get away from the house, I didn't really check what I was packing. I don't really have anything that matches. But that's okay. I'll fix that tomorrow with a wad of cash from my duffle.

Having had my hair wrapped up for a while now, I unravel it. It falls in long, messy strands down my back, the damp tickling my skin.

A knock at the door sounds.

My body stills with sudden fear. I call out hesitantly, "Y-yes?"

A female voice calls out, "Slippers and coffee for Miss Smith, courtesy of reception."

My body goes limp. Laughing to myself, I run a hand over my face and walk over to the door. I unlock the door, and the second I twist the nob, I'm thrown back. The harsh blow makes me land on my back, pain coursing through my torso and bottom.

Blinking, I look up. And stop breathing.

Julius and Ling stand there, looking down at me. Ling trains her gun on me, and I scramble back, panting. "How did you find me?"

An expressionless Julius steps forward. I scramble backward till I hit wall. Body shaking, I tremble in terror as he approaches. Kneeling by my side, he sighs out loud before uttering, "Rule one of making a successful getaway." He reaches out, his fingers gently removing wet strands of hair

from my forehead before settling his gaze on me once more. “Never leave a trail.”

ELEVEN

JULIUS

Moments like these do nothing for me. I don't feel big, or strong, or manly. Seeing Alejandra sprawled on the floor like this did not make me happy. I have to say, I did find satisfaction at the shocked look on her face when she recovered from her fall, but having her thrown around like that, her small, frail body looking more ragdoll than human?

Nope. I don't like it.

Gently taking her by the arm, I help her off the ground and am surprised that she allows me to lead her without a fight. I walk her over to the bed while Ling closes and locks the door. As soon as I sit her down, she shuts us out, dipping her chin, she pretends I'm not there.

The move is so childlike that my usually calm demeanor spikes, and suddenly, I want to smash heads.

My heart beats up a hard, quick drumbeat as my anger rises. I pace in front of her. I pace a long while before I utter a low and rough, "I'm real mad at you, Alejandra."

Her response is immediate. "Fuck you."

Pausing midpace, I turn to face her, my jaw tight. That was defiance and disrespect, plain and simple. My anger rises to a higher level, bubbling like molten lava deep in my veins. I mutter a deathly quiet, "Talk to me like that again and we're gonna have problems, *chica*."

Lifting her face to mine, she lifts her chin in insolence. "You're not my father."

"No, only the man you tried to frame for your husband's death. The same husband you accused of murder. No, I'm not your father, but if I were"—I shake my head lightly, appalled—"I'd disown you for being a little cunt." Bam.

Taken aback by my blunt statement, her eyes widen, and her mouth opens before she controls herself and snaps it shut. She looks out past my

elbow into nothingness, losing focus, and something tells me I just lost her inside her own head.

Ling, sitting at the small table, waves her gun in the air to get her attention. "Which, by the way, is now on me, considering I'm the one who shot him." She scoffs. "Not that it wasn't worth it. The guy was an asshole." She looks at Alejandra and shrugs. "No offense."

Alejandra swallows hard, shuts her eyes, and then whispers, "Please stop talking."

Ling rolls her eyes. She doesn't like drama. I manage to keep quiet a short while before joining Ling at the table. Leaning forward, I place my mouth to her ear, and whisper, "What do you see?"

Ling watches Alejandra closely, assessing her carefully before responding just as quietly, "I see a scared little girl trying to be strong."

Me too.

I stand, making my way over to the bed. Pulling Alejandra up with a stiff yank, I pick up the duffel and throw it to Ling. She catches it, opens it then smirks. "Alejandra, you shock me, you dirty little sneak."

That catches my attention. "What?"

Ling lifts wads of cash out of the bag, and I frown then scowl down at Alejandra, who refuses to look at me. "Exactly how long have you been planning this?" She doesn't answer, but she visibly pales. I thought I was a good judge of character. It's obvious to me that I can't be trusted around beautiful women. They clearly fill my head with bullshit, and what's worse is... I let them. My lip curls in disgust, and I yank Alejandra forward a little harder than I should. "Move."

But she digs her heels in, eyes wide, pulling back in clear panic. "Where are we going? Where are you taking me?"

Without looking down, I grip her arm so hard I know it'll bruise. Dragging her to the door, I utter, "I told you what would happen if you lied to me. You're going home." I look down at her and smile sharply. "What did you think? That you'd just get away with it?" I lower my face to hers till we're almost nose to nose. "Vito Gambino wants you in a body bag."

What I don't add is, "And he's getting his wish, because your father is a pussy."

Scared Alejandra fights me to no avail then suddenly turns into resigned Alejandra. She stops hesitating and allows me to move her. Her sudden

compliance should have me nervous, but I'm too pleased with the fact that I have her.

The second we're outside, I realize my mistake. I hear her inhale harshly and I know what's coming.

The little minx is going to scream.

I do the only thing I can think of. Pushing her against the concrete wall with a harsh thud, I grip her throat hard. Gritting my teeth, I hiss, "Don't you fucking do it, bitch. I will off you right here if I have to."

Alejandra reaches up and scratches at my hand with one of her own while balling her other hand into a fist and hitting my arm. Her eyes wide, her mouth opens and closes, a gurgling noise escaping her.

I should let her go. I should apologize. But I don't. She has to understand that for as long as she's with me, I own her.

Ling moves past us sounding a little more than put out. "Jesus, c'mon! You're making a scene."

I allow the struggle a little longer and do it without flinching. The harsh reality of this situation is sinking in. If I need to, I will kill Alejandra myself.

I won't like it, but I'll do it.

The fear in Alejandra's eyes is very real, and as they bore into mine, it radiates off her and into me.

My eyes narrow at her as I try to figure her out.

What the hell is her deal?

She has money from her own family. She didn't need the dough. The short time I saw her with Dino, she looked happy. Tired, but still happy. Every person we'd spoken to told us that Dino and Alejandra were loyal to each other and happy in their marriage. Why would this little slip of a woman have her husband killed? I just can't make sense of it.

A sudden thought crosses my mind.

Was Dino Gambino cheating on his wife?

Another thought.

What if Alejandra was cheating on Dino and the baby isn't his?

The latter makes more sense to me.

My voice low, I lean in close. "I'm gonna let you go now. And you're not gonna scream, are you?"

Desperately gasping for breath, face purple, she gurgles some more, shaking her head vigorously.

The second my hand eases on her throat, her shaking hands hold onto mine at her collarbone. I hold her up, supporting her, as she coughs and wheezes, taking in much-needed oxygen. Her forehead beaded with sweat, she closes her eyes in relief and the small action turns me vicious. Gripping her collarbone, I growl, “Do *not* make me do that again.” Her eyes open and blink weakly, her bottom lip trembling. My eyes focused on her lips, I grind out, “I did not enjoy that.”

“Fuck, Julius. Move your ass. We need to get out of here,” calls Ling, the clicking of her heels echoing throughout the parking lot.

Absently rubbing my thumb against her collarbone, I look down at this frightened and hurt woman, and in one night, I’ve become everything I hate in a person. I soften my features. “Don’t run from me.” An order.

Rather than responding, Alejandra closes her eyes and leans her head back on the brick wall, panting. As her shoulders slump, some of her fire fades. I’ll take that as an okay.

I grip her upper arm and walk her to the car. Ling opens the door for me, but before I put her inside, I reach into my pocket, turning her to face me. I lift her hands, place them together and pull the black cable tie around her wrists as tight as it can go without cutting off her circulation. Ling steps forward and duct tapes her hands together. As I walk back to the driver side, I hear Ling close the back passenger door and join me in the front.

“What if the car rolls?”

My brow furrows. I start the car and look at my guest in the rearview mirror with an assessing gaze. She lifts her taped and bound hands. “What if the car rolls?”

Her big doe eyes don’t leave mine. After a short while, I deepen my look of boredom and respond a cool, “Then you’re well and truly fucked.”

She blinks back at me, showing no emotion. Then she shocks me.

Alejandra Gambino smiles. A soft smile. A secret smile. And it hits me right in the cock.

Fuck her for being so beautiful.

Leaning back in the passenger seat, she closes her eyes, and within half an hour of driving, her breathing steadies as she falls asleep. I feel Ling’s eyes on me. I turn to look at her before narrowing my eyes. “What?”

Her small, manicured hand reaches out to squeeze my thigh. “Told you it’d be okay.”

I remember doing this alone. I remember never needing someone. My partner in crime was Twitch, and after he died, I didn’t want anyone else. Losing people hurts, in body *or* spirit. But I am grateful for Ling. It’s nice to share the load.

I spare her a quick smile. “You called it, Ling Ling.”

She returns the smile, and we drive on in companionable silence, her hand resting on my thigh.

When my eyes start to droop, I decide on a change of plans. “I’m in bad shape over here. I don’t think we’re that far from the loft.”

Blinking sleepily, Ling checks the GPS. “Around fifty-five minutes.” She turns in her seat, looking back at a sleeping Alejandra, before asking, “You sure you want her in your space?”

My space is very important to me. It’s my safe place, away from all the headfucks of the world. It’s my refuge.

But right now, I don’t have a choice. I can’t drive on for much longer. If I were a car, I’d be running on fumes.

“It’s one night.” I shrug lightly. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

ALEJANDRA

Feigning sleep for so long is harder than it looks. Because you have little else to do, you find yourself submerged in what the people around you are saying.

When Julius asked Ling how far it was to the loft, I stopped breathing.

Sleeping people do not stop breathing.

I righted myself the moment I realized. I was lucky no one had noticed.

Knowing it won’t be long till I make my escape, I fight my racing heart and continue to breathe steadily. And I will continue to do so until the car comes to a stop.

The car finally begins to slow, the breaks quietly squeaking. Ling opens the passenger door and exits. After a short moment, the car moves on, slows once more and finally, the engine cuts out.

It's almost time.

My heart drums up a beat likely to cause a heart attack. I'm petrified.

The cold sting of bitter tears prickles the inside of my eyes.

This is my only hope.

The door beside me opens, and without a single thought, I sit upright and slam my head forward into... *Shit*. Into Ling's.

She stumbles then falls back, holding her now bleeding nose, and that's all I need. Stepping outside, my bare feet hit the icy cold ground, and without even knowing where I'm going, I run.

I hear him. "*Fuck!*"

The anger in his voice fuels me. I run harder, around the side of the building, tears rushing down my face. I didn't even know I was crying until my vision blurs. Huffing and puffing, pain radiates through my heel as I step on something sharp. I cry out as it pierces the skin. I know I'm bleeding, but I can't do anything about it. My hands are tied.

I stand and stumble.

Shit, that hurts.

I try once more, but my body crumbles underneath me.

Goddamn it. Shit! No.

I'm not going anywhere.

I'm done.

And, *God*, that really sucks. I had a plan.

You're weak. You're pathetic. Embrace death, you asshole. It's the best you're gonna get.

Those bitter tears fall freely, and I welcome the release. Sitting on my bottom, I wait. Footsteps sound behind me, and in a rare case of modesty, I lower my face to my knees to hide my tearstained cheeks and red eyes.

Without a word, his arms come around me, under my knees and behind my back, and he carries me back to the car.

"You broke my nose, bitch," Ling utters. She sounds more annoyed than angry when she mumbles, "Do you know how long that'll take to heal? I'm going to be purple for two fucking weeks. Thanks, by the way."

Julius sits me down in the open car door and lifts my foot. I risk a peek to find him glaring up at me. "You stepped on a nail." Shaking his head at me, he reaches down, grips the butt of the nail with his fingers and pulls. I yelp

and pull back. Pain radiates through my foot, calf and shaking knee. He examines the nail. "It's rusty. You ever had a tetanus booster?"

Ling stands behind Julius, licking blood off her upper lip, smirking. "Hurts like a bitch, don't it?"

It does. It really does.

Julius turns to Ling, and in a gesture of affection, reaches up to hold her face in his hands, running his thumbs over her cheeks. "You okay?"

Ling smiles a bloody smile. "You know how I like it." She glances at me before blowing me a kiss. "That was just foreplay."

The fact that this woman gets off on pain makes me ill. The fact that Julius seems to be the one who delivers said pain breaks my heart. He's probably just like Dino, and if that's the case, I have no hope in hell of surviving.

He releases her face then hands her his cell. "Call Aida. Tell her she's going to need a tetanus booster and antibiotics. Ask her if there's anything she can do for your nose."

Ling nods then moves toward the entrance of the building, away from the car. My heart jolts. Having Ling around made me feel safer. And now I have an angry god-like man in my midst... I decide to be honest. "They're going to kill me."

He doesn't respond, just watches me.

"I don't want to die."

His jaw tics, but he says nothing.

"You're my only hope."

It's then he responds, a short bark of honesty, "If I'm your only hope, little sparrow, say your prayers. You're as good as dead."

The statement forces my chest to tighten as anxiety sets in. My chest heaves with unsteady breaths.

I'm not ready to die. I don't even know how to live yet. It seems unfair somehow.

Julius straightens then crosses his arms over his chest, looking something like an avenger. It's such a sight, chills run down my spine. As he watches me, Ling unceremoniously blows blood out of her nose and onto the pavement.

She doesn't seem like a bad person. She could also be my one hope of escaping. Shame courses through me. "Sorry about your nose." This comes

out in a near whisper.

Ling looks me up and down, narrowing her eyes for good measure. “All’s fair in love and war.”

I nod, knowing exactly what she means.

I’m not sure how much time passes before a white SUV comes down the drive, parking behind the black one I’m currently seated in, but I’m colder than ice. I’m not sure what I expected when Julius called for a nurse, but this wasn’t it.

A very short, very plump mature woman with a cigarette hanging out of her mouth approaches. Her shock of bright purple hair is short and styled, and she wears blue scrub bottoms with a pink floral scrub shirt. She waddles over to us. “What kind of shit you get yourself into this time, Mr. Carter?”

He smiles down at her. And I feel it all over. My gut churns.

I wish I were the type of person who had smiles like that reserved for them.

He kisses her cheek. “I missed you, Aida. Gotta make excuses to see you is all.”

She snorts out a disbelieving laugh, spits out the cigarette then steps on it. Turning to me, she takes a look at my heel then over to Julius. “This needs to be cleaned. I need salt and water, quite a bit of it. Can you get that for me, dear?”

Julius looks over at me. His eyes narrow in warning before he nods and heads into the building. As soon as he’s out of sight, I lean forward and hiss, “Please, they’re going to kill me.”

A bright light suddenly shines, illuminating the entire front of the loft, and Aida ignores me. “The hole is deep. The salt water is going to hurt like hell, missy. I hope you’re a tough one, because I don’t tolerate bullshit. Especially the self-inflicted variety.”

My voice hoarse, I utter, “If they don’t kill me, *he* will. Please help me. All I need is for you to find my brother—”

Aida’s eyes turn sharp as she cuts me off. “I would shut that pretty mouth of yours, girl.” My lip trembles and I turn away, fighting the grief I’m feeling.

Will no one help me?

That's when Aida sighs. She inspects my other foot, and utters quietly, "You think someone who planned to kill you would call a nurse to make sure you didn't die of tetanus?"

That...

My brow furrows in thought.

That is a damn good point.

I open my mouth, but she places up a palm, stopping me. "If I were you, I'd behave. Dealing with men like Mr. Carter can be harmful to your health." She glances up at my bruised temple. "But something tells me you already know a little something about that."

Julius comes out of the building carrying the things Aida needs.

I don't have much time. I ask desperately through a whisper, "What do you suggest I do?"

She responds immediately, clinically. "Keep your head down and your mouth shut. This is not a game. But if it were"—her hard eyes meet mine—"Julius Carter would win."

TWELVE

ALEJANDRA

Julius brings over a bucket of water and a container of salt. As he walks, his eyes find mine and don't leave them. His eyes speak full sentences, yet, I can't make any of them out. I wish I knew what they were saying. Making his way to Aida, he places the bucket by her side. Without even looking at him, she holds out her hand, and he places the container in it.

Aida reaches out to my hands and removes the tape before cutting off the cable tie. I rub my sore wrists as she mutters, "You're going to need those hands in a minute."

The familiarity between them does not calm my sprinting heart. In fact, it has the opposite effect. My heart beats harder, faster.

They've done this before.

Aida takes some salt in her palm and drops it into the water. Pulling out a wooden tongue depressor, she stirs it a while before taking my injured foot and placing it in the warm water. But I'm not ready for it. The salt in the water stings my open wound almost as badly as the warmth of the water does. Gasping loudly, I grip the sides of the passenger car seat and bite my bottom lip as my entire body shakes.

Aida glares at me. "Perhaps the pain will be a lesson to you."

I bite my lip so hard I'm afraid I'll puncture it. And Julius... he watches me. His hard gaze burning holes through me, I close my eyes to keep myself safe from those harsh blue eyes.

Ling smirks cruelly. "Payback's a bitch, bitch."

My body trembles and I begin to sweat. I feel it trail from my temple down my jaw, dropping at my chin. Wetness runs down my nose, over my lips. The saltiness of the perspiration is so harsh it burns my eyes. I try to blink it away to no avail.

Then Aida places a gloved hand in the salt water and proceeds to torture me in the form of a deep clean. She runs her hand over my heel, and it hurts

so bad that my mouth opens in a silent scream. Pulling out a large cotton swab, she lifts my foot out of the water and peers closely into the hole in my heel. I expect the cotton swab to graze lightly over the wound, not to be placed directly into the wound, and none too gently.

It's then that I do scream.

Aida comments, "Maybe we should take this inside."

Julius shakes his head. "Don't want her bleeding in the house."

Gripping the car's doorframe, I take in a shaky breath and let out a trembling wail. Aida continues to twirl the cotton swab deep inside the wound. I'm unable to take a solid breath. My head droops sideways, and with hair plastered to my face in sweat, I whimper hoarsely, saliva dribbling out the side of my mouth and down my chin.

In short, I'm a hot mess.

The cotton swab is removed from the wound and held up in front of me. Aida points out the speckles. "Regardless of what you might think, I'm not doing this for fun. See those specks? That's rust. I need to do that one more time, so prepare yourself."

My body shakes violently, border-lining a fit, as I plead, "No, please don't. No more. Please don't."

Nurse Aida ignores my pleas. She takes another cotton swab and repeats the process. Whatever I look like right now, shaking and moaning, must look like I'm not having much fun, because even Ling looks down at me, tissue balled up in her nose, sympathy etched on her features.

Aida pulls out the swab and checks it. Seeming happy with the cleanliness of the wound, she gently smears antiseptic cream in and around it before packing the small hole with gauze. "Take that out when you wake up tomorrow and put some more of this antiseptic cream over it. After you unwrap it, don't cover it again. Keep it open, keep it clean. Wash it twice a day with salt water. You should be okay within the week, but it's going to be sore for a while." Turning to Julius, she orders, "She's not going to be up for much in the next several days. You're going to have to help clean the wound."

His brow furrows. "What are you saying, a week? It's a fucking puncture, not a gunshot wound. You're telling me she needs a week for that bullshit to heal?"

Aida looks back at me, and as she looks me in the eye, I see apology. It's then that I realize that Nurse Aida had been meaning to help me by giving me more time to heal than is necessary. The older woman looks back at Julius and answers quietly, "Four days at the very least."

Without another word, Aida begins to unbutton my blouse. I slap at her hand. "Hey!"

Ignoring my sad attempt to keep some small form of dignity, she utters a hard, "You need a shot. Actually, you need two." Her eyes meet mine. "Unless, of course, you'd prefer the derriere to the upper arm." Her brows rise. "I can drop your pants as fast as I can get your sleeve down."

The fight leaves me. I don't want to get an infection. I don't want to be sick. I allow her to manhandle me.

Aida pulls down my sleeve to reveal my arm. She pulls out two already loaded shots. Taking an alcohol swab, she cleans the skin on my upper arm before administering the first shot. It stings like a motherfucker, but I bite my tongue. The second burns twice as bad as the first, and she mutters, "The booster is a slow release, so it works in place of a ten-day pill course."

Aida places a cotton ball on my arm, cuts off a piece of medical tape and sticks it there. She explains, "There's likely to be a lump there tomorrow. Don't touch it unless you want it to bruise."

Ling steps up then. "Can you set my nose, Aida? I don't want it to heal crooked."

Aida sighs and stands. "Okay, but take it in the bathroom. Chances are, when I do it, it'll bleed like a faucet."

Ling's gaze snaps to me, fury evident. Curling her lip, she lifts her hand and flips the bird my way. Walking away, she mouths, "Fuck you."

Aida waddles behind Ling, disappearing into the house, leaving me with Julius.

"You need help walking?"

I look up at him. My mind is set on more important things. "Are you taking me home?"

He is. I see it in his eyes. He's going to take me home, to my death, then leave like I never existed to him.

"I can't go home." This comes out a whisper, and far more pathetic than I intended.

Julius tilts his head, studying me. "Your brother."

“What?”

Julius straightens. “Your brother will help you.”

I force out a cold laugh. “My brother is a soldier. Even if he wanted to help me, he couldn’t. And my father...” My eyes close. I swallow past the thickness in my throat. “My father will do what he has to in order to keep the peace.”

In layman’s terms, I’m already dead to him.

Blinking away the stinging behind my lids, I declare, “I’m not going back there.” As God is my witness, I fucking mean it.

Julius simply rumbles, “You’ll go where I take you.”

Already shaking my head, I state, “No I won’t.”

Then he smiles. A small smile, but a smile at that. “You really think so, little sparrow?”

I glare. “I know so.”

His smile intensifies, and if I weren’t in this fucked-up situation, I would take the time to appreciate that smile. A smile like his deserves appreciation. It’s too bad he’s an asshole sent to kill me. He doesn’t seem like the type to get off on his job.

He steps forward, arms extended. “Relax, li’l bit. I’ll carry you to the house.”

Julius Carter may be a master of the game, but he has made one solid mistake.

He has underestimated my will.

The moment he steps into arm’s reach, I extend my leg, kicking him square in the balls. His breath leaves him in a whoosh, but he reaches out to grab hold of me, his fingers securely fisted into my long hair. Pain radiates through my scalp and my eyes water, but he doesn’t pull, just holds on. I kick him again, this time in the knee, and fight. I watch as the pressure builds inside of him. The vein in his temple bulges and he loosens his grip.

With no time to spare, I shake his hands off me, ripping the sleeve of my blouse, and limp away as fast as I can. Approximately three seconds later, I’m tackled to the gravel, the impact forcing my breath to leave me in a *whoosh*.

I’m winded.

We struggle.

I hit him, kick him, and even attempt to head-butt him. My hands closed into fists, I fight for my life. Trying to dodge my blows, his arm snakes around my middle, across my chest. I reach back and attempt to pinch him. Anything to get him to let me go.

“Stop hitting me.” This is growled into my ear.

But I don’t stop. I fight harder. I twist in his grip, kick out and hit him wherever I can reach. I don’t stop to think about the fact that I’m hurting myself in the process.

A hand once again tangles in my hair and pulls back harshly. *“I said stop hitting me!”*

My voice quivering, I plead, “Please don’t take me back.”

Julius stills. After a moment, he mutters, “I don’t have a choice.”

“We all have a choice.”

The hand in my hair loosens. “Most of us do. You lost that right when you framed your husband and let us kill him. You took my right away for me.” He hisses out, “I don’t have a choice.”

Gasping for breath, his body leaves mine, and he pulls me up by my lapel. I stand on shaking legs and yell, “Goddamn it! Just let me go!”

His nostrils flare, and he barely contains his rage as he aims the gun at my chest. “Get inside.”

“No.”

“I have a gun pointed at you, bitch. I have the upper hand. Get in the fucking house.”

My eyes water more from frustration than fear. “I’m not scared of you or your gun. Just let me go. I can’t allow you to take me home. They’ll kill me.”

His jaw tics. “I don’t like repeating myself, Alejandra.”

If he plans to take me home, I feel I have no choice. I limp forward, getting closer and closer to the loaded gun till I’m a hair’s breadth away. Reaching up, I take the barrel in my hand and pull it to my forehead, panting harshly. I grind out, “Do it. Pull the trigger.”

Those blue eyes look at me, into me. My stomach dips. I fight the effect they have on me, just barely. “Don’t think about it, just do it.”

He attempts to lower the gun, and a swift sense of panic fills me. I shuffle forward on my aching heel and take the barrel into my hands, once again using what little strength I have left to lift the gun up to my cheek with

shaking hands. I hold it there. My voice hoarse, I utter a rough, "I'm as good as dead. Grant me this one kindness. Kill me before they do." My eyes shut and I breathe deeply. "Please. Release me."

The gun is firmly pulled from my grasp, and before I let out the first sob, an arm is wound around me, guiding me to the house. As this is happening, all I can think about is how to get my hands on that gun.

If Julius won't kill me and he won't let me go, I'll just have to kill myself.

THIRTEEN

TWITCH

“Hey.”

I turn to face Nox, currently in the driver seat of his family truck. He eyes me thoughtfully, carefully, before reminding me, “This is what you wanted, T.”

Looking out of the passenger window to the almost deserted diner, I nod in complete silence. A thought comes to me, and I snuffle a light laugh.

If you’d have asked me five years ago if I’d ever willingly give myself up to the cops, I would’ve told you that it wasn’t in my nature, that I’d rather go down swinging, fighting till my last breath was pulled from my body. But things have changed.

Part of me wishes Lexi could see me now.

That same part of me thinks she’d be proud of me.

The other part of me knows she’s better off without me and prompts me to stop being a fucking sap.

I clear my throat. “You know this dude?”

Nox sighs, “Yeah. Old contact. Used to be a field detective, but he fucked up. Now he’s on desk duty.”

“I’m thinking bringing me in is gonna get him back in the field, no ass-kissing required.”

Nox doesn’t deny it. Instead, he grins. “That’s the plan.”

My lip twitches with a struggling smile, but the effort causes my stomach to turn with the wrongness of this situation. In a sudden movement, lest I have a moment to rethink what I’m doing, I reach over to open the door. “Let’s do this.”

Nox and I enter the diner and the smell of disinfectant hits my nostrils. A lone waitress mops the floor and calls out, “Closing time, boys.”

A tall man sitting on a stool, sipping coffee, calls back, “It’s okay, Sheila.” He turns to me, and when I see his face, I pause in my tracks. The

man's hard eyes hit me with a glare, and he mutters, "They're with me."

The man stands, unfolding himself from the stool, and takes his coffee to a booth. The lights shut off around us, leaving only the light from the kitchen to illuminate our surroundings, and Nox slides into the booth. I take my time, seating myself next to him.

I take in this man, this cop, and I don't do it discreetly.

What can I say?

I don't do well with authority figures.

He watches me in my blatant display of disrespect and grins. "Antonio Falco, raised from the dead, alive and well." When he reaches out with a hand, I try not to sneer. "Casper Quaid."

I take his hand firmly and pump it once before letting it fall. Nox greets his old friend. "Cas, how you doin'?"

Casper sighs, running a hand through his too-long blond hair. "Overworked and underpaid. Same shit, different day. How's Lily?"

Nox's face softens at the mention of his wife. "Asking about you. Wants you over for dinner sometime soon."

Casper shakes his head slowly, his blue eyes full of mirth. "You're not careful, I'll steal your girl."

Nox clicks his tongue, leaning back in the booth, smirking. "You can sure try."

Small talk. Meaningless small talk. It drives me nuts. A part of my brain jitters and I do my best to not grind out, "Are we gonna talk business or what?"

Casper loses his smile and turns to face me head on. "What's to discuss? You want me to take you in, and being that Nox is an old friend, I'm going to do that in a respectful way, no cuffs. You're not gonna get that from anyone else, Antonio."

"Twitch." My jaw steels and the damaged part of my mind lashes out. "It's Twitch."

"Okay, Twitch." Good guy Casper throws his arms out. "So, are we doing this or what?"

I look over to Nox, and he eyes me warily. He doesn't think I'll go. I can see it in his eyes. He's looking at me like I'm a wild animal. Placing an arm on my shoulders, he leans closer to me and mutters quietly, "Stick to the plan."

The plan.

My fucking plan.

I'm taking a big risk here, and for the first time in my life, I'm anxious at the thought that things may not go my way. It's enough to make my stomach coil, because this time around, I actually give a fuck. The uncertainty kills me.

I take my time standing while weighing up my options. I must be taking a while, because Nox clears his throat.

No risk, no gain.

The thought settles my nerves.

If this goes my way, I have a lot to benefit from it.

Besides, you'd risk it all for them.

I take a deep breath and let it out slowly, turning to face my captor. "What are you waiting for, Detective Quaid?" I lean my hip on the booth and cross my arms over my chest. "Let's fuck shit up."

We wait in the parking lot by Quaid's standard white guy sedan while he wakes the police chief of his precinct to discuss the willing surrender of one Antonio Falco. When Quaid returns to us, his eyes shine with enthusiasm, locked on me, eyes on the prize, and he tries to maintain his calm as he speaks, his voice low. "Chief wants you brought in discreetly." He turns to Nox, a look of awe on his face. "You got contacts in deep places. Deeper than you ever let on."

Nox lowers his gaze to the gravel-covered ground. "It's all about who you know." He's shutting down, avoiding me.

I don't like that. My brow lowers a fraction. "What?"

Casper eyes me good, blinking in surprise before his lip lifts and he laughs softly. "He doesn't know, does he?"

Nox sighs, running a hand down his face, suddenly aging ten years, but it's Quaid who fills me in, a sly grin on his face. "According to Interpol, you're dead."

"Yeah, and?"

Casper grins. "According to the US government, you're very much alive, Mr. Falco, with a residential address in Nevada."

Nox tries to shut him down with a, "Cas, you don't know what you're talking about," but Quaid goes on. "Only thing is, you're apparently a sixty-

one-year-old man.”

“Cas,” Nox grinds out, catching both our attention. His glare firmly set on his friend, he growls out a slow, “You don’t know what you’re talking about.” He pauses a second before adding, “Stop.”

My voice scathing, I peer out to my friend and blink. “You keeping shit from me, brother?”

The look that crosses Nox’s face, accompanied by the earnest sincerity of his response, tells me he isn’t. “Never, brother.” Nothing but honesty. “Never.”

My racing heart slows knowing Nox would never betray me.

He wouldn’t dare.

I’d hate to kill his woman. I like Lily, but Nox isn’t stupid. Liking a person has nothing to do with causing the death of said person, and Nox... he knows I’d do it. That’s the price you pay for duplicity.

We exchange a look of understanding before Nox turns to Quaid and mutters, “Take care of my boy,” then jerks his chin toward me, and says quietly, “Get your hood up.”

I listen to my friend and reach back with both hands, gripping the cold material of my hood, slowly pulling it over my eyes, leaving only my nose and mouth visible. I take a long, slow breath before letting it out slowly through my nose.

Nox jerks his chin toward me then turns to leave.

My hand darts out, and I grip his forearm tight. He turns, a look of confusion creasing his eyes. I speak low, only for his ears. “Owe you.”

It takes everything I have in me to not scowl when I say it.

I fucking hate being indebted to a person.

Nox, knowing me well, predicts my internal struggle and shakes his head. “Let my woman cook for you, listened to my girls read, taught my boy how to pick a lock.” His brows rise, and he grins at that last one. “Not too sure Lily will be overly thrilled about that one”—his smile softens—“but no marker. We’re good.” He steps forward, his hand gripping the back of my neck, squeezing affectionately. “Watch your temper.” He shakes me by the scruff of my neck, then whispers, “Take care of business, man.”

I’d rather die than admit it, but I’ll miss the asshole.

Watching Nox leave, I turn to Quaid, watching, waiting for the change of character, waiting for him to kick the shit out of me and cuff me.

But it never comes.

Instead, he opens the front passenger door and waves a hand toward it. "Your chariot awaits, princess."

Motherfucker.

With a silent growl, I get in the white guy sedan.

The short, stout police chief is waiting for us out front with a single uniformed officer. Quaid parks in front of the station, but when I think he's going to move to exit, he spares a nod for fatty police chief before speaking low.

"I'm going to get out of the car, make my way around to your side, and then you're going to step out. I'm going to take you by your arm, lead you in."

My eyes slice over him in a tight glare.

He turns to me, catching my scornful stare and shrugs. "Best I can do with no cuffs."

"I'm not running, man," I say quietly. "Don't fucking touch me."

Quaid nods in acknowledgment. "Know you're not running, Twitch, but I got a job to get back to." He lets out a short sigh. "Help me out."

My hackles rise. "I don't know you." My shoulders tense. "Don't owe you shit."

"No, you don't," he admits. "But if this works out..." he pauses a moment before adding calmly, "*I'll owe you.*"

He gets my attention.

Having a cop owe a criminal is nothing to sneeze at. Sure, I'm aiming to get out of the life, but I still have shit to take care of.

I let him stew for a minute then, in perfect calm, mutter, "I'm ready."

My eyes close of their own accord as Quaid steps out of the vehicle and moves around to the passenger side. He opens the door and, without hesitation, I readjust the hood covering my head and step out. The feel of his hand gripping my forearm pulls a knee-jerk reaction from me.

Much like a rabid dog, I snarl.

His grip loosens slightly, but I still don't like it. I want to throw him to the ground and kick the shit out of Detective Quaid in front of his boss. And laugh while doing it.

The fact that I haven't done that reminds me this is all a chink in a long chain of events to come, and that I'm a changed man, no longer selfishly thinking of myself.

As we walk up the few steps to stand in front of the police chief, the older man takes one look at me and laughs.

My fists clench tightly by my sides with that mocking laughter.

The chief reaches up and pushes my hood back, blinking at my appearance, before turning to Quaid and uttering a cool, "Is this some kind of joke?"

Quaid stands taller, showing all the respect a white guy can show. "No, sir."

The chief looks me in the eye but speaks to Quaid. "I know Antonio Falco." He pauses, sharpening his gaze on me. "I've dined with Tony Falco, played cards with the gentleman, been to his home and shared forty-year-old whiskey with the man." His eyes meet Quaid's. "And this ain't him."

Quaid's hand tightens on me in a way that tells me he's pissed. "Sir, I—"

I can't fucking handle it any longer. I snatch my arm out from Quaid's none too lightly and talk directly to the chief. "So you know a guy named Falco. My bet is there's a few of us out there. Especially in New Jersey."

Silence.

I have him there. He knows it. I know it. We all know it.

The chief blinks at me, then asks, "Where were you born, son?"

"New York Methodist, April '75."

He sucks in a hissing breath through his teeth, steps back and blinks at me in what can only be called controlled confusion.

Licking his lips, he takes his time saying what he has to say. "Detective Quaid, you didn't bring me Antonio Falco."

I feel Quaid panic by my side as he starts, "Sir, I didn't know—"

But he's cut off as the chief adds in deathly calm, "You brought me his son."

What the fuck did he just say?

The chief takes a step toward me, unblinking, and says the words I know are coming but dread to hear. "Antonio Falco. Junior."

Shit.

Motherfucker knows my pops.

FOURTEEN

ALEJANDRA

It's funny how some moments can change your life, shape it, mold it into something unfamiliar, going somewhere foreign, and all you can do is accept the fact or lose the fight.

Well, I don't accept the fact. Nor do I anticipate losing the fight.

My thinking right now?

Bring it the fuck on.

I am tired of being the weakling, told where to go, what to do, how to dress. For once, I am taking control of my life, and if that means smiling through my suicide, then so be it.

Julius had it wrong.

I am never going home. Not willingly.

If he truly believes he's going to take me back there, the only way I'll let him is by escorting my cold, lifeless body to my father's front doorstep.

As I half lay on the leather chocolate-brown chesterfield with Julius sitting close on the coffee table, facing me, watching me with those cold blue eyes, his elbows resting on his knees, covering his mouth with the tips of his fingers, I'm quietly reminded that this man is far more dangerous than he looks.

His calm demeanor has my mind working a mile a minute, and alarm has me whispering a quavering, "Who the hell are you, Julius Carter?"

Light blue eyes narrow on me, but I don't receive an answer.

From the open doorway, a confident voice purrs, "He's the guy you call when the very best manage to fuck up." Ling steps forward, smiling widely, and for a single moment, I wonder how a woman with balled-up tissues stuffed up her nose can still look beautiful. She sits on the matching chesterfield opposite mine, a fraction to the left so as to still intimidate me with her vicious, happily cruel stare. Crossing a dainty leg over her knee, she smooths her black dress with delicate, red-painted fingers. "JC is judge,

jury, and executioner.” At the paling of my face, her pearly whites flash. She loves what she’s doing to me. “Julius doesn’t make the laws of our world, Alejandra. He is the law.”

My insides churn painfully.

Well. That surely makes me feel better.

Thank you, Ling.

In an unconscious action, my hand grips at the thin material at my stomach, and I fight a grimace. Nerves have always been a killer for me.

Julius’s gaze travels down my body and lands in the exact region where my hand is resting. Slowly sitting up straight, he reaches into his pocket and pulls out an orange tube of pills. In a swift motion, he throws it to me, and I catch it easily. My brow furrows in confusion as I look down at the white label and read aloud, “Doxylamine.” I open my mouth to ask what they are, but I can’t find the words. I’m so tired.

Julius speaks for the first time since our rancorous fight out in the front yard. “It’ll help you keep food down.”

“Food?” What?

The man holds himself tall, the picture of patience. “My friend’s girl had the same issue. Take the pills. You gotta eat.” He adds, “For the baby.”

The baby?

Oh, God.

My stomach works itself into a knot, and it hurts so badly that I don’t bother fighting the contorting of my face that time.

“The baby,” I mumble, gripping the material at my front with one hand while clutching the orange tube of pills with the other. I stare at the wall over Ling’s head.

My short list of options weighs on me.

Julius eyes me solicitously, but Ling... she sees me. She sees what Julius doesn’t.

That I’m a fraud. Dishonest.

If I have any chance of repairing the damage I’ve already done and making Julius see me as a person, not a lying sack of shit, I have to start being honest. I need him to trust me enough to let his guard down. I need him to let his guard down so I can get hold of his gun and end this on my terms.

Before fear immobilizes me, I throw the orange tube back to Julius. He shakes his head and begins, “No shame in needin—”

My voice finds me, but it’s weak. “There is no baby.” Even quieter, “I lied.”

He blinks at me, disbelief heavily set in his watchful gaze.

The moment his body turns rigid and stills, my heart pounds. When Julius stands, reaching down to grip the edge of the coffee table, my chest aches, and my body turns cold as ice. I scramble back, knees up, reaching up quickly to cover my ears with my balled up fists.

I know what’s coming. I’ve seen this expression before in the face of my husband.

It’s the calm before the storm.

The coffee table flips, crashing into the wall with an echoing boom, the force of which leaving a gaping hole at the point of collision.

Julius booms, “*Goddamn it, Alejandra!*” The veins in his neck strain with every coarse word. He begins to pace in the space where the coffee table used to reside. He opens his mouth and lets out a stream of curses. “*Motherfucker. Fuckin’ hell!* I don’t believe this *shit*.” He resumes pacing, shouting some more, but something pulls me from reality. “Was everything a lie?”

He turns to face me, hands on hips, his sky blue eyes flaming. “Answer me.” My mind tugs at my subconscious, cocking a finger, whispering, “*Come with me,*” and the lines between reality and hallucination blur. I can’t hear his voice anymore, but I see his lips moving. “*Answer me.*”

A hidden memory resurfaces from the dark, shadowed place I’d long past buried it.

A trip to New York for your twenty-second birthday would sound like a dream. Sure, it sounds like a fun way to celebrate. In theory.

When Dino approached me the week prior, telling me he had business in New York and would likely miss my birthday, I must’ve forgotten my game face, having been all too happy with the arrangement.

With Dino away, I’d be able to spend time with my family, my brother and sisters, and I didn’t get a lot of time with them anymore. Dino didn’t like me spending too much time at my father’s house.

I was his wife. My place was with my husband, as were my loyalties.

My husband's paranoia had reached a point where not even his closest friends and family were allowed to be left alone with me. Of course, he never came out and said the words, but his trust in others had diminished greatly.

The next night, Dino returned from a family meeting at his family's restaurant and, spotting me in the kitchen, came up from behind to curl himself around me.

Being lost in my own world, I jumped when his arms banded around me.

Dino laughed softly at my cheek, nipping my ear playfully. "Scaredy cat."

He was in a good mood. My relief, palpable, I let out a thankful laugh. "I didn't hear you come in."

Smiling, he turned me to face him and bent low to take my lips in a firm kiss. "Guess what?"

He was so handsome when he smiled from his heart. My hands came up in a familiar motion to rest on his chest. "What?"

"You know I'm going to be in New York for your birthday—" he started.

I cut him off, smoothing the front of his jacket with soft hands, "Honey, it's okay. I get it. It's just business."

"That's just it." His smile intensified. "You're coming with me." His smile turned into a grin. "We'll go out for dinner, maybe see a show, go clubbing. We're gonna party in New York for your birthday, baby."

Well, shit.

My hands stilled on the front of his jacket, and my face fell.

I wasn't getting much-needed time with my family after all. My heart sank, and I felt the cold sting of tears behind my eyes. I blinked them back.

Dino's expression grew icy, and I knew the exact moment his anger started to stir at my reaction. So I did the only thing I could do, and I did it well. After all, I had years of practice.

I faked it.

Sniffing loudly, I forced the tears forward, blinking rapidly, and clutched at his shoulders. "You would do that?" I let a single tear fall and whispered a weepy, "You'd do that for me?"

Before he could gauge my reaction, I threw my arms around him and squeezed tightly, hoping to God I was pulling this off. My voice earnest, I sighed into his chest. "I didn't want to say anything, but the thought of you

being away for my birthday..." I pulled back and smiled shakily up at him. "Thank you, Dino. It's going to be great."

When his stiff arms loosened, cradling me, I knew I had him. He looked down at me, his brow furrowed crossly. "I would do anything for you, baby." He pulled me close and vowed, "I love you."

So New York came, and from Dino's constant good mood, on a Saturday night at a club called The White Rabbit, I made a fatal error.

I smiled at the bartender when he handed me my drink, tipping my head back and laughing when he winked at me and told Dino he was a lucky man.

Dino responded kindly, left an unnecessarily large tip, took my hand and guided me to the edge of the dance floor. I sipped my cocktail, smiling to myself at how much I'd dreaded this trip. I was actually having fun.

I yawned, and catching it, Dino called the limo driver to meet us out front shortly. When we made our way out and slid into the back, Dino pulled me onto his lap, nibbling at my neck. Being tipsy and overly happy at Dino's demeanor during this trip, I leaned into his mouth.

Dino called out to the driver, "Privacy," and without a word, the partition window went up.

Dino kissed his way down my neck, onto my chest, and then swiped his tongue in the valley between my breasts. "Have fun tonight, baby?"

I clutched at his head and moaned, "Oh yes, honey."

With a swift tug at the neckline of my simple black dress, my breasts were bared, and Dino took a stiff peak into his mouth, sucking with enthusiasm.

My back bowed with the intense pleasure flowing through my body.

"Who is he?" Dino asked quietly, before switching to the other nipple, laving it with his tongue.

Panting, in a haze, I responded, "Who?"

Lifting his head, he muttered, "The bartender. Who is he?"

Blinking slowly, I pulled back to look at my husband. "I don't know. I've never seen him before."

He smiled before lowering his mouth back to where I needed it. I sighed in appreciation.

A sudden, burning pain radiated through my breast, and I yelped, trying to pull back. But Dino's arms tightened around me. A second yelp was

pulled from me as the pain returned with a vengeance. Frightened, I pushed at my husband's shoulders. "Dino, stop."

But he bit me again. Harder.

Gritting my teeth, I swallowed a wail of agony, as I whispered a broken, "But it's my birthday!"

With a firm hand, he pushed me off his lap and onto the floor of the limo. I landed on my stomach and, with a harsh wheeze, the breath was knocked out of me. I heard the jingling of his belt. The bottom of my dress was harshly lifted over my hips, and my panties pulled down to my knees.

I wasn't ready for him when he entered me from behind, muttering, "You lying little bitch."

The pain was unbearable.

With every jolting, dry thrust, hurt plagued me, my stomach rolling, white spots dancing in front of my eyes.

I was going to faint.

Deeper and deeper he went, grunting and mumbling abuse into my ear, until finally—thankfully—darkness embraced me.

The only realization that Dino isn't tearing my body apart comes in the form of a choked scream escaping me, as I clamber back into the corner of the sofa like a wounded animal. My shaking hands rise up to cover my open mouth, and I pant softly into them, a light sheen of sweat on my forehead. I blink through stinging tears.

I try to swallow through the thickness in my throat. My frightened statement sounds into the silent room, "I hate you."

Ling and Julius exchange a curious but frowning glance. Ling shrugs discreetly, but I catch it, and suddenly, I'm mortified.

As my cheeks heat, my subconscious laughs.

You're losing your mind.

My attempt to clear my throat weak, I lift my gaze to meet Julius's. "If you don't plan on killing me tonight, is there somewhere I can get some rest?"

It takes him a moment, but he speaks gently. "Upstairs. Second room on the right."

Upstairs.

My foot hurts like a bitch, and he gives me a room upstairs. Of course he does.

Punishment.

I'm being punished. I understand the message being sent, and I'll take it on the chin.

Slowly making my way past them both, standing tall, although every second is pure torture on my wounded foot, I carefully take the stairs one at a time, my tender heel aching with every step, but I don't let them see my pain.

I don't dare.

I'm good at hiding pain. Living with Dino made sure of that.

They can take everything from me, but I won't let them have my pride. They can pry it from my cold, dead fingers.

FIFTEEN

JULIUS

My eyes follow Alejandra as she steels her will and passes me with her head held high. The delicate scent of her shampoo trails behind.

Orange and vanilla.

I try not to breathe it in, but I can't help myself, and when I do, I breathe it all the way into my lungs, closing my eyes in silent prayer. I don't know what to do with her. She's turned my world on its head.

The little woman is defiant, strong-willed, and mouthy. None of those traits should be sexy, but I'd be lying if I said the angry pout of her lips didn't stir me in ways I wish it didn't, in ways I'd have to ignore.

What happened down here a minute ago... I don't know what the hell just that was, but it would be really great if it didn't happen again.

Her blank stare, her bleak gaze, will haunt my memories. The moment she came crashing back down to earth, she reentered the atmosphere with a bang. Whatever the fuck it was she saw scared her half to death.

In a normal situation, I'd say she earned the terror and to shake it off, but something about her... something is off. The entire situation is off. For once, I don't understand the motive. And it eats away at me. My mind runs a mile a minute.

What am I not getting here?

If I had any sense at all, I'd pick up my pistol, follow her into that room, aim for her forehead and shoot, sending her body back to her father.

But a mild sense of injustice flares through me as I think about this puzzle. Having always been one to trust my gut, I am set on finding the missing pieces. I find myself becoming invested and wanting to know all of what Alejandra Gambino knows.

I need to figure out where I fucked up.

Why did she frame her husband?

"What are you doing, Julius?"

Lifting my head, I catch Ling staring at me, her perfect brows raised. She shakes her head lightly and asks quietly, “What are you doing?”

My back straightens and I move to walk out of the room.

Ling’s next words halt me in my tracks. “I can sneak in while she’s sleeping. Boom. She won’t know what hit her.” She adds, “She’ll go quickly. Quietly.”

She’ll go quickly. Quietly.

The statement is too much. “You aren’t curious?” I turn and watch her carefully. “You don’t want to know why she did what she did?”

Ling remains quiet a moment before speaking through a tired sigh. “She’s a convincing liar. You don’t get to be that good without practice. Trust me, I know.” She pauses a second. “Makes you wonder.” After a long moment of mutual silence, Ling shrugs. “She could be a selfish bitch who wanted Dino’s money to herself. Maybe she planned this from the beginning. Maybe she’s not right in the head.”

I pause, arresting her with my solemn gaze. “You don’t believe that, do you?”

My partner slides down to sit on the sofa, her expression cautious. “No. I don’t.”

Her face is almost unreadable. My brows narrow at her. “What *do* you think?”

Ling looks mildly uncomfortable as she shifts in her place and clears her throat. “The thing that just happened, when she spaced out...” She bites her lip before speaking softly. “It used to happen to me, Jay. It used to happen a lot.” As my gaze turns questioning, Ling mutters, “Post traumatic stress.”

My gut coils and I tiredly run a hand down my face. *Fuck*. The last thing I need is to sympathize with Alejandra Gambino. I’d rather have not known this.

Ling, once again putting on her game face, rolls her eyes. “So what? It doesn’t matter. Shit happens. You pull up your panties and move on.”

It doesn’t matter.

I remain silent, but my lingering solemnity has Ling worried. When I feel her hand on my arm, I look down to see her pretty almond-shaped eyes blinking up at me in question. “I can make it quick. She’ll just go to sleep and never wake up. Some people would give their left nut to die like that.”

No. It shouldn’t matter.

But I can't help but feel there's more to learn from this little woman. I would need to get inside her head, need to get close to her, take her apart piece by piece and open her up.

My decision made, I shake my head, and Ling dips her chin in defeat. With a huff, she moves to walk away from me, but I catch her wrist before she can escape. "Four days. I'll give her four days. If I don't get anything worthwhile out of her by then, she's gone."

Ling's anxious expression softens. She raises her hand and gently cups my jaw, running her thumb over it. "Julius, you're one of the only friends I have, and I would do almost anything for you." Her emphasis on "almost" is more than apparent. Dropping her hand from my cheek, she takes a step back, away from me. Her eyes turn frigid, and her mouth sets in a grim line as she adds menacingly, "But I will not die for you."

Her heels click away, and left to my own devices, I lower myself to the sofa, digging the heels of my hands into my eyes.

She'll go quickly. Quietly... It doesn't matter

Yet, it matters to me.

Why does it fucking matter to me?

My grave expression quickly turning to one of hostility, my eyes hood as my jaw sets.

Alejandra Gambino will tell me everything I need to know. She will talk.

I will do whatever I need to make that happen.

Ling is right.

I am not going to die for a frail, useless slip of a woman.

SIXTEEN

LING

The young woman lying asleep on the bed never even hears me enter. With the stealth of a snake and gracefulness of a feline, I work my way soundlessly into the center of the room.

Amongst our circle, I have earned quite a few titles in my years with Julius.

Black widow. Last look. Chinese Cinderella.

I have earned these names by being the ruthless bitch I am. I might be small and sexy, but I am not delicate. I may arguably be the most dangerous woman in the world.

Why?

Because I'm unassuming.

Don't ever mistake my femininity as weakness. I will slit your motherfucking throat while reapplying lipstick.

A word to the wise... Don't always trust what you see. After all, even salt looks like sugar.

Chinese Cinderella, I silently scoff. I can't tell you how many times I've almost skinned a dick over some asshole calling me Chinese.

Stupid American redneck fucks take one look at me and say, "Oh, she's Asian. She must be Chinese."

I'm goddamn Vietnamese, motherfuckers. Take note or lose a limb.

In this minute of relaxed reprieve, I take Alejandra in, my expression turning semi-sympathetic at the thought of what she could have possibly experienced to make her have terrors almost as bad as mine.

With her back to me, my eyes travel down the length of her. Petite, too slim, with long, black matted hair. Dirty, ripped clothing and a frayed bandage on her heel.

I mentally snicker.

She's pathetic.

I don't know why that makes me happy, but it does. I never could make friends with pretty girls. But then I think about how terrified she was...

My face hardens and my lip curls. It takes all my will to silence the vicious growl threatening to escape my burning throat.

It's hardly my problem. What does she know about pain? It can't be worse than what my family did to me.

After all, no one cared when my father and brothers...

Don't you do it, girl. Don't you dare go there.

My emotions on high, I close my eyes and inhale deeply, exhaling slowly, begging for the return of my calm.

It takes a second to realize I've let my guard down. Then, without turning, she speaks quietly. "Are you going to kill me?"

Her meek voice startles me. The .22-caliber pistol in my hand suddenly feels heavier than it should. I grip it tighter, and it takes me a while, but I finally respond a hardhearted, "Yes."

Her body stiffens a moment before she relaxes, snuggling into the pillow. Her voice carries an edge of relief as she whispers, "Good. Thanks."

The fight I had anticipated—that I craved—has been taken from me by those two softly spoken words.

What the hell is wrong with this picture?

Her words surprise me, and although she unknowingly made this very easy for me, I love when people beg for their lives. The kneeling, the groveling, I especially like it when they kiss my designer pumps before I boot them so hard in their mouths that they see stars.

Killing someone who wants to die... where's the fun in that?

I raise the gun and take aim, but as my finger rests on the trigger, I huff out a sigh, loosen my grip, lose focus and lower the pistol with precise slowness. Never being one to respect a person's space, I move to sit on the bed, right next to Alejandra.

She half turns to look at me, blinking back tears, silently mourning her short life, and I ask, "Do you want to die?"

Rather than answer me, she looks at my swollen face and mutters, "I really am sorry about your nose," promptly turning her back to me once again.

Ugh. I hate a suckass.

"I asked you a question." I do not like being ignored.

When the length of her pause is too long and I open my mouth to tear her apart with a string of insults, she sighs long and low. “Vito wants me dead. His sons, Gio and Luc, want me dead. My father will do whatever Vito asks, including presenting his daughter’s head on a silver platter. There is no one who can help me now. I am well and truly fucked.”

Perceptive. She is very much well and truly fucked. Proper fucked.

I remember what Julius said earlier. “Your brother—”

A small amount of fire burns in Alejandra’s eyes when she turns to face me and cuts me off with, “My brother would walk through the fires of hell if I told him it would help me.” She shakes her head lightly. “He’s a good man. I won’t do that to him. I won’t cost him his life.”

Maybe Julius wasn’t completely addled to suggest Alejandra might be valuable. She knows the life. No doubt, in her position from her throne, she saw things, heard things that may be of significance to us. I try my luck with an important statement, but offset its importance by telling it in complete boredom. “You’re right. You’re totally fucked.” I shrug limply. “That is, unless of course, you can prove yourself useful.”

Her body turns rigid next to mine. She blinks up at me with her soft brown eyes, wide with a false innocence, long lashes fluttering in an attempt to feign confusion. But those doe eyes of hers... they’re calculating as fuck. “Useful? Useful how?”

I smirk on the inside.

Oh my, Alejandra. What secrets do you carry in the pretty little mind o’ yours?

I slide off the covers to stand by the bed. “It doesn’t matter. Like you said —” I turn to the door, walking toward it, smiling cruelly. “—you’re already dead.”

As I reach the doorway, I hear the covers shift, and she asks a panicked, “Wait! You’re still going to kill me, right?”

“Nah.” Over my shoulder, I throw her a sadistic smirk. “I’ve decided to throw you to the wolves.”

A look of intense fury crosses her face. Her face flashes, chest heaving, nostrils flaring, and those pretty doe eyes blaze furiously as she grits her teeth, reaches to the side of the bed, picking up the Swarovski crystal vase of white budding roses, rearing back and throwing it at me as hard as she can while letting out a string of Hispanic curses.

I don't blink as the vase connects with the doorframe by the left side of my head, smashing into tiny pieces. The curses continue and my eyes hood as my heart beats faster. Inappropriate timing, I know. Feelings of heat and lust coil up inside of me, and I bite my lip to quell my sudden arousal.

Alejandra must see the change in me, because the lips on her lovely, flushed face stop moving and she watches me closely in puzzlement.

Making a show of eyeing her tight, petite body, images of this wounded bird pressing her lush, soft lips against mine replay over and over inside of my head, and I warn her quietly, "Don't ever fight me." Her brows furrow, and to make things clear, I add, "Not unless you want to fuck me. Is that clear enough for you, Mrs. Gambino?"

"Castillo," she corrects, the fury in the gaze ebbing away.

I take in what she said, tilt my head and question, "I beg your pardon?"

She lays down on the bed once more, her back to me and utters a hard, "Don't ever call me a Gambino." Softer then, she adds, "I'll be a Castillo till the day I die."

Well, now we're getting somewhere.

That did not sound like a statement from a devoted wife, let alone one who loved her husband. I knew there was something funky about Dino and Alejandra from the moment I saw them together, but I seemed to be the only person who did—apart from Miguel Castillo, that is. They seemed too perfect, too put together. It was disgusting, really. To anyone else, they came across the doting couple, but to me, the air about them was unnatural. Forced. They were nothing but show.

I repeat her words. "Till the day you die." My eyes dance. "Won't be long now."

Her tone resigned, she allows, "No. It won't."

And something about the way she says this makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand.

When I realize I've been standing at the doorway, watching Alejandra lie on the bed in complete silence for over a minute, I spin and stride up the hall and down the stairs, my heels clicking underneath me.

Julius stands from his seated position on the sofa, and I twirl in front of him, turning my back on him, moving my hair out of the way. Without skipping a beat, he gently unzips my dress down to the small of my back and asks, "Well?"

Here I am, a man-eater, with the silky skin of my bare back exposed to this beautiful man, and all he asks is, ‘Well?’

I have to remind myself this is Julius, and Julius never lets me play. He has never led me on or made promises. He’s kind of boring. I don’t even know why I want his meat in my mouth. I’ll just have to find my own source of amusement when all of this is over, preferably in the form of a man whose dick is so big it hurts. Until then, I have my fingers and my precious showerhead. Adjustable spray.

But my gut clenches at the memory of Julius’s first glimpse of Alejandra, the unconcealed awe in his gaze as he took in her loveliness, and the flash of jealousy on my partner’s face when Alejandra made to kiss her husband.

I saw it.

I fucking saw it. And I didn’t like it.

He never looks at me like that.

With an annoyed sigh, I walk away from him. Just before I head back upstairs to my room, I taunt a man who doesn’t deserve it. Holding onto the banister with my pump resting against the first step, I confess, “I went up there to do what you weren’t man enough to. I went up there to put a bullet in her brain.” As his jaw steels at my admission, I go on, “Doesn’t matter though.” I move up the stairs with an impassive smile. “Li’l bit is planning on killing herself.”

Choke on that, boss man.

SEVENTEEN

JULIUS

I was sixteen and still in juvie when I got the call. An officer who I considered a friend—only in private—came bearing the news. His face averted, hat in hand, he told me my sister, Tonya, had taken a bunch of pills, and although her stomach had been pumped, it didn't look good.

She wasn't going to make it.

Tonya was only fourteen and a new mom. With our parents dead, she had only the help of my mother's sister, our Aunt Georgia, who took guardianship of Tonya. With six children Aunt Georgia had of her own, it wasn't easy for Tonya's small voice to be heard over the majority. Whenever I got the chance, I called to check in on my baby sister and my niece, but it was seldom, and our conversations were time limited.

Tonya told me that being a mother was hard. She rarely slept, and the baby was demanding. Aunt Georgia helped out, letting Tonya sleep when she could, but our aunt had to work to support her now extended family. Aunt Georgia's shifts became longer, because the bills weren't going to pay themselves, and there were hungry mouths to feed, and Tonya, at the age of fourteen, who should've been playing with Barbie dolls, was nursing a child. A restless child.

The last call before my sister attempted to take her own life, she spoke about putting the baby up for adoption, refusing to speak Keera's name. She told me that she was a terrible mother and her baby deserved a good life. Tonya stated it wasn't the baby's fault she was born into our family. And I sat emotionless, remaining silent, listening to a little girl grown up too fast, making decisions no fourteen-year-old should have to make and making those decisions on a rational level.

Before our time was up, I told my sister I loved her and that she needed to do whatever she felt was right, that I would support her decision. But the truth was I didn't want my niece to be adopted out.

It was hard to explain, especially with people not knowing the truth about Keera. But Tonya and I did. And Keera was as important to me as my baby sister. They were family, and I was all they had.

I was escorted back to my cell, left on my own after the news of my sister's suicide attempt. Emotions swept through me.

Sadness. Hurt. Anger. Betrayal. And finally, guilt.

My baby sister was going to die in a sterile hospital bed somewhere unfamiliar. I wasn't there to hold her hand, to protect her. I couldn't pray to a deity I didn't believe in. I had nothing behind me, nothing divine, no god to help me see the light.

I felt nothing. And I felt it completely.

That afternoon, when I went out to the quad for some fresh air, I had my first run-in with a boy who would unbeknownst to me become my biggest ally.

There he was, a lanky scrap of a boy with wavy black hair that had grown too long, anger set in his hooded brown eyes. He obviously hadn't found the pecking order in the yard to his liking, because he came at an older boy, a boy built like a tank, at full speed after the basketball he'd been shooting hoops with was taken from him.

I sat on the ground and watched him, waiting for him to back down. But he wasn't. He didn't. And he was going to get his ass beat when the older boy stopped being amused by the unusual show of fight.

My brow dipped in confusion. The boy was different, savage and animal-like. From the way his eyes darted side to side, assessing, to the way he held himself, his body language was barely human.

Thinking of my sister and my not being there for her, something inside me coiled then released. A protectiveness came over me, and I found myself getting involved in a yard fight I had no place being involved in.

The older boy had a hold of the young'un in a loose headlock. The kid struggled aimlessly, his face turning a deep red as he growled and fought, and I called out, jerking my chin to the tank, "Yo, Johnny. The kid's new. Give him a break. He doesn't know the way of things."

Johnny, the older kid, turned angry eyes on me at being spoken to in such a familiar way, but realizing whom he was talking to, his gaze held a glint of respect. "I won't hurt him too bad." He looked around to his friends, a cruel grin stretching at his lips. "Teeth grow back, don't they?"

His group of cronies laughed and heckled obediently.

I stepped closer to the struggling boy but kept my eyes on Johnny. “You took the ball. He got pissed. You made fun of him. It’s done. Now”—my tone was calm but firm—“let him go.”

Johnny’s face turned purple with rage, and just as he opened his mouth to speak, the little shit in his grasp opened his mouth and spoke through gritted teeth. “*Fuck you. I don’t need your help, nigger. Go back to the plantation and pick your cotton, boy.*”

The fuck he say to me?

The goddamn nerve.

“What did you say to me?” The vein in my temple pulsed, and my heart began to race as this boy picked up the thread and pulled, unleashing anger I’d long since hidden from the world.

Johnny and his friends laughed loudly, shocked at the kid’s outburst. The kid had gained a small amount of respect in their eyes, enough for Johnny to let him out from the headlock.

I stepped closer to the boy, almost nose to nose, glared at him and warned, “You better watch your fucking mouth—” I grinned viciously. “—*boy.*”

But the kid stood tall, his smile more a snarl. “Make me.”

He was quick. Too quick for me to react, and before I could register what had happened, I was falling backward onto the basketball court, my eye throbbing like a bitch.

The lanky fuck punched me.

The moment I landed on my ass, I lunged at him, and although he had time to move out of the way, he didn’t. It was as though he welcomed the fight, wanting, needing the violence that ensued. We rolled, and I sat on his stomach, rearing back and letting loose. I threw my fists into him at an alarming pace, his face being knocked to the side with every blow. A weaker boy could’ve died, *would’ve* died. But not this one.

No. This one laughed manically, his teeth stained red.

We were broken up after only seconds, but the damage was done. We wore our battle scars. My black eye, his broken nose and split lip. At feeding time, he sat on his own in a corner, but he watched me as I watched him.

For a moment, I hated him. He evoked the monster in me, the demon we all had inside of us. But he didn't bother hiding his demon. He danced with it. He wanted to feed it, nourish it, bring it to the forefront.

I wanted to kill him. There was something wrong with the kid, unnatural. He had a poison in him. Like a rabid dog, he needed to be put down.

And I planned on doing just that.

Lights out came and went, and I waited in the dark. He was three cells away from mine. My mind calculated how I'd do this. I had to be quick.

I didn't care about what they did to me. I was already in for murder, and my sister was likely dead. I had nothing, no one. I was empty inside.

Six a.m. came, and lockdown was lifted. The cells unlocked then slid open with a jarring squeal, and gripping the makeshift shiv in my hand, I moved fast, determined.

He lay on the cot with an arm thrown over his swollen eyes. I swooped in, kneeled by his side, gripped his shirt and pushed the shiv close to the skin at his throat. Chest heaving, I pressed my mouth to his ear, and hissed, "You ready to die, baby boy? Don't worry. I'll make it quick."

His body stiffened at my hands on him, but he forced himself to relax, and when he uncovered his face and turned to look at me, I saw something flash in his cold brown eyes.

Acceptance. Resignation.

He blinked at me before turning his gaze up to the dirty ceiling. "Do it already."

The fight had left him. And what was worse, it seemed as though he welcomed death.

What the hell am I doing?

I had killed once in an uncontrolled fury. I did it because I was angry, my sister was hurt, and she needed protection regardless of the cost. I looked at myself, deep inside, and asked myself if I could do that again. It would be worse this time around, aimless and for naught.

The answer hit me hard.

Yes. Yes, I could.

I looked down at that boy and quickly reassessed the situation. This kid may just be the most honest person in this godforsaken place. More honest than me. He didn't lie about what he was. I could use someone like that on my team.

My heart pounded in my chest, and I swallowed hard, removing the shiv from his neck but gripping his shirt tighter. “You’re never going to survive in this place. What the fuck do you think you’re doing, picking a fight with the tank?”

His eyes closed, and he bit out, “I don’t give a shit if I die. No one else would either.”

My mind worked. A decision was made right then. This boy and I, we could help each other. “I’m going to help you make something of yourself, kid.” I stood, and he seemed surprised at my change of attitude. “Don’t you want to get back at those people who said you’re no one?”

He sat up staring into the hall by my hip, gripping the bottom of the cot so hard his knuckles turned white, and I knew my words had affected him.

I pressed harder. “You stick with me, and we’ll watch the world burn.” A harsh smirk tilted my lips. “Set it on fire yourself. Hell, I’ll even hand you the lighter.”

His grip loosened, and he muttered, “I’m not like you. I’m not smart.”

A humorless laugh escaped me. “Who told you that? *Them?*”

The boy’s attitude toward me softened a little. “And I thought *I* was crazy.”

“I’m not crazy. I’m determined.” I made a vow to that boy. “We’ll have it all. Money. Women. Power.”

The boy’s lip twitched. He thought I was out of my mind. “Oh, yeah? How are we gonna do that?”

With determination, I stated, “However the fuck we have to. You might even get to kill a few guys.” He must have heard the truth in my tone, because his eyes snapped up, his hard gaze meeting mine strength-to-strength. “You’re either with me, or you’re against me.”

He huffed out a laugh, shaking his head, running a hand through his messy hair. When I didn’t respond in kind, he lost his laughter, blinking at me with shrewd eyes.

A full minute passed before he answered, “I’m with you.”

I smiled then. “What’s your name?”

“Antonio Falco.”

A snort escaped me. Of course it was. “I’m calling you Tony.” I moved to exit his cell, turning to face him at the open doorway. “I’m Julius. Nice to have you on board, brother.”

Later that day, the good news reached me. My sister had survived. She was being moved to the psychiatric health ward, but she was going to live.

This day just got better and better.

The boys of juvie didn't know what hit them. Tony Falco had a fight in him that even I couldn't tame, not that I wanted to. With my encouragement, he let loose, targeting the most feared of boys and tearing them to shreds.

I was the brains. He was the brawn.

Within a fortnight, the boys held their heads lowered submissively when they walked past us in the quad, hoping to avoid detection. We had high hopes for ourselves. Who would've thought that a mere ten years later, grown men would cower in our presence.

We were a force to be reckoned with. As I had promised my friend, my brother, we watched the world burn, and the stench of burning flesh did nothing to sate our hunger for power.

We wanted more. *Needed* more.

I lost my brother because of a confidence I had instilled in him. Despite what I had told him, we were not invincible. He put his faith in me, and I'd let him down.

Losing Antonio "Twitch" Falco left a gaping hole inside me.

I wish I had done things differently.

But that was then, and this is now. I am a different person from the cocky bastard I was five years ago. These days, I'm very much a realist. I won't be blowing smoke up anyone's ass, not ever again.

And as I make my way up the stairs of my home and stride down the hall to the open bedroom, I stare down at the still form on the bed.

My lip curls in disgust.

I have always been a good judge of character.

How did I get it wrong with this woman? I silently worry that my attraction to her may have blurred the lines.

My feet move of their own accord and my knee nudges the bed, jolting her into awareness.

Her swollen eyes blink away sleep, and she stares up at me with those big eyes, her long lashes fluttering lightly.

She's so goddamn beautiful.

And that just makes me angrier.

“Get up,” I order, moving back toward the door.

But she doesn’t follow.

Seeing her sleep addled, with her full pretty mouth parted in surprise as she eyes me cautiously, causes me to rage inside. I want to kiss those sweet pink lips punishingly until they bleed.

My cock jerks at the thought of a willing Alejandra in my bed.

Damn it all to hell.

My jaw tenses and I stalk back to the bed, bending at the waist and speaking in expert calm. “Unless you want me to drag you down the stairs by your hair, kicking and screaming, you’ll move your little ass, Alejandra. You hear me?”

I expect a fight. I expect tears and yelling.

What I get instead is her fearful eyes turning dead, void of emotion, her head lowered in obedience and her robotic movement off the bed toward the door. She limps the entire way down the stairs, and although I want to help her, I take this time to watch her instead. Some part of me wants her to hurt. At the bottom of the stairs, I steer her right, toward the open doorway to my suite.

She limps toward the center of the room, staring at the imposing four-poster bed, and I lock the door behind us, placing the key in my pants pocket.

With my back to her, I begin to undress, undoing the buttons on my shirt, and tell her how this is going to go down. “Your life is in my hands. I decide whether you live or die. You do not take that decision away from me by choosing to take your own life.” Shrugging my shirt off, I slip off my shoes and go on, “I don’t know what I plan to do with you right now, and seeing as I can’t trust you, you will be in either my or Ling’s presence every second of every day. I don’t trust Ling not to kill you, so you’ll sleep with me.” I move toward her. “Hold out your hands.”

Head lowered, she obeys without a word.

I don’t want that to turn me on.

Why does that turn me on?

I cuff her then place her palms together, using electrical tape to bind them. Taking her by the upper arm, I all but drag her to the bed and push her down on the left side. I use another set of handcuffs to link her to the headboard, testing the bond by pulling on it myself. Satisfied that she won’t

be getting away, I look down at her, my mouth set in a thin line. “Go to sleep. And don’t do anything stupid. That wouldn’t end well for you.”

She doesn’t make a sound, and I undress in peace and quiet, thinking about what the hell I’m meant to do now.

Goddamn it. I never intended on being a babysitter, nor her bodyguard.

Dressed only in my white sleep pants, I move to the right side of the bed, lie down and then reach up to switch off the light, trying hard not to think about the close distance between us. With her cuffed to the bed, it wouldn’t take much to pull down her thin black pants and get between her soft thighs. She wouldn’t be able to fight. Well, she would, but no one would hear her protest.

She’d be too small to take me at first, but I’d make it good for her. I’d get her ready, take my time with her, touch her till she was nice and wet. Make her come on my tongue.

Fuck, I love eating pussy, and in my mind, Alejandra tastes like a woman should. My mouth waters as I squeeze my eyes closed. My heart begins to race as arousal shakes me.

Hard as a rock, I reach down to adjust myself, gripping myself tight. I let out a huff of pleasure as my hand circles my cock, and swallow hard. My touch lingers unnecessarily long, until finally, I remove it on an exhale.

Minutes pass, and we lie in complete silence until her soft voice sounds in the darkness. “And if I run?”

My arousal flees me. My dick softens immediately, and I feel ill at my body’s reaction to her. I think about my response for a long moment before I turn on my side, my back to her, and let her have honesty in its purest form. “Pray to God you can outrun my bullet.”

EIGHTEEN

TWITCH

Motherfuckers cuff me.

I'm taken into a white, sterile room with four flimsy chairs, one of which hurts my ass to sit on. It takes all my strength, but I don't complain. Not a word.

Only when the chief invites two other stiff-looking cocks in, who are introduced to me as a detective and a sergeant, do my haunches begin to rise. When the chief turns to Casper Quaid and mutters, "That'll be all, Officer Quaid," I snap my gaze up to his.

His face blanches, and he lets out a short laugh. "Chief, I brought him in —"

The chief nods. "You did. Good job." He pins Quaid with a hard stare. "We'll take it from here."

Casper Quaid just got punked. And I don't know why I care that he did.

The guy is no one to me. But from the moment I met the man, he's been nothing but respectful to a guy who doesn't deserve respect. He doesn't come across as a bad guy.

Casper knows he's lost the fight and moves to exit the small room. My eyes follow him as he leaves, his chin dipped, eyes hard. Without Quaid on my side, I feel a steady hum in the room around me. My defenses rise. The animal inside of me is begging for a fight.

It's been too long.

The door closes with a soft click, and the chief takes a seat, leaving the other two pricks standing. "Mr. Falco," he begins. "May I call you Antonio?"

I fucking *hate* that name. My jaw tics. "It's Twitch."

The chief smiles politely. "Twitch, then." He pauses a moment. "You want to tell me why you're here?"

I can't help myself. I grin and mutter, "You want to suck my dick, old man?" His face turns severe, and I chuckle. "Then maybe you should stop with the niceties and get Quaid back in here." I glance up at the two fuckers standing guard behind the old man. They glare down at me, and I blow a kiss to one then wink at the other. "Never did well with authority, chief."

The chief sits taller. "That's not necessary. Quaid is—"

I cut him off. "Yeah, he fucked up. I know. I get why you don't want him in here. There's only one problem with that, pops." I lean back in my chair, slouching a little. "I'm not saying a single fucking word without my boy Quaid." I'm getting bored. Lifting my hands, I shake my wrists, the handcuffs jingling musically. "And get these goddamn cuffs off me, yo. Where the fuck am I going to run to in here?"

I made my play. Now we wait.

My stare heavies on the chief.

I'm not afraid of you.

The chief eyes me curiously. "Mr. Falco," he starts. "Twitch." He pauses a moment, before asking a calm yet firm, "Why are you here?"

I hope curiosity will get the better of him. "I'm just a man wanting his life back."

He blinks at me. "I'm sorry. I don't quite understand."

My response is to simply lift my arms to chest height and gently shake my chains.

I'm not talking, bitch.

The chief sighs. "You're asking a lot of me. And you've yet to give me anything that makes me think our connection will be of mutual benefit."

But I glance up at the sergeant, looking over his body suggestively. "I bet you like being bent over and spanked, huh, big boy?" The sergeant's face turns purple and my eyes smile. "Make your wife cuff you then play with your asshole? That how you get off? Does she know you crave cock? Trust me, most women don't mind. They love to watch."

"Twitch, what are you doing?" The chief's getting nervous now. He should be.

The sergeant impresses me. Although his jaw tenses and his face turns an unusual shade of red, he breathes deeply and centers himself. He looks as though he wants to lay into me, but he just watches me. Fair enough.

He's not going to help me prove my point.

I turn to the other guy—Detective Deep-throat—and eye his crotch. “What about you, sunshine? I bet you were a wrestler in high school. Convinced yourself that all the hard-ons you got while rubbing against another man’s ass was a result of the fight. But they weren’t, were they?”

“Mr. Falco,” the chief barks in warning.

The detective is close to cracking. I need to up my game. My gaze lingers on his mouth. “It was the struggle you enjoyed. Two big men fighting for dominance, waiting for one to fall to his knees...” The dude shifts on his feet, and I breathe out an amused, “You getting turned on by this, faggot?”

He lunges at me and time slows to a crawl. My eyes shut in the unique pleasure of the fight, and I smile as he all but jumps over the rickety table to get to me. My chair is thrown backward, and it takes what seems like hours for my back to hit the floor. Anticipation has my heart racing and, *fuck*, I wish I could participate in this dance. Pain explodes at the apple of my left cheek, and although it throbs for a moment, soon, my face numbs.

All it takes is a few well-timed seconds.

The sergeant and chief pull him off me, and the detective is escorted from the room, glowering at me and uttering, “I’ll kill you, cock sucker.”

With my hands behind my back, the chief grips my upper arms, pulling me up and sitting me back down in the feeble chair as I tell the detective, “I’m already dead, pretty boy. Do your worst.”

My chest heaves and my heart races from adrenaline. I work at steadying my breathing, when the chief asks a baffled, “Why?” He doesn’t know what to make of me. I’m about to lay it down.

“I’m a dangerous man.”

The chief snorts, clearly unamused, before he paces then hisses, “You’re a goddamn smartass with an attitude problem.”

He’s pissed. I don’t blame him. “I need you to understand.”

Frustrated, at his wit’s end, he pauses his pacing and turns to glare at me. “What? Understand *what*?”

“That I...” I raise my right hand, the detective’s pistol resting lightly in my palm, handcuff dangling from my wrist. “...am a dangerous man.”

His face turns white as a sheet, and he opens his mouth to speak, to shout, who knows, but I shush him. Slowly raising my empty left hand, I hold the pistol out in the other and place it in the center of the table, sitting back, before explaining to the older man, “You think you got me locked

down. I need you to understand that you can't cage an animal like me. There's always a way out, and it might take time, but if it's there, I'll find it. You need to know I'm here because I'm letting you keep me here, but I can walk out at any time." I jerk my chin toward the gun on the table. "Eight caps in that baby, and only five of you here at present." My eyes hood in boredom. "You think I'm playing? I want something from you, and you best believe you'll be getting something in return. After all of this is over, you'll see it was you who got the higher end of the bargain."

The chief doesn't give himself away. He remains solemn, reaching out slowly, taking the detective's gun from the table before moving to sit across from me. "What do you want, son?"

Son.

Get a load of this bitch. Nothing makes my blood boil faster than that term.

Standing so fast that the dinky chair flies back, I bring my arm up then slam it down, beating my fist on the goddamn offensive table so hard the boom echoes throughout the little room, and roar, "*I want my fucking life back.*"

My chest heaves with unsteady breaths. This has to work. I need to make this work. I don't have a plan B. Both of my hands rest on the table, and my shoulders slump as I dip my head and mutter, "I want my life back."

The door bursts open and three men storm in. I'm ready for them. My posture defensive, I will break these motherfuckers if they come at me. The detective looks ready to take me down again, the sergeant looking to the chief, but it's Quaid who notices the cuff hanging from my wrist right away. The chief waves the men off before turning to Casper and saying, "Officer Quaid, it seems we require your assistance."

Before the detective leaves, the chief hands him his gun and utters quietly, "You best be keeping an eye on your things when Mr. Falco is around. The boy's got sticky fingers."

The detective's pale and stunned face has the door closed on it, and I laugh on the inside.

Quaid sits next to me, leans forward and asks, "You good?"

The chief takes a seat, and I respond loud enough for him to hear me, "Yeah. I'm thinking the chief and I are on the same page now."

The old man looks tired. “Not quite, but I’m definitely intrigued.” He runs a hand down his face. “Okay, you want your life back. What are you going to give me?”

I take the piece of paper out of my pocket and hand it to him. He opens it and reads silently as I tell him, “These men on a silver platter.”

He glances at the list and frowns. “How? I know these men.” His cautious eyes meet mine. “They’re untouchable.”

“With what I know”—I slouch back in my chair, crossing my arms over my chest, and I grin savagely at the boss man—“we can make even gods bleed.”

NINETEEN

ALEJANDRA

It's still dark. The cold has me grinding my molars together, my jaw locking tight, to stop my teeth from chattering. I don't know how long has passed since Julius rolled over, taking the warmth of the covers with him.

The cuffs hold me securely against the headboard, and I can't turn over or wriggle closer to the comfort of the quilt. Julius ordered me to sleep, but my defiant eyes only close for fleeting moments before I'm rudely awoken by the hurt.

The hurt... oh, Jesus.

Goddamn it, I *hurt*.

I don't know how much longer I can keep quiet, but every time I move to open my mouth, fear grips me, and I am once again immobilized.

My arms have been numb for hours, I'm sure, and every now and again, sparks ignite in the tips of my fingers like electric currents of pure agony. My hands are so cold they burn, and I have to bite my tongue to stop myself from crying out in pain as the pins and needles poke and prod at me from the inside out.

My body is stiff from the crisp air of the cool night, and my muscles ache as I shiver. If I call out to Julius, he'll wake, but I can't help but think that my doing so would result in punishment for me, so I decide to ride it out till morning.

Dino liked to play mind games with me. His brother Gio would take great pleasure in taking me by force, by torturing me. After it was all said and done and Gio had punished me, turning my mind pliable to Dino's every whim, my husband would take me and bathe me, care for me and hold me close, providing the comfort my broken soul craved. He would kiss me with a gentle mouth and court me with even gentler words, and the broken part of me would hold onto him, craving to be repaired, and I would

sleep, feeling a false sense of safety in the arms of a man who was crazy in love with a woman who did not feel the same.

Our marriage was one giant clusterfuck.

I made excuses at first.

He was hurt by my rejection. He couldn't control his anger. Work had made him a cold man, desensitized, and he didn't realize what he was doing. That Dino loved me and he wouldn't always be that way.

Every time, I swore it would be the last time.

I did this for years.

He dealt out hits as though they were kisses. His extreme corrections of my behavior were unfounded and often. He made feeble excuses to lay his hands on me. The truth became clearer to me with each beating, each bruise, and every injury.

I had married a psychopath, and there was no escaping him.

What was worse was that I had not one, but two crazy men to watch myself around. If I so much as gave Gio a hard look, he would go to Dino and fill his head with false rumors of my flirtations, and that night, Gio would grin in victory while I wept helplessly underneath him, crying hopelessly and begging for mercy, as he entered me harshly.

My husband was a closet voyeur. He got off on watching his wife being hit, restrained and fucked. More often than not, he would masturbate to my cries, head thrown back. At an especially pained yelp, his entire body would strain, he would grip himself tight, and I would watch as the man who claimed to love me came, spurting white stickiness all over his white-knuckled hand as I continued to be raped.

Dino Gambino was a sick fuck, and I'm glad he's dead.

At my back, I feel Julius shift in the darkness and, as though he's trying to be careful not to wake me, he moves soundlessly across the room to the door next to the closet, closing it behind him. A bright white light shines from the crack at the bottom of the door. A minute passes, and I hear the toilet flush followed by running water. He steps out, and I try to still my quaking body as the bathroom light shines directly on me like a savage spotlight, giving me away.

I quiver in the heavy silence of the room. My eyes snap shut, and I pray he hasn't seen me. But I know he has.

The bathroom light dims suddenly, and footsteps cross the room, then it illuminates. Julius steps away from the light switch and moves closer to me, his head tilted in confusion. He doesn't know what's wrong with me.

Hours.

I've been like this for hours, and he can't figure out what the hell is happening to me. My chest squeezes and the bridge of my nose begins to tingle. I shut my eyes once more, praying the stinging behind my closed lids will subside.

I have stayed strong all damn night, but when he reaches my side of the bed and kneels down by my face to get a better look at me, I humiliate myself by gasping for breath before bursting into tears. One falls then the next follows, and suddenly, a downpour of unrestrained emotion streaks my cold face. My vision blurs as wet warmth trail my cheeks. Body wracking sobs escape me, my mouth open in a silent wail as my chest heaves with every shaking breath.

I hurt.

I hurt so damn much that right now, in this moment, arms wide in affection, I welcome death as a lover.

Julius tuts, his sleepy blue eyes soften, and he utters, "Oh, baby." His large hand reaches out to stroke my tearstained cheek. "You're freezing."

My mind clears for a millisecond, a single moment where some part of me grasps at a fragment of hope as I realize these are not the words of a cruel man, a killer of women.

My heart can only take so much. This has been a shitty week for me. For a second, I forget where I am and who I'm with, treating Julius as a man who might give a fuck about me. I sob and let out a pathetically shaky, "I couldn't *reach*."

Stroking my jawline with warm fingers, he mutters thoughtfully, "I know."

"I'm cold." My voice breaks as I confess quietly, as though the statement is a dreadful secret, and as if to make a point, my teeth chatter uncontrollably.

He stands, looking down at me, and for a moment, his expression hardens. I can't help but wonder if the mild anger displayed on his handsome face is there due to what is happening to me, or him, for letting this happen. He blinks, watching me with his mouth drawn tight, then sighs

audibly and walks over to the tallboy by the door. He opens a drawer and returns with a small set of keys and a switchblade.

The sight of the small knife has my stomach dipping severely and my heart racing and, immediately, my crying stops, the agony replaced with panic and dread. Even if I wanted to get away, my useless body can hardly move. I watch him turn the key and smoothly free my hands. I shift to sit, but he presses me down with a firm hand. “Don’t move yet. When the circulation comes back, you’re going to be in a world of pain, girl.”

He works quietly, using the knife to cut away the electrical tape that joins my palms, peeling it off carefully. A certain warmth spreads through my torso at the tenderness of his actions and, for one insane moment, I want to thank him for his kindness, but before I’m able to, he sits on the bed against the headboard and lifts me, dragging me into the space between his legs with my back to his bare chest.

Instinct has me struggling, body rigid, and muttering a rattled, “No, no, no,” when the circulation in my arms begins to return, and my entire body feels as though I’m singeing, burning up, from the inside out. As liquid lightning strikes me all over, tearing me apart from the middle and forcing my body to tremble angrily, a hoarse scream is torn from my throat. But Julius doesn’t punish me for my outburst like I assume he will.

Instinct has taught me that the majority of men can’t be trusted and will betray you given the chance. His reaction would puzzle me had I not been in gut-wrenching misery. Rather than smack me around for the noise, he shushes me as if he would a child, rubbing my arms determinedly with his warm hands, holding my shaking body still.

The pain is too much, has gone on for too long, and my head spins. The fight leaves me, and bright white light dances in front of my eyes. My stomach coils then lurches as my body weakens, my head lolling back onto a hard shoulder. I feel Julius go rigid behind me, but he says nothing.

It’s all I can do to keep breathing.

Hours pass, or at least it feels like they do, and I stare blankly at the wall on the opposite side of the room, blinking slowly as the pain lessens, working its way out of me. Julius continues to rub my arms in complete silence, gentler now, as I gather my bearings.

My face wet with tears, I continue to stare into nothingness, my breathing hitching every now and again at the memory of the pain of the last few

years of my life.

Just above a whisper, I breathe out, "Please, Mr. Carter." His large hands still at my elbows, cupping them lightly in silent acknowledgment. Perhaps I should feel a small amount of shame at our current position. I don't, but maybe I should. If someone walked in on us at this moment, they might think we were lovers. "Please," I repeat, and fresh tears stain my cheeks. "Free me or kill me." My body begins to shake as I close my eyes and cry out years of pent-up sadness. With my head still resting back on his shoulder, my voice cracks once again, as I utter quietly, "I'm sorry. So sorry. It's my fault. I didn't know this would happen. I'm sorry."

He doesn't speak for a long while, but when he does, it isn't at all what I want to hear. "You fucked up." To lessen the blow of his next words, he resumes rubbing my arms, slowly, speaking gently. "Now you live with the consequences."

Something tells me Julius is about as real as a man comes. I risk asking something very stupid.

Turning from the V of his legs, I sit sideways in the gap between them, my legs resting on one strong thigh. I must look a mess, but Julius looks me in the eye, unconcerned about my emotional state. My bottom lip trembling, I can't seem to stop the tears from falling as I reach out to touch his forearm, and ask, "What would you do if you were me?"

I expect him to say he would comply with his captors, that he would do whatever they wanted and that he would accept his fate. But I have quickly come to realize Julius Carter is an enigma and does only what he wants, not what a person expects.

His eyes glance over my face as he leans back, resting lightly against the headboard. He brings his arms up, and my fingers slip away from his skin, breaking contact, as he folds his arms behind his head, looking the picture of ease. "I'd fight. Run. Scream, threaten, tear shit apart." His shoulders jump lightly. "Do whatever it took to get out."

I take a deep breath and process his words. On a shaky exhale, I meet his blue eyes and confirm, "But you're not going to let me do that, are you?"

His eyes soften to match his tone. "No, baby, I'm not."

I nod to myself before slipping off the bed and moving jerkily, limping toward the bathroom, doing my best to ignore the stiffness in my muscles and the ache in my heel. I turn on the light, and in the corner of my eye, as I

move to shut the door behind me, I see Julius straighten and move to speak. But I already know what he will say. Before he has a chance to warn me, I leave the bathroom door open an inch.

From the moment our conversation ended, something shifted, changed between Julius and me. An informal understanding was met. I know where I stand.

Comply or die.

My gut coils in restlessness as I hook my thumbs into the waistband of my pants, push them down to my knees and sit on the toilet. As I relieve myself, I whisper to myself, “It’s okay. You’re going to be okay.”

And my mind tips its head back and laughs.

No, you’re not.

Not even close.

TWENTY

LING

Therapy.

Ugh. Gross.

Julius makes me go. Over the past four years, I've gone through about a hundred shrinks.

As per the conditions of our working together, Julius makes the appointments, and I go. No one said I had to submit completely, but Julius is convinced I need help with my *quote* daddy issues and sex addiction *unquote*.

Pfft.

Please.

It's pretty great to be me. I fucking love my life. I mean, it could be worse. I could be back on drugs. I could be a prostitute again. I could still be shopping at Target.

Why doesn't anyone consider how I feel about myself? He calls them issues. I call them a shitload of fun. But Julius is no nonsense, just as Twitch was, and I don't have much of a choice if I want to remain in this job. So here I am, in the waiting room of Dr. Maura Sternson.

I've seen her only twice before. It normally takes a few sessions of playing for me to break them.

A sly smile spreads at my lips.

I'm feeling exceptionally lucky today.

But as I wait, I watch the fifty-something-year-old man flicking through his magazine. I mean, yeah, he's kind of round in the middle and thinning on top, but he's tall, and his sensible plaid shirt and khaki slacks have me wondering how bad I could turn him. The unattractive ones more than make up for it with enthusiasm, as though they're thanking you for spreading your legs for them. They totally worship me.

I think he'd like if I'd call him daddy.

Just then, he frowns down at his magazine before lifting his gaze to me, as if he felt my eyes wandering over him.

My smile widens and, keeping eye contact, I wink at him.

The man's brows rise ever so slightly, but still, he looks around. Finding that he is the only other person in the room, he turns back to me, and I chuckle softly, watching the pink flush start from the bottom of his neck, rising up all the way to his scalp.

Oh damn, I like him. He's simply adorable. I *must* have him.

I fight a god-awful pout and stifle the scowl that threatens.

Fuck. I hate this place. I don't want to go to therapy. I want to play. I want Mr. John Doe over there to come while I ride his motherfucking face. I—

"Ling?" Her soft, musical voice sounds and I'm torn away from my fantasy.

I shake my head lightly to clear it and give her the once-over. It's much harder to smother my scowl this time.

This woman has got to be no older than forty, and there she stands in her brown orthopedic shoes to match her ugly taupe cord pants and a white plaid shirt. Plaid was cute on Mr. John Doe, who now escorts his frumpy wife out the door, his sweet flush still visible.

Plaid on *her* however...

God, she repulses me.

My void expression changes completely when I smile and stand. "Dr. Sternson. So nice to see you again."

Her smile is polite. "Come on in. I'm sorry my last session went over. I hope you weren't inconvenienced."

Oh, Maura. So *goddamn* polite. "Not at all. It's no problem, really."

See? I can be normal too when I put my mind to it.

She waves her arm out, and I step inside her office, taking a seat on the soft caramel-colored sofa, crossing my legs at the ankles, the picture of perfection. For two weeks, she's been trying to break me. Little does she know I am a diamond and cannot be broken.

Taking a seat on the identical sofa opposite me, she smiles and reaches back to place her long, mousy brown hair into a clip at her nape. "Can I get you anything before we start? Coffee? Tea?"

Dr. Maura Sternson takes a different approach to other psychiatrists, no doubt why Julius booked me with her. She likes to keep things casual, tries to get close to a person, breaking them down bit by bit until they're a blubbering mess. Oh, never fear. Dr. Maura will be there, tissue in hand with a shoulder to cry on. She cures people, she told me on my first visit. Boasted her recovery stats and all.

What the hell am I doing here?

Good news, brain. Dr. Maura Sternson is going to cure you.

Dr. Maura Sternson is a cunt.

I tame a grin at my inner dialogue and wave her off with a small smile. "No, thank you. I'd rather we begin."

"Of course," she starts, but loses her smile. Leaning forward, closer to me, her look of concern is award-worthy. "Ling, you've been to see me twice now and we haven't even scratched the surface of your issues." She smiles once more, softly this time. "I think we should start by talking about why you try to instigate a sexual relationship with so many men."

I correct her, proudly at that, "There are no relationships. It's just sex."

"Exactly." She nods. "Why do you suppose that is?" When I don't rush to answer, she goes on a Dr. Maura spiel. "Intercourse sure can be fun, Ling, but without the emotional support of a relationship, where do you see yourself in five years?"

I smirk. "I don't even know if I'll make it five years from now."

Her expression dims. "This is what I'm talking about. You joke about the most morbid things. It's a worry."

I shift in my seat as the beginnings of anger start to boil inside me. "Would you prefer I cry about the morbid things in life instead?"

"No," Dr. Maura states. "But talking about them and how you feel would help a lot. And we could start by brainstorming if you like. Let's pinpoint where sex turns violent for you."

I deadpan, "Could be when my dad and brothers started beating and raping me when I was five." She tries desperately to mask the shock on her face, but I see it. And I rage inside. "Or it could be when I was sold to a whorehouse at six."

Don't you fucking pity me, bitch. I'm more a woman than you'll ever be.

This is over. I'm ending this now. Fuck this hoity-toity asshole and her civility.

I glance over at her desk and see the black and white photograph of Dr. Maura, her Hispanic-looking husband and a lean, pretty teenage girl, all midlaugh. How precious.

It makes me want to ralph.

I jerk my chin toward the photo. "Your husband... is he your daughter's father?"

She looks over at the picture and smiles sweetly. "No. He's her stepfather. Why do you ask?"

"No reason." I smile. "You were telling me how sex is evil. Go on."

She lets out a surprised laugh. "No, Ling. I wasn't. Sex can be wonderful in a meaningful relationship between two people who love each other."

Oh shit. She's asking for it.

A dark smirk crosses me. "You know what's even better?" I pause for effect. "Fucking a stranger down a dark alley. You don't even exchange names. He pushes you against the filthy wall and it's on. Like a mutt and bitch in heat." I breathe deeply and rest against the sofa. "It's invigorating."

She looks disappointed in me. "Ling, that doesn't sound very fun."

"Do you have sex with Bobby over there?" I ask, knowing full well this question will not be answered.

Dr. Maura blinks, surprising me with her response. "Of course I do. He's my husband."

I roll my eyes at her sweet disposition. "Yes, but do you let him *fuck* you." I grin. "You've been a naughty girl. He puts you over his knee and smacks that round ass till it's nice and pink." I push some more. "Do you let him eat your pussy? Or is that too uncouth for you?"

Dr. Maura swallows hard and her voice quavers. "We're talking about you, Ling."

Adjusting on the seat, I sit up straight. "No, no. Let's talk about you, Dr. Maura Sternson." She's in trouble now. "About your sad sex life and how your husband beats off every time you're not home. Or about how you fake your orgasms to make him feel better about not being able to take you there." My face turns mocking. "No, I know. Let's talk about how women like me fuck husbands like yours down dark alleys. Or maybe about how your husband is at home spreading the luscious legs of your daughter and eating that tight little muffin of hers like he's on an all carb diet."

Dr. Maura's face turns outraged, and she stands so fast that it amuses me. She points a trembling finger at me as she wears rage on her face for all to see. When she yells, "*Shut your fucking mouth, you little bitch!*" I know I've won.

Gasping at the realization that she's just verbally abused a client, her eyes wide, she covers her mouth with a hand and rushes out of the room, a sob escaping her as she hurries past me.

I look around the empty office and rest back onto the sofa. "Was it something I said?" I take my purse and walk out of Dr. Maura Sternson's office shaking my head and muttering, "And people think I'm fucked up."

TWENTY-ONE

TWITCH

Four days have passed since my offer of cooperation to the San Francisco PD was made. And in that time, I've had a fight on my hands and points to prove.

Detective Deep-throat—aka Detective Jason Renley—has been on my ass every spare minute of his time, his threats laughable and cliché, trying his best to rough me up at my insinuation of his homosexuality.

Truth is, I knew the guy wasn't gay, but for a dude who lived in a city of gay pride, I could scent his homophobia from miles away.

Best way to taunt a homophobe, as everyone knows, is to call him a fag.

And it seems he hasn't forgiven me for it.

Imagine my surprise when Detective Renley threw me into a wall the day prior and moved to pitch his fist into my face when an unlikely champion had him down on his ass quick as lightning. Sergeant Dan Willem—the same sergeant who I asked if his wife plays with his asshole—got in the young man's face and hissed out, "Chief says to stand down, boy, you stand down, hear me? Or do I need to bring you down a peg or two myself, Jason?"

Detective Renley's face blazed a fiery red as he stood abruptly, getting close enough to the older man to show his irritation at the interruption without getting into his face about it.

The power struggle was thick in the air, tangible, but Detective Renley knew better than to disobey his superior and walked away without a word spoken.

Sergeant Dan Willem watched the younger man walk away and placed his hands on his hips, letting out a long sigh then turning to face me. "I'm not going to ask you if you're okay, because quite frankly, I don't give a shit if you are." His cool green eyes assessed me. "But the chief wants you in one piece, so I'm going to make sure you stay that way."

He waited a moment, blinking at me.

I didn't get it. What the hell did he think was going to happen? That we'd have some witty exchange and become unlikely allies?

Please.

I wasn't about to thank him. I wanted to knock his head in. "I don't need a bodyguard."

Sergeant Willem smiled coldly. "Seems you do, *sunshine*."

He didn't see the blow coming, and the immense satisfaction I felt when my foot connected with his knee, causing his legs to buckle, was like my own personal form of ecstasy. With a yelp, he hit the ground, and I didn't look back as I moved to make my way to the chief's office.

During the day, I'd been given free rein inside the bullpen, but at night, I was locked up in a cell, like a common criminal. These guys still had no idea who they were dealing with. If they did, they'd know there was nothing common about me. But I'd give them time to grasp the fact. They needed that time. I had no doubt it would be a shock for them to realize they harbored one of the most dangerous men in the world, and that man let some no-name po-po fucks lock him in a cell every night. I would humor them for as long as it took, but when push came to shove, I was no man's bitch.

As I walked inside, the chief didn't bother looking up from his paperwork. "We talked about this, Twitch." With a shake of his head, he lifted his face and looked at me over the reading glasses perched on the tip of his nose. "Three days and you've made it your mission to injure almost every single one of my men and insult all of my female officers. When does it stop, Falco? You're acting feral, and I have to tell you, it's concerning."

Having not stepped outside this building for days already, I was quick to respond with a light shrug. "Cage me like an animal, and suddenly I become one."

"I can't let you go, son." He set his glasses down and shook his head gently. "You know I can't."

A harsh laugh was forced from me. "You think you could stop me?"

Straightening in his chair, he observed me guardedly. "Actually, yes, I think we could." Damn. The chief was getting cocky again. And that sounded like a challenge to me.

I always did love proving people wrong.

In the early hours of the morning, in the partial darkness of the semi-lit bullpen, I unlocked my cell with the key I had accrued from the very first day and walked out of the lockup that was acting as my current residence. I scanned the key card I'd stolen this afternoon from—I looked down at the ID—a cadet named Janet Nolan and made my way out of the back entrance. A small smile hit me as I wondered how long it would take them to realize I wasn't there.

That night, I ate a juicy steak and baked potato loaded with sour cream, slept in a decent motel bed and showered without an officer watching my ass like I was about to shoot explosives from it. And it felt damn good. Silence was good too. But my leaving was never meant to be permanent, more of a lesson learned the hard way.

I wake early that morning, shower and dress then walk to a diner to get myself a coffee and breakfast before returning to the station. The young Janet Nolan at the reception desk stands suddenly with her mouth gaping as I enter. Taking my sunglasses off, I ask, "He in his office?"

She nods quickly, and I drop her keycard onto the laminated counter. Suppressing her shock, she steps forward to frisk me before buzzing me into the cop shop. I wink at her as I walk inside, my head held high, and already I hear the commotion.

"You goddamn *moron*, you just let him leave?" This has me pausing just before I make it to the chief's office. I can't place the voice. I don't know this person. "Have you any idea what you let pass through your fingers? The information this guy might have had would be invaluable. And what do you do? Fucking taunt him!" A harsh exhale. "*Jesus fucking Christ!*"

The chief sounds tired when he responds, "It wasn't a taunt. I thought it was *fact*." He pauses before adding, "Never had anyone escaped the hold before. How was I supposed to know he would?"

A scoff of disbelief sounds. "Gee, I don't know, Peterson. Maybe because"—his voice rises to a shout—"he *fucking told you he would!*"

"Shit, Ethan, they *all* fucking gloat. This is the first time it's actually come to fruition. I didn't know."

Ethan, whoever the fuck that is, lowers his voice mildly. "You have no idea what you've done. Heads are going to roll, beginning with yours."

For a split second, I think about walking away just to spite the chief. It takes only that split second to remember the woman—the angel—with long

brown hair and smiling eyes, and my need to get back to her has my pride fading fast.

Placing my hand on the knob, I turn it and step just inside the office, standing tall, making my entrance one of impact.

Both men swivel to face me, and they say nothing, just stare. A full minute passes and not a word is spoken. The chief stares hard, blinking in confusion, as if I were a mirage about to fade away at any moment.

I move forward and take a seat on one of the cushy guest chairs in the chief's office before lifting my coffee to my lips and speaking to keep the mood light. "I would've got you a coffee, Chief." I sip. "But I really didn't want to."

The exact moment he implodes, I see it. And it makes me snuffle a laugh under my breath.

His face turns bright red and the veins in his neck bulge when he moves to close the office door behind me. The second that door is closed, he lets loose. "*Where were you?* We had a deal. You help me, and I do what I can to help you. You do *not* leave!"

My shoulder bounces. "Those are your policies, not mine. Besides, you should know by now that I don't follow the rules." My gaze hoods. "I make them."

This does nothing to quell his fury. "Goddamn it, you son of a bitch." The chief comes at me, rage blazing red in his eyes, but the other man in the room places a solid hand on his shoulder to stop him. Chest heaving, the chief stills before changing directions, moving to sit behind his desk, flexing his hands in a nervous gesture implying he has the need to fuck shit up.

I glance at the other man before jerking my chin up at him and muttering, "And who the fuck are you?"

The man's gaze meets mine a long, somber moment before his eyes crinkle in the corners, and I can't help but feel he might be holding in a laugh. Holding a clear note of authority, dressed in a charcoal gray suit with a plain white shirt and black tie, his salt-and-pepper hair cut and styled neatly, with his black dress shoes so shiny you could use them as a mirror, I immediately dislike him. It's not necessarily his fault.

Well, okay, yeah, it is. His entirety shouts "I'm a big shot," and, hell, there can only be one of us in a room at a time.

The man, looking fit for a guy in his fifties, holds out a hand to me.

Amateur.

I don't take it. I simply hold his gaze without blinking.

His hand falls to his side, and a small smile stretches his lips. "Mr. Falco, my name is Ethan Black."

Another lukewarm sip of coffee. "That meant to mean something to me, pops?"

Ethan Black tilts his head to the side. "No. Not unless you're in with the FBI."

FBI?

I turn to look at the chief, who can't seem to bring himself to meet my gaze right now. And with that non-gesture, hostility makes a base in my mind. I stand with my hands fisted by my sides and utter, "You lying piece of shit."

The chief comes out of his seat at my accusation. "I did *not* lie."

The heat of the moment has us talking over each other like a couple of grade-schoolers. "You done messed with the wrong guy—"

"We're negotiating, Twitch—"

"The fucking FBI? You set me up, and I swear to God—"

"I'm not setting you up, you neurotic asshole. I'm trying to help you!"

"Fuck you! Fuck the FBI. I'm out."

I'm already walking out the door, when Ethan Black opens his mouth and calmly states, "Sit down, Mr. Falco, or I swear to you that smart little boy of yours is never going to meet his father, because he'll be spending the rest of his life in a maximum security prison."

I spin so quick with a single intent in my mind, but the current influx of emotion in me makes me sloppy. My blow never meets its target and, red-faced, I watch as Ethan Black disregards my attack with little more than a wave of his hand. He sits in the chair I previously occupied and starts talking. "AJ, isn't it? Apparently his kindergarten teacher says he's top of his class and quick as a whip."

My feet glued to the floor, I stand there, panting, my anger steadily thrumming a drumbeat through my veins. "*Don't.*" The single word is said with enough heat to burn.

The chief, calm for the moment, begins, "Twitch—"

"Don't you say a fucking word, old man. I'm barely holding it together."

Enough is enough, and apparently, so thinks the chief. “If you’d shut your goddamn mouth and listen for a moment, I can explain why the chief of staff and special counsel of the FBI is standing here right now, in this room, and why you aren’t being cuffed.”

If I open my mouth right now, nothing good can come of it, so I do the only thing I can to keep the peace. I keep my mouth shut.

Ethan Black, Chief of Staff and Special Counsel of the FBI, sits taller, before explaining, “I think what Police Chief Peterson is trying to say is that you may have some information we could use. And in exchange for this information, we’re prepared to offer you a new identity, clean and clear. Pretty generous of the FBI, considering you were a known drug lord manufacturing all sorts of street candy, acting under the guise of your plastics factory, as well as faking your death. Not to mention multiple weapons charges, money laundering, theft, fraud, and the list goes on, and on, and on.” He pauses to let that sink in. “That is a pretty long list of charges, Mr. Falco. You’d be looking at life in prison, and if I had anything to say in it, a non-parole period of 100 years.”

A whole lot of shit bombards my mind at that moment, but there’s only one thing that really sticks to the forefront. “Three months.”

Ethan Black throws me a look of confusion. “Excuse me?”

“Three months,” I repeat, before adding, “You’ve got me for three months and not a fucking day more.”

The chief looks to Ethan before approaching me guardedly with a look that one might approach a wounded dog with. “Twitch, let’s not be unreasonable. Three months is simply not enough time. Hell, most stings wouldn’t be ready in that time.”

Ethan agrees, “I’m sorry, Mr. Falco. That’s not enough time.”

I push. “We’ll make it enough time.”

Ethan shakes his head. “How? There are only so many hours in a day.”

“Three months,” I stress, before muttering, “It’s all I have to give, Black.”

He must see the truth in my eyes, because after an uncomfortably long moment, he nods lightly. “Okay. Three months.”

My relief palpable, I get to work. I don’t have a moment to lose. I’m *this close* to getting my family back, and nothing is going to stand in my damn way. “I need a map.”

The chief's brow furrows. "A map? What for?"

"You're going to need to know where these men live."

Ethan chuckles as if I just told him something cute. "We already know that information, Mr. Falco."

"No, you don't." I say this with such complete confidence that both men steal a glance at each other. I lift my hand and snap my fingers. "A map. I need a map."

The chief yells out for Detective Renley, and within minutes, I hand over the secret locations of five of the hardest criminals the planet has ever seen. Once my friends, now my enemies. It's a shame, but for me to reappear in the world, they need to go. So fuck 'em.

I feel like a goddamn narc. But I can almost taste my freedom, and something tells me there isn't a sweeter taste in the world.

Oh wait. Of course there is.

Lexi.

TWENTY-TWO

ALEJANDRA

The warm brown tone of the chesterfield sofa is exceptionally deceptive. The moment you sit on the inviting-looking couch, the chill of the firm, cold leather makes you realize that this expensive piece of furniture is here for intimidation, not comfort. And right now, it's doing a damn good job of doling out its purpose.

This morning, when I woke for the second time, I was hardly surprised to find myself handcuffed again. It was *who* I was handcuffed to that was surprising.

It seemed that after my emotional outburst in the middle of the night, Julius had decided that cuffing me to the bedframe was not the smartest idea. I returned from the bathroom, walked to the edge of the bed, to the place Julius remained seated with his back against the headboard, and held out my hands to resume my position of prisoner. I wanted to show him that I could be trusted, because gaining the trust of your captor seemed to be a smart move.

My eyes desperately sought permission to wander to Julius, to explore him unabashedly, but I wouldn't allow it. That didn't mean they obeyed. Peripheral vision was a beautiful thing.

How could a man who looked so surly, so angry, come across as tender as much as he did unfeeling? I was unsure how to process the evening, especially the moment he took me into his arms and held me, caressed away the pain he had been the cause of. My mind told me to be wary, that this was the way things began with Dino. Yet my heart frantically held onto the sliver of hope that came with the sympathetic gesture.

Rather than secure me again, he moved back over to his side of the bed and waited patiently for my stunned surprise to fade. As I moved slowly, quietly, to lie on the opposite side of the bed, Julius sat tall and threw the covers fully over my small body, all the way up to my neck, making sure I

would be warm during the night. With everything that had happened over the last few days, I was sure I'd never get to sleep.

But then I woke up, dazed and confused.

I don't know what time my eyes fluttered open, but long, warm fingers brushed mine and anxiety set in. My eyes opened wide, and when I tried to pull away, the fingers followed. I attempted to bring my hand up, but came into some difficulty, probably because I was cuffed again and the opposite cuff was attached to a thick wrist. That wrist was attached to a strong, muscled, coffee-colored arm. When I realized I was dangling Julius's arm in the air, I dropped my hand, letting both ours fall to the bed with a bounce.

A snuffle sounded over the other side of the bed, the mattress moved, and suddenly he was awake. Sitting up, he blinked sleepily down at me as I lay still, wide-eyed and awkward, pulling the covers up to my nose.

"Time is it?" he asked, knowing full well I didn't have a watch.

When I didn't respond, he lifted his cuffed hand, pressing a button on his wristwatch to illuminate the screen, and then spoke gruffly, "I need to be somewhere in an hour, and Ling's out, so you're coming with me." He turned to face me. "You can shower first."

Behind the safety of the quilt, I spoke a muffled, "I don't have any clothes."

His eyes roamed my covered body without a care in the world. "Fine. I'll go first. You can borrow something from Ling."

Something told me Ling didn't wear jeans and sneakers. With my heel punctured, I wasn't even going to attempt a pair of pumps. "But my heel..."

I sounded like a whiny asshole.

"*Alejandra*," he uttered firmly, annoyed, then huffed out a long breath. "We'll find something." Then he reached over to our wrists and, with a small key, unlocked his hand, freeing it. He reached back, and the unmistakable light clicking sound of the handcuffs locking again sounded.

I was once again fastened to the headboard.

I was also back to plain ole Alejandra.

The way he called me baby...

Shit. Is that all it takes to win you over, a pet name he probably uses with every woman he meets? That's tragic.

I shook my head to clear it. This man was dangerous to me. This man would likely be the cause of my death, if not at his own hand. I was not to trust him.

Emotions were fickle. Talk was cheap. It was actions that spoke louder than words.

Actions like his from last night?

Without a single word uttered, I pulled myself up into a sitting position, my arm raised at an awkward angle, my elbow attempting to bend in a way that an elbow will never naturally bend in. But I sat quietly, my mind sleep addled and void of any real thoughts. I wondered whether my sisters were missing me, or were they disappointed in me, in what I'd done.

A big part of me hoped that Veronica, my closest sibling, my best friend, would know there were reasons for me lashing out in such a way.

Lashing out, I thought with a cool laugh. It sounded like something a teenager did, like taking the car without permission, or borrowing your mom's heirloom diamond earrings and losing one. No. Lashing out was a poor phrase to use. Lashing out didn't end in the cold, violent death of a person. Well, not normally.

I wanted to feel bad about Dino's untimely demise, but, God help me, I couldn't even muster a small piece of sympathy or regret. Rather, I felt warm. I felt my lungs expand to their full potential. I could finally breathe again.

My reason for doing what I did was simple.

I had lost all of my basic human rights. Desperation was my main motivator.

My melancholy thoughts left me as the bathroom door opened and Julius stepped out of the cloud of steam, wearing a pair of too-dark-to-be-navy jeans low on his hips, the button on top still undone.

Beads of water clung to his defined torso as if they had a hard time letting go and, as my eyes roamed his madly toned upper-body, I can't say I blamed them. He caught my roaming eyes and he stilled. Affected, his stomach clenched a single moment before he took a step forward. The slow movement shook me, and my cheeks blazed in mortification as my surprised gaze met his hooded one.

Shit.

I was caught out.

My belly dipped at the thought. Embarrassment warmed me.

He kneaded one broad shoulder with a large hand, and I could tell of his discomfort, but he never let his pain show.

It had been so long since a man had touched me with gentle hands or kissed me long and slow, with feeling. My gaze came to rest on those full, unintentionally inviting lips, and I wondered how it would feel to kiss a man I wanted to kiss, not one I was forced to.

The thoughts were irrational. Stupid, even. I should not have been thinking these thoughts about anyone, let alone Julius. *Especially* Julius.

I told myself that it was only because he was extremely attractive, gorgeous actually, and that being in close contact with a man of Julius's stature was bound to stir some feelings in a woman who craved affection.

It was a crush.

Once again, my eyes glanced over the sharp angles of his beautiful face and came to rest upon his full mouth. I fought a sad sigh.

A harmless crush.

A crush was all it ever could be.

The truth was, I'd never felt so attracted to a man based solely on his appearance. His dark, short, neatly trimmed hair. The day old stubble on his cheeks. The way he held himself, tall and menacing. His flawless light brown skin, high cheekbones, strong nose and manly chin. Those lips...

Oh, God, those *lips*. They were the stuff of pure fantasy.

His lightly veined arms. The size of his hands. I looked down to his bare feet and my gut clenched. Down to his icy-blue stare, it did it for me. He was the complete package, looks-wise. And it should've been the furthest thing from my mind, but I wanted him to hold me again like he did the night before. The feel of his strong, muscled arms around me evoked feelings in me I'd believed were long dead.

Shit, but that meant something to me. That was important to me. It was something bittersweet, something I wanted to explore knowing damn well it could never happen.

I clenched my legs together tightly, slightly shocked at the warmth slithering down my chest and settling in my lower stomach with a light throb.

Knowing I wasn't immune to the male body was kind of exciting.

That meant there was life after Dino, and the fact had me no longer wanting to die, because, at the end of the long, dark tunnel, there was still hope for me. A very small sliver of hope, but hope nonetheless.

Julius walked into his closet a moment and walked out just as quick, pulling on a thin cream-colored sweater. It looked soft and warm. As he approached me, I wanted to reach out and feel the cool wool myself. I held back, clenching my fingers in reproach.

He leaned over me, and I closed my eyes, breathing in the warm, spicy scent of his cologne. When he unlocked me, my limp arm gave way, but he held it fast. A pained look spread across my face, and my mouth parted as his long fingers worked the stiffness out of the muscles. It felt wonderful.

He felt wonderful.

Julius must have been watching me closely, because he mistook my pained expression for actual hurt. “I don’t like cuffing you, but you leave me little choice.” My gaze flew to his at the gruffly spoken words, and he went on, kneading the muscles in my forearm. “Regardless of what you might think, I don’t like the fact that you’re hurting. If I could, I’d let you go.” His admission stuns me. “But Gambino wants you dead, and I’ve got to give him something.”

My breathing heavy, I swallowed hard and held his stare. “I don’t want to die.” My whispered confession is very real.

His eyes softened a moment. His hands worked my arm a second longer then his fingers slid down past my wrist then curled around my hand for a whisper of a moment before he placed my hand on my lap. His voice held a notion of regret. “That’s not my business.” He released me and took a small step back, his eyes on me, his gaze cautious. “Not unless you make it my business.”

My mouth gaped in an attempt to save myself, and all the words begged to come spewing out, but I snapped it shut just as quick. I reminded myself that all the men in my life had either deserted me or hurt me, and this man would do the same. I would be wise to watch out for any tricks Julius planned to use.

This man did not want to help me. He wanted to manipulate me.

He missed nothing, dear Julius, and shook his head softly in irritation. He moved ever so slightly, placing his hands on his hips, looking at me expectantly. “Can’t help you unless you talk to me, little sparrow.”

I so badly wanted to become his little sparrow, but my body curled in on itself, my cheeks pink, as I responded quietly, "I'd like to shower now." Then added, "Please," in case I seemed mildly ungrateful.

Coming forward, he grasped my elbow and led me to the bathroom. I walked inside, and the door closed behind me, the distinct sound of a lock clicking over echoing inside the pristine white en suite.

I looked wistfully at the shower stall, reached for the hem of my dirty shirt, but then hesitated.

What if Julius decided to come back in while I was showering?

I couldn't let him see me.

A split second decision had me removing my bra, sliding through the armhole of my blouse, and pants, but leaving my underwear and ripped, dirty top on. Turning on the water, I waited until the temperature was to my liking then stepped under the warm spray, wetting my hair. I shampooed twice, only satisfied when my hair squeaked from cleanliness. I didn't spot conditioner, but I wasn't about to complain. I undressed the wound on my heel and cleansed it gently. It stung so badly, but I kept quiet lest Julius come storming in to see what was wrong. I soaped up thoroughly and took my time rinsing off, and when I was officially clean, my skin scrubbed red raw, I stood under the spray with my eyes closed, just because it was soothing to my soul.

A hard knock on the door startled me. I called out, "Yes?"

Julius responded through the door, "Brought in some of Ling's clothes." The click of the lock turning over sounded then the doorknob started to turn. "I'm bringing them i—"

Sheer panic had me yelling, "Leave them in the closet!" It took everything for me to not shout, "Do not come in here."

Much to his credit, he did not press the issue, just grunted, "Hurry up."

After a five-minute pep talk to myself, I covered my bottom half with a towel while draping another over my shoulders, leaving my body completely covered, before rushing out of the bathroom, face down, and making it to the enormous closet, which could have acted as a second bedroom.

I was pleasantly surprised at the selection of clothes he had brought. I slid on the plain black panties provided but, as predicted, there were no jeans in sight. However, there was a classy but comfortable pair of black

slacks that fit me nicely, but were a little loose around the waist. I slipped back on my own bra, because Julius hadn't thought to bring one of Ling's, and shrugged on a tasteful, white long-sleeved shirt, buttoning it up one button from the top. My hair was a write off without product, but I brushed it out and let it hang wet down my back.

When I spotted the shoes he brought, my heart warmed.

A black leather pair of ballet flats rested on the carpeted floor of the closet, and under the circumstances, I couldn't have picked a more sensible style of shoe. I tried not to think too much about Julius and his thoughtfulness, but it was hard not to. When I slid them on, they were a little big, but maybe only half a size.

When I was as satisfied as I could be with my appearance, I walked out of the closet, careful to not put too much pressure on my injured foot. Julius stood from his seated position on the bed, noticed my limp immediately and frowned. "I forgot." His mouth pursed. "It hurt a lot?"

Keeping my eyes on the ground at his feet, I reached up to place loose strands of hair behind my ear, and muttered, "Taking the packed gauze out of the wound wasn't exactly fun."

"No," he stated, his tone gentle. "It wouldn't have been." He watched me closely a moment before he checked his wristwatch and sighed, "We have to go."

He turned and left the room without speaking another word, leaving the door open behind him. I took it as an open invitation and followed like the pet I was.

I get to sit in the front of the black, scary-looking SUV this time around. And from the moment we are buckled up and ready to go, Julius starts lobbing rules at me.

Pressing a button on the driver side of the car, all the doors lock at once, and as the car is set into motion, Julius begins talking. "I don't want you to misunderstand me, Alejandra, so it's better if I tell you how this is going to go down. If you attempt to gain the attention of any passersby while we are driving, I'll punch you so hard, right in the mouth, hard as I can, and you will pass out."

I see. Not a violent guy at all.

That's reassuring.

I remain silent as he goes on. “If you tell anyone in the outside world that you’ve been kidnapped, I will shoot those motherfuckers right in the head, right on the street, and let their deaths be on your conscience.”

Again, good to know. Not that I expected anything else.

“If you try to escape me—which would be foolish, to say the least—I will lock you in my closet without food or water up until the time you starve to death, at which point, I will deliver you to Vito Gambino and be on my way, back to living my life.”

Ouch.

That one stung a little.

He does not look at me the entire trip, just drives carefully with his eyes on the road. Eventually, the car slows to a crawl then stops completely in front of an old style redbrick bungalow. “You will not look at anyone. You will not talk to anyone. You will be polite, and you will not speak unless spoken to, understand me?”

“I understand,” I mutter reluctantly.

He nods, sighing lightly, looking somewhat reassured. “Good. That’s real good.”

Julius steps out of the car and walks around to the passenger door just as I move to step down onto my sore heel. I hiss lightly and lift my foot again to take the pressure off, but Julius is there before I can blink and lifts me down off the high seat of the SUV and lowers me carefully until both of my feet touch the ground together.

The soft scent of his aftershave has me near salivating. He smells divine. I swallow hard then blink up at him, his hands still clutching my waist, and mumble, “Thank you.”

He ignores my appreciation as much as he ignores my warm gaze and takes my hand, tucking it into the crook of his elbow. “Don’t put all your weight on it. Use me as a crutch.”

I’ve used people as a crutch my entire life, Julius. Don’t ask me to do the same with you. I’m afraid to.

Because I could definitely get used to using Julius as a crutch. And a fine crutch he’d make.

The gentle wind blows my hair into wretched snarls as we move in sync. We walk to the front door of the home in silence, because, quite frankly,

there's nothing more to say. He steps forward, lifting his finger to ring the doorbell. Choir bells chime in the distance and the door swings open.

A pretty, short woman with curves to kill and skin the color of melted chocolate gasps when she spots Julius. The jeans she wears look painted on, and the black, long-sleeved tee hugs her large bosom. The only thing out of place is her white and pink fuzzy bunny slippers. Her soft brown eyes are surrounded by long, thick lashes, and her long brown curls hang loosely to her hips. Her gaping mouth quickly turns into a smile. "You said you had work."

His eyes crinkle in the corners as he replies, "I decided to take a break."

The woman tips her head back and laughs heartily. "Best thing about being your own boss, I s'pose." Her brow furrows and she places a hand on her thick hip. "You just gonna stand there?"

Julius smiles then, bright and blinding, folding the small woman into his arms and rocking her back and forth. The woman grips the back of his cool wool sweater tightly and makes a content humming noise in her throat as Julius cradles her to him, and I decide to hate her.

They pull away from each other, smiling like a couple of fools, and the woman looks kindly to me before turning back to Julius. "You gonna introduce me to your friend, Jay?"

Jay? Not only does she get his smiles, but she has nicknames for him too?

Yep.

Fuck her.

I feel his eyes on me as I stare blankly at the woman and he makes lame introductions. "Tonya, this is Ana. Ana works with me." He waves his arm out between us. "Ana. Tonya."

Tonya takes my hand and smiles hard. "Oh, do come in. What are you having? I can make just about anything. Coffee, tea? I have soda, or I could make some Kool-Aid."

Julius fights a sigh. "Tonya, sweetheart..."

Sweetheart? Oh, now I'm fuming. The sad part is that I don't even know why.

Yes, you do. You're jealous. Pea green with envy.

I hate my brain sometimes.

Tonya cuts him off with a wave of the hand. “Don’t you ‘sweetheart’ me, brother mine.”

Brother m—

Wait a second now.

My head snaps up.

Did she just say brother? This gorgeous woman, this Tonya, is his *sister*?

She walks down the hall, and Julius holds out his elbow to me. I take it wearing a look of puzzlement, and Julius nudges me along. Tonya speaks to herself as she reaches the end of the hall. “I so rarely entertain. I wish you’d have told me you were coming, Julius. The house is a tip.” As we enter the kitchen, she is flushed, looking like a frazzled mess, and with apologetic eyes, utters to me, “I wasn’t expecting company.”

Jesus Christ, I’m an asshole.

Okay, so maybe I was a little hasty in my judgment. I want to make up for my mistake.

My iced-up heart melts at the sweetness of this woman. She wears her heart on her sleeve. I know Julius won’t like it, but I can’t help myself. I need to set Tonya at ease.

Forcing a smile, I remove my hand from his elbow, step away and lie to Tonya. “I hope you don’t mind me saying, Tonya, but you have a beautiful home. I can’t see any of the mess you’re claiming is around here somewhere. I’d love some tea.” In my friendliest tone, I utter, “Can I help out?”

“Why, thank you, Ana. You’re too kind. Chamomile okay?” The relief in her eyes is obvious, and her tight shoulders droop as she smiles in return. “Well, why don’t you get the water on and I’ll fix us something to eat.”

Tonya crosses the kitchen to the refrigerator while I take the empty pan off the stove, fill it with water and put it on to heat. I move to get a few of the mismatched mugs off the windowsill, when warm fingers grip mine, cocooning my small one, squeezing . His body moves in close to mine, his front brushing my back, the delicate warmth of him seeps into me. I close my eyes and breathe him in. A shiver flows through me as he places his lips at the shell of my ear and speaks on a hush. “You didn’t have to do that.”

Without looking back, I murmur quietly, “No,” I concede. “I didn’t.”

But I did. Not for his sake, or even Tonya’s, but for mine. If there is one thing I have, it’s manners. And as I feel Julius’s large body retreat, I wonder

how many days I have left to live, not meaning to, but hoping my good deed bought me one to spare.

TWENTY-THREE

JULIUS

Tension fills me as we leave my sister's house a little over an hour later. The drive home is silent, a mild buzz of strain in the air. I don't like the way Alejandra smiled when Tonya told her about how I look after her and Keke. I could almost see the spark of hope in her eyes. There was no need for it to ignite into a healthy flame. I quashed it with a muttered, "That's because you're family." I turned to stare Alejandra right in the eye, with meaning. "I don't give a fuck about anyone else."

Her eyes held an emotion I couldn't quite place, perhaps desperation or something akin to it. Alejandra kept quiet for the rest of our visit, as she was told, speaking only when spoken to, including when my sister's face turned somber. "Ana," she started, cupping her mug of tea, warming her hands, "you involved in all that badness my brother's involved in?"

Alejandra seemed lost for words, and then she turned to me, probably trying to gauge how to answer that. When she saw she wasn't about to get any help from me, she looked down at the table, running her fingers gently along the grain of the polished wood. A sad smile crossed her face as she told my sister quite honestly, "*I am* the badness your brother is involved in."

Graceful, even in certain death.

Tonya blinked at her, brow low in puzzlement, before letting out a long sigh. She shook her head slowly and chuckled. "Well, that's a relief."

My sister was not what one would call subtle. "Tonya..."

Her eyes wide, she said, "What?" She looked at Alejandra, and stated, "She's not that bad. I have to admit, I expected worse. I mean," she snuffled, amused, "what could she have possibly done, Jay?"

I let out a humorless laugh before straightening and glaring at my sister. "You have no idea."

Tonya looked to a pale Alejandra, reached over and patted her hand kindly. "Don't you worry now. Jay will help you get out of trouble." My

sister looked up at me without a shadow of a doubt, in complete confidence, as if I hung the stars at night. “Won’t you, Jay?”

Alejandra smiled at my sister, grasping her fingers like a lifeline. But her smile wobbled, and when she spoke, her voice shook. “I don’t know if he can help me. I really messed up. My own family has written me off.”

Tonya responded confidently, “He will help you. It’s what he does.”

Alejandra let out a short bark of laughter, and I knew what she was thinking. She was thinking how wrong my sister was, but she declined the opportunity to correct her. And I was grudgingly grateful for it.

I shouldn’t have gone there, but I can’t help myself. I silently wonder what it would be like had I brought Alejandra to meet my sister under different circumstances. I would seat her by my side, where a woman like Alejandra belonged, and be proud to show her off. Rest my arm on the back of her chair in a display of ownership and hold her close every possible moment. Every motherfucker would know she was mine and I’d treat her like the queen she was.

The unexpected vision leaves a bitter taste in my mouth.

Regardless of how much I denied it to myself, I wanted Alejandra, and not just to warm my bed. I wanted her for my own. She had a light in her eyes that called to the darkness in mine, her very presence calming. She got me, got this life, understood the way things were. It was tough for a person to be as gracious and kept together when you and yours lived off spilled blood, but Alejandra did it with ease.

I wanted her.

I wanted her so bad I ached inside.

But it was a moot point. I’d never have her, and it damn near killed me inside.

Under different circumstances.

Now, as we drive along the highway with the radio barely audible, I keep my eyes on the road, but can’t stop myself from asking, “Why didn’t you call me out?”

She glances at me from the passenger side before turning back to the window and grumbling, “What good would it have done? It’s clear your sister loves you.” She sighs softly. “I’m not about to make your life shitty just because mine is.”

“You don’t have to be afraid of me, Ana. I don’t have a hidden agenda. You don’t have to watch your back.” Her sad eyes come to rest on me, unblinking. I hold her stare a moment before turning back to the road. “I’ll stab you in the front.”

An amused scoff. “Well, that’s a relief.”

This entire situation tires me out, mentally and physically. She doesn’t understand that I am at war with myself. My rough statement comes out quiet and weary, “It fucking should be, you ungrateful bitch.”

I feel her still, likely surprised by the foul and unexpected statement, my offending words hanging in the air like a bad smell.

Has she any idea what keeping her alive would cost me?

My job. My allies. My fucking *life*.

It means nothing to her.

Her muteness begins to get to me. “You hungry?”

“Uh, yes. Yes, I am,” she responds carefully, quietly, as if I would be cruel enough to deny her food. And it suddenly makes me realize that her careful responses and reaction are likely because someone *had* been that cruel to her. But who?

“Are burgers okay?”

Blinking in thought, she nods. “Sure. I mean, I’ve never had one before, but food is food.”

I do a double take, grateful that what I said in anger hasn’t affected her too much. “You’ve never eaten a burger before?” Lips pursed, she shakes her head, and I see nothing but raw honesty in her eyes. “How is that even possible?”

A small smile plays at her lips, and she rolls her eyes at the question. “I’ve led a very sheltered upbringing, Julius. Went to a very strict, very catholic all-girls school. My sisters and I weren’t allowed friends. All we had was each other. We only ate at home or at high-end restaurants. Junk food wasn’t allowed, although Veronica and I managed to bribe one of my father’s men to get us a pizza one time. Interaction with boys was a definite no. I’d never even seen the male anatomy up close until my wedding night. My life was... is...” She pauses and frowns at the loss of words, before whispering, “I would change a lot about my life.”

Bitterness seeps out of those words, and I want to know more about her, but I shouldn’t. It’s a catch-22. Get to know more about her, risk becoming

attached to the little woman. Don't ask the questions I feel I need to ask, hand her over not knowing things I should've known.

Alejandra is hiding something, and I plan to find out what. I will need to push, I will need to poke, prod, and chip away piece by piece to reveal what's on the inside, and by the end of it all, she won't like me very much, but that's life.

Suddenly, she's irritated. "Why are you being nice to me? This would be so much easier if you'd just yell at me and slap me around."

"You want me to slap you around?" I ask in mild disbelief.

"Well, no," she admits. "But it would make things simpler. I would know how to feel if you did. I can deal with hatred. I don't know what to do with indifference." She peeks over at me quickly before looking back out the window. "Or maybe that's your plan. Maybe you want me confused."

I shake my head. "Nope. No plan. Regardless of how I treat you, you're still my prisoner."

"Oh, Julius." She breathes in deeply then responds tiredly on an exhale, "A prisoner is no longer such if she wants to remain jailed."

Damn, she's good. But I refuse to bite.

With that bold statement, we drive on, and thick silence replaces heavy conversation.

TWENTY-FOUR

ALEJANDRA

Firstly, burgers are delicious. Julius ordered us both chocolate shakes to go with it and I have to admit, I was a little appalled.

It did not sound appetizing in the least. But then our meals arrived. One bite of that juicy, tender meat in a bun and I was in heaven. I didn't think too much about my company, only how much food I could get into my mouth at once. Chewing with gusto, a pleasure overload flowed from my toes all the way up to the very hairs on my head.

Then I spotted Julius smirking at me, an almost affectionate, teasing lilt to his voice when he stated, "You eat like a pig." For all that dreadful statement said, he looked awfully pleased by the knowledge.

Mouth full, I glared at him, jerking my chin to the ketchup dribbling down his chin, and garbled, "Like you can talk, asshole."

His smile stretched wider, and I reached across the table for my shake, taking a sip just as a hiccup threatened to rise and, oh, my God... heaven itself could not have formed a better pairing than burgers and shakes.

It was official.

If I lived this out, I was going to get happily fat.

A moan escaped me, and in all the excitement, I bounced my heels on the floor in wordless pleasure, gripping my burger tight in both hands, my eyes closed as I tried to process how amazing it was and how I had been missing out. And Julius's eyes crinkled at the corners as he continued to eat quietly, watching me.

It would be the first of many days where I would question my entire being. Had I lived a day in my life, or had I merely existed? I didn't know much about the world, but I knew a whole lot about the underground. Things most women would swoon dead away from, I would barely flinch at. I was an old soul trapped in the body of a twenty-four-year-old, and here... now... Julius had given me something I would cherish for always.

He had given me a taste of normal.

He had lent me his sister for the morning, showing me how regular siblings should interact. He had given me burgers, and although I would never admit to it, I would've given anything to Julius then, had he only asked.

It felt appropriate that I should express my gratitude. Taking another big bite of my burger, I murmured, "So... thanks."

When his expression turned solemn, I wished I had kept my mouth shut. But then he swallowed and spoke, his eyes never leaving mine. "Welcome."

I looked down at the table in relief and ate the rest of my burger with a smile on my face.

"Goddamn it, Ling!"

Julius is pissed.

He's yelling, and he's yelling quite loudly.

A soft thumping sound follows, because he is also pacing. And with those three words, our good morning turns to shit.

As soon as we returned to find Ling standing by the kitchen bench, making herself a latte on the fancy coffeemaker Julius owns, he paused in his tracks, causing me to walk right into his back. He checked his wristwatch, then asked her, "You're back early. What happened?"

She tilted her head prettily and forced a smile. "It's a funny story, actually." But there was no humor in her voice, indicating that she was a goddamn liar and there was nothing funny about what had happened.

So Ling began to explain what went down, and Julius grew more and more tense, and I started to back away from the kitchen. Eventually, Ling got to the punch line of her story, and Julius shook the heavens with his rage. He paced some more, muttering under his breath, and every now and then, he would point and bellow at her.

My body anxiously taut, I finally managed to slink out of the kitchen and rushed into Julius's room, sitting on the bed with my knees to my chest, waiting for the storm to pass.

But Ling continued to speak her mind, unaware—or very aware—of the fuel she was throwing onto the fire. The argument reached its climax when Ling lost her cool and thundered, "*Fuck your self-righteous assholery, boss man.*" Things rustled and car keys jingled. "I'm leaving. I'm so fucking out

of here. I'm going to find someone to fuck, and you know what?" Her heels clicked farther and farther away. "I'm going to call him Daddy!" Just before the front door slammed, she shrieked, "*And he's going to love it!*"

The car started, revved hard, and then sped away, spraying gravel onto the house, causing a pinging and clinking sound to air in the thick silence.

In the tense quiet of the aftermath of the small war, Julius sighs loudly, and then... nothing.

I wait a long time for him to come find me, but he doesn't.

After a few minutes of ear-splitting silence, I decide to venture out from the safety of the quiet room and look for him. I don't need to go far. I peek around the corner and find him sitting at the dining table, his sleeves pushed up to the elbows, his head lowered with his fingers massaging his temples.

My manifestation must be large enough to alert him to my presence, because he looks up, straightening, looking the picture of dignity. So I say the only thing I can think of saying. "Sorry."

His shoulders relax a little, and he shakes his head. "It's not even a thing."

"It looks like a thing." Feeling bolder at his calm demeanor, I step into the room and slowly make my way to the chair closest to his. "It definitely *sounded* like a thing."

His eyes trained on the empty chair opposite him, he utters, "All things with Ling are a *thing*. But that's just her. She's all hellfire and lightning. Never a dull moment. You either love her or hate her, no in-between."

My heart sinks.

I'm pretty sure I'm at the latter end of the scale with her, but Julius... he clearly loves her. And it makes my stomach turn.

"I'm sure she'll come around," I say for the sake of the conversation, not really wishing she would.

He doesn't even spare a glance at me, and it makes me feel worthless. "She will. Always does."

The silence that follows starts off comfortable, but soon, the tension builds until I can't hold my tongue anymore. "Ling..." I start. "Is she really going out to find someone to—" My mouth opens and closes like a fish out of water, but I can't seem to end my query.

"Yeah," he growls, his lip curling in loathing.

And my heart stutters. Painfully.

Had I misread the relationship between the two of them?

Of course Julius will never look at me in a sexual manner. He is too professional. Not only that, but he hates me for the trouble I've caused him. I would give anything to make it better between us. I crave the serene yet static presence Julius radiates. A mix of peace and anger and chaos and beauty all rolled into one.

With my days dwindling, my desperate mind has gone through all the scenarios. And they all come back to one possible solution. I can make it happen, I'm sure of it. It will take time, and that's one thing I don't have, but I'll be smart about it.

I can do it. I know I can.

At least, I hope I can.

I'll make Julius fall in love with me.

I wait patiently, taking this time to meditate.

The fight with Ling left Julius rattled enough to shower without locking me into a room, and although the thought excited me, a question was then posed.

Where would I go?

Currently, I was a walking target. Not to mention I had no money, no clothes, not a friend in the world.

My chances out there, on my own, were far worse than they were in here, with Julius.

I tiptoed into his bedroom and undressed with ease, walking into his closet and taking my time at picking something more comfortable to slip into. When I looked down at myself, I closed my eyes and swallowed hard, telling myself that this was all I had left in my artillery.

Ling was gone. Who knew when she'd return? I was hoping it was later rather than sooner, because she was a bitch, and she was a bitch who made her stance on me quite clear.

She fucking hated me.

Now, as I stand at the kitchen sink, looking out into the sterile but neat yard, I vow to do what I can to give myself the upper hand.

The soft padding of his feet stepping closer has my heart racing.

I can do this.

I feel his gaze on me before he even speaks. “What are you doing, Ana?” His question weighs just about more than I can carry.

My heel throbs as I turn slowly and he looks down at my ensemble, his eyes raking over every visible part of me, where they hood sensually.

“Oh, baby.” He takes a predatory step closer, lifts his eyes to mine and lets out a soft growl. “That was a very bad idea.”

The way he looks at me alone is enough for my body to shudder delightfully. I can’t seem to get my mouth to function. All I can do is preen under his observant gaze and let out a breathy sigh.

The air sizzles with a muted hum and with every slow, calculated step toward me, my heart beats faster and faster until I feel about ready to pass out from the pressure his presence exerts. I swallow hard and my mouth parts lightly. I push back against the kitchen counter holding myself up.

He’s too much and with the gentle crease of his smiling eyes, he knows it.

With a single step forward, he crowds me, towering over me, but his presence isn’t intimidating in the least. His words are warm, oozing honey. “You sure about this, little sparrow?” His fingertips start at my elbow and trail downward. His long fingers pause then snake around my wrist, holding me firmly in place.

No. Not intimidating at all.

My eyes flutter with pent-up lust, and I tilt my head back to look up at him, blinking dreamily. My gaze lands on his full lips, and I take in his semi-guarded expression. My lips dry, my tongue darts out to wet them, and I nod in silent permission. He releases my wrist and the loss of contact almost has me crying out in mourning.

His face softening marginally in acceptance as he bends at the knees, placing his hands on my hips, and with one smooth move, he lifts me onto the cold countertop. My body breaks out in gooseflesh. He shuffles closer, his body moving into the open space between my thighs, attempting to get as close as physics will allow. His large hands slide from my hips, around to squeeze my ass, and my hands come up to hold onto his shoulders, a gentle flush heating my cheeks.

He keeps me here, close, in this off-kilter embrace and his cool, blue eyes never leave mine as hands roam my body, caressing and kneading at my

soft flesh. His touch is electric, and I find myself biting my lip to keep from the embarrassment of moaning at his mere touch.

I'm burning up inside. The hot area between my thighs throbs delicately.

My hips, my thighs, my back, shoulder, and neck... none of these places are safe from his erotic massage.

Julius brings his forehead to mine, closing his eyes as his wonderful hands slide down my back to rest on my hips. He stills a moment before inching closer. Frustration has me attempting to shuffle closer, but he holds me tight. I lift my face to his and my top lip brushes his full bottom one. My heart pounds and my hands begin to shake. I squeeze at his shoulders almost painfully.

Enough foreplay.

I need his mouth more than I need my next breath.

He pulls away an inch and his hand comes up to cup my cheek, his thumb running gently but firmly over my parted lips. My hands slide down off his shoulders, down his material-covered chest, my nails softly scratching over his ribs until I am where I want to be.

Holy shit, I am *this* close to an orgasm.

My God, Julius is more than I expected. More than I bargained for.

The hem of his white cotton tee is lifted by deft fingers, up and over his head, forcing my nimble hands to release him a single moment before I clutch at his shoulders once more.

A moment's pause and I want to cry. Julius has made me feel more in these few minutes than Dino *ever* had.

My lip begins to quivers.

Being here, with Julius, like this, has become the most raw experience I've had in my entire life. A life changing experience.

He looks into me and I return it, full force. No words are spoken. None are needed, not now.

What began with my needing to do this has ended with my wanting this more than anything I have ever wanted before.

Fuck the plan. I need this, need Julius.

His hands come to rest on my thighs and, without asking, he slides them upward in an attempt to access the most intimate part of me. In a moment of panic, I let out a soft gasp and his expression blanks. He stops, making a show of moving his hands over the clothing. He settles by wrapping his

strong arms around my waist, pulling me into him, and when he does, his already hard cock rocks into me. The move has my eyes fluttering shut, and a low moan escapes me.

I don't see the tender assault coming, but when his mouth takes mine in a deep, searing kiss, I groan into his mouth, and my body heats at the purring sound coming from deep in his throat.

Oh, God. Shit. I am a moron.

Why have I allowed this to happen?

I hadn't expected to be so affected. I hadn't expected to be affected at *all*.

I'm officially in way over my head. I know this because Julius Carter has lips that dreams are made of, and now that I've had a single taste of him, I am afraid this feeling of want won't be sated so easily.

I'm drunk in lust, and I've never felt this way before. It's disconcerting.

Sitting on the kitchen counter, wearing nothing but his shirt and a pair of panties, with my arms wrapped around his neck as he gently bites then sucks on my bottom lip, nothing has ever felt so natural before in my life than being in the arms of Julius Carter.

He reaches up to take my face in his hands. Looking down into my eyes, he searches.

For what?

I'm not sure. But when I smile up at him, I can almost hear the gears grinding inside his mind.

Releasing my face as if it's the hardest thing he's ever had to do, he takes a step back, away from me.

No.

"Julius."

Don't do this. Please, don't do this.

My voice is no more than a whisper. "Don't you dare, Julius."

Please. Please don't leave me. I need you.

Oh, God, I need him.

The words quiver. "Julius, don't you dare walk away from me."

He avoids my piercing stare as he takes another step back, effectively breaking what little I have left of me. He utters a rough, "We shouldn't be doing this, Ana."

I blink up at him. My brows furrow in confusion. "Yes. Yes, we should. Because it feels right. When something feels this good, that is *exactly* what

you should be doing.”

He scoffs then shakes his head as though I’m the stupid one. “You don’t know what you’re feeling. You’re confused.”

He called it, but I won’t admit it. Yes, I’m confused. I’m a fucking mess.

A stabbing pain in my heart inflames my emotion, until suddenly, I’m aching inside. My voice low, I grind out, “Godammit, don’t tell me what I’m feeling. I’ve had a whole lot of wrong in my life. I know what feels right.”

But he steps back once more, and sheer desperation has me vowing, “If you walk away from me now, I will never have you again.”

His eyes narrow a moment before he calls my bluff, turning and walking away. Before he exits out the door, he mutters, “It’s what’s best.”

I wrap my arms around myself, fighting off the chill Julius left in the room. But I don’t cry.

I won’t.

TWENTY-FIVE

TWITCH

“You goddamn moron. Lunatic. *Jackass*.” Ethan Black is having a bad day. “Do you have any idea what you’ve cost us?”

I place my thumbnail in my mouth, chewing on it lightly. “Enlighten me.”

“It was a bogus address, Twitch. No one there. *Nada*. Literally nothing. A SWAT sting wasted. Another opportunity down the drain.” Ethan’s fists ball up by his sides so tight that his knuckles turn white. He strides forward, a menacing expression on his taut face. “If you’re fucking with me, kid, you’ll rot behind bars. I swear it.”

I tilt my head and throw him a deadpan look. “You look a little tense there, Black. Might I suggest more fiber in your diet?”

“Twitch.” The chief cuts in before Ethan can lose his cool. “What happened? I think we’ve made it abundantly clear that if we don’t get our part of the bargain, neither do you.” He frowns in confusion. “Why are you playing games with us?”

“You didn’t think I’d actually give you the full address, did you?” The look of annoyance on both of their faces is beautiful.

“What, then?” Ethan wants to get down to business.

I shake my head. “You think I’m gonna take your word for it that you got these guys? C’mon.” A laugh through my nose. “No dice.”

Ethan Black sighs loudly before rolling his eyes and shouting, “*What do you want?*”

My statement is simple. “I want to be there. Present. As witness. Then you’ll get more from me.”

The chief looks unmoved. “No, Twitch. Now you’re asking too much.”

Ethan walks around the desk to stare out the glass of the office door. “No fucking way. I’m not taking you out on the field.”

I shrug carelessly. “Then I guess we’re at an impasse.” I stand and begin to move. “I’ll leave you to it.” I turn to the chief. “I’d wish you well, but—” I smirk lightly. “—I really don’t want to.” My feet take me to Ethan Black’s back, which is currently barring the door, and I say, “Get out of my way, Black.”

Ethan turns, his expression guarded, his mouth drawn in a thin line. “If you fuck me, I’ll fuck you right back.”

“I don’t have any intention of fucking anybody.” I repeat myself for the umpteenth time. “I just want to go home, be with my son, be with my woman. That’s all.”

I see the moment he loses his internal struggle. He sighs long and low and closes his eyes tightly, his face pained. “Okay,” he mutters quietly, then again louder. “Okay.” His eyes open and he looks toward the chief. “Have him ready in two days. We leave at dawn.”

My emotions spike, but I hold them at bay. I only have one thought going through my mind at this moment.

Yippee-kai-yay, motherfucker.

TWENTY-SIX

ALEJANDRA

Something changed in Julius the night before.

What happened between us was still thick in the air as I made my way into his bedroom, the picture of obedience. I still tasted him on my lips, felt his body close to mine, but I told myself to shake it off, that dwelling on it would harm me more than it would him. So I did all I could and pretended that nothing happened, that there was no kiss, no moment between us.

Ling hadn't returned to the house by midnight, and when he muttered something about lights out, it was obvious he was worried about her. I pondered why he wouldn't just call her and demand she come home. After all, he was her boss.

But that wasn't my business. What was my business is what happened when I entered the bedroom. I was expecting *something*.

I got nothing.

Nothing at all.

He didn't cuff me to him, didn't cuff me to the headboard, didn't verbally threaten me in any way, he just left me be. He did, however, lock us both into his bedroom suite that night, and although I expected him to lecture me on what would happen should I escape, he simply undressed, changed into his sleep pants, turned off the lights and slipped into bed without looking at me or saying a word, turning his back to me as if I wasn't even there.

My emotional response was puzzling to say the least. His overlooking me, disregarding me as though I was nothing, was beginning to build a curious reaction from me.

I was missing his eyes on me, missing the way they held me tight, glued to the spot. Strong feelings of unwanted desire caused my chest to ache.

His indifference was not only startling but also hurtful. Completely ridiculous and irrational, I know. And a shred of my stretched mind wondered if I was beginning to develop Stockholm syndrome.

It wouldn't do.

I had a plan, and I was sticking to it, somewhat. If I was going to see it through, I couldn't start to get attached to the sometimes-scary but more-often-considerate man.

It wasn't fair. Out of all men to get stuck with, I got the one who stirred the butterflies in my belly with a humble glance from those stormy blue eyes.

How could a person simply stop being attracted to someone?

I wasn't sure it was possible.

My mother used to say that when a man could hold a woman's attention without a word spoken, it was a recipe for disaster. And for me, that was Julius. Regardless of my mother's advice, I wanted to push the boundaries. I had nothing to lose. *Literally* nothing.

My own life was forfeit. I had nothing left to gamble with... apart from my body.

It was inviting disaster, knowing it would end in tragedy, but not caring in the slightest.

It was reckless and irresponsible, and I wasn't too sure if I gave a damn about the consequences, come as they may.

As I lay in the darkness, a small smile pulled at my lips. Pushing the boundaries was sounding more and more thrilling by the minute.

It was exhilarating, even, to do something that wasn't for the good of the family.

I was on my own, responsible for no one and nothing apart from my own ass, and I would do what I needed to make sure I lived another day.

Tomorrow, I'll lean my hands against the wall that is Julius, and I'll push.

Ling returns just after dawn, and the visible relief in Julius's body language has me furious on the inside.

I woke sometime after sunrise and didn't bother rousing Julius. Instead, I slid out of bed and moved silently to the bathroom, leaving the door open just a sliver. I showered quickly, noticing that somebody had placed conditioner where there was none the day before. Thanking the heavens, I slathered a whole heap onto my thick hair, massaging it in and leaving it to work for a minute while I soaped up and rinsed off.

After I washed out the conditioner and stepped out of the shower, it was time for me to start pushing.

I took my time drying off with the large bath towel hanging by the shower stall, using the spare as a turban for my wet hair. Making my way to the vanity, I used my hand to wipe off the condensation from the mirror and took a look at myself.

My body was... Well, it wasn't pleasant. It was damaged in more ways than a person could count, not all injuries visible to the naked eye. Body language had a lot of pull with what I was about to do, and I needed to be tactful.

Wrapping the towel around myself high up on my chest, I spied the toothbrush hanging by the sink and smiled. Running water over it, I put a small amount of toothpaste on it and, still grinning, placed it in my mouth, using it to brush my own teeth. Forcing myself to sober, I called out to him, purposely using the nickname his sister had called him. "Jay?"

He answered immediately, gruffly, letting me know he was well aware of where I was. "Yeah."

My feet took me to the bathroom door and, with my fingers on the handle, I pulled it open a fraction, sticking my head out to him. My expression neutral, I told him, "I don't have any underwear."

He stood without looking at me and left the room. I knew where he was going and, by God, he was going to give me his attention when he returned.

I threw the towel off my head, working my fingers through the long, wavy strands and checking myself in the mirror. The towel around my chest I loosened slightly, just enough to dip into the valley between my breasts. I licked the excess toothpaste off my lips, leaving them glossy and pink.

When he stepped back into the room and turned to leave the clothes in the closet as I had asked the day prior, I called out, "In here, please."

A moment later, the door opened wider, and his sleep-hooded eyes met mine, widening ever so slightly before moving down, then even farther, to my now-chipped pedicure then up again, resting on my almost non-existent cleavage before reaching my face.

Yeah. Ignore me now, you son of a bitch.

But then a mild look of aggravation crossed him. "That's my toothbrush."

I left it in my mouth as I took the clothing offered from his outstretched hand. Holding the bundle in my arms, I blinked innocently at him, removing the blue toothbrush from my mouth before licking my lips clean very, very slowly. “I don’t have one of those either.”

I knew I was attractive. That wasn’t me being a pompous asshole, that was a mere fact. It was just about the only thing I had been complimented on for all the years of my life. Who gave a shit that I got straight As in high school? Not my family. I was always the pretty one, whatever that meant.

It was hard to miss, the way men looked at me. Those looks normally made me uncomfortable. It was the way Julius looked at me at our first meeting at the house, the day Dino was removed from my life, the first time those looks were welcomed. That was the day Julius no longer spared such glances for me, and I would curse it forever.

He would come around.

Hell, he already was.

Pretending I didn’t see the way his eyes roamed me was difficult but I returned to the mirror, no longer looking at him, allowing him to look his fill. “Thanks for the conditioner.”

No response.

“I’m going to need a few things, if you don’t mind.”

Still no response.

“Nothing too fancy, just a razor for my legs and underarms, maybe some *female* deodorant,” I emphasized, as I took his and liberally sprayed my armpits, “bras, panties, and a pair of scissors so I can cut my hair.”

The buzz of anger in the air had me forcing down a knowing grin. I was intentionally being a brat. I wanted a reaction, and I wasn’t at all prepared for the one I was about to get.

He stepped into the bathroom one menacing step, and I turned, my back to the vanity, anticipating his approach. With a short look at his bare feet and long, muscled legs, my heart beat faster. His brow low, he searched my face, and the silence was killing me.

“You think this is a goddamn hotel?”

Another step closer, and as I moved to retreat, my towel-covered lower back came into contact with the cool marble of the vanity. I was stuck. There was nowhere to retreat to.

My lips parted in surprise at the aggression that came off that calmly spoken question.

Cheeks flushed, I shook my head.

“You think I’m your fucking butler?” His jaw steeled with that one.

I swallowed hard, my voice weak. “I’m not asking for much. I didn’t ask to be here, Julius. Don’t be unreasonable.”

He took one more step, this one larger than the others, and stood toe to toe with me, looking down at me with eyes so cold they could only be described as glacial. “Let’s recap, shall we?” Oh, I didn’t like the sound of that. He leaned down, getting into my face, and his quiet words were somehow louder to me than a shout. “You force yourself into my life, ending an innocent man’s life for reasons you won’t reveal to me, fuck up my reputation and mess with my business all in the span of an hour, and *embarrass* me, have me chase you halfway into the next county, burden my life with your mere presence and take over my space, my personal haven, where I go to be relieved of shit like you”—Jesus, that hurt more than it should’ve—“and you feel you have the right to ask anything of me?” His nostrils flared with his barely concealed fury and his eyes blazed. “Bitch, *please*. I beg you to give me an excuse to pop your ass and, right now, you’re coming close.”

What he whispered next was somewhat baffling.

His hand came up slowly, and he gently fingered a strand of my hair, accidentally touching my upper arm, causing it to break out in gooseflesh. His warm breath on my cheek, he muttered, “You’re not cutting your hair. Don’t ever fucking ask me again.”

With that, he spun on his heel and left the bathroom, shutting it closed behind him with a light slam.

The hurt in me throbbed through my entire body, my breathing stiff, making my limbs weak. Raising my fingers to my lips, I held them there.

I’d wanted a reaction and, yes, I’d gotten one. And this reaction rocked me.

But then, why did it seem I was more affected than Julius?

I shook off the thought and turned slowly, brushing my teeth in thick silence, hoping the morning would improve from here on out.

Now, about an hour has passed before the sound of the front door opening slowly, quietly, sounds. It closes with a hush, and soft, muted

footsteps move down the hall.

When she moves to pass the kitchen, she glances in, stopping in surprise with her heels in one of her slender hands. The look of shock is quelled quickly and, lifting her nose in pride, she makes her way into the kitchen as if nothing happened the day before.

A cat-like smile on her pretty, bare face, she walks right past me without a backward glance and moves toward the coffeemaker, where Julius stands. “Morning.”

Dressed in blue jeans and a white long-sleeved tee, his shoulders loosen as the worry of not having his precious Ling nearly disappears, and he brings his mug of coffee to his lips and sips. “Have fun?”

Her tone is non-committal. “Yep, sure.”

He glances at her over his mug. “So, who was it this time? Chip? Norman?”

I watch her watch him thoughtfully before she responds daringly, “I never got his name, but I got a hell of a response when I called him Daddy.”

I’m sure he’s going to tear her apart with that smartass comment. Instead, much to my despair, he dips his chin, shaking his head lightly as his body shakes with his silent laughter.

“All things with Ling are a thing... You either love her or hate her, no in-between.”

Wasn’t that what he’d said?

One thing I knew for sure, Ling and I would never be friends. And what I was about to do was going to cement our hatred for one another.

I stand from my position at the dining table, bringing my empty coffee mug over to the kitchen sink and rinsing it. From my peripheral vision, I see the very moment she notices the clothes on my body.

“Yo, bitch. You raid my closet?” she asks, scarcely hiding her anger at the thought.

Wearing an expression of angelic innocence, I look down at the wide-leg linen pants and toffee cashmere sweater before looking up at her and responding, “Uh, no. Jay got them while I was showering this morning. I hope that was okay.”

Tone. Innuendo. A false sense of closeness. The short declaration had it all.

I aim for a hit.

And my belly warms as I see my arrow meets its mark.

Ling's smug expression falters. Her eyes narrow at me then she turns the same look on Julius. "Oh, 'Jay' is it now?" Pushing herself off the counter by her hip, she moves to exit the kitchen. "Well, I'm tired. I've been up all night." She glances from me to Julius. "I'll let you and *Jay* get back to whatever it was you were doing before I got here."

We watch her ascend up the stairs, and a full minute passes before Julius comments, "I don't know what the hell that was about but don't play with her, Alejandra. She doesn't do games well, and when she decides she wants to play, it's only because she plans to win."

Don't we all?

My face turns hard as I remark, "Thanks for the warning, but I'm not playing games."

My life is not a goddamn game. This is serious.

He calls me out with little fire, "Sure are. You did it with me just before in the shower, and now you're doing it with Ling."

"No, I'm not," I speak too fast, my guilt evident.

His full lips tilt in the corner and, raising his hand, he scratches at his five o'clock shadow. "Baby," he starts. "People like me and Ling invented manipulation tactics. Can't nobody do 'em better than us. You're making rookie mistakes and giving yourself away." His semismile softens his entire face, and it's beautiful. "Just stop, and we'll all get along just fine."

I frown and turn so he can't see the internal struggle building behind my eyes.

I was giving myself away? How?

My shoulders droop with the knowledge that he's been onto me from the moment he woke. The soft clink of his mug being placed in the sink sounds and I feel him at my back.

What he says next has my entire body turning cold with dread. "Want me to off your dad for you?"

My eyes wide, I spin on him and gape, before rushing out, "What? No! Don't you dare!"

His face expectant, he nods softly, then states, "That right there. That's who you are, Alejandra. You're not a seductress. You're not a schemer. You wear your heart on your sleeve. So whatever you're thinking, stop, and just be your sweet self."

He was killing me with his words, and I was ashamed at the hot sting of tears burning my eyes. I blinked them back. "I'm not weak."

"No," he agrees without hesitation, but looks at me from a different angle. "And I'd love to get inside that head of yours." He straightens, taking a lock of my hair between his fingers and tugging gently. "But you won't let me in, baby." He let the strand of hair fall to rest on my shoulder and shrugs. "I want to help you, but I can't do it without what you know. You don't have a lot of time, so you need to decide what's worth more to you... your life," he urges, as he takes a number of steps back toward the stairs, "or your pride."

As he follows Ling upstairs, he leaves me there, alone, unsupervised, and it's then that I realize he isn't insincere. He is confident I won't leave, and he's right, because I have no one. No one but him.

Perhaps he really wants to help me. Or maybe...

A cold feeling spreads throughout me from the toes up.

"People like me and Ling invented manipulation tactics. Can't nobody do 'em better than us."

I shake my head at the comprehension that I had just been played like a finely tuned violin.

Julius does not want to help me. He wants to get rid of me. He wants to save his own ass, as I planned to do for myself, not that I blame him. If it were a choice between you or me, I would almost always choose myself.

He'd all but told me the truth in his anger-filled speech this morning that I was nothing but a piece of shit.

If only I could be like Ling, someone with backbone, someone capable. Maybe then I could find my place in this messed-up world of mine. Maybe if...

A light bulb goes off in my head, illuminating my thoughts, making them crystal clear.

Just like that, my plan changes from A to B.

I'm not going to become like Ling.

A secret smile glances my lips.

I'm going to replace her.

TWENTY-SEVEN

JULIUS

"Don't walk away from me," I growl, following her through the house. Goddamn little sparrow is making my head implode with every silent glare. If she wants to continue to hold her tongue, I will make her talk. Maybe telling her that I should have just let Gio have her was fierce, but her reaction was one I needed to see. The only person she had that kind of reaction to was whenever Dino's brother was mentioned.

My lip twitching in anger, I fight the urge to reach out and grab her by the wrist to keep her still, and I accuse, "You were having an affair with him, with Gio? Weren't you? That's why you wanted Dino dead." I pause to gauge her reaction, but she's off, as far away from me as she can possibly get. "I should've guessed. He didn't look all that upset about the death of his brother." I glare at her retreating back. "I'll bet my left nut that's why he offered to find you himself. Is that it?" She keeps walking and my stomach burns, tight and coiled in agitation, and fury blazes, singeing my insides. *"Talk to me."*

She limps as she power walks, not as badly as she did the day before, but bad enough that my stomach tightens with the need to pick her up and carry her to the sofa, somewhere soft and comfortable. My pride, of course, will never allow that to happen, but for the record, I want to.

"Fuck you," she snarls, doing laps around the house, this being our second time through the kitchen. I smile secretly, knowing she has no idea where to go, but this doesn't slow her pace.

I try a gentler approach.

"Alejandra." Shit. My tone is still too harsh. I try again. "Baby, stop. Let's talk."

At my calling her baby, she spins on her heel, wincing slightly, and I nearly run her down at the sudden stop. She glowers up at me, raising a

hand and poking me in the chest with one solid finger. Her eyes flame and she speaks through gritted teeth.

“Stop.” *Poke.* “Calling.” *Poke.* “Me.” *Poke.* “Baby.” *Poke, poke, poke.*

Fuck.

The attitude.

It does things to me.

My dick stirs from behind my black pants and I shift on my feet, throwing her a menacing look. “I’ll call you whatever I feel like, *baby.*” I move slowly, getting down into her space until we’re nose to nose. “For all intents and purposes, you belong to me.”

And, dear God, I wish that were the honest truth, that I could use her the way I really want to. Sleeping beside her is hard enough. My dick cries wet, thick tears every morning in the shower, but it hardly satisfies me.

Ling called me out the night before, and although I denied the accusation, she was right. I’m getting attached to her. It was a rookie mistake giving her access to my space. And as much as I want to get rid of her, my chest tightens at the thought of... of...

My mind utters the words I wouldn’t dare.

Of being alone again.

Ling is also a friend, but she is more an associate. She has her own interests, and they don’t involve me. Honestly, I don’t dig the shit Ling is into. We don’t interact socially, don’t go out to dinner, and we don’t get deep and meaningful. Not that Ling has it in her to do deep and meaningful. She has her space upstairs, and I have mine downstairs. We eat together on occasion only because it’s convenient, but we do this in silence for the most part, intermittently talking shit about work.

Alejandra is a complicated creature and, Lord have mercy, I find myself drawn to her. All day, she doesn’t stop with the talking, but as soon as we move toward the bedroom to sleep, she shuts down, becoming jittery and stiff. And it fucking kills me.

I get it. She doesn’t know me from Adam and, at night, I might fantasize about all the different ways I can make her scream in pleasure, but I won’t go there. Not even if she wants me to.

Well, damn.

Okay, I’d likely resist a while but, fuck, I’m only human. I don’t know if I’d have it in me to deny a woman like Alejandra. She’s petite, something

I've always loved. She's beautiful, a bonus. And she's smart, not at all the ditz she'd have me believe she is.

The sands in her hourglass quicken by the minute. Tomorrow is her deadline.

If she doesn't give me something—*anything*—by then, she gets sent back home, a lamb to the slaughter.

I'm giving her an opportunity to save herself, but she's making it difficult.

Lightly grasping the front of her linen shirt, I watch her big brown eyes widen as large as saucers, and I growl in warning, "Time's almost up, little one. What's it going to be?"

Her eyes bright, she swallows hard and looks me in the eye, as she states, "You're just like them."

My brow furrows. "Like who?"

She takes a step back. "Them." Then another. "All of them." Suddenly, a look of pure sadness sweeps her. "You don't want to help me. You want to help yourself. The only person I can rely on is me." Her eyes meet mine, and there's something there. Grief, maybe. "I thought maybe you were different, but you can't even see what's right in front of you."

I take a step toward her, taking both her hands without permission and squeezing them tightly as I implore, "Give me a reason to help you." I let go of her hand and reach up to cup her cold cheeks. "I'm all ears. Just say the words, baby."

Her eyes fill with tears, and she shuts them tight before they have a chance to betray her. She sniffs prettily and lets out a hoarse whisper. "I wish I could trust you, Julius." As she dips her chin, I let go of her, and my hands fall to my sides. She hits me hard with her next softly spoke words. "You seem like the type of guy that a girl would do just about anything to have on her side." In her voice, I find traces of pensiveness.

And with those words, my chest caves. I want her to stay with me. Permanently.

Shit.

Is this what happened to Twitch with Lexi?

What the fuck was this little sparrow doing to me?

Because I get it now. I get it. And I owe Twitch an apology for all the ribbing I gave him.

As she turns to walk into my bedroom, a feeling of dread passes through me at the realization that I have someone special in my grasp and that I may have to let her go. Knowing this, I panic.

My next offer stuns even me. “What if I said I’d protect you?”

She pauses at the doorway and, without turning back, responds, “I would tell you not to make promises you can’t keep.”

My body rigid with unease, she closes the door behind her, the soft click of the latch echoing in my mind.

“You rang,” Ling utters as she walks into my bathroom.

I don’t exactly feel good about this, but I also don’t have a choice. “You’re up tonight. I have a meeting that I can’t miss.”

Her eyes narrow dangerously. “So you go out and drink with the boys, while I get stuck babysitting the little cunt who likes to backchat?”

Fixing my hair in the mirror, I put no heat into my next comment. “Don’t call her that. And yes, every now and again, you’ll have to do something you don’t want to. It’s called working, Ling.”

“No,” she argues. “*This* is not working. Working is guns and men in suits and shoot-outs.” She leans her hip against the counter and moves to place her face in my view. “*This* is bullshit.”

This is the closest to pouting I’ve ever heard Ling get. I glance at her, my brow raised in surprise.

She lowers her face and sneers. “I’m not going to like her just because your cock stands to attention whenever she’s in the room.”

My eyes on her, I lean in, and warn, “I’m getting real tired of this petulant bullshit attitude of yours, Ling. On a five-year-old, it would be cute. On you?” I look her up and down. “Not so much.”

She opens her mouth to fire off another round, but I cut her off with, “I expect I don’t need to tell you that if she’s harmed in any way, there’ll be hell to pay.”

Her mouth set in a grim line, she nods once. “I get it.”

“No, you don’t,” I tell her. “You don’t get it. This shit I’m spouting is serious.” Taking a step closer, I lock her in, me at her front, the vanity to her back. I lower my gruff voice. “If you lay a hand on her, touch a single hair on her head, look at her the wrong way, I swear to you, Ling”—my breath

heats the apple of her cheek—"you will be out on your ass without a dime, blacklisted." My hand comes up to caress her cheek. "Now do you get me?"

A moment's silence.

"Yeah." A look of pure hatred shines in her eyes. "I get you."

"Good." Dropping my hand, I move to the mirror, looking at myself one last time, and mutter clinically, "That's real good."

TWENTY-EIGHT

ALEJANDRA

Julius walks out of the bathroom and back into the bedroom as I continue to clean the healing wound on my heel. He approaches the bed and kneels when he reaches my side. “Still sore?”

I don’t look up at him because I’m afraid he’ll see too much in my eyes, see inside of me, see the anxiousness of knowing he’s leaving me alone with Ling. It’s now with the apprehension I feel that I comprehend how ridiculous I had been to have once felt safer with Ling as a buffer between Julius and me. I realize he wouldn’t leave me with her unless he had to, so I don’t embarrass myself by begging, mainly because I’m sure if I did, he would stay. And that would just confuse things between us even more. “It’s getting better.”

He watches me in quiet as I put my all into my task, doing my best to ignore him.

“I’ll be back late.”

I keep my voice even. “Okay.”

“Look at me.”

I really don’t want to, but his tone is firm and unyielding, and after years of having submission beaten into you, it becomes little more than a reflex. My eyes meet his, stormy and full of concern, and my mouth parts, my breath leaving me in a whoosh. It’s like being run over by a bus, then the bus reversing, and being run down again. My breath hitches and I don’t realize I’m crying until I feel the wetness trail my cheeks.

“Hey,” he starts, reaching out to wipe away a tear with his thumb, running his fingers down my jawline.

And I can’t stop the whispered words from escaping. “Please come back.”

He frowns. “I will.”

“Good,” I mutter, blinking through the torrent of streaming tears, then speak just above a hush. “Because right now, you’re all I have.”

Before I can assess the impact of those words, I am swooped off the bed and lifted into a strong pair of arms. They hold me tight. They are unwavering, and for the first time in a long while, I feel safe.

“Get out,” he barks, and I hear the notorious sound of heels clicking from the doorway of the bathroom, toward the bedroom door, and then out into the hall.

My face buried into his shoulder, he cradles me as if I were the most precious thing in his life, and it leaves a chaotic mess of thoughts in its trail. His large hand slides up my back to the base of my neck, where his warm fingers hold me to him, and I wonder if Julius needs the contact as much as I do.

“Look at me,” he speaks gently. This is not a demand, but a beseeching request.

With a light sniff, I pull back, clutching the material at his sides with everything I have. He searches my face a long moment before leaning in and pressing his warm, full lips to my forehead, softly, with tender regret. I press myself into him and take all that he gives me. When, finally, he pulls away, he lets out a long, weary sigh before glaring at me, but there is no heat behind it. It’s all for show. And to back up my claim, he speaks softly, taking care. “Tomorrow, we’re going to talk, yeah? And we’re not leaving a single stone unturned. ‘Cause things...” He eyes me cautiously, as though I’m a frightened animal set to bolt at any given moment. He finishes his statement. “Things have changed.”

His startling admission has me blinking up at him. How have the tables turned so? And why did his declaration secretly thrill me? Realizing he expected some form of response, I gave him a short nod of agreement.

His soft face turns inflexible when he avows, “You best not play me, Alejandra. It wouldn’t end well for you.”

Without a thought, my mouth opens, and I return, “I already tried.”

With that, his face softens once more, and a small smile plays on his lips. “Oh, yeah? How’d that go?”

“Not very well,” I admit quietly, without an ounce of shame.

And the giddiness that whooshes through me as he dips his head, his shoulders bouncing in silent laughter, is priceless. For a short moment, I

feel as normal as I possibly can.

Even more so when he lifts his smiling face and shocks me with the brightness of his million-dollar smile. Thrice as much when he leans toward me and presses his full, soft lips to mine in what would essentially be the shortest, most precious kiss of my brief life.

Soft-mouthed. Closed-lipped. And perfect in every possible way. So much that the shock of it makes me want to cry all over again.

My chest aches and a spark flares through me, warming my cold heart. Hope reignites.

Would it truly hurt to confide in Julius, just a little?

It's not like things can get worse for me.

I'm so sick of being hurt by men, and although fear plagues me, somewhere deep inside of me calls out to give him a chance.

The male, woody scent of his cologne fills my lungs, and I wish to drown in the smell of him, never wanting to come up for air, willingly forfeiting my life for this single moment.

Not meaning to in the slightest, I release the material at his sides and run my hands up his firm, muscled chest, gripping his large shoulders with my small hands as tightly as I can. Julius releases my lips and breaks my heart when he shows me true, unselfish affection, keeping his face close to mine then running his nose up the length of mine before returning to peck my lax lips once more.

"It's all about us now," he coaxes, running his firm hands down my back, resting them on my hips then squeezing lightly.

And with a short, stifling breath, I learn to trust again. "Yeah." Because quite frankly, if I would ever want an *us*, I would want an *us* with Julius.

He stands then, placing me on my feet and giving me a look that tells me he no longer wants to leave. With a huff, he shakes his head and steps away from me. "Tomorrow, we talk."

"Okay," is all I say, because I can't think with him so close.

Another step toward the door. "And you'll tell me everything."

"I will," I promise, masking my surprised relief of having someone to confide in. I haven't been able to openly talk to anyone in years. Having that now, after all this time, makes me feel equal parts nervous and thrilled.

He pauses at the doorway, dressed in all black, looking like heaven on earth. He takes his time, looking his fill, and without a single spoken word,

he turns and leaves. And I let him.

"It's all about us now."

What does that mean exactly?

I definitely know what I *want* it to mean, but my hopes have been dashed so many times before, I don't want to overthink Julius's cryptic statement.

My mind a mess, I climb back into bed, curl up into a ball, holding myself tightly, and cover myself completely.

Not ten minutes pass before I hear the tedious sound of clicking heels in the distance. The covers are thrown off me and I stiffen, not sure what to expect. Maybe a beating, just to shake things up.

Instead, Ling glances down at me in repulsion. Looking down her nose at me, she says, "Get up."

But I'm confused, and the words don't sink in.

After a short minute, she repeats herself, "I said get up."

Using my elbow to lift myself into a half-sitting position, I question her, "Why?"

With a sly smile, she reveals, "Because we're going out."

What?

I sit up fully, eyes wide. "Where?"

But she retreats, her signature heels clicking right out of the room.

I collapse back onto the bed and wonder whether this is such a good idea.

From down the hall, Ling yells, "*Get up!*"

And because it sounds more of a demand than an invite, I get my ass up.

TWENTY-NINE

TWITCH

When Ethan Black hands me the long, black baton, I blink down at it a moment before turning my glare up to him and asking, “What the fuck? You think this is band practice, Black? Jesus, give me something deadly.”

After the silence I gave as a peace offering during the eight-hour flight to the state of our target, you’d think he’d be more appreciative.

Black grins darkly and leans in to sneer, “Not on your life.”

Cocksucking jack-off.

Surrounded by men in black SWAT gear, I blend in with the crowd, dressed extraordinarily similar, but the only thing missing could save my life.

A gun.

As the truck slows to a crawl then stops completely, I shake my head. “Not feeling good about this, Black.”

Ignoring my concerns, he probes, “Is that the place?”

My eyes turn up to meet his and I let my defiance be known through the cold expression on my face.

He stares me down before asking again, “That the place or not, Twitch?” And I breathe deeply, calming the urge to break his fucking jaw.

I don’t bother looking out the window. I’ve been here before. I remember it well. “It’s the place.”

The quaint townhouse in the suburbs is modest and appears to be like any other townhouse on the block. It draws very little attention to it in the way of looks. If a person were to pass it on the street, they wouldn’t look twice at it. It’s unassuming, inconspicuous, designed for that very purpose.

The goings-on inside however... that’s something else completely.

Drugs are being packed and sold as we wait. Also being sold are the bodies of girls between the ages of sixteen and twenty. Because, as Egon Baris, owner of this house and the leader of the Albanian Shiptare, had once

told me, no one wants to pay for saggy tits and a loose cunt, but men will pay surprisingly well for a playmate without an identity, a playmate that no one will miss should that playtime escalate to something darker.

Majority of these girls are brought in by the container-load from Eastern Europe, mainly from Poland, Ukraine, and Romania. The prettier ones are led by the promise of becoming dancing girls at popular US nightspots, while the plain girls are told they will be serving at some of the finest eating establishments this country has to offer.

Egon doesn't like to drug his girls, because, A: he gets off on seeing the girls cower in fear, knowing what's coming when a man steps into her room, and B: he doesn't believe in wasting his product.

There are concealed, illegally obtained, military grade weapons in the basement, including those of police officers, former and present. Some of the artillery belongs to the Russian armed forces, but it was stolen by some ballsy prick without a name, a man who didn't expect to survive the heist, and when the price of those weapons tripled, Egon paid the man without complaint, into the hundreds of millions.

Pocket change for a man like him.

Egon Baris is a known psychopath. To make matters worse, he's a *paranoid* psychopath. Which likely means that from the moment this very military-looking truck is visible from the house, he's going to panic, and he's going to do this in an extreme way.

How do I know this?

Because it's what I would do.

A block away, parked at the side of the road, I warn Ethan, "He's going to come out guns blazing. You get that, right?" I pause to let that sink in then speak loud enough so the eight others in the truck can hear me. "You get the men first, but don't take the women for face value. They might look meek and pretty, but they're Albanian. These bitches are taught to wield a gun from the time they're old enough to carry one and, believe me, they don't think nothing of popping all your asses. If anyone pulls a gun, and you better believe they fucking will, you take 'em down." I look around at the stern-faced men who don't bother to look back at me. Disrespectful fucks. "You take 'em all down."

But Black rushes to add, "All except Baris. We want Egon Baris alive. If you need to take him down, use non-lethal force." I throw him a look that

says he's crazy if he thinks Egon will be an easy target. With a roll of his eyes, he barks out, "Listen, I don't care if you shoot out this dickhead's knee-caps or if he loses a hand. You just make sure the motherfucker is whole enough to stand trial and serve in prison, is that clear?"

A chorus of "Yes, sir" rings out, and a minute later, over the radio, Black confirms that the second truck is in position, rounding the back of the house and they're ready to move at Black's word.

The clothes I'm wearing feel restrictive, although they are anything but. It's all in my head. The black fatigues fit well, but the thick material of the long-sleeved black shirt is heavy on my skin. Shit, I'm used to wearing silk, not heavy thread cotton. The bulletproof vest over the top of it is stifling. With a black helmet to match, I do as the others do and pull the goggles over my eyes, lifting the half-face mask up and over my nose at Black's demand. The black steel-toed boots however... I'm keeping those.

Black's men have three weapons within arm's reach, an MP5 sub-machine gun in hand, and two .45-caliber pistols strapped to each thigh.

And me?

I look down at the baton with blind rage. It's like Black's setting me up to take a bullet.

Fuck him.

It happens fast, too fast to truly comprehend.

The truck starts and jolts forward, building up speed then screeching to a halt in front of the house Egon Baris built on sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll. The men file out in beautiful uniformity, up the front steps and I follow behind, way behind. If anyone's getting shot, you mark my words, it's going to be a dude with a motherfucking gun, not me. Although they don't announce their presence, as soon as the door is smashed in—thanks to the heavy breacher used as a battering ram—shouts and cries in Albanian sound throughout the entire building, along with the sounds of thudding footfalls as Egon's men work to hold the keep.

Shots are fired as soon as Black's men are sent upstairs. The shocked cries of the girls are loud, and hearing them beg for their lives in broken English makes me want to smash heads.

"On the floor! Hands up!"

"Put your weapon down!"

“Where is Baris? Huh?” A heavy thud sounds, followed by a long, pained groan. *“Where is Egon Baris?”*

“If you do not comply, I will shoot you. Do you understand me?”

“It’s okay, miss. I’m not going to hurt you.”

“Get down. Get down. I said get down!”

The law is tedious work. If it were me here on my own, they’d have never heard me coming. The last thing they’d have seen was the barrel of my gun between their eyes and then *bam*.

It was a mercy, my way, really. Quick and concise. No life flashing before their eyes, no nothing.

Just fade to black.

The end.

Game over.

Yeah.

It was definitely a kindness, my way.

The fight, the struggle for control, it sends the blood humming through my veins. Truth be told, I’m not needed here. With sixteen armed men including Ethan Black and myself, the war is already won.

But I get it. I understand the need to battle. After all, you back a dog into a corner and they’re gonna bite. Same goes for people.

Scattered bodies of both men and women litter the floor, some still moving but visibly injured, while others lay with their eyes open, their faces in a state of shock, the light dimmed in their cold, dead stare.

Carnage.

It’s my life.

The only thing better than sex is taking the life from someone who really fucking deserves it. Nothing can satisfy like that. Not even busting a nut.

I follow one of the men around the corner to the already breached entrance of the basement, when a shadow comes forward in the corner of my eye. Without a second thought, I lift my arm as high as I can and bring it down so fast that the baton makes a whooshing noise through the air, followed by a loud snap as I break the arm of one of Egon’s men.

He howls in pain, falling to the ground, clutching at his arm, and Black’s man, the one in front of me, turns at the agonizing cry. He looks down at the man as I lift my leg, bringing it down, stomping on the man’s face. Blood spurts from his nose as I feel the crunch of the bones breaking in his face

beneath my heel. I do this again and again, not because I need to, not because I need to disarm this man, but because it feels so fucking good to break something in this all too perfect world. The man grunts, then again, and once more, softer this time, till nothing escapes his parted mouth, his eyes completely hollow.

That's when I decide to step away. I pant and swallow and inhale deeply, as the soldier boy by my side utters, "Not bad."

And I huff out a half laugh, fighting to breathe. "Says the guy with a gun."

The dude smiles then, and I tail him as he enters the basement. Four of Egon's men have been disarmed, and Black looks around at the weapons in the room. With a shake of his head, he turns to me before speaking into his earpiece. "Copy that." He runs his fingers over a Russian APS assault rifle. "The fuck was he preparing for, World War III?"

"Men like Baris don't ask questions," I admit gruffly. "We sell to the highest bidder."

Black moves to walk past me, but stills when he reaches my side. "We got him. He tried to escape through an intricately built rabbit warren of underground tunnels, but we got him."

My response is artless. "Good."

It was good. That was one down, one less thing stopping me from rejoining my family.

Oh yeah, it was definitely good.

More trucks roll in, and the house is torn apart. Evidence is collected, the injured are carted off to the hospital, the dead are bagged and tagged, and Black comes to stand by me. "You did what you said you would, Falco." He looks uncomfortable to concede, "I wasn't sure you would, but you pulled through. You brought us a big fish. Good job."

I don't care for sentiment. It makes my stomach coil. So as always, I bring a dose of real to the table. "Don't you fucking thank me. I didn't do this for you." I blow out a long breath, then mutter, "Fuck, I'll empty the entire motherfucking sea if it means I get to go home, Black." A moment's pause, then, "Tired of other people getting my son." I swallow hard. "I just want to be with my son."

"You will," Black replies immediately, before moving up the stairs of the basement and out of sight.

That sounded like an oath to me.

I'm hoping it was, because if Ethan Black doesn't fulfill his promise, no hurricane nor hellfire could stop me from making his wife a widow.

THIRTY

ALEJANDRA

The loud dance music booms its bass beat right through my chest, forcing my heart to thump to the tune of Calvin Harris and Rihanna's "This Is What You Came For," and the flashing blue neon lights darting across the darkened club hurt my eyes, but I don't dare complain, because regardless of what I feel, I'm out of the house, and that trumps all else right now. Irrespective of the fact that I'm out on the town with Ling, this evening feels somewhat ordinary. A kind of normal I hadn't experienced before in my sheltered life. Tonight, we aren't abductor and captive, but just two women going out for a drink in an obviously popular nightspot.

The fact that Ling has brought me here somewhat eases my mind. Logic tells me that she wouldn't have taken me somewhere so congested if she planned on killing me. A definite bonus.

I wish I had a cell phone. I wish I could call Julius and tell him where I am, or perhaps just text him, hoping to hear that *ping* and feel the reassurance of his response.

Whenever we had friends and family over, Dino and I would play the role of loving couple so well that by the time people began to leave, I would sometimes forget it was all an act. And when the ball dropped, and Dino would commence being master of my body, dictator of my mind, a slow sadness would seep into my very soul. I would feel nothing but the cold reality that was my life, a life I would've traded in a heartbeat to the first taker. Dino had the ability to make me feel higher than the tallest mountain, but I came to realize he only made me feel that way so he could push me over the edge and watch me fall, stumbling to my death, over and over again. Round and round we went.

It was hard living my life, and doing it in ladylike silence.

The truth is, I am not unlike any other woman. I want to be with a man who accepts me for who I am. I would like for a man to love me for all my

small quirks rather than shame me for them. And above all, I crave the affection of a man who will give it to me freely, not use it as a weapon against me.

At this moment in my life, I am tired, but I am strong. And I will keep going as far as the road takes me, as far as there is road to travel.

I've paid my unjust dues for more than ten lifetimes with my marriage to Dino. I'm not giving up this life, not one I've earned with the scars of my misery, not without a fight.

It takes me back to something my brother told me when I asked how it felt to kill a person. Miguel explained, "Ana, *bebida*, we all come into this world kicking, and screaming, and covered in somebody else's blood. You got to decide if you have a problem going out the same damn way. And me? I do not."

As per all the children in my family, I had been taught to handle a gun. My father wasn't interested in having us girls know about weapons, not until Miguel pointed out that, regardless of how safe we think we are, knowledge is power, and he assured our father that the lessons would not corrupt his little ladies. To say he was impressed with how well we took to our shooting classes was an understatement, and on my wedding night, my father gave me a gift.

It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen, a gold-plated .22-caliber semi-automatic pistol with rose-gold budding roses engraved into it, the spiked vines coming up the grip to decorate the barrel. It was love at first sight, and I cherished it, taking it with me everywhere I went thanks to a concealed weapons permit. Until one fateful night, the first of many nights where Dino and Gio would push me so far over the edge that careening to my death sounded a wonderful reprieve from my shitty existence.

After being mentally abused for what seemed like hours, Dino had tied me naked to the bed with a ball gag in my mouth and a sheer blindfold over my eyes, and I listened to Gio describe the ways in which he would deflower my then nine-year-old sister. When she was ready, of course. Dino laughed and told Gio he would have to wait a while. Gio just replied a cool, "Oh, do I?"

Dino laughed, but I heard the threat clear as crystal.

Gio wanted my sister Rosa for his own.

I sobbed violently behind the blindfold, spittle dripping down my chin around the ball gag. I knew I had to do something to keep Gio away from her. But a man like Gio was not easily swayed. He needed persuasion in a manner of which he understood.

So when Dino released me, smacking me lightly on the bottom and telling me to get myself cleaned up, I kept my head lowered tamely and moved across the room, heading toward the bathroom, while Dino poured Gio another glass of overpriced, disgusting whiskey. I knew it was dreadful. After all, I'd had it poured down my throat a number of times.

On my way to the bathroom, I stopped just before I made it to the doorway. Reaching over to my purse, which hung innocently enough on a golden hook, I took out my gun, dropping my purse onto the floor, and I turned. Holding my weapon in both of my hands, I only had one man in sight, arms raised, pistol poised with the promise of eternal deliverance.

My vision blurred as I began to speak, my entire body shaking with pent-up anger. Breathing deeply through my nose, I spoke low, only for him. "She's just a child."

Somewhere in the room, a firm voice spoke. "Alejandra, what do you think you're doing?"

But the rage bubbled, boiled inside of me, and reality was slowly slipping away. I took a step forward on trembling legs, my glaring eyes on the smirking face of my brother-in-law. "You're not worthy. You are toxic."

His smile began to falter, his amusement vanishing, and I could see I was beginning to strike further and further to where it hurt. And it felt so damn good that I couldn't yet see the consequences of my actions.

My own cold smile began to form through the mist of fury, and I pushed, "You are nothing, the middle son, the forgotten one, so goddamned desperate for attention."

Gio's smile fell completely, crumbling away like bits of stone as the sea pounded angrily against a ragged cliff side, and for me, naked and beaten, the victory was immeasurable. Another step forward, less trembling this time, my small triumph had me doing this with a false sense of confidence.

My smile turned vicious, barely human, and I spoke through gritted teeth. "You can't have her, you sick fuck. I'll kill you first." My finger wrapped around the trigger, but before I had a chance to cleanse the world of the pure evil in front of me, something came down hard on the back of my

head, and as I landed on the ground with a thud, my head lolling to the side, my last vision before I lost consciousness was Dino taking my gun and handing it to his brother.

It was lost to me. I never saw it again, nor was I granted the use of a single weapon after that one incident. I think it was a shock to Dino. He believed me tamed in every way. I thought it was good to keep him on his toes, resisting ever so slightly at random moments over the years. I thought I was so smart. I resisted enough for Dino to have to repeat himself, never enough to truly make him angry. Truth was, at the time, resisting was all I had. I didn't think too hard about what I was really doing. For Dino to have me struggle then submit over and over, it was a game to him, one I didn't realize I was playing. My occasional defiance followed by a swift surrender had Dino thinking he was winning me, my body, every damn time.

Now that I knew this, I hated that I had given that to him.

So to have a man like Julius come into my life when I had fallen lower than the rocky crevices of hell, for him to hold me so tenderly when I cried, to wipe away my tears and kiss my forehead as if I were an exquisite treasure, that meant something to me.

I want to keep that.

I want to keep him for as long as he will allow it.

Perhaps I'm not the smartest girl in the world, but I'm not stupid enough to pass up what Julius makes me feel. And for once in my life, it's *good*. Knowing that the unexplainable feeling is mutual is more than I could have imagined.

Now, as I avoid putting too much pressure on my still tender heel, Ling takes a seat at the bar, ordering drinks. I stand awkwardly by her side, and I just know she's not going to offer me a seat, so I sit myself down beside her at the very moment the bartender places our drinks in front of us with a seductive smile.

When I dragged my ass out of bed and followed Ling to her room, she already had an outfit picked out for me. Wide-legged black pants with a tight black tank top and a beautifully intricate black lace wide-sleeved kimono-style cover that belted up around the waist. I picked up all the garments and moved to take them back to Julius's room so I could change, when Ling yelled out, "I don't bite, bitch."

To that, I called out, "Sure you do," and I stressed, "*bitch*."

Her cackle sounded as I closed the door behind me.

Now, with my hair pulled up into a neat bun at the top of my head, completely makeup-free, I ignore the pounding in my temples and lift my drink to my mouth. The second I smell it, I wince and put it back down on the bar.

Ling, in her perfect red dress, with her perfect red pumps, and her perfect red lips fighting a pout, leans over. “What’s the problem?” The only imperfection on her is the white strap across the bridge of her still bruised nose. It looks so much better than it had the day before. It’s almost completely healed.

I shake my head and keep my eye on the bar. “It’s whiskey. I can’t drink whiskey.”

“God, you’re so fucking precious.” Her lips pucker in distaste, and she flips her dark, gorgeous, dead-straight hair over her shoulder, looking out into the crowd. “Order whatever the fuck you want then. Jeez.”

She signals the bartender, and I order a Cape Cod—more commonly known as a vodka cranberry—thanking him as he places the tall glass in front of me with a wink. I sip at the tart cocktail, and I salivate at the mild sweetness of the cranberry juice. I have a feeling I know the answer already, but I ask Ling, “Does Julius know we’re here?”

“No,” she responds immediately. “I was told to watch you.” She grins modestly. “He never said anything about not leaving the house.”

Oh, she thinks she’s so clever.

I stir my drink with my straw. “Is he going to be pissed?”

She turns to me slowly, throwing me a look that says ‘What do you think, genius?’

My shoulders slump, and I sigh quietly. “He’s going to be pissed.”

Crossing her leg over the other, she explains in a bored tone, “Julius is always pissed. There are just varying degrees of his pissiness. Some days, he’s less pissed than others. Besides, he doesn’t have to know. We’ll be back before he is.”

The need to ask questions is overwhelming. I do my best to come off inconspicuous, and pry where I shouldn’t. “Has he always been like that?”

Her brows narrow at me. “What makes you think I’ve known him that long?”

“I don’t know.” I shrug. “You guys have a comfortable familiarity thing going on. I just assumed—”

Ling cuts me off with a curious glance, leans over and stares down at my lips. “There could be other reasons for that familiarity, Alejandra,” she offers enticingly.

My heart sinks, and it does this so dramatically that my straw slips out of my fingers and falls onto the dirty floor.

Ling takes obvious pleasure in my reaction. Her eyes flash in accomplishment as she sips on her whiskey sour and says, “No, he hasn’t always been like that. Believe it or not, there was once a time when Julius smiled a whole fucking lot.”

My voice soft, I have to ask, “What happened?”

“He lost someone.” Her posture stiffens to project a certain gracefulness, but her eyes betray her sadness. “We lost someone.”

I can’t think of anything to say to that, so I simply nod in understanding. Suddenly, a thought crosses my mind, and I wonder...

Ling’s husky chuckle sounds, and she answers my silent thought. “No, sweetheart. I’ve *always* been like this.” She raises her glass to mine, clicks them in cheers and drinks, tipping her head back and downing the first drink, moving the one she ordered for me closer to her.

Minutes of silence pass, and having finished my first drink, Ling orders me a second. The alcohol loosens my taut shoulders, and with it, my tongue. “Have you ever been to jail, Ling?”

She snorts. “A pretty girl like me? Naw.” She smiles then, and I’m shocked to find it’s genuine. “Anyway, I’d just fuck my way out.”

A surprised laugh bubbles up my throat. “What about Julius?”

Her watchful eyes search me. “I shouldn’t tell you shit.” She tilts her head to the side and puckers her lips in thought. “But I suppose now that Julius is planning on keeping you, it changes things.”

My mouth gapes a little with that revelation.

He *what* now? Does that mean what I think it means?

The spark of hope I felt earlier ignites into a healthy flame and my heart warms.

“*It’s all about us now.*”

Is that what Julius meant? He wasn’t taking me back?

My mind implodes with the possibilities.

Ling has no idea of the shock she's just dealt me and seeming to have a mental argument with herself, she straightens. "Meh, fuck it." With her expression completely void, she utters, "Yes. Yes, he has. Spent all his teenage years locked away in juvie."

It shouldn't have surprised me, but it did. Eyes wide, I shuffled my stool closer to her. "What for?"

"Manslaughter. It was originally a murder charge, but his aunt got some fancy lawyer who managed to talk the charge down, saying he acted in self-defense."

And my heart falls into the pit of my stomach.

Ling looks down at her drink a long moment. "If you caught your father raping your sister, what would you have done?"

Oh, God.

My heart stutters then races, and the blood drains from my face.

He didn't kill just anyone. He murdered his *father*.

An image crosses my mind. A younger, clean-faced Julius, sitting alone in a prison cell and taking his punishment graciously, knowing that his beloved sister is safe in the world.

It suddenly makes sense, his close relationship with Tonya. He saved her. He was her hero.

Hot tears spring behind my closed lids.

How I had wished for my own Julius in my days of despair.

I realize my emotional response is somewhat unusual, but I cannot stop the intense warmth flowing throughout my torso, slowly spreading to each and every one of my limbs. Soon, I'm just about glowing.

Suddenly, Ling stands, and she does this quickly. Her eyes fastened on a man across the room, she mumbles, "Stay here."

"Hey." I reach out to grasp her arm, but she turns on me, eyes flashing, and then we're nose to nose, as she hisses through gritted teeth, "Don't fucking move from this spot, Alejandra. Do you hear me?" Something cold and metallic is pressed into my knee hard. "I will shoot you. I will shoot you right in the kneecap. *Don't move.*"

She is not fucking around.

My eyes wide, I swallow hard and nod, because I'm not in the mood for a gunshot wound.

She moves across the room in no time at all, fluid and graceful, before standing by the booth, in profile, and speaking to a person I can't see. No matter how far left or right I move, I can't see shit.

Ling starts off smiling. After a moment, her face changes and I spot the way her hand remains clenched by her side. Soon, a tall man stands, but I can't make out his face. He leans over Ling, speaking directly into her ear. He does this for a long while. Minutes pass, and Ling wears a stricken expression before pulling herself together and removing all emotion from her face. She responds to the man, and he grips her shoulders, as if to try and keep her there. But all this does is infuriate her. Her light expression now dark, she speaks harsher, the veins in her neck bulging with every barked word.

The man pulls away from her, and I can finally see his face.

He's handsome. He's also Asian.

The conversation has taken a turn. Soon the man gets down into Ling's face and shouts at her, his gorgeous face contorted in rage. He grips her upper arms and shakes her like a ragdoll.

Oh no.

I watch Ling closely.

I've seen that shuttered look on her before. It's the same look I received after I broke her nose.

He shouldn't have done that.

She jerks his hands off her, and before the man knows what's hit him, Ling reaches under her skirt, flips open the butterfly switchblade, rears back and stabs him, pinning him to the wall by a knife through his palm. His roar echoes over the top of the music, or maybe I've just imagined it.

Mouth parted in shock, I move to stand, but she's already walking away, and by the time she reaches me, I'm up and following her without prompting. She only pauses for a moment to tip back her glass and finish her drink in one swallow.

We exit the club and enter the car. As we pull out onto the street, Ling utters clinically, "Wasn't that fun?"

I don't answer. In truth, it doesn't sound much like a question, let alone a question one should answer.

Blinking into the street, she mutters a quiet, "Yeah. That was fun."

THIRTY-ONE

JULIUS

Surrounded by laughing men letting loose with their drinks, I lean back in my chair and cradle my icy tumbler of straight up ouzo.

Half-naked women hang off members of the many firms. To the side of the room, one of the guys graciously accepts a blow job that one of the broads has offered. Another bout of laughter takes over the men, and it irritates me to no end. Men in my world don't laugh often. We meet once quarterly to talk a whole hour of business then dedicate the rest of the evening to shooting the shit.

I don't want to be here tonight.

I'm agitated, unable to concentrate, because my main focus is currently sleeping in my bedroom, curled up in my bed. The fact is that I'm away from Alejandra, and that makes me uneasy.

I wonder if she's all right.

My lip curls at a thought.

If Ling fucks with her, goddamn it, I'll make her sorry.

How I wish I could just up and leave these cocky fucks to their own little party. But you don't just leave one of these gatherings. That would be disrespectful, and I have seen men killed for less. You disrespect one of *these* men, and you leave in a body bag.

For years, we have met on the first of every January, April, July and October to discuss what has been happening in our respective worlds. Around the time these firms of dangerous men united, many of the gangs were at war with each other. Times have changed. War was not productive. The men decided a treaty was necessary, and as long as no purposely directed offense was given—otherwise known as “throwing shade”—then all was well in the underground.

Men who threw shade around here never lasted long. It only took a few months between the introduction of someone new, thinking they were hot as

hell, believing they knew better than the rest of us, and wanting us to grovel at their feet. Then, suddenly, they were gone.

Never to be seen again.

Cocky assholes were okay as long as they kept it on a leash, but you never dishonored your brethren, which, in some unlikely way, we all were.

While Marcos Demitriou gets his dick sucked, the conversation turns subdued.

Aslan Sadik, a Turk of The Lost Boys, puts the lit cigar to his lips and puffs lightly, exhaling the thick smoke around him. “You all hear about what happened to Baris?”

Silence ensues. Even Marcos stills, gently pushing away the kneeling woman who is all tits and fat lips. She pouts and he tucks himself into his pants before gently caressing her cheek, moving to rejoin the men.

All eyes are on Aslan and, so fucking typical of the Turk, he loves the attention. He inhales deeply, speaking through his exhale. “Fucking cops got him. Knew where his safe house was. Found it all. Most of his men are dead. Those who aren’t are just waiting for the moment to hang themselves.” He looks around the room. “Heard one of his men already did, with the sheet from his hospital bed.” He mimes a noose being pulled around his neck. “It’s all over. There’s no recovering from that. He has lost everything.”

The heavy accent of Titus Okoye, Liberian arms dealer, sounds into the silence. “How?” he asks, his dark face quizzical. “How did they find him?”

Aslan doesn’t respond, simply looks around the room at the people around him with clear interest.

Polar opposite of Titus, Lars Odegard of the Norwegian Pelt, looks his slender, pale face down at Aslan, his light blue eyes skeptical. “If I’m hearing correct, there is a note of accusation in your tone, Aslan.” At the clear statement, Aslan shrugs, his brows raised in mock innocence, and Lars runs a hand through his white-blond hair, looking as though he would love to throw his tumbler right in the center of Aslan’s forehead, leaving him a bloody mess.

Lars is not appeased by Aslan’s silence on the matter. “Tell me, Turk, who of us would gain from Egon being knocked out of the game?”

I’m not in the mood for this mindless debate, but Aslan is fucking with some serious men here tonight. Tensions are rising, and I need to restore the

calm. With a light snuffle, I roll my eyes. “None of us have gained directly from Egon Baris being taken out, but in saying that, we *are* businessmen.” I grin around the table, easing the strain. “The question is not who would gain from that Albanian psychopath losing his place in our world.” A few of the men chuckle, while others smile in agreement. “The question is who of us would be stupid enough to not want to replace the services he no longer provides?”

The men break out into enthusiastic laughter, clapping and nodding in agreement at the words I have said that all the others were thinking. And Aslan’s solemn spell is over.

I look Aslan in the eye, my own holding a warning, as I admit, “Because I would be all over that.” I lift my tumbler to my lips and throw it back, downing the contents in one smooth gulp, slamming my glass onto the table with a solid clink. “In a fucking heartbeat.”

Elias Munoz, American-Argentinian boss of Los Gatos Negros, the guys you go to for all your party drug needs, raises his glass to me. “Well said, Julius. Insightful, as always.”

I incline my head to him in silent thanks as a topless waitress comes over with a fresh tumbler of ouzo. Discreetly, I check my wristwatch and sigh at the display.

10:07 p.m.

Fuck me.

I fight the urge to run a hand over my eyes and sigh tiredly. This get-together will last well into the night, and I’m stuck in a room full of horny men, when I could be in my bed, sleeping beside a walking wet dream.

Figures that time would move slower than ever tonight.

My fingers tap against the solid marble of the table, and I stare at the wall, thinking about what Alejandra would possibly tell me tomorrow. Nothing much shocks me anymore. All I can hope for is something I can use to help her, to set her free.

Free.

I frown at the word.

In my opinion, freedom is overrated.

The man tells us we have freedom of speech, but cuts us down when we say something that doesn’t meet his ideals. We have freedom to go where we please but are told to follow the path laid out for us. We’re told to speak

our minds, but constantly have our mouths sewn shut, ordered to listen to those who apparently know better.

No.

Freedom is definitely overrated.

Besides, it's not like Alejandra will ever truly be free. She will be allowed a taste of it through me. The cost of her freedom comes at a high price, and when the time is right, I'll lay it on her, and something tells me she's going to be pissed as hell when it all comes to light.

It doesn't sit right with me, keeping it from her, but I know in my gut that after the smoke clears, she'll take my gesture for what it is. The ultimate act of protection.

The minutes pass slowly, and I don't bother initiating conversation with anyone. I'm not much of a talker on the best of days. My attention is elsewhere, when a woman dressed in a black suit enters the room and bends at the waist to speak into the ear of Luka Pavlovic, nicknamed the Croatian Sensation by women everywhere, owner of the establishment we sit in right at this very moment, and because I don't have my eyes on him, I miss the way he scowls at me.

"Julius, brother." From across the table, he all but growls, "You have a caller."

Silence, clear enough to hear a pin drop.

All eyes on me.

Well, fuck.

This is not good. A cardinal rule broken. You never reveal the location of a meet and, lord knows, I didn't. So who did?

I can't hide my bewilderment. "Excuse me?"

The woman stands by Luka and relays the message. "A gentleman has asked to see you, Mr. Carter. He's waiting in conference room two."

My eyes settle on Luka, and I respond calmly, sincerely, "I swear I don't know what this is about. I didn't tell a goddamned soul where I was going to be tonight."

The expression on my face must reveal my honesty, because, after a long moment of staring me down, Luka's posture eases. He lifts his glass, sipping at it before placing it back on the table. "Then by all means"—he waves an arm towards the door—"see to your unexpected guest."

I stand, straighten my jacket and exit the room. Walking down the hall, I pause when I come to stand in front of the door with the bold number two on it. In the back of my mind, I wonder if this is a set-up. I wonder if the man is Gio. Unconsciously, I reach into the breast of my jacket and grip the handle of my .45-caliber gun, taking it out of its holster and holding it by my side just in case.

Without further delay, I open the door, ready to meet whatever fate lies behind it.

A man stands tall by the floor-to-ceiling window, looking down onto the street below, with his back to me. He utters a gravelly, "Close it behind you."

So I do, not yet willing to relinquish my weapon.

I walk deeper into the room, taking in the tall gentleman. Dressed in a nicely fitted gunmetal gray suit, his salt-and-pepper hair styled just as it should be. When finally, he turns to face me, I frown. His hooded brown eyes, the shape of his brow, his face is somewhat familiar to me, but I can't place it. But I don't believe I've met this man before. He has to be pushing sixty.

"Can I help you?"

To my surprise, the old man looks down at the gun in my hand and tuts. "Put that away, boy. You'll take somebody's eye out."

With a puzzled glance, I do as I'm told, feeling much like a little boy being reprimanded by an uncle.

He watches me closely, and when my weapon is out of sight, his face softens, the wrinkles around his eyes creasing with his easy smile. Holding out a sheet of paper, he reveals, "Got my boys to clean up and we took a lot of these down, but I'm bound to have missed some."

On the paper were two photographs, one of myself, one of Alejandra, both taken candidly. Above the photos, in bold black letters, is written 'Have you seen these people?' followed by a cock-and-bull story about stealing a motorized wheelchair from a single mother and her disabled daughter.

Motherfucking Gio.

The asshole isn't as stupid as I originally thought.

"Where did you get this?"

The man walks over to the closest table, taking his time pulling out a chair and sitting slowly, as though he has all the time in the world.

He does not answer.

And it fuels my irritation. I snap, “Yo, Pops, I asked you a question.”

The man returns, “And they’re the wrong questions to ask, Julius Carter.”

My body tightens with pent-up frustration. “Who are you?”

“Ah.” The man smiles deeply, crossing his ankle over his knee, and his dimples flash. “Now you’re getting there.” He watches me a long moment before he spreads his arms out by his sides and answers me. “My name is Antonio Falco.”

I blink at this motherfucker a whole minute before I tip back my head and let laughter consume me. I laugh for minutes, hours, and the man simply watches me, a knowing smile on his face. I can’t contain my amusement, wiping away tears of mirth. “Listen here, old man. I knew Antonio Falco. He was my partner, my best friend, my *brother*. And you ain’t him.” Suddenly, my amusement fades as quickly as it began and I take a menacing step forward. “Shut your fucking mouth. You don’t say his name. You don’t even think it.”

But the man’s smile deepens affectionately. “I know who you are, Julius. I know who you were to him, to Twitch. I know much about you that I’m sure you don’t even know about yourself.” His face turns stern. “But should you talk to me with such blatant disrespect in the future, I’ll pop you in the mouth myself, son.”

Someone needs to call a nursing home, because Pops is clearly fucking crazy. Yet something about the way he looks at me, the way he speaks, has me calming my tone.

I try once more, softer this time. “Who are you?”

His eyes smile, as he relays, “I already told you that, Julius. I am Antonio Falco.”

I huff out a breath of annoyance. I don’t have time for this shit.

My feet move fast. I spin on my heel to get the fuck away from the mental patient when he utters the words that have me pausing in my tracks.

“Antonio Falco,” the old man repeats, as I reach the closed door. Just as I move to open the door and call security to clear him out, he adds, “*Senior*.”

And although my mind is doubtful, images of this man flash through my mind, and the familiarity in his face suddenly clicks.

This man is an older version of Twitch.

THIRTY-TWO

ALEJANDRA

The ride home was uneventful. Ling drove us back to the house in eerie, uncomfortable silence.

I didn't like it, but I also knew that asking about what happened at the club was asking for trouble. Yes, she had revealed a little about herself to me, and I no longer felt completely frightened of this woman, but tonight proved she was exactly as I imagined her to be.

Brutal. Violent. Ruthless.

My mind told me that knowing someone like Ling was good and she would make a useful ally. If I could only get her to tolerate me, we'd be in business. She didn't need to know I planned on taking her place in this life. I would befriend her, but I would have to start slow.

Baby steps.

She pressed the button on the remote attached to the visor above her head, and the gates began to open. We drove into the compound that acted as Julius's home, and when she parked out front and turned off the car, I jumped out and waited for her to do the same, walking with her to the front door.

The door now unlocked, she opened it, let me through and then locked it behind us.

I took a deep breath and made the decision to be kinder to Ling, starting now. "Hey," I said, and when she turned to me, I smiled softly. "Thanks for taking me out tonight. I've never been out like that, not for a girls' night, you know."

Fuck.

In that one statement, I had already pushed too far, and from the way her brows narrowed at me, she knew something was up.

So, of course, I kept going. Swallowing hard, I tried again with, "What I meant is that I don't know what's happening with me and Julius, but

regardless of whatever goes down, together or not, I'm glad to have a woman around the house to talk to about girl things."

Oh shit. That was so condescending. I was making it worse.

She took a step closer to me, and my cheeks flushed pink. I didn't know what else to say, so I just blurted it out. "I hope we can be friends."

Ling's face softened, and as my heart pounded in my ears, I breathed a discreet sigh of relief. She put her hand out to me, and with a smile, I moved to place mine in hers, to shake on it. I was so hopeful that I forgot to feel weary. Just as my fingers brushed hers, she pulled her hand back, away, and I didn't see the action, but I most definitely felt the hard slap against my cheek.

With a gasp, I reached up to cup my throbbing, blazing cheek and watched her carefully.

Well, shit. That wasn't how it was meant to go.

"What the fuck?" I whispered through a pant.

Looking somewhat remorseful, Ling let out a heavy sigh and apologized. "Look, I'm sorry. Here." She holds out her hand once more, and I hesitate a long while before dropping my hand from my cheek and moving to place it in hers, slower this time around.

It seems my years of being directly involved with horrible people had done nothing to better my judge of character, because as soon as my fingers brushed hers, she reared back, face contorted with rage, and slapped me across the same cheek so hard that I let out a yelp, falling to the ground in a heap.

For a small woman, she packed a hell of a punch.

Her heels clicked quietly as she came to stand over me. My face flaming, I could do nothing but look up at the woman in red as she spoke. "Just a reminder that we are not friends. You are nothing like us. We will *never* be friends. I only have one friend"—her eyes flash severely—"and if you take him from me, what happens as a consequence of that will be your fault, not mine."

The sound of her heels echoed throughout the hall as she left me on the cold floor in the dark.

Nothing was going my way.

I wanted to yell. I wanted to scream and stomp my feet in the unfairness of it all.

Instead, I got myself up and whispered into the night, “Crazy bitch.”

Oh yeah.

She definitely had the psychopath gene.

The time on the digital alarm clock on the nightstand reads 11:45 p.m., and no matter how hard I try, I can’t seem to succumb to the slumber I crave so deeply.

After the altercation with Ling, I decide it’s probably not a good idea to ask her for some clothes to sleep in. I undress quickly, throwing Ling’s clothes in a pile at the corner of the walk-in closet and look around for something to wear. It’s cool this evening, so I decide on the soft, warm-looking sweater Julius wore the day before.

Slipping it over my head, I push my arms through the holes then hug myself tightly, dipping my chin and pressing my nose into the material, breathing in as deeply as my lungs will allow. It still smells of him, the scent of his cologne light but unquestionably there. It feels as though I’m cocooned, wrapped up tight, safe in its midst.

It’s nothing compared to being held by Julius, but still, it feels wonderful, coming in a close second.

As soon as I lay my head on the pillow, I turn to face his side of the bed and frown.

This house only seems warm when Julius is in it. I miss him and his mighty but serene presence.

It doesn’t take me long to realize that falling asleep without Julius by my side is not an option, so I slide out of bed, barefoot, and make my way to the kitchen for a glass of warm milk.

I hope there’s honey in the pantry. If not, I’ll have to make a shopping list.

My feet lose traction, and I stumble at the thought.

Julius and I have yet to talk about whatever the hell this is, and I’m making *lists*?

I shake my head at my naivety. Even *I* think that’s pathetic.

As I open the kitchen cabinets, I find a small pan, pour some milk into it and turn on the stove. When I open the pantry in search of honey, I find none, but decide to use some maple syrup in its stead, pouring some into the heated milk. With my nightcap now steaming, I switch off the stove, spill

some into a mug and sit on a stool at the breakfast bar, holding my hands around it, warming them.

I take my first sip and close my eyes in subdued delight.

It's almost perfect, which is high praise for not having used the correct ingredients. Under the circumstances of my life, I've come to acknowledge that anything being *close* to perfect can be deemed flawless in my book. After all, who am I to judge perfect, when I am so far from faultless myself?

Lost in my thoughts, I startle when I hear the front door unlock, and my heart stutters then beams.

Julius is home.

I place my mug down on the counter, slide off the stool, doing what I can to ignore the niggling discomfort in my heel, and wait. Solid footsteps down the hall come closer and closer until his tall, darkened figure appears in the shadows of the entrance to the kitchen.

"Ana?" he asks huskily. "What are you doing up?"

My feet move of their own accord, and I can't think much about anything apart from being close to him. I don't slow when I reach him, and I don't mean to slam into him with such force, but when I do, snaking my arms around his lean waist, he grunts in surprise at my unforeseen strength.

He stands so much taller than me that when I place my cheek against him, it rests just above his taut belly. I close my eyes at the care he takes, wrapping one arm around my shoulders, the other cradling the back of my head, holding me to him firmly.

This hold screams "you are safe" while vowing "no one will ever put hands on you again."

"I couldn't sleep," I explain lamely. A short moment passes, and I repeat, "I couldn't sleep," but bite my tongue when my heart bids me say "without you."

Tall, strong Julius. Beautiful mocha-skinned Julius, with his cold blue eyes and warm, inviting lips, holds me in his grasp in complete silence, gently rocking me side to side, comforting me, providing me in one simple gesture more than anyone had ever offered me before. And with every further moment in this man's arms, I lose myself, falling deeper and deeper in lust with this imperturbable, aloof man who cares so deeply but refuses to show it to the world, only to those he deems worthy.

And that care he shows me makes me feel worthy in a world where I was taught to feel merely content.

How does one become something from the nothing they always were?

All I've ever had in my life was my looks, and all those looks had brought me was misery and pain. I would give anything to contribute as an equal, regardless of how I get that done. I'm not scared to work hard or get dirty to get what I want.

I want to be worthy of Julius, and for as long as he'll have me, I will work on becoming his ideal partner. This will not be a one-sided relationship. I will give to him as much as gives to me. I vow it.

Julius pulls back, placing his hands on my shoulders and looks down at me, his eyes searching my face. "Listen, I—"

That's when I hear the second set of footsteps coming in behind him. My shoulders stiffen immediately. I didn't know we had an audience.

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize you had company." I dip my chin in discomfiture and move to back out of his hold, his hands releasing me, but when I glance up at him, his expression tells me he does this reluctantly. "I'll leave you to it."

But as I turn to leave, I catch sight of the man who stands in the open doorway, the moonlight illuminating his face. And I still.

Shock holds me immobile as I shamelessly stare at the man, my mouth gaping. I swallow hard and whisper, "Signor Falco?"

The older man smiles in greeting, the creasing in his face making him all the more charming. "Alejandra," he utters softly, kindly. "This is a bad town for such a pretty face."

The shock begins to fade and, in its place, joy forms, bubbling up inside of me. A startled laugh escapes me. He holds out his hands and, wide-eyed and in awe, I step closer to him, placing my hands into his leathery ones.

Blinking down at his hands then up at his face, I mutter in astonishment, "It is you."

"No other alike me," he teases.

I glance between Signor Falco and Julius, and probe, "But, how?" Oh shit. I'm so confused. "I don't understand."

Julius scowls at the other man. "You didn't tell me you knew her."

Signor Falco throws him a look. "You didn't ask the right questions." Then he turns back to me and sighs. "My dear, you've managed to get

yourself into quite a mess, haven't you?"

At that blunt statement, I snatch my hands away from his and rush backward, my hand coming up to cover my throat. My heart begins to beat faster, and suddenly I'm gasping for breath. No matter how much air I inhale, it does little to satisfy my lungs. "Oh God," I whisper hoarsely. My voice cracks when I say, "What you must think of me..."

I try to move farther away, but a wall has unexpectedly appeared at my back, holding me steadily by the shoulders. Then his lips touch the shell of my ear, and he mutters, "Breathe. Just breathe, baby."

Then Signor Falco is there, right in front of me, his face stern. "Now, listen to me, young lady. I have always thought of you as a kind, even-tempered girl who has had to put up with far too much in her young life. I do not think poorly of you, not now, not ever. My daughter has had a lot to say about you in this past week, defending you to no end, and after listening to my Manda, I have to tell you, Alejandra, it makes me feel stupid to have not seen it before." His expression turns desolate. "I know." He says this in a way that makes my body tremble.

My mouth is suddenly parched, and I lick my dry lips nervously. "Wh-what do you know?"

"All of it." The father of my best friend, my doctor, my biggest supporter—Dr. Manda Rossi—straightens, his face severe but his tone soft. "Manda told me everything." He pauses a moment before he repeats with meaning, "*Everything.*"

We hold each other's eyes for a long while before I feel Julius squeeze my shoulders in silent support. "This reunion is just dandy, but I need to know how you two know each other."

I swallow hard and attempt to speak. "Manda..." But my jaw is slack, and my mouth just won't cooperate.

Signor Falco turns his eyes up to Julius and explains on my behalf, "My daughter, Manda, is a close friend of Alejandra's. She's also her doctor."

Julius sounds staggered. "You have children. Other children."

"Yes," Signor Falco returns in a solemn hush. "I also have a son, Giuseppe. We call him Zep. Believe it or not, he and Antonio were born only days apart."

What does that mean, *other* children? Who is Antonio?

I find my voice, but it's weak. "Antonio?"

Signor Falco smiles down at me, taking my hand and leading me to the dining table. "Once, a very long time ago, I was in love with two very different women from two very different ends of the scale." He holds a chair out for me, and I sit. He does not go on until he finds his own seat. "One of those women, I was engaged to marry. Her name was Angela Rossi." He inclines his head to me. "Zep and Manda's mother. She came from a good family, an Italian family who knew the life. She was beautiful, but her eyes..." He waves a hand over his eyes. "They were bitter. Bitter and sad. Most of the time we were together, she spent telling me how much she despised me, and I felt I would never win her affections." He sighs long and low. "The other woman was Lucia DeMartino, a no-nonsense waitress at a casino I would frequent with my boys. She was Italian too, but in the eyes of my father, she was nobody. She was a serial flirt and was so fun to be around that she made me forget about all my responsibilities. She made me crave a normal life. Every moment I spent with her was filled with laughter and passion, and we loved each other very much."

Signor Falco seems lost in his own head, when he admits, "It was difficult to love a woman who didn't return the affection. Angela was stubborn. I could see she was beginning to feel something for me, but she never let herself admit it. So whenever Angela rejected me, I would go find my Lucia. And there she would be, in her small apartment with no furniture, with only a small double bed dressed with sterile white sheets. And she welcomed me, no matter the hour. She just wanted to be with me, even if it meant living a half life with the man she loved."

He glances up at me, holding up two fingers. "Two ends of the spectrum. One woman giving her all. One not giving enough." He shrugs. "I was young and stupid. My father knew about Lucia." He snuffles a laugh. "Heck, *everyone* knew about Lucia, but I had my duty to fulfill. And so I married Angela. Lucia knew, but it didn't matter to her. Only I mattered."

I'm enthralled. "What happened next?"

The old man links his fingers, resting his hands on the table, looking down at them. "This life, our life, is not for everyone. The more time I spent with Lucia, the more she saw that disturbed her. She kept talking about the day we would run away and just be together, away from the guns and violence. She was naïve, and I let her be. It was kinder that way. Angela was built for this life. Lucia was not. Imagine my surprise when Angela

announces that we were expecting our first child?" He chuckles. "I was overwhelmed. That feeling of exhilaration, of becoming a father, was something I hadn't expected to feel. So I think long and hard about my life and decide to end things with Lucia, but when I get there, she's crying happy tears." He throws his arms out by his sides. "'Hey, Tony, you're going to be a daddy. Isn't it grand?'"

My heart squeezes like a vise. "What did you do?"

With his mouth drawn in a grim line, he mutters, "I was kidding myself to ever believe I had a life with Lucia. I was with her until the birth of my firstborn son. We named him Antonio, and that meant something to me. He was my namesake, and that right should have gone to my wife, but Lucia... I loved her more than was wise. I spent four days with my baby boy, holding him, trying to memorize the feel of him in my arms. Then, Giuseppe was born, and his birth had done something to Angela. Every moment she watched me with our son, speaking to him, cradling him, she softened a little more toward me until her affections began to grow, and she asked me to forgive her, to be faithful to her."

"You left Lucia? You left your son, just like that?" My heart breaks for the woman.

His eyes bright, he states, "She was my wife. It was my duty to be faithful to her. Besides, one of my sons was bound by my name. He would have to do his duty to our family. My other son was not honor bound. Without my name, he would live a normal life. Fall in love. Marry anyone he wanted." Signor Falco's eyes meet Julius's over my shoulder. "How was I to know that Antonio was destined to follow in my footsteps regardless? I left to give him a better life. He was meant to have a good life. I wasn't to know that my leaving would cause more damage than good. I think about him, every damned day. I'm glad he had you, Julius. Thank you for being his brother, for being there when I couldn't be."

A thick silence ensues, thick enough to carve with a knife. "Where is he?" I ask. "Where is Antonio?"

Signor Falco's eyes glaze over in grief.

It's Julius who answers, and he does this on a whisper.

"He died."

THIRTY-THREE

ALEJANDRA

“Things have changed,” is what Julius said. Those words were only spoken this afternoon, and for some reason, it feels like a lifetime ago. For so many things have happened in the meantime.

And after what happened this evening, I feel changed.

I am not frightened anymore.

I am calm, at ease. And I know something will eventually rock that calm and send me adrift, but before that happens, I plan to take the sails and charge out to sea.

Uncertainty hits me like a blow to the solar plexus. Looking at myself in the reflection of the mirror, I judge that reflection harshly, and before I can change my mind, I pull Ling’s robe over my near-naked body.

I tell myself I owe it to him. I owe him something. *Anything*. So I will venture into uncertainty with my arms stretched wide and my head held high.

My bare feet move silently along the cool tiles of the bathroom floor. My heart jolts as I come to stand a short distance, on the inside of the closed door. Closing my eyes, I breathe deep and soldier on.

Three more steps...

My legs begin to shake.

Two more steps...

A flush rises from my neck to heat my cheeks.

One more step...

My heart beats steady, hard and fast, like a drum.

Without a moment’s hesitation, I lift my hand and turn the knob. It opens soundlessly, and as I gently push open the door, I’m greeted with a sight.

Julius sitting up in bed, his bare torso resting against the headboard, sheets pooled just under his waistline to reveal a small swatch of hair

trailing from his taut belly down lower, lower to where I can't see any more. His eyes on me, waiting expectantly.

"What are you doing, baby?"

Slipping inside the bedroom, I close the bathroom door behind me with a gentle click then stand back against the cool surface for fear of getting too close. My lips part, and I manage, "This is what you wanted, right?"

With a slight shrug, the silky robe slides off my shoulders and down my back, pooling at my feet, leaving me exposed.

Julius sits up off the headboard. "Ana."

My nickname comes out unsure, strangled.

But this is what I came here for. This is what he asked for. And he deserves answers.

Stepping forward, out of the dark and into bright strips of moonlight illuminating through the open blinds. He moves to stand, but stills as he sees. I know the exact moment he does, because his eyes widen then shutter, and dipping his chin, he curses through a hiss.

I am mortified.

This is hauntingly embarrassing.

My temple throbs as my eyes begin to burn, but I push on. I point a shaking finger to the raised scar above my hipbone. "The time Dino caught me smiling at our waiter."

Julius raises his head to look at me, but I don't dare meet his eye. Instead, I train my gaze on his heaving chest.

My eyes closed tightly, and I point to the scar on my left breast. "The time I received flowers anonymously." Breathing in, I add on a shaky exhale, "Turns out, they were from my sister."

Turning, I lift the right side of my panties to reveal the scar on my ass. Lowering my head, I dip my chin and utter a hoarse, "One of the many times Dino had Gio raped me and I made the mistake of moaning." The first tear falls when I mutter a hushed, "Dino thought it was out of pleasure." More tears fall. I whisper a miserable, "I was being torn apart."

Still with my back to him, I reach over across my chest to place a hand gently on the scar at my left shoulder. "The time I didn't say I love you fast enough."

I turn again, and with my face lowered, I touch the scar at my ribs. "The time Dino found a text message on my phone from my brother, Miguel." I

blink down at the ground. “It was a photo of my husband at a bar, laughing in the company of another woman.”

My left thigh. “The time Luc made a joke about Dino and I laughed.”

Between my breast and underarm. “The time Dino forgot my birthday, and I didn’t remind him.”

Near my bellybutton. “The time I went to the mall and didn’t tell anyone.”

My hip. “The time I burned dinner.”

Not knowing how to be graceful about it, I simply touch the space between my thighs, gently cupping my most intimate place. “The time I stupidly asked Dino for a divorce.” He wouldn’t know it from my position, but this scar is relatively bigger than the others.

A sudden feeling of self-consciousness washes over me. I lift my shaking hands to cover my small breasts. I stand there a while before I find the words I am looking for.

“These are the scars he left me. And though these hurt, the most painful ones are those you can’t see.” I force open my eyes and meet his. “My husband convinced himself that he loved me. I was forced to love him back. I’m not sorry he’s dead.” My body shaking with pent up rage, I rasp, “I hated him.”

I am so miserable that I can barely get out the words. “My marriage consisted of three emotions. Happiness, anger, and sadness. Happiness when we first married, anger when I realized Dino wasn’t the prince I thought he was, and sadness when I finally understood that nobody was coming to save me.” I pause a short while, before adding coolly, “So I planned to save myself.”

As I stare into those blue eyes, I’m slightly shocked to find them devoid of pity.

Feeling empowered, I stand tall. Julius slides out of bed, naked as the day he was born, and walks over to me, his long, thick cock swinging. I hold his eyes. He gets closer and closer until we’re almost toe to toe. My heart beats faster and faster, and the mixture of feelings flowing inside me becomes too much. So much so it’s frightening.

Taking a shuddering breath, I close my eyes, feeling the heat of his bare body so close to mine.

He leans down and his chest brushes mine, causing a delicious friction on the way down. I swallow hard as my core pulses. When he straightens and my face gravitates upward, my lips silently seek his. I lean closer, and at the very moment I move to stand on my tiptoes, something cool covers me.

My eyes flutter open to find Julius standing a foot away from me, Ling's robe draped over my shoulders.

The heat of the sudden flush takes me by surprise.

Oh, God. I showed him my spoiled body then tried to kiss him. Of course he doesn't want me. I'm damaged goods.

Dino made sure no one would want me ever again.

Disgrace turns my body cold.

Reaching behind me, I find the doorknob and turn it. As I attempt to slip out of the bedroom on shaking legs, Julius slips an arm around my back then bends, placing the other around the backs of my knees, lifting me as if I weigh nothing at all. The rush of panic that follows leaves me no choice but to wrap my arms around his neck as he walks me back to the bed.

Without asking permission, he tugs the open robe off with a single pull, leaving me only in the black lace panties—*thank you, Ling*—and gently places me in the center of the bed.

I panic some more, and I do this in earsplitting silence.

But this is Julius, and I should know better by now. Unfortunately, the past has taught me to expect the unexpected.

The mattress dips when he slides in next to me, reaching over to pull the covers over the both of us. He lays his head on the pillow we share, our faces close, almost nose to nose, and his hand comes to rest gently on my hip, kneading the space there with his long fingers.

"Kill him myself," he mutters into the partial darkness. "Wish I could go back to that day."

His words bring a harsh reaction. My stomach tightens, and my flesh breaks out in goose bumps.

He keeps speaking, softly, so as not to scare me. "Beat him. Torture him. Break him. Take him out. I'd do it. They'd have to use dental records to identify him. I wouldn't bat an eye at his mangled corpse." He sighs lightly. "Destroy every piece of him, baby. I'd do it."

Julius doesn't say it, but in my mind, I hear him say, 'I'd do it *for you*.'

His face seems nearer than before, and it takes me a moment to realize I'm the one unconsciously seeking him out, seeking out the warmth of his lips.

"Kiss me," I beg on a whisper.

I want it more than I want my next breath.

But instead, he squeezes my hip, almost punishingly. "Bring him back just to do it all over again."

His words are a decree, a pledge, a vow. These are the things he would do for me. These are the things he would do to keep me safe.

Oh, God.

My pussy clenches in arousal, and it shocks me.

What the hell is wrong with me? I should not be turned on by this. Violence was not my thing. Why was I turned on by this?

Wide-eyed, I blink up into his face, and the tip of my nose brushes his. "Please," I implore, placing my hands on his taut stomach then sliding them up to his chest, over to grip his shoulders. "Kiss me."

But as I move to place my lips on him, he moves back an inch, looking me in the eye. "This is how it is. I don't fuck around. If I'm done with you, I'll tell you. You'll never not know where you stand with me, because I'll keep you by my fucking side for always."

That is some declaration. Perhaps it isn't a declaration of love, but it is as close to it as I am going to get from Julius. And to me, it's perfect in every goddamn way.

My stomach warms and my body unwinds; the happiness brought from that one direct statement is overwhelming.

"Okay," I breathe, because I can't seem to do much else with myself.

He looks down at my parted lips, and my insides singe at the heat in his eyes. His words are everything. "For always."

I realize he needs something from me. And I give it to him.

I repeat quietly, but with meaning, "For always."

His next words are less hearts-and-flowers and more fire-and-brimstone. "You fuck around on me," he starts, reaching up to run his warm fingers down my jawline. "They won't ever find your body, baby."

It's moments like this that remind me of the man Julius is. It's not often I see the man behind the mask, but I know he's there. I feel him lurking in the shadows, waiting for the right moment to come out and play.

But his words don't alarm me. They don't scare me, because I will never fuck around on this man. There will be no other for me, only him, and I will make him happy. He will never regret his decision to keep me. I swear it. I am his. From this moment on, I belong to him.

You creepy fuck, that almost sounded like wedding vows.

Yeah, I muse in silence. I suppose they did.

Right now, here with Julius, I am reclaiming ownership of my body. And I am doing that by giving myself to him. Shuffling closer, I press my bare breasts against his chest, my nipples taut in excitement.

My voice husky with need, I plead for the last time, "You're driving me crazy, baby. Now, please, for the love of God." My hands slide up from his shoulders and gently cup the sides of his neck. "*Kiss me.*"

Ask and you shall receive.

The hand on my hip pulls me impossibly close and, without thinking, I hook my right thigh over Julius. The unconscious move has the tip of his thick, hard cock pressed up against the delicate material of my panties, the hot heat of him forcing a light moan from me.

It's been so long since arousal shook me like this, years even. I had forgotten what an orgasm felt like, so when Julius reaches around me, gripping the cheeks of my ass in his hands, squeezing and kneading, undulating against my wet panty-covered pussy with just the right amount of pressure, I don't even feel it coming.

My heart begins to race, and I feel like I'm free-falling. My eyes snap open, wide, and spots of color dance around the room. My mouth rounds in an O as Julius rolls his hips, causing firmer friction.

It's right there.

Right there.

Right... *there.*

My nails dig into his nape, holding him against me. My cheek against his, I feel his soft panting against my skin, and it's so fucking hot that I whimper. Softly at first, then louder, and louder again as my pussy begins to clench uncontrollably, my hips thrust in time with the contractions. I moan long and low, as if I were an animal in heat. I suppose it's a fitting reaction considering I feel wild at this very moment. Ecstasy pulses through me, radiating outward throughout my entire body, and a sudden weakness has me barely able to keep my arms around him.

I'm a puddle of bliss, panting against his warm cheek.

My panties are now soaked. I can feel the wetness against my hypersensitive clit, and I shudder all over. Swallowing with effort, I place my lips against his cheek and mutter a hushed, "Sorry."

His silent laughter makes me smile. He pulls back to look at me, his eyes soft. "You can apologize for a lot of things, Ana." He brings his lips to mine, and utters against them, "But don't ever apologize for that. Never that, baby."

Julius leans into me, taking my bottom lip into his mouth, suckling on it. His full lips taste of mint and liquor, and my tongue darts out to lick him, following the seam of his mouth. He tastes like sex and happiness. Gripping me tightly, he kisses me. I part my lips, accepting everything he has to offer. His tongue brushes against mine. They dance together, mating, and I press my face closer, into his. He groans into my mouth, and my thighs tightens around his hips.

In a move that surprises me, Julius slides one hand up my back, over my nape, tangling his fingers into my hair, then growls, "Fucking love this hair. Don't you ever fucking cut this hair." His hand fists into the long, thick strands the color of dark chocolate and he tugs lightly, enough to make his point. "I will be pissed as hell, baby."

At this moment, high on what could possibly be the best orgasm of my life, I would agree to anything Julius asked of me. "*Cualquier cosa por ti, querido.*" I close off by pulling against his hold, forcing him to let go of my hair, to place my lips against his, kissing his full lips as softly as I can.

Anything for you, my darling.

He moans into my mouth. "Fuck *me*. I can't wait any more. My cock needs in you." He kisses me, deep, wet, hot. His large hand cups my wet crotch, pressing his fingertip into the seam of my pussy and rubbing gently. His lip curls and his eyes flash, as he drawls, "You gonna let me in that tight pussy, baby? That hot, wet pussy?"

Oh, God. Such a pretty mouth talking such filth. So *dirty*.

I love it.

The things he's saying are going to give me a heart attack and an orgasm, simultaneously.

I feel weak against him, so weak I can't even make myself speak. Instead, I nod with enthusiasm, eager to feel him.

His eyes flash, clearly pleased at my willing response. Reaching up to his neck, he takes my hands and brings them down, past his stomach, lower still, guiding them down before wrapping them around his rigid shaft.

And that's when I realize that's a whole lot of cock.

"It's so big," I mumble as I run my loose fingers over the thick, inflexible heat. And this is not a good thing. I mumble this with pure misery, a frown on my face.

"Yes, it is," he returns. He does not state this is an I'm-a-cocky-asshole way; he simply states the fact.

Goddammit, I'm so tired of being hurt.

A small amount of my arousal dulls.

Julius reaches back without breaking contact with me, opening the nightstand drawer and retrieving a condom. He doesn't hesitate the way I do, doesn't let me regret my choice. Tearing the foil packet open with his teeth, he brings the condom down between us and rolls it on. And he does this while keeping it real. "I want to fuck you bare, baby, and that day will come, but you were married to a cunt of a man who fucked around, and he did this then came home and fucked you bare. And I'm not going to talk about his brother right now, because I'm about to fuck and I don't want to lose my hard-on." He looks up at me from his cock. "Not saying you have anything, baby, but I sure as hell ain't taking the risk, which means until we both get ourselves tested and cleared, I'm not going to make out with that pussy I crave more than air, nor am I going to go ungloved when we fuck." His eyes hold no amount of disgust. This is just Julius laying it out. "Okay?"

I know this is not only fair but responsible, too. But, *fuck*, I hate that Dino put me in this position of sheer mortification. My body turns stony with it.

"Okay." My nose begins to tingle with the familiar sting of tears, and I blink them back. "Sorry."

"Shut your fucking mouth." The harsh words are spoken so gently that they feel like a warm embrace. He grips my hips, digging his fingers in enough to pinch. "Shut it right now. Nothing that happened to you was your fault. *Nothing*. You were a young woman surrounded by bad people who knew better, people you trusted to take care of you. You trusted them to

keep you safe. A shit-ton of people failed you, Ana, but you aren't one of them. You saved yourself. You did nothing wrong. Understand me?"

"Yeah," I croak quietly, and deep down, I know he's right.

"Good." He slides away from me, laying down flat on the bed, slowly stroking his cock with long, delicious fingers that I want to suck into my mouth. "Climb on, baby." His eyes hood as I sit up, and he trails my near-naked body with a glance. "Ride me."

On my knees, I crawl to his side, hooking my thumbs into the waistband of my panties and sliding them down my thighs, to the mattress, where I step out of them. I throw my leg over him, to the left side of his waist, then scoot closer, bringing my knees into contact with his hips.

He reaches out to me, running the back of one hand up, over my stomach, which clenches in response. He runs his knuckles over my breast, farther, trailing over the sensitive bud that tightens at his light touch, causing me to tremble in pure bliss.

As he continues to explore my body, taking his time, I rest one hand on his stomach for balance then reach back to take his long, hard cock into my small hand. I sit up taller, guiding the tip of him to my wet entrance, and when my parts kiss his in warm greeting, I remove my hand, placing it with the other at his stomach.

His breath catches as I put the slightest amount of pressure, sitting gently. The head of him slips inside of me and we both moan, my eyes rolling into the back of my head with desire. With my eyes closed, I sit down farther, but wince as the girth of him stretches me wide.

His hands on my hips, he holds me there, not allowing me to seat myself an inch more. "We got all the time in the world. Take it slow. I want this good for the both of us, baby. Just relax."

It's like he always knows what to say.

I remind myself that this man will never force me; he will never rape me, or use my affections to manipulate a situation. Julius will never hurt me like Dino did. Julius does not get off on pain. He wants only mutual satisfaction, nothing more.

And here I am, on top of him. A position Dino never allowed me to try. It put a woman in a position of control, and he would never allow that.

But Julius would. Not only would he allow it, but he was the one to suggest it.

Taking a deep breath, my calm returns and I move my hips around slowly, testing how much pain I am in.

Surprisingly, there is no pain.

Warmth lights my belly on fire and turns my blood to boiling lava while my nipples tighten at the feeling of impossible fullness between my welcoming thighs. I know there is more, so I test the waters, rearing down in torturous slowness, taking one more inch, then another. And although it burns as he stretches me, it doesn't hurt.

No.

It feels amazing.

My head begins to float, and I feel my heart beating through my clit, my cheeks flushed with passion.

I seat myself farther, taking another inch, then one more, and then, with a light wince, my belly contracts painfully and I realize I can't take anymore.

And it makes me sad.

"Oh," I utter softly, disappointed.

Julius runs his hand up my bare thigh. "No rush. It'll take some time."

"Yeah," I respond, running my nails over his belly.

With a gentle tug, he pulls me down to lie on his chest. His lips take mine in a warm, deep kiss and I reach up to cup his cheeks as he begins to rock into me with tender mercy.

His hands roam my body, running over my back to squeeze my nape then trailing over my ass and back again, finally resting on my hips as his thrusts increase.

I pant into his mouth, gasping when he touches a particularly sensitive spot inside of me, and when he works on hitting that spot over and over, my body trembles and shakes. My fists clench against him, my nails scratching at him.

It's happening again.

I feel it coming this time.

But how? I've never had an orgasm twice so soon. It's not right. Something's wrong. Panting, I shake my head, and muse aloud, "No."

Julius grips my hips tightly and drives a little deeper, his thick cock sliding in and out of my tight pussy. "Yes, baby. Yes."

A bright light flashes behind my closed lids and, gritting my teeth together, I whimper and whine as the orgasm takes hold of me, pulsing

pleasure from my toes to the very hairs on my head. When it finally passes, I fall limp against Julius, breathless.

His thrusts turn jerky, and with a low growl, his body turns rigid, his stomach tightens against me, and he grips my hips hard enough to bruise, his cock twitching inside me as he finds his release.

And when his breathing returns to normal, he reaches up to stroke my hair with lazy tenderness. My eyes droop heavily, and I let out a short yawn. Julius follows suit, and with his arms around me, naked and bared to him, I find sleep.

The best I've had in years.

THIRTY-FOUR

TWITCH

“I need to make a phone call.”

Ethan Black glances up from his newspaper a short second before he goes back to reading, and he mutters, “What for? You don’t know anyone anymore. Everyone thinks you’re dead.”

“Not everyone,” I say quietly, from my place at his dining table, picking up the mug of hot, black coffee and sipping it in silence.

Black and I may never be friends, but I’m a man who understands what it would take for a guy like him to take in a guy like me. Ever since the capture of Egon Baris, I’ve been treated less like a criminal and more like a colleague. The day after the bust, we flew back to San Francisco. We stopped by the SFPD to have a powwow with the chief and then Black jerked his chin to me. “Grab your things.”

I didn’t ask questions. What was the point? It wasn’t like Black would give me a straight answer anyways.

When we arrived at the two-story house in the suburbs, I followed him inside, where he walked me down the long hall to an open doorway, waving his arm to guide me in. “This will be your room.” He pointed to the end of the hall. “Bathroom and shower are that way.” He glanced to the right. “Kitchen is over there. Help yourself. I’m not your maid, so you’ll have to wash your own clothes and make your own food.”

Saying thank you is the hardest for me, so I diverted attention by asking a question. “I thought you were married with kids?”

“I am,” he responded, before blinking at me. “You didn’t think I’d actually take you to my house, did you?” His lip twitched. “This is one of the FBI’s many safe houses. You and I will be living here until the completion of our terms.” He sobered almost immediately. “There will be times when I’m going to have to leave you here alone. I don’t want to ask you if I can trust you not to disappear on me, because I’m not stupid enough

to believe I can cage you—not anymore, anyway. All I ask is that if you decide to leave the house, wear your hood and keep your head down.” He placed his hands on his hips and turned fatherly on me. “And, for all that is holy, leave a fucking note.”

When he spun on his heel and turned, shaking his head, I walked into my room. It was decent. I’ve had worse, that’s for sure. It was simple, with a built-in closet, a chest of drawers and a queen-sized bed.

Yeah. I’d definitely had worse.

It would serve its purpose, and I would get decent sleep at night. It was more than I could have hoped for. After all, I could still be in the never-quiet, never-darkened cells of the SFPD.

Black’s eyes come away from his newspaper in meaningful sluggishness. His brows rise as he asks, “Just how many people know you’re alive, Twitch?”

I keep my gaze on him, not needing to think about the answer. “One of my boys and an old associate. Now, Officer Quaid, the chief, and you.”

He thinks about this then his lips stretch into a smile. With a slight shake of his head, he chuckles aloud, and it pisses me off. I’m not the butt of anybody’s joke.

“What’s funny?” I grind out.

His chuckle turns into an outright laugh. “I would not like to be you when your lady finds out you’ve been alive all this time.” He mock winces. “No, sir-ee. She’s going to make your life a living hell.”

Shit.

My body turns cold at the thought. I try to justify myself to a man who has no fucking idea what it took for me to leave Lexi behind. “She’ll understand once she knows the reason I left. I didn’t have a fucking choice. I *had* to leave.”

“You’re telling me?” He snorts a laugh. “Have you ever dealt with a woman scorned, Falco? Do you know anything about women at all?” He watches me frown then softens his tone. “There’s no fixing this. She’s not going to forgive you. You’ll be lucky if she lets you see your son at all.”

“I’m his father,” is my lame argument.

Black murmurs, “And according to his birth certificate, you’re deceased. Even with your new identity, the one we fashion for you, you won’t have any rights. Not in a court of law.”

My stomach turns at the thought of being kept from AJ.

It's already been so long.

I need my son.

I'm in bad shape. I'm dying without him, without *her*.

Shaking off the unbearable thought, I repeat myself, "I need to make a call."

Motioning with his head to the phone on the kitchen counter, he says, "Secure line. Pick it up, wait for the three clicks, and then dial." He takes a moment to stress, "Do *not* use your cell phone. Not even if it's a burner. Even burners can get picked up."

As I stand and move toward the counter, Black utters conversationally, "Hope you're not too attached to that."

I hate when he speaks in riddles. "Attached to what?"

"The tattoo." He taps his cheek, denoting my infamous 13. "Because it's got to go. It's an indicator. We can't afford for someone to see it and start spreading rumors that you live."

That means he plans on taking me on the other stings. That was good. I could deal with that.

"No." I lie, although I want to get violent. "I'm not attached."

I try not to think about it, although he's suggesting that I remove my past, the day I met Lexi. That day is everything, and *fuck yeah*, I am attached as hell to the memory of it.

"Good," Black mutters, nodding. "Because your first session of laser is this afternoon. The guy says you'll need four to five sessions, four weeks apart."

Well, fuck.

No way out of it, then.

I'll do it like I've done everything else in my life.

I'll take it like a man.

Picking up the phone, I put it to my ear, wait for the three clicks to sound, and then dial. It rings once, twice, three times then he answers.

"Fuck me. It's 6:00 a.m. Someone better be dying, asshole," Viktor Nikulin groans into the phone, and I fight a grin.

I get to business. "Viktor Nikulin?"

"Yeah," he mutters, and I hear him shuffle, likely to sit up. "Who's this?"

I speak quietly, but firmly. “I live in the shadows of the underground and see a lot of things, deal with a lot of people, know a lot of firms.” I pause momentarily, feeling Black’s eyes on me. “Your brother is a problem for me.”

Viktor Nikulin responds, a mixture of anger and disgust lining his voice. “I don’t have a fucking brother.”

“Yes, you do. We both know you do. And it’s fine to disown him, murderous psycho that he is, but Maxim Nikulin is a problem for me. I need to know where to find him.”

He pauses a moment. “You gonna kill him when you find him?”

“No,” I tell him honestly. “But he’ll probably die in prison.”

He sighs. “Listen, I don’t like my brother, but even if I knew where we was, I wouldn’t tell you. Shit. I don’t know you, man. For all I know, you could be a cop.”

I chuckle softly. “I’m definitely not a cop.” *Just working for one.*

He sounds puzzled. “Who are you?”

“I can’t tell you that.” I try to get the information I can. “And I know you don’t speak to your brother, but he’s still your family, and I get that you want to protect him. Wouldn’t he be safer in prison? Seems Max has gone out of his way to make a lot of enemies.”

“I’m not worried about him being put away. I don’t want to protect him,” Viktor confides quietly. “I’m worried for all the men he’ll take a knife to while he’s in there. I want to protect *them*.” He inhales deeply then exhales slowly. “Do me a favor, yeah? Whatever beef you got with Maxim, leave me and Anika out of it.”

The dial tone hums in my ear.

Shit.

No luck.

Maxim Nikulin is going to be a pain in my ass.

One week later...

“I need a gun,” I shout at Black as his soldier boys scatter around the waterfront property owned by Neo Metaxas.

I’m more than a little pissed. There is no point in me bringing down these men if I can’t enjoy my life because I fucking died trying to achieve it.

Black is being an asshole. “You don’t need a fucking gun! Stay back, away from the action.” He grabs the front of my shirt, shaking me. “We had a deal!” he roars, and spittle sprays me. “You don’t get to make orders. You fucking take them!”

So that’s how it is, ‘ey? We’ll see about that.

He releases me, and I stumble while he jumps into the fray. Neo’s men pull their guns, but Black’s soldiers are quicker. Shots are fired, and I stay back, my goddamn baton in hand.

With my helmet and half-faced mask on, no one is going to recognize me, and it’s a good thing because Neo and I were friends. His men know me.

The now-interrupted poker game scattered all over the floor of the mansion, I watch as red stains splatter onto the pristine white velvet sofa.

Neo’s going to be pissed. He always did have a thing for white furniture.

When I spot one of Black’s men crying out, a hunting knife sticking out of his thigh, falling to the floor in a heap, clutching at his leg and groaning in pain, I don’t think too much about running in the middle of an all-out war to get the guy someplace safe. Placing my hands under his arms, I pull with all my might, because this guy is a fucking tank. I manage to drag him into the empty kitchen and sit him up against the fridge, out of sight.

He moans, and I shush him. Not in a soothing way, more of a shut-the-fuck-up-and-don’t-draw-attention-to-us kind of way. He groans some more and places his shaking hands on the handle of the knife. I know what he plans to do, but I push his hands away and grip his sweaty face. “You take that out now, and you’re gonna bleed to death. Right here. In this house.” He doesn’t seem to be listening, so I shake him. “Is this where you want to die?”

The man shakes his head, and it’s then that I realize he’s young, maybe in his mid-twenties.

Somehow, my thoughts wander to my son and my heart squeezes.

I gentle my hold on the man-boy and grip his shoulders lightly. “Don’t touch it. Stay here. Don’t make any noise, not unless you want to die, understand?”

Sweating bullets, he nods as tears stream down his face. I reach for the pistols at his thighs and take them out of their holsters. Holding them up, I

tell him, “Now, I’m taking these, all right? And I’m gonna shoot some bad guys.”

“Take ‘em down.” Speaking through gritted teeth, he pants out, “Take ‘em all down.”

I grin, although he can’t see it through my mask. “Oh, I plan to.”

Just as I make to back out of the kitchen, the solider wheezes, “*Behind you.*”

My feet turn me at lightning speed and time slows. In the blink of an eye, I see the guy pointing a gun at me, and I know him. The man is Neo’s brother. George the fucking Greek, we called him. He has a wife. He has kids. He’s got people who depend on upon him, and right now, in this moment, he’s coming at me. Coming to kill me.

I go from semi-startled to furious in a second flat.

This is the man I used to be. I was a man who thought only about money and himself. But this guy, George, he has a family, and the fact he is throwing it all away for a couple mil is revolting.

I suppose some people take what they have for granted, but being away from my son for so long... nothing on this earth could make me go back to being the greedy, egotistical jerk I was before, not when I have him to live for.

Aiming for his heart, I remember Black’s words.

“Maim, injure, mutilate... but do not shoot to kill, goddamn it!”

My aim lowers, passed his groin, lower still and when I’m there, I pull the trigger.

As his bullet flies past my arm, mine meets its mark, and I watch in complete satisfaction as it pierces his knee, tearing him apart. With a shocked yelp, he falls to the ground and, shaking, still aims his guns at me. Before he has a chance to shoot again, I run toward him, and my steel-toed boot connects with his face. The back of his head smashes into a kitchen cabinet and his eyes turn dull as his consciousness fades.

“Here,” I mutter to the young man, as I take George’s gun in my hand, handing back one of the two I’d taken from him.

His expression one of agony, he takes the gun and tells me, “Get out of here. I got this.”

I peek out into the hall before making my move and running across the open living area. One of Neo’s men wrestles with one of Black’s, and

Black's boy is about to be knocked the fuck out.

As I move toward them, I call out, "Hey!" for a moment's distraction, and it works. Both men look up at me, and I take that moment to kick Neo's guy in the face, off Black's soldier. Once off him, Black's boy regains control, taking the guy down and keeping him there.

My work done, I move on to find some other asses to kick.

Two of Black's boys flank a guy with his head turned at an unnatural angle, blood all over his face, his neck clearly broken, as they hold a second, cuffed man.

The doors to the patio open and I spot Black reading Neo his rights, although, they're a little different to the ones I'd heard before.

Black stands tall, glaring down at a silent Neo Metaxas. "If you speak, I will pistol whip you. If you breathe too loudly, I will box you right in the fucking mouth. If you so much as look at me the wrong way, I'll have my boys beat your ass, so do yourself a favor and keep your mouth shut, Metaxas, because nothing is going to save you from the hell I'm going to deliver you to."

You know, now that I think about it, Black and I aren't *complete* opposites. He's kind of a badass, not that I'd ever admit it to him.

When Black spots me holding two guns, he scowls hard, before taking them from me and placing them on the table by his side. Like a fucking child having his favorite toy taken from him, my anger spikes, but I don't dare speak in front of Neo.

From the corner of my eye, I see one of Black's boys sitting beside a man who might've been unconscious at one point, but is no longer. When he jumps up and knocks the soldier on his ass, reaching for his gun, I react. And I do this quicker than any of the motherfuckers in the entire force.

Reaching behind Black, I take one of the pistols off the table and, this time, I don't aim low.

Neo's man stands, aiming his stolen pistol right at Black.

Ready. Aim. Fire.

Boom, bitch.

The dude's eye crosses as my bullet hits him, taking out his left eye, leaving a gaping hole where it used to be, his brains splattering all over Neo's dove-white armchair. He lands on the floor where his face will forever remain a picture of eternal astonishment, his eyehole oozing red.

My heart races and my chest heaves. I'm running on pure adrenalin.

I turn to see all of Black's men on their feet, weapons raised, staring at me. I look from Black to Metaxas then back to Black. Taking a step back, I place the gun back on the table, laying it down with a gentle clunk. I move to leave the patio, but before I do, I move toward Black. Leaning in close, right up to his ear and only loud enough for him to hear me, I grunt, "You're welcome."

I walk back inside and ignore the curious stares of all of Black's men, taking myself into the kitchen, where I watch the young man be loaded onto a stretcher by a couple of medics, the knife still lodged in his thigh.

I cross my arms over my chest and wait in solitude for the commotion to die down.

Next time I ask for a fucking gun, something tells me I'll get one.

THIRTY-FIVE

ALEJANDRA

Julius lies on his back with me pulled in close. My cheek rests on his pectoral, and with our hands entwined over his beating heart, I mutter quietly, “My brother.”

His fingers pluck at mine softly, as if he has to reassure himself we are here, together at long last. I have been waiting my whole life for this man, only I didn’t know it. Now, as we are, a solid feeling of contentment washes over me. He grunts in confusion.

I raise my head reluctantly and muse aloud, “I should speak to my brother. I need to know what’s happening. I need to know that my sisters are okay.”

A look I can’t quite read passes over his face and, without malice, he utters a drowsy, “Baby, what you did... you have to understand, you ain’t got no family anymore.” My heart just about shatters when he adds, “I’m your family now.”

He’s trying his best not to spook me. Am I so precious that I need to be spoken to like a child?

I need to let him know how things are in terms a man like Julius will get.

“I may not be shooting at people every other day like my pal Ling over there, but I’m not squeamish, and if somebody posed a threat, you better believe I will take that threat down with brutal force should the need arise. It’s just you for me, Julius.” Leaning down to him, I press a soft kiss to his chest. “Don’t be afraid for me. *I will protect you, cariño.*”

When I glance up at him, I see that look. I see it clear. He’s asking himself, ‘Where did the Ana I need to protect go, and who is this woman?’

And I can’t stop the roll of my eyes.

This life of ours is not normal.

This life is dirty.

The thing is, no matter how hard my father tried to raise me to be good, I never intended on staying clean.

“Don’t look at me like that.” I straighten things out by gripping his strong, stubbled chin between my fingers, holding him still and repeating the words my brother told me all those years ago. “We all come into this world kicking, screaming, and covered in somebody else’s blood.” I have never been more honest in my life when I admit, “I have no goddamn problem going out the same way.”

He blinks down at me as I release his chin. “*Fuck*,” he exclaims, before rolling on top of me, holding his weight off me by his forearms. His warm lips descend, and I shiver when he kisses my collarbone. His lips against me, he rolls his cock against my thigh. “I have never been hornier than I am right fucking now.”

My eyes flutter closed at the feel of his mouth on me, and I wrap my legs around his bare, lean hips in silent approval.

That’s when the door to the bedroom opens with a long squeak. I don’t move. Under him, my eyes widen. With his lips still at my throat, I feel his body give out from above me, and he covers my body with his full weight, sighing into my neck.

A feminine throat clears. “I can see you’re busy, boss man, but it’s like 11:00 a.m. and the old dude who keeps smiling at me silently over the dining room table is starting to freak me out.”

At that, he lifts his head, blinking down at me with his brows low in anger, eyes flashing. Then he whispers, “Fucking, Ling,” and reaches across to pull the covers over our naked bodies.

Completely unbothered by his nudity, he ignores Ling, sliding out of bed, and walks across to the bathroom, closing the door behind him. The shower starts and pulling the sheet tightly across my breasts, I sit up to look over at her in the open doorway. If I’m being honest with myself, I’m fuming on the inside. I hide my anger well when I stare openly at her, and state, “Next time, you’ll knock.”

Her eyes narrow slightly, but she smiles. “Congratulations, Ana.” She raps her nails onto the polished wood of the doorframe, before raising her brows and uttering quietly, “You’re officially one step up on the food chain.”

Something about Ling is so odd, so peculiar, that I'm beginning to feel mildly uncomfortable.

Her lips twitch. "You always get what you want, don't you, itty bitty pretty one?" She holds me immobile with her intense glare. "But you'll never appreciate your winnings until you lose." She straightens, moving to exit. "Prepare yourself."

As she reaches in to shut the door behind her, I take in her parting words and my mind runs amok.

What the hell is she planning?

Still speculating what Ling meant by what she said, I miss the sound of the shower being turned off, only coming to my senses when Julius opens the bathroom door and steam billows out around his fine, tall frame. Rubbing a towel over his face, he drops it to the ground and catches me watching droplets of water sluice down his chest toward his abs.

I feel no shame, openly exploring him with my eyes. He is mine now.

When he throws the towel around his waist, I look up into his eyes with a soft pout.

He's not a man of many words, my Julius.

He jerks his head toward the open door behind him, and I take the hint, slipping out of bed with the covers wrapped around me. As I shuffle past him, he hooks his hand around the back of my neck and pulls me close, looking me in the eyes and holding my gaze as he descends, pressing his lips to mine, feather soft. The hand at my neck squeezes as he pulls back, and it makes me realize that sometimes talking is overrated.

He runs his nose up the length of mine, and I close my eyes, taking in his warm affection. "You and me, babe."

My eyes flutter and I reach up, running my hand over his chest to squeeze his shoulder, breathing out, "Yeah. You and me."

His hand comes up to tangle in my hair, and he tugs gently, forcing me to expose my neck. "Treat you like a queen."

And with those words, my body no longer welcoming his kisses, my brain warns me to calm down.

Take it easy. He didn't know. He doesn't know.

Gently removing myself from him, I take a step away and dip my chin. "He used to tell me that. He used it against me, that I was going to be his queen and I'd rule beside him." I bite the inside of my lip, begging my

stomach to uncoil. I blink up at him through a frown. "I didn't want it. I don't want to be a queen, Julius. Not ever." My hand comes up to touch his stomach. "I want to be a nobody, a peasant. I just want to live free." Again, I can see I've made him question who I am and what my motives are. But I'm just me, Alejandra Castillo. A woman who has been torn apart more often than put together. My broken shards are yet to be repaired. I'm not even sure they would fit together any longer. I scratch lightly against his abs. "Can you possibly begin to understand that?"

His eyes soften, and his lips twitch as he lets out a rough, "Can't promise I'll treat you like a peasant."

A shocked laugh escapes me. "Yeah, okay, that might've been a bad example."

His lips spread into a smile as his eyes take in my own. "Gorgeous when you don't, but when you smile, baby..." His eyes shudder, and his fingers come up to tap the spot right over his heart. "*Boom.*"

I can't help myself. I cup his cheek and run my thumb over his thick lips. "Same goes, *cariño*," I offer gently. "Same goes."

Turning his face into my hand, he kisses the center of my palm, and my insides swell with warmth, because Julius gives me something I have never had before.

Somebody I could love.

With more effort than I believe I can muster, I playfully push Julius away and, smiling, head into the bathroom to shower.

Ten minutes have passed, and when I step out of the bedroom, showered and dressed in more of Ling's clothes, I pause in my steps at the sound of a female crying in earnest.

My heart begins to pound in my chest. It must be bad.

It would have to be to make a person like Ling cry like this. I thought her emotionless for the most part.

I hesitate just before the living room and hear Signor Falco speak softly. "Now, now. Don't cry." He's kinder than I remember. "Come sit by me, Miss Ling."

Huh?

I'm confused.

Why is Signor Falco offering Ling comfort? He doesn't even know her.

But then, Ling sobs out, “I loved him. I loved him so much.” Her sob turns to a growl. “I would’ve done anything for that piece of shit. And he chose *her*.”

I step just inside the open doorway to find Ling seated by Signor Falco on the sofa with their backs to me. They haven’t yet heard or seen me. Ling’s hands are being held tightly in Falco’s, with her head bent in only what can be described as pure anguish.

Julius spots me from his place on the opposite sofa and discreetly shakes his head.

I understand. Ling won’t like me seeing her like this, yet I can’t walk away.

Signor Falco looks from Ling to Julius. “It sounds like my Antonio was more complex than I had imagined.”

“He wasn’t complex at all,” Julius mumbles. “He just knew what he wanted. Didn’t have time for those he didn’t.”

Oh, wow. Ouch.

My chest aches for Ling, although she doesn’t deserve sympathy.

Julius’s insinuation is plain and simple, clear as crystal. Antonio didn’t want Ling.

Ling, too smart to have missed the message, snaps her head up and, with bubbling rage, booms, “*He wanted me till she came along!* She fucked everything up. And that boy of hers...” Her voice breaks as the anger fades and the sadness seeps into its place. “That beautiful boy of hers. He should’ve been mine. His baby should’ve been *mine*.” She speaks softly as if talking to herself. “After all the shit I put up with, I earned that baby.” Ling croaks out a furious, “He died because of her.”

“He died for her,” Julius shoots back. “Twitch died *for* Lexi. He died protecting her. There’s a difference.”

Ling turns to Signor Falco and barks out a harsh laugh. “The men in my company tend to lose their minds over women. In fact, it’s common for their brains to turn to shit. They lose all their sense.” She turns to glare at Julius. “I wouldn’t be surprised if you pulled the same stupid stunt over your new little pet.”

“So what if I did?” he returns, quick as lightning. “What the fuck does it have to do with you?”

“With me?” she squawks in disbelief. “What does it have to do with me?” The croak in her voice is absolutely heartbreaking. “You’re my only friend, you son of a bitch.” Her breath hitches painfully. “You’re all I got. You fucking matter to me.”

As much as I don’t like Ling, that statement tears me apart, and I feel myself soften toward her in a way that could be deadly to me.

“Ling Ling.” I see Julius falter, clearly not expecting that response. It doesn’t take a genius to see he cares about the poisonous viper in turn.

But Ling sets her anger on someone else. “Where were you?” she utters in deathly calm to Signor Falco. “His mother hated him. His stepfather beat them both. He was just a little boy.” She pulls her hands from his and snarls, “Where were *you*?”

“I was building an empire. Raising Antonio’s brother. And then I was blessed with a daughter.” Signor Falco sighs audibly. “If I had known...”

Ling stands, glowering down at him. “Well, you didn’t, because he clearly didn’t matter enough to you. You know, not being of the right fucking bloodline and all.”

It’s then that she spots me.

Coming around the sofa, she gets in my face, speaking in lethal serenity. “The fuck are you looking at, skank?”

I remind myself that she’s in pain, grieving for a man she loved all over again, and I can’t seem to get my fight on. Instead, I say quietly and genuinely, “I’m sorry for your loss.”

Her face crumbles and a tear escapes, trailing down her cheek, but Ling has more pride than to let me see her cry. As she passes me, she throws her shoulder into mine, slamming me into the doorframe.

Not surprising. It’s not like I didn’t expect it.

Signor Falco glances over his shoulder and smiles, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. What Ling said is evidently playing on him. Julius motions me in, and I don’t hesitate. When I move to sit beside him, he places his arm around my waist, pulling me onto his lap. With his arms locking me into his tight grasp, I see Signor Falco’s lips twitch, and he utters teasingly, “If this Lexi is anything like Alejandra”—his eyes dance—“well, I suppose I can see why my son would willingly lose his mind for a woman like that.”

Julius nods. “She’s one of a kind.”

“Did...” Signor Falco asks hesitantly, “did he love her?”

“Took a bullet for her,” is all Julius says in response.

This, I interpret as “Of course he loved her.”

Signor Falco nods then smiles. “And I have a grandson?”

Julius’s arms tighten around me for a single moment before he loosens his hold, and his voice holds much affection when he speaks. “Yeah. He was named for his daddy and godfather. Antonio Julius Falco. We call him AJ. He’s four and smart as a whip.”

“Well, isn’t that something.” Signor Falco smiles, but it wobbles, and his eyes shine. “Antonio Falco the third.”

A thoughtful silence follows.

It doesn’t last too long, and Julius is the one to break it. “Give me some time. I can talk to Lexi. See how she feels about you meeting your grandson. I’m sure she’d love to meet you.”

“Oh no,” Signor Falco states with a shake of his head. “I couldn’t ask you to do that. You’d have to tell her how I gave my son up. She’d likely not want anything to do with me or her son.”

Julius rests his hand on my knee. “You don’t know Lexi. She’s good people. Let me talk to her.”

Avoiding the offer, Signor Falco looks to me. “I spoke to Manda last night.” My heart races in interest. “She’s glad you’re okay.” Looking from me to Julius, he says in way of question, “She would like to see Alejandra for herself, make sure she’s safe.”

My heart stutters in excitement as I snap my face down to look at Julius, hoping the answer will be the one I wish for.

He looks to me. “Do you want to see your friend?”

Oh my God.

Not even able to speak, my lips tremble as I mouth, “Yes.”

“I see no problem with that.” He looks to Falco with a nod. “Set it up.”

If this is some sort of sick joke, I will never forgive him. But I just can’t see Julius doing something so cruel.

My thanks comes in the form of me wrapping my arms around his neck and burying my face into his flesh, breathing him in, pressing myself into him. Julius accepts my regard with a gentle hand running up and down my back soothingly.

“Now,” Signor Falco utters. “What are we going to do about this situation of yours?”

Lifting me easily, Julius takes something out of his back pocket and hands it to the older man. I lift my head and sit quietly as Signor Falco reads from the paper.

Julius mutters distantly, "Spread the word."

Although he nods, Signor Falco looks at me with a frown and explains, "I will do my best, but it might be hard for me to explain, considering Alejandra's first husband was only buried four days ago."

First husband?

What?

Standing on weak legs, I escape from Julius's hold and, with a pale face, snatch the piece of paper from Signor Falco, reading in silence.

And my stomach turns.

Blinking up at Julius, I rasp, "We're married?"

THIRTY-SIX

JULIUS

I am prepared for this.

I'm not fool enough to believe Alejandra will be pleased. Rather, I know she is going to be furious. If I could explain it to her, make her see this is vital, she will come around. Truthfully, even if she doesn't accept it, I won't give a rat's ass.

If she expects me to feel bad or sorry for manipulating a situation to my advantage, *our* advantage, she's got another thing coming. That's what good businessmen do. They take a shitty situation and find a way to profit from it.

Looking more than beautiful in her current state of fury, I realize I want to be alone with her. I turn to Antonio Falco Senior and mutter, "You should go."

He glances from Alejandra to me, and he nods in agreement. "Yes, I should." Alejandra doesn't move a muscle as Falco places an arm around her and presses a chaste kiss to her temple. "I'll call to let you know when Manda can make it down." He glances back at me. "I'll see myself out. Keep in touch."

I hear what he says, but I can't take my eyes off Alejandra. She's going to lose her shit at any moment, and it's not something I want to miss. Behind my closed zipper, my dick twitches.

There is something about a woman with attitude, a woman who needed to be calmed, tamed, that is so goddamn sexy I can't look away.

The moment she hears the front door open then close, her head snaps up from its submissive stance and her eyes flash. "How long?"

It would be stupid to play games with her right now. Without an ounce of emotion, I state, "Two days after you fell into my lap."

She blinks up at me, her face softening but only slightly. I'm betting she wasn't expecting that answer. "I—" She stumbles across her words. "How?

Why? I mean, it's not real or anything."

I hold my hand out to her, hoping she'll come to me. Part of me wonders if she'll leave and go her own way. That same part of me wonders if she's stupid enough to believe I'll let her go.

With the previous relationship of hers, the only relationship she had, I'm betting on her being too scared to leave, which definitely has its advantages. I don't necessarily like it, but it does hold some sway over how real her reaction will be when I do what I have to do.

My gut clenches at the thought of leaving her, even for a day, but I have to do what I can to tame this situation and blow the sharks from the water. Some risks are worth the gain. I'm hoping this one will be.

She doesn't come to me, and I don't show how much that bothers me. I drop my hand with a soft sigh and tell her how it's going to be. "I had a feeling about you, that you had your reasons for doing what you did. I'm not going to lie. I wanted you, even after you fed me to the dogs. I decided to prepare plans A through to Z if I was going to keep you safe, baby. Simple as that. I went through a guy I know, does these things quick. Charged an exorbitant amount, but that stamp there makes it official, and official costs. Before you say anything else about it not being real"—I hold her eyes—"in the eyes on the law, you are now Mrs. Julius Carter. That's as real as it's going to get." Just because I love the angry flush on her cheeks, I add a deadpan, "C'mon, Ana. I can't possibly be as bad a husband as your first."

Her eyes narrow at me and her lips thin in irritation. But before I can enjoy the annoyance I've caused, she throws a spanner in the works by nodding sadly and agreeing in agonizing melancholy, "No. I suppose you're right."

Nope. I don't like this Alejandra.

This Alejandra is the woman Dino fashioned, the woman who was beaten into the mold he set.

I like my Alejandra irate, irritated and real, with emotion in her eyes and a goddamn backbone.

Shaking my head, I close my eyes. "That won't do, Ana." When she looks over at me, her pretty doe eyes hold little to no light. "Listen to me, young sparrow. I'm not him. I won't hurt you for saying the wrong thing. I might get mad and we might argue sometimes, but all that means is that

when I fuck you later that night, I'm going to be rougher than I ought to. When it's done, it's done. Over with. I've only got two rules. We don't sleep apart and we don't go to bed angry in this house. We kiss and make up, whether our pride wants us to or not." Her eyes wide in disbelief, I add, "I'm not sorry for taking the decision out of your hands, baby. You're my wife. We're a team. And you're exactly where I want you. By my side."

She takes a cautious step closer to me, and some of the warmth in her eyes returns as she mutters, "I don't think I've ever heard you say so many things all in a row." Her lips lift at the corner, and she's dangerously close to smiling. "I kind of liked it, the whole talking thing."

My face dips and I suppress the sigh of relief, instead laughing silently. I didn't expect to get off so easily. Lifting my hand past my lowered face, I absently rub at the back of my neck and reveal, "Yeah, well, you better get used to it, because I only talk to people worth talking to." The implication is there and completely true. From this moment on, this woman will be my world.

I don't think she understands what that means or the lengths I will go to keep her safe. Not yet, but she will.

I take a quick peek at her to find her standing in front of me, her face soft in thought. "Okay." She approaches the single step it takes to reach me, taking my hand and holding it tight. "Okay. So what's the plan? What do we do about Gio?"

If I tell her the plan, she'll ruin it—not knowingly, but she will.

I tell her what I can, leaving out major details. "The man who killed Raul, Maxim Nikulin, my sources have located him. I'm going to deliver him to your father."

"Julius," Alejandra frowns, "that's not enough. My father will do whatever it takes to secure his alliance with Vito." Her hand squeezes mine. "And Vito wants me." I lift my face, and she runs her fingers down my cheek. "You can't stop what's coming. I've committed the insult of insults. Vito will have justice for his son."

Sitting up tall, I reach out to grip her hips in my hands and pull her toward me. She knows what I want and rolls her eyes at me as she climbs onto my lap, facing me, her thighs draped over the sides of mine. Her arms come around my neck, and she leans in to press her chest to mine, virtually nose to nose. "I'm beginning to think this lap thing is a thing of yours."

“Whenever you’re near me, I want you as close as possible, and this is getting you as close as possible without being inside of you. So yeah.” I kiss her full bottom lip, gently nipping it, my arms tightening around her back. “You can call it a thing of mine. Get used to it. You’re going to spend a lot of time right here.”

Her lips pucker to accept my closed-mouth kisses as I continue to assault her lips in gentle slowness. Against my lips, she whispers, “I’m scared, Julius.” When I pull back to look into her eyes, she confesses, “I don’t want to die. Not the way Gio will deliver. He’ll take his time. Make it slow.”

“You said Vito will want justice for his son. What about your father’s justice for you? I’m thinking your pops isn’t going to take too kindly to knowing the things Vito’s boy was doing to his girl.”

But she’s already shaking her head. “No. Even if I had proof of what was going on, my father has always taught me that we have to make sacrifices for the greater good. If he knew, he would just tell himself that being married to Dino was my sacrifice to make in this life. Besides, I don’t have any evidence to back up my claim.”

My anger spikes at her cool detachment. “Your entire fucking body is evidence, Ana.”

Her expression is still. “You don’t know my dad. He’ll care, but he’s a businessman. He won’t care enough.”

My father-in-law sounds like a stand-up guy. If someone ever dares to put their hands on my child, God help them. After I’m done with them, they’ll be begging for death, and because I’m a merciful guy, I’ll give them what they wish.

“Fuck your father. We’ll work something out.” I hold her tighter, moving to rest my cheek against her chest, eyes closed in pleasure. She works her fingers through the hair at my nape, resting her cheek on top of my head and, caught up in drowsy bliss, I barely hear her when she starts, “So, husband of mine.” I pull up and catch her awkward, wide-eyed expression. “Exactly how old are you?”

I blink at her a moment before I tilt my head back and let out a rumbling laugh. When she leans down to kiss my lips, I chuckle into her smiling mouth.

Unexpectedly, marriage doesn’t seem so bad.

Not when it’s to this pretty little sparrow.

My sister answers the door, and when she spots my hand clutched in Alejandra's tiny one, her mouth parts while suspicion enters her eyes. "Uh," Tonya starts, leaning her hip onto the wooden doorframe and admitting with a tilt of her head, "I did not see this coming."

I grin. "You gonna let us in or what?"

She straightens with a jolt. "Yes, of course." Smiling at Alejandra, she moves to the side waving us in. As she leads the way down the hall, she picks up shoes, a school bag, and random items of clothing, before stating, "Please excuse my daughter's belongings. Teenage girls are messy, but they don't mean to be." Her nose bunches in sincere affection. "They're just too busy to remember where things are meant to go. I swear if that girl didn't have her head screwed on..." She chuckles to herself. "Well, you get what I mean."

Alejandra smiles at my sister and admits, "I do. When I was living at home, my sisters, Veronica, Carmen, and Patricia, were all teenagers, and I was constantly picking up after them. My youngest sister, Rosa, is thirteen now"—her eyes widen comically—"and the attitude on that one is something to be reckoned with."

Tonya laughs softly. "Oh my, yes. Thirteen is an awful age. All those hormones cut loose, and one second they're yelling, the next they're crying, and whether they'll admit it or not, sometimes they just need a hug and to be told everything will be all right."

The sheer admiration in Alejandra's eyes is something known to me. I feel it every time I watch my sister be a mother to her daughter.

"Speaking of teenagers," I begin. "Where's my girl?"

Tonya rolls her eyes. "In the cave she calls a room. I'll go get her. She'll be so happy to see her Uncle Jay and meet his..." Unsure what to call her, she looks to Alejandra and flushes slightly. "I'll just go get Keera."

We sit down at the dining table in the kitchen, and I look down at my wife. "You okay?"

I'm not prepared for her smiling response. She places her small hand on my knee and squeezes. "I'm with you, aren't I?"

Fuck.

How is it this little woman's high opinion of me makes me feel like a better person? And what sort of idiot am I to have given her that power?

Without blinking, I mutter a rough, "Yeah, baby."

I may as well have just told her I'm hers.

Her smile widens beautifully, her full lips stretched happily. "Then, yes, I'm okay."

Goddamn.

Fuck it.

I am hers. She just made it so.

When I hear the running footsteps coming down the hall, I move to stand, placing my hand on Alejandra's shoulder in reassurance. The young woman's beaming face appears around the open doorway, and a light shriek escapes her. Faster than a speeding bullet, Keera is in my arms, and I hold her as tightly as she grips me, rocking her side to side.

She grabs my shirtfront and shakes me, her expression one of mock anger. "You never visit anymore."

"Work, baby girl," I explain.

She shakes me some more, her big brown eyes wide, her long wavy hair swaying as she does. "You care more about work than you do your family, Uncle Jay?"

Tonya lets out a throaty chuckle from behind us, and she peers around Keera to look over at Alejandra. "Never underestimate the guilt a sixteen-year-old can place on her uncle."

Alejandra smiles openly at the young woman. I gently extract Keera's fingers from my shirt and pull her into my side, hugging her to me. "You know I love you, but a man's got to make money."

Keera pouts. "You have plenty of money already. You don't need any more damn money."

"Language," I warn her with a raised brow. I melt when she flushes.

I can't deny it. She's a good girl.

"Keke, I want you to meet someone," I tell her as I pull her closer to Alejandra, who moves to stand.

Keera eyes Alejandra carefully, then speculates out loud, "Mom told me you brought a woman here. Said she was pretty. I wondered if she was your girlfriend."

"She's not my girlfriend. This is Alejandra," I explain, before adding cautiously, with a watchful glance at my sister, "my wife."

Both women still, Keera stuck in a moment of stunned disbelief, whereas my sister reaches up to clutch at her heart, an expression of desolate

confusion crossing her.

Tonya's voice can't hide her pain. "You got married..." Her brown eyes shine brightly. "...and you didn't invite us?"

"Tonya, sweetheart," I begin, not sure of what I can do or say to make the feeling of betrayal any better.

Keera steps back, blinking up at me, her eyes cold. "You didn't want us there, Uncle Jay?" The words are spoken in deceptive calm.

"No, that's not how it went," I tell them both, my mild annoyance unconcealed.

My sister shakes her head, her face pained, unsure what to say to me.

But Alejandra clears her throat and speaks, and when she does, she lies charmingly, "Actually, it was my idea to do a courthouse wedding." She says easily, "You see, I've been married once before, and that marriage was..." She takes her time, looking for the right word. "Horrible. I did the big wedding the first time around and it was awful, stressful." She comes forward, placing her hand in mine in a silent show of support then smiles ruefully up at me. "I didn't want to put Julius through that. It didn't seem like that would appeal to him, so I made a suggestion." She looks over at Tonya, and then at Keera. "We'd do a courthouse marriage then come straight here and celebrate." She smiles, then adds, "You're the first people we've told. I knew Julius would want to share this with you, his family."

Tonya's sadness has lifted, but only slightly, while Keera crosses her arms over her chest and glares at Alejandra. "And what about your family, Alejandra?"

I utter through gritted teeth, "I'm her family," at the very same time Alejandra states, "Julius is my family."

We pause to look at each other at our perfectly timed declarations.

My sister, ever the romantic, sighs at this, smiling softly at the two of us. "Well, look at us, being selfish and all, when I should be offering the both of you my congratulations and welcoming my new sister to the family." Tonya steps closer to Alejandra and holds out her hands. Alejandra takes them graciously, as Tonya clarifies kindly, "We're not much of a family, and I'm sorry for that, but we're all we've got."

"Thank you so much. I'm glad to be part of it," my little sparrow chirps.

I look from Tonya to Keera.

She's confused and hurt.

“Keera,” Tonya mutters, frowning at her daughter. “You’re being rude.”

But ignoring her mother’s unspoken warning, Keera looks Alejandra up and down. “I don’t even know you.”

Unblinking, Alejandra offers a firm, “You’ll get to know me,” not backing down to the sixteen-year-old.

Alejandra’s polite show of power has Keera’s brows rising, almost impressed. She side-eyes me. “And she makes you happy?”

I raise my hand to scratch at my brow and fight a grin. “Unbelievable, I know.”

“*Hey.*” Alejandra elbows me in the ribs, and I wheeze out a long breath at the unexpected move as Tonya laughs and Keera’s lips twitch.

It’s then I know everything is going to be okay.

I didn’t even realize I was looking for the reassurance.

Not until I found it.

THIRTY-SEVEN

ALEJANDRA

The drive home is uneventful, and I'm thankful for it. After spending time with Tonya and Keera, I made every effort for the young woman to warm up to me. All I got in return was that stoic stare. She did, however, give me an inch at the end of the night when she stood to hug Julius good-bye. I didn't expect much, so when she looked me up and down and pursed her lips, before reluctantly muttering, "Welcome, fam," I let out a stunned little laugh.

And now, as we drive on in silence, I have to get something off my chest, something I'm not sure how to broach.

I turn to face the man I will protect with my life, and proceed with caution. "She's your sister, isn't she?"

Julius glances at me momentarily, his brows low in confusion, before turning his eyes back to the road. "Uh, yeah. I told you that already." He frowns, misunderstanding me. "You feeling all right?"

I shake my head. "Not Tonya," I mutter gently. "I meant Keera."

When his face shutters and his hands tighten around the steering wheel, I add softly, "Ling told me you killed your father, because he was raping your sister. I'm beginning to think that Tonya fell pregnant as a result." But he ignores me, feigning concentration on the road. I blink at his curious reaction. "It's okay, Julius. It's nobody's business, and I'm not going to tell anyone. I just wanted to let you know that I know, is all." When he disregards me, it hurts, but I understand this fact must be painful for him, so I mend the rift by reaching over and squeezing his thigh, saying, "Hey. I'm sorry for bringing it up. If you want to talk about it, about *anything*, I'm right here."

Five minutes pass, and as they do, soundless mayhem wreaks chaos in my mind.

What have I done?

When, finally, he speaks. But he does this without feeling. “She knows,” he utters roughly. “Told her when she was fourteen.” He huffs out a breath, and it’s almost as if all his energy is spent with it. He looks so tired, so lost. “She cried, called herself a freak, told us she felt dirty. It was a miracle she came out perfect as she was.” His expression turns lax as he thinks out loud, “I remember the epiphany she had. She was fourteen, and not only had she found out she was, for all intents and purposes, an abomination, but she also found out that her mom was raped by her own daddy.”

My eyes close at the heavyhearted words that spill from him. I calmly wonder how long he’s kept this all to himself.

“Oh, baby.” The whispered endearment is wrenched from my tight throat, thick with emotion.

“Deserves the world, that girl,” he allows. “They both do.”

“I’m sure they do,” I concede courteously, and a particularly heavy pain slices through me knowing I will always come third in this man’s life. But I accept the fact and move forward.

“I swore I’d give it to them, no matter the cost.”

Ah.

It begins to make sense. I have found what drives him to do what he does and I’m not at all surprised. Not even a little bit.

Admiration sweeps through me, but as quickly as it comes, it goes, and in its place festers the pain of uncertainty. I, too, had a champion at home.

My heart squeezes sorely.

What has become of my brother and sisters?

“Julius,” I approach warily. His eyes briefly glance mine and my heart aches, as I all but beg, “I really would like to speak to my brother.” He turns back to the road, and I quickly rush out, “Just one last time and I-I promise to never ask again.” Slumping in my chair, my eyes close and I reach up to cover my face with my hands. I speak through them, but it’s muffled. “Before you tell me they’re not my family anymore, I need you to know that you risk upsetting me, and when I get upset—” I remove my hands from my face and pose my futile, under-delivered threat. “—I am less than cooperative.”

Unfortunately, it’s the only threat I have to use right now.

Luckily for me, Julius’s lip twitches, and I catch the sight of his shoulders moving in silent laughter, and my uptight posture eases. After a

moment of composure, he humors me and does it in perfect seriousness. “Can’t have an uncooperative wife now, can I?”

I nod and return in complete sobriety, “I’m sure you’ve heard the saying.” I turn to catch his curious look and realize he has no idea about *the* saying. I take pity on him and fill him in. “Happy wife, happy life.”

His shoulders bounce some more as mirth takes hold, and I smile to myself at the light teasing.

Julius reaches over and takes my hand, entwining our fingers then pulling them to his mouth, where he presses soft kisses to my knuckles. And my stomach swirls with solid waves of tenderness.

I barely hear him when he mutters a hushed, “Damn fool of a man.” Another kiss. “Burnin’ in hell.” A soft peck. “Worth her weight.”

But, and here’s the important thing...

I do hear him.

The house greets us in silence, and as I walk past him, Julius catches me around the waist and pulls me to him, his front flush against my back. He leans down to place his stubbled cheek to mine, and I lean into it, regardless of how it scratches the delicate skin on my face.

For a strange yet exhilarating moment, I wonder if this is what normal feels like.

If it is, I never want to lose what little normal Julius provides.

“Nice night,” I reveal quietly, into the darkness of the hall.

“Yeah,” he drawls at my nape, and the heat of his breath has me breaking out in gooseflesh.

How on earth was a woman meant to keep her mind about her when in his presence?

At the moment, I don’t really care about my sanity. I spin in his hold and hook my fingers into the pockets of his jeans, standing on my tiptoes, wanting desperately for him to take my mouth in a deep, earth-shattering kiss. “Bedtime?”

His gorgeous eyes hood, and it’s so goddamn sexy that my core contracts. “Mmmm,” is his only response, the approving sound vibrating through his chest to mine.

I don’t hear her step out of the shadows.

Ling speaks softly, her voice unusually tentative. “You’re back.”

I want to yell at her for interrupting and plan on doing so, but when I turn around to deliver, her appearance has me backing off.

Dressed in a short kimono-style robe, her legs bare, with no makeup on, her hair wound up into a ball at the top of her head, she avoids my gaze when she announces, “We got a delivery this afternoon. It was an envelope. I forgot about it till about twenty minutes ago. I didn’t—” She swallows hard and bites the inside of her cheek. “I didn’t think it was important.”

Julius steps out from behind me and makes his way over to her; his cautionary stance tells me this is a rare display from Ling. “Ling Ling,” he says guardedly. “What is it?”

Holding the robe together tightly, she starts, “I only started watching it when you came in. I would’ve called, but—”

Watching it?

“It’s a video?” Julius enquires.

It’s so strange seeing her without her perfect red lips, her perfectly straight hair, her perfect composure. Part of me wants to cheer at the discovery that she is like any other woman, but it’s so alarming that, instead, it gives me chills.

She’s well and truly shaken up.

“A video from Gio,” she confirms. My body turns rigid. Then, finally, she looks up at me, eye to eye, but what she says next has me wishing she didn’t. “And it’s addressed to Alejandra.”

My heart goes from meek stuttering to wild pounding. I see the TV on in the living area and immediately recognize the voice as Gio’s. Without a second thought, my feet carry me there.

Ling calls out, “Don’t go in there!” Then she adds a panicked, “*Fuck*. Don’t let her watch, Julius. It’s bad.”

My legs take me as far as the open doorway. The image on the television rocks me. I barely notice when Julius moves past me, remote in hand. I snarl, “*Leave it on.*”

“Ana, baby, you don’t want to see this. Let me take care of it,” he offers reasonably.

Without any heat, I return, “Shut up.”

Moving toward him, I take the remote out of his hand, and he lets me. I turn the volume up louder than is necessary, but I need it. I’m so afraid of missing even a single moment.

My eyes water at the brightness of the screen, but instead of retreating, I move closer.

I skip back to the very beginning of the video and watch the horror unfold.

Gio steps into the screen. “Is this thing on? Yes. Good. Okay.” With a sigh, he moves to sit down on the empty chair.

The chair next to my bound and bloodied brother.

Miguel sits tall, even though his breathing is labored and his brow is split open, raw to the bone. He can’t talk due to the rag tied around his gawking mouth. His eyes are duller than I have ever seen them. He can barely keep them open.

Gio shuffles around in the chair. “Okay, so I’m guessing by now, you know that word has spread.” His smile is mocking. “Congratulations to the happy couple.” He claps lightly then turns to my brother, mussing up his hair playfully. “This guy, huh? You have to love this guy. So much faith, so little brains.”

Gio stands then, beginning to pace, all signs of humor lost. Suddenly, he stops and faces the camera, arms wide before placing his hands on his hips. “What the fuck were you thinking, Alejandra?”

He blinks into the screen as if waiting for a response. “We had a good thing going, you, me, and Dino. You were good for us. I mean, you fought, but I know deep down you liked it. You didn’t make us work *too* hard for it. It was the same every time. You fought, you broke, and then you sat there, and you took it, like a good girl. You were quiet and meek and fucking pathetic.” He glares. “Exactly the way a woman should be.” Sitting by my brother, he shrugs. “So what happened? What changed?” He nods as if in understanding. “Okay, so you’re pregnant.” He rolls his eyes and scoffs, “So fucking what?” Leaning in, he sobers and places his fingers to his lips, before removing them and stating, “I need you to understand that this baby, this *brat*, is mine now. I claim it as my own, and I’m coming for you and it.” He smirks cruelly. “I need to take care of my family, after all. The boy will need his uncle.” He glances at my brother quickly before looking back at the camera, his eyes shuttered. “One of them, at least.”

He stands from his sitting position, reaches behind him and removes a large hunting knife, running his fingers gently against the sharp blade. “What did you think, that I’d let you go like nothing ever happened?” He

rushes forward, stopping just before hitting the camera, his eyes blazing, and growls through gritted teeth, “You took away the only person who understood me. The only fucking person who got it. Got *me*.” He steps away and runs a calming hand through his short hair. “And look at who you left me with.” He throws me a what-the-fuck expression. “My baby brother, Luc? The fucking pansy? I’ll bet if you pull down his pants, you’ll find a fucking pussy where his cock should be. Mister No-Unnecessary-Violence. Mister Making-Love-Is-Dandy.” A look of disgust crosses him as he shakes his head. “You fucking bitch. I will gut you for this.”

He stills then blinks up into the camera as though he just got a better idea.

Gio takes his knife and stills. “You need to be punished, Alejandra, and since you’re not here, someone needs to fill in.”

When he moves toward my brother, I’m already sobbing. “No,” I whisper hoarsely, my body quaking as I cry. “Please don’t.”

But I know my pleas are pointless. This video is only showing me what has come to be. And in my heart, I know my brother is already dead.

Gio grips Miguel’s hair and pulls hard, getting down so they’re nose to nose. My brother winces as Gio snarls, “What are you doing talking to Falco?” He wrenches his head back harder. “You got no fucking business talking to a man like that, you fucking faggot.” In the ultimate act of insult, he releases him a moment, only to slap him across the face. “Tell me what you sent him, and I’ll let you go.”

Gio pulls down the makeshift gag and my brother’s lip curls, his response weak and breathy. “Fuck you, you sick fuck.”

Gio laughs harshly before head-butting him. As Miguel groans, Gio cricks his neck and gloats, “If I remember correctly, your sister said the same thing when I tied her to Dino’s bed and took her tight little asshole.” He grabs his crotch and shakes it lightly. “Oh yeah, she screamed all right, but you bet she liked that shit.”

At that, I hear rapid footsteps, and then something behind me shatters. Julius lets out an animalistic roar that jolts me, but not enough to look away.

The tears don’t stop as I watch Gio beat up my brother. When he plunges the knife into his chest, I let out a sobbing shriek and stumble back in the shock of what I’ve just witnessed. “No, no, *no*,” I cry, my entire body weak and shaking.

My eyes close in suppressed grief, but only for a moment.

At the sounds of my brother's groan, I look at the screen and almost wish I hadn't.

Gio, having pushed my brother's chair to the ground, stabs him repeatedly in the stomach and chest with all his might, and I can only watch as my brother blinks sluggishly, wheezing out his last breaths.

I don't cry anymore. I can't. Emotion has left me. All that is left is hazy detachment.

I am numb.

I am cold.

Blood roars in my ears and I barely blink as Gio slices my brother from chest to stomach, laughing, and begins to remove his insides, disemboweling him. My brother trembles and shakes as blood drips from the corner of his mouth.

Before he finds peace, Miguel turns his face to the camera, his eyes closing in a tired darkness that will soon become permanent, and wheezes out a gurgling, "Ana... Kick... Scream... Fight."

I find no comfort in knowing my brother died a proud man. Not when the empty vessel that carried him stares so openly at me, silently cursing me to the depths of hell.

Gio stands from his kneeling position over my brother and wipes off the blade onto his pants. "I didn't want to do that, Alejandra." He chuckles to himself. "Who am I kidding?" His bloodstained face grins. "Yes, I did. And I really enjoyed it. I'm fucking hard from it."

My guts recoil at the realization it's not his blood.

He moves to take a seat, stepping over my brother to get there. "Now, what did we learn today?" Resting his hands on his lap, he entwines his fingers and stares, unblinking, into the screen. "Newton said that for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction." He looks down at my brother's body with raised brows then smiles. "I'm thinking he's right."

His face somber, he mutters calmly, "You take something from me, I take something from you."

Gio stands and vows, "I'm coming for you, and you'd better be ready for me when I get there, baby." He takes the camera into his hands. The screen shakes as he places it at eye level. "I was going to wait, but I think I'd better tell you the good news now." He lets out a soft chuckle. "My father wants

us tied together once more. He wants our families to try again. They wanted me to marry Veronica, but as it turns out, Luc wants her. Oh, I fought for what I want. You're going to *love* this." His smile darkens as he reveals quietly, toxic, "I get Rosa."

The screen goes blank, and with it, my mind.

In the past five minutes, I've witnessed a madman's rage, my brother's death, and the promise of making my thirteen-year-old sister a constant victim of rape, abuse, and mental torture.

What was he thinking, that I was just going to sit by idly and let that happen?

Fuck no.

I decide right then and there.

I'm going to kill Gio.

I'm going to kill him myself.

An unexpected spell of courage blooms from deep within my gut. I will be ready for him when he comes.

My feet spin and I walk out of the room, shouting out, "Call Signor Falco. Call him right *now*. If my brother sent him something, it's got to be important."

Whatever it is, for my own sake, I pray it's useful.

THIRTY-EIGHT

TWITCH

Bogdan Mihailović is a sentimental fuck. He is also third on my list of five.

Although Yugoslavia no longer exists, regardless of the fact that the breakup of the country happened back in '92, Mihailović still calls his crew The Yugo Boys. The Serbo-Americian group is too chaotic to be called a firm, too organized to be called a mere gang.

They're stuck somewhere in between. Have been since I met them.

I know a few Serbian men, and for the most part, they're decent people, but *this* group of men... they are out of control. They do nothing in halves. Eating feasts every damn night, partying too hard and drinking too much. Overindulgence is a specialty of theirs.

Mihailović doesn't know it yet, but The Yugo Boys are done. Their time has come to disband, and I don't feel the least bit sorry for making that happen.

After taking down Neo Metaxas and the pinnacle shot that saved Black's life, I had been given more freedom to do as I please. Not that I ever need permission.

I always was more an *ask forgiveness* than *permission* type of guy.

So when Ethan Black told me that I no longer needed to remain indoors so long as I wore sunglasses and clothes that covered my tattoos, I did what I'm sure was expected, and I laughed at him.

Had he learned nothing about me in our time in partnership?

He glared at me a whole minute before shaking his head and walking away, only to return a moment later and bark at me to decide on what I wanted for dinner.

I chose steak, and I requested it from a decent place too.

I expected a dispute and wound up surprised when Black cooled his jets and agreed. When he muttered something about wanting to chew on a nice, thick piece of meat, I bit my tongue. I mean, c'mon. He set that one up from

a mile away. I really wanted to tell him that he couldn't chew on mine but I wasn't in the mood for a war of words with the guy who had a four-foot stick shoved up his ass.

The food arrived, and Black paid the delivery guy, moving the brown paper bags of dinner into the kitchen. We sat in silence, dishing up our own plates before sampling what was one of the best cuts of meat of my life. Either it was sincerely incredible, or it had been way too long since I had eaten a decent meal.

I was thinking a little from column A, a little from column B.

The scab on the apple of my cheek had itched almost constantly since my first session of laser tattoo removal. The skin specialist I spoke to told me that because the tattoo had been done so long ago and had already faded quite a bit that she was confident I wouldn't need any more than five sessions, but she would judge how clean the area looked after four.

She advised me that after the session, the skin might swell or blister. I wasn't too happy about that. She then said the area would likely scab, itch, and bleed. That kind of sucked. Then she reminded me to stay out of the sun, massage the area for ten minutes a day and drink plenty of water to stay hydrated. I was confused. They were treating me like I was going to have an amputation or some shit.

Luckily, I had only been subject to the scabbing and itching, nothing too serious. But still, I couldn't shave and had already started to harbor a decent growth, which prickled. For the moment, I was irritated as hell.

As I lifted my hand to scratch at the area, Black coughed in warning. My hand fell back down to the table, causing my cutlery to clang loudly against my plate.

"It's only for a little while," he muttered unsympathetically.

My lip curled at his cool reasoning. "Gotta do this shit maybe five times over. Didn't know it'd feel like this." I sighed loudly, picking up my fork and jabbing a garlic green bean before shoving it into my mouth, then garbled, "I want to shave, dammit."

Black's lip twitched.

Motherfucker wanted a go at me. "What?"

He wheezed out a laugh, cutting his rare steak and stabbing a piece then using his fork to point at me. "You're acting like a little bitch."

I was dumbfounded.

Did this wrinkly ole ball sack know who the fuck he was dealing with?
I deserved respect.

At my stunned silence, he tipped his head back and laughed with glee. “Oh, I know you won’t like hearing it, but *goddamn*. You haven’t stopped complaining the entire time we’ve been here.” He got serious, tilting his head to the side, looking at me with pure frustration. “I have a wife. I have two sons and a daughter. Do you think I’d rather be here with your surly ass or home with them?” I didn’t answer, because if I did, I’d leave myself open to being called Captain Obvious. He went on, “You hear me finding fault with every damn thing?”

No. He wasn’t. But it wasn’t a fair comparison. “You get to see your wife and kids any time. My entire life depends on this next couple of months.” I held him with a stare. “You’ve had your family for a long time. A little time away from them can’t possibly hurt. Fuck, might even feel like a holiday to you.” I played with my food. “It ain’t the same thing.” I might’ve been sulking, but I didn’t care. “My woman *mourned* me. I got a son that doesn’t know his pops. He’s my world, and he doesn’t—” I stood fast, cutting myself off.

I was critically close to breaking something, and before that something became Black’s nose, I stood, carrying my almost empty plate to the sink. I dumped the rest of the food into the trash then rinsed my plate, using the running faucet to splash some cold water onto my face, careful to avoid my healing scab.

The breathing exercises I’d been taught came in handy at this very moment. I closed my eyes, inhaling deep and exhaling slowly, mentally counting out ten reps. Once I was through, my shoulders sagged in relief.

This was a means to an end. It wouldn’t last forever. I needed to calm my shit down.

But I didn’t want to calm my shit down. I wanted to brawl with a worthy opponent. I knew it would help nothing. Thing is, it was who I was. And I may not feel better after the sparring was over, but while it was happening, I was on cloud fucking nine.

I heard Black approach the sink and opened my mouth to blast sharp words at him like knives, but when I turned, the words turned to dust in my mouth.

My eyes remained glued to the spot at the center of the dining table.

Behind me, he placed his plate into the sink, pausing only a moment to lay a hand on my shoulder, squeezing firmly for a split second before heading up the stairs and into his bedroom on the first floor.

The door closed quietly and, without feeling much of anything, I moved toward the table, my bare feet padding along the cool tiled floor.

I moved to the chair I had occupied at dinnertime, reached over and snatched them up in my hand, not daring to look at them until I made it to the safety of my room, closing the door behind me and switching on the light.

The bed beckoned me to it, and I sat quietly, lifting the small bundle of photographs up to eye level.

I smiled down at the first candid photo.

AJ sitting in a shopping cart, looking decidedly shamefaced as he snuck a candy bar in with the other groceries. A young woman dressed in all black with her hair styled into a short black bob, black painted lips and smoky eyes mock glaring at my son, her hands on her hips.

I didn't know the Goth chick, but she couldn't have been any older than twenty-one.

The next photograph had my heart skipping a beat.

In the park, AJ playing with his trucks as Lexi lies flat on her stomach on the plush grass. He rolls the trucks over Lexi's jean clad bottom, using my baby's spectacular ass as a mountain for his earthmovers to move across. It was a little thicker than I remembered, but not at all less tempting, maybe even more so. I brought the photo closer to my face and squinted, but Lexi's smiling face was blurred. Disappointment flooded me.

Damn.

The next photo had my throat thickening.

Lexi, dressed in a white sundress, her long, wavy hair flowing around her as the wind carries it. She held herself, looking miserable as she leaned her back against the front of a white marble headstone, a single daisy tucked behind her ear.

My white marble headstone.

My everything, this woman.

The next image was taken the same day. Lexi leaning into the white marble, pressing her cheek to it, an expression of sheer longing worn on her

beautiful face. The daisy now laid across what should be my eternal resting place.

Dangerously close to crying, I flipped to the next image and bit the inside of my cheek as I took in the image of my somber son placing a handful of chocolate buttons on top of that headstone.

And just like that, I crumbled.

The first of the tears fell, and my breathing hitched, echoing into the silence of the cold, sterile bedroom. The place where my heart should be ached uncontrollably. My chest heaving, I tried to take in a full breath as I clutched the photo in both hands, so hard that it wrinkled, and kissed the image of my son over and over again.

I needed to get home to him.

To them.

My purpose renewed, I reminded myself that everything I do, I do for the people I love.

Failure is not an option.

Two weeks, three days later...

Phoenix is hotter than I remember, even at night.

The black military-style convoy bounces, jolting all the occupants of the vehicle, as we travel the bumpy road into the desert.

This bust is going to be easier than the others, easy because Bogdan Mihailović was arrested this morning. That doesn't necessarily mean it's going to be without its work. My thinking is now that Mihailović is in lock-up, his shit is going to be tight. Tight, as in triple security. That's if his crew aren't already moving locations.

Surveillance quickly came to know his habits and determined he visited the same café every morning in his hometown of Chicago, Illinois. Before he had a chance to order his breakfast, Black's guys swooped on him. He was taken into custody on little more than a whim, and now I'm silently praying the foxhole is still where I remember it to be.

The soldier boys are silent, as usual; the only difference this time is that Black bounces his foot up and down in noticeable apprehension.

A lot is riding on this memory of mine.

Lucky for me, I'm still sharp as a tack.

The driver navigates the directions I give him, and before we get there, my mouth turns dry, and I force an audible swallow. My brow damp from the humidity, I close my eyes in trepidation, but I should know better than to question myself.

An hour and forty-five minutes into our desert drive, the driver's companion opens the hatch separating the navigators from the cargo, and announces, "Sir, we're approaching some kind of bunker."

My exhale is long and slow and one of pure relief.

Black looks over at me and nods respectfully. I incline my head in return.

It's on.

But this time, I ain't fucking around.

Into the silence of the cab, I announce, "I need a gun."

All of the soldiers move at the same time, and my defenses rise. I look around at each and every one of their hands extended, pistols offered without question.

If I didn't know better, I'd say these men were showing me some sign of respect.

I blink over at Black, daring him to say something, as I reach over to take a pistol from the guy sitting next to me. I mutter, "Thanks."

Soldier boy responds, "No problem."

I nod, my lips pursing, as I let out a quietly growled, "Let's knock some heads."

THIRTY-NINE

ALEJANDRA

Life's situations have a way of pulling emotions from you. The particularly trying moments stretching them so thin that you don't really *feel* anymore. You just *are*. Existing as a drone, and nothing more. But in that state of numbness, those stretched emotions, however slender they may be, are still very much there. Yes, they are there. My mind fingers those emotions like strings of a harp, plucking at cords marked misery, sorrow, and grief, playing an unnamed piece that I will soon call vengeance.

My eyes have become so dry that even blinking feels a chore. But I don't dare weep, not a single tear, however much I crave the release.

My heart tells me to harness the anguish I feel, to harness and use it. Which I plan to.

Julius enters the bedroom. I know this because I hear his firm footfalls still once he reaches the bed. My eyes close as I lean over the sink, holding myself up by gripping the sides of the vanity until my knuckles turn white. I breathe deeply, trying to make sense of what I need to do.

Vito Gambino wants me dead. Gio wants the baby I never carried.

Gio murdered Miguel in cold blood and, in my opinion, an eye for an eye has been served. There is no longer need for me to die. My brother took my place. His life was worth so much more than mine.

Julius comes to stand at the open doorway of the bathroom. I feel his eyes on me, but I refuse to look at him. If I do, my sorrow will leak out of my eyes, spilling down my cheeks, and with it my fury.

"Baby," he says in that smooth, gravelly lilt of his, and my stomach churns violently.

"They broke me. He killed my brother and now he wants my sister, Julius," I mutter coldly. "She's thirteen years old." My eyes open, but rather than gazing up at him, I take in my own drawn reflection. "*Thirteen.*" I shake my head slowly. "He can't have her. I won't let him have her."

“Okay,” he states.

“She’s just a little girl.”

“She is,” he acknowledges.

“He wants to break her. Hurt her. Steal her innocence. Turn her dark like he did me.”

He straightens. “Not gonna happen.”

Frustration wells up in me as I admit, “I need to do *something*. I don’t know where to go from here. I can’t even think of what to do, where to start.” My voice is weak when I mumble, “I want to kill him, but how—” I lose the words. When I find them again, I speak them resolutely. “How do you plan a murder?”

A long moment of silence, then quietly, “Come with me.”

It’s not a question, because he knows he doesn’t need to ask. Of course I’ll go with him. I’ll follow Julius anywhere, blindly. “Where to?”

“Not far.” Reaching into his pocket, he pulls out his car keys, holding them tightly in his palm.

I need to think, but I’m too wound up. Doing something boring, something uninteresting, like going for a drive, might help clear my head. “And when we get back, you’ll help me? We’ll make a plan?”

He stares down at me, unmoving, before stating, “You and me, baby.”

And it’s the words I need to hear. Those words are a declaration. Julius will help me, help rid my life of the parasites that are the Gambino family.

We’ll do it together, as a team. A storm is coming.

There are few facts in life.

The sun will always rise at dawn and set in the evening.

We are born with nothing and die very much the same.

And finally, we all bleed red.

These are undisputed facts, but I have my reservations. I’m dying to slit Gio Gambino’s throat to see what color evil bleeds.

At this moment, although I keep my chaotic emotions to myself, my shattered heart needs Julius more than he may ever know. So we’ll go for a drive, just so I can keep him close to me and I can be where I’m most comfortable.

By his side.

We reach the pristine white building, and although it's now in the early hours of the morning, the lights are on, and I can see people moving around through the lit windows.

I glance over at Julius as he parks on the street. "What is this place?"

He blinks at me a long while before speaking, and when he does, my heart sinks. "Got a message from Falco while we were at Tonya's." Running his fingertip over the leather steering wheel, he reluctantly confesses, "Asked him to call your brother, let him know you were safe." My cold heart warms somewhat. This beautiful man of mine. "Falco said Miguel went through your house after you left. Said the safe was left wide open."

What?

Julius goes on. "Told me Miguel sent him some of what he found as insurance. Gio had been keeping an eye on him, thinking you'd contact him. Sent Falco discs, hundreds of them, dated and timed."

I'm somewhat baffled. The only safe I know of, I emptied when I left.

My brows furrow in bewilderment. "What are they?"

Julius shrugs lightly. "Falco can't get into them. The files are scrambled. He opened one, but it asked for a password. He didn't key anything in. Ten seconds later, it fried his computer. Dead."

"I don't understand."

"The files are protected," he states carefully. "I'm guessing whatever is on them is important."

"Okay," I mutter to myself, before asking a long, drawn out, "and we're here because...?"

"Braden Kelly. Irish mobster. Currently on parole." He shoots me a knowing look. "Computer whizz."

"You think he can work out what these files are." *Let me guess.* "He owes you?"

Julius shakes his head. "No, but if he comes through, I'll owe him."

My chest aches at the subtle beauty of those words.

I was brought up in the underground, and I know what it means for a man to owe a favor. It's never done lightly and quite a big deal to owe a marker. You don't offer a favor unless you plan to deliver, because if you don't deliver, you die. The issue is that you never know what you're going to

have to do as a result of a marker. It's a worrying thought, to owe someone unconditionally like that.

My frosted insides begin to melt, my feeling of loss thawing at the reminder of what I've gained in Julius.

Julius is willing to do this for me. It isn't even something he questions, like it's a no-brainer, as if I am worth the consequence.

The warmth that consumes me is comforting, and things I once never dared to feel come forth, igniting the barren pyre at my heart. It sparks, then a small flame flickers, and within moments, it roars into a blaze that the gods would deem worthy.

I'm falling in love.

Reluctantly at that.

Knowing the fact is rather startling. After Dino, I never thought myself stupid enough to fall in love. Let alone to a man like Julius.

Yet, here we are.

Now, I'm *definitely* not stupid enough to believe Julius will ever truly love me. But I would be blind to miss the way he looks at me. He may never love me completely, but he likes me, a lot, and I'll take it. Love makes people do unpredictable, moronic things. Our marriage will leave me content, satisfied. Yes. I can see myself being comfortable in a coupling where my partner and I are attracted to each other, crave each other's company and make each other laugh. I'll consider it a bonus that I don't get beaten every second day.

Julius steps out of the car and walks around to my door, opening it and helping me out. Testing the waters, I put all my pressure onto my heel and am more than surprised when all I feel is a light pinch that is completely bearable. I move to take his hand, but he pulls away. And, *ouch*, it hurts.

"Jesus." He sighs loudly at the sight of my obvious reaction, shoving his hands into his pants pockets. "Don't look at me like that, Ana. It would be in our best interest for Kelly to think we're just working together."

He's right, of course, so when he jerks his head toward the building and starts walking, I follow behind, lagging in silent protest.

The reception area is empty, and the white fluorescent lights beaming against the spotless white walls hurt my eyes. There is a wooden door behind the reception desk that beckons, and I assume we mean to enter it,

but Julius moves to the inconspicuous white door to the left, presses his finger to the button at the side of it and waits.

A speaker I can't see shrieks then hums, causing me to wince at the ear-piercing sound. A gruff man asks, "Yeah, what do you want?"

Julius's lip tilts up at the side and then inquires loudly, into a microphone that isn't visible, "Braden Kelly around?"

A crackle and buzz. "Who wants to know?"

"Julius Carter."

A drone then a semidistorted voice announces, "Well, fuck me."

The door whirrs, then a loud buzzer sounds somewhere behind it. An audible click unlatches, and the unassuming door opens to reveal a redheaded man in his late thirties with a ginger beard. His eyes light and surrounded with laugh lines, he smirks at Julius, revealing a blinding white smile. "Fuck me, indeed." Throwing his arm out, he takes the hand that Julius hasn't yet offered and shakes it roughly. He has a light accent that intrigues me. "Carter, come in, will ya? I've got to get back before they fire me."

Julius and I follow him inside and walk quickly along the stretched hall, rushing to keep up with the man I assume is Braden Kelly.

Julius sounds amused. "Doesn't your family own this place?"

Kelly throws him a grin. "Oh, aye. And believe you me, they'd use any excuse to get rid'a me. Say I'm a bloody lunatic." He looks around Julius to me and maintains his pace with ease. "You take out an eye with a letter opener *one time*..." He shakes his head and clicks his tongue audibly. "One bloody time."

I can't help the smile that forms at my lips. He's quite amusing.

Just because these men are cold-hard killers, it doesn't mean they don't have a certain charm, and Braden Kelly oozes it.

We approach the door at the end of the hall, and Braden throws it open to reveal two other men sitting around a table who turn to look at us. One of them stands, a tall man with auburn hair long enough to curl behind his ears. When he sees Julius, his jaw steels. And although he's clearly not happy about having us here, he shows his respect with a single nod. "Carter. How goes things?"

Julius inclines his head in a show of esteem. "Connor."

The man who remains seated seems neither affected nor unaffected by our presence. He's shorter than Braden, stouter than Connor, with his long hair tied into a ponytail at the base of his neck. He leans back in his chair, chewing on a pen, but his eyes smile. "Julius. What's a fine man like you visiting the Kellys' in the early morn? Don't wish to get your pretty hair dirty?"

Braden laughs heartily. "Oh aye, Shane, nor those expensive shoes."

My gut sinks at the insults they're throwing. I mean, are they mental?

Do they have a death wish?

Connor grins at his brother's ribbing. "Nay, lads." He jerks his chin to me. "Look, will ya? He's come bearing gifts." He shoots me a wink and, without thinking too much, I walk toward him, not stopping until we're nose to chest, and channel my inner Ling. I need to do this, because I'm convinced men like these would find the presence of a meek woman working with Julius suspicious.

I look up at him and smile, batting my lashes in clear seduction. He's too entranced to notice my hand advancing. His surprised yelp when my fingers grasp his cock is *everything*. My smile remains as I squeeze harshly a moment before releasing him. Without losing eye contact, I move back toward Julius and listen as Braden and Shane laugh, while Connor hisses, gripping his dick through his jeans.

Braden shoves his shoulder into Connor. "Hope you like your presents with teeth."

Shane adds, chuckling, "You won't be getting no sympathy from me. You knew better, Con."

Connor's face turns red, but a smile twitches at his lips. He keeps his eyes on me, and when he speaks, his voice is warmer than it had been a moment ago. "And who might you be?"

I keep my mouth shut.

Julius responds on my behalf, "This is Maria Gambirella, from New York. She's working with me a while."

"Italian." Connor tuts, clearly disgusted. Shaking his head in mock sadness, he sighs, "It could've been so good between us, love."

At that, Shane perks up, looking intrigued. "Oh? What's happened to Miss Ling then?"

Julius advises diplomatically, “Even Ling needs a break from time to time.”

But Connor frowns in my direction. “You look familiar to me.”

My gut begins to churn wildly.

It’s okay. He doesn’t know you. Relax.

I force my anxiousness to calm as I respond evenly, “We haven’t met.” I look down at his crotch and force a sly smile. “I would’ve remembered.”

Julius’s hand touches my lower back in warning. And my cheeks turn red with pent-up frustration.

If my feigned flirting bothers him, he shouldn’t have told me it would be better if these men didn’t know he was my husband. I’m just playing my role.

“So,” Braden starts, “why have you come calling? We haven’t seen you since our brother’s funeral.”

My mouth opens without permission or thought at that. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

All eyes on me.

After a moment, Shane responds with a heartfelt, “Thank you, dear. Mighty kind.” Then he raises his arms in the air, stretching. “But the boy brought it on himself, got his nose caught up in something he had no business being a part of, and that got him killed.”

Julius responds a quiet but unyielding, “Killing him wasn’t something I wanted to do.”

And it hits me like a wet towel thrown at my face, connecting with a harsh and echoing slap.

Julius.

Of course.

Judge. Jury. Executioner.

Shane eyes his brother’s killer hard. “We know. We all have our places in this world. Danny didn’t watch the road, and he stepped into oncoming traffic.”

Connor leans closer to me, blinking thoughtfully at my face. “I swear I’ve seen you before, dearie. I just cannae place where.”

“You haven’t,” I say in a tone that leaves no room for contemplation.

Braden watches Julius carefully. “Enough chatter. Why are you here?”

Julius steps forward, taking a seat in the vacant chair in front of the desk, and I move to stand behind him. “Can you unscramble a file?”

Braden blinks, clearly not expecting the question. “It depends on what was used to scramble it in the first place.”

“How long would it take?” Julius asks, looking bored, tapping his fingers on the arm of the chair.

Braden shrugs. “If I had the file—”

Julius reaches into his pocket, retrieves a metallic USB and throws it to Braden. “How much?”

Braden Kelly clutches the USB and grins. “You think I’m stupid, Carter? Money means naught to me. Life of a gypsy, ya know. I’m thinking of something more useful.” Still grinning, his eyes widen as he points a finger at Julius. “I want a solid.”

It seems having Julius Carter owe you is worth more than all the money in the world.

Julius pretends to think about it a long while before he nods in acceptance. “A marker it is. Now...”

Braden moves around the desk and sits himself down before the running laptop. He locks in the USB and, without so much as a word, his fingers move over the keyboard at a rapid pace. A minute passes and he snorts in amusement. “Whoever scrambled these needs a solid kick to the shin. A five-year-old could have done a better job.” He glances up at Julius. “They’re video files. This’ll take no time at all. Sit tight.”

Shit.

Video files.

Oh shit.

My gut clenches.

They couldn’t be? Dino would never have been so stupid. He didn’t... He wouldn’t...

Would he?

Julius seems to be thinking the same thing I am, because his face turns hard and he stands rapidly, looking to Braden’s brothers. “Excuse us, boys. We need a moment alone.”

Shane raises his hands in understanding. “Come, Connor. We have work to do.”

As Connor stands, he looks me up and down. "Aye, I'm coming." He exits the room, closing the door behind him.

Braden works tirelessly until finally, he smirks, raising his hands in a holy gesture by the sides of the laptop. "I'm a fucking genius, I am."

"You did it," Julius muses out loud. He sounds impressed.

"I think I have, my friend. Give me a second." Braden types some more then suddenly, the file opens, and although I can't see the screen, I can hear the commotion.

If Braden's face hadn't blanched so much as he stares at the video in shock, the sounds of my audible sobs and pained screams in the video tell me what he's watching.

I should've known Dino would record what he and Gio had done to me. He was, after all, a voyeur.

Braden looks up at me, confusion written all over his face, his voice soft with compassion. "Lass."

Without warning, the door swings open and we all turn. Connor stands there, a proud smile on his handsome face. He clicks his fingers, and announces, "I know who you are."

I swallow hard, my hand fisted by my sides. I feign arrogance. "Oh yeah?" I taunt. "Who am I?"

In a second flat, Connor's smile turns into a glower. From behind his back, he raises his hand and points the gun at my head. "A dead woman."

My eyes close and my body jolts with every shot that is fired.

A moment passes, and I feel no pain. When I hear the agonized groan, my eyes widen in stunned disbelief.

Julius stands over Connor, who clutches the bleeding wound at his shoulder, holding one hand up in the air, a hole through it, dripping red onto the white tiled floor. His teeth gritted in pain, he hisses out, "You fucking *mule*. Do you have any idea who that woman is?"

"I do," Julius responds in perfect calm. "She's my wife."

Braden stands slowly from his chair, hands raised in a placating gesture, his eyes on the gun Julius aims at his brother's head.

When Shane runs into the open doorway, he looks down at the bloody heap that is Connor then back up at Julius, uttering a quietly stupefied, "Fuck me."

Braden sighs wearily, “Fuck me, indeed.” He looks over at Shane and states, “Mam’s gonna be pissed.”

FORTY

JULIUS

Aileen Kelly is the respected and treasured matriarch of the Kelly clan.

From the moment Redmond “The Butcher” Kelly, Aileen’s late husband, received his terminal diagnosis, he scathingly informed his sons that he would not be handing down the reins to any of them, for they were not ready to lead. Instead, Aileen stepped up and took over without a hitch. Not many women hold such power in these parts, but Aileen proved time and time again that she could out-manuever even the slickest of firms and hold the upper hand for as long as she felt she needed.

She is a brutal but nurturing woman, especially when it comes to her sons.

I had met her only once, and that was at the trial of her son. She held me with her eyes boldly, daring me to take her Danny away from her. And as Daniel Kelly knelt down before me, almost eager to take his punishment, I pulled the trigger with my eyes on her. To show my respect to the Kelly family, I attended the funeral. Aileen didn’t so much as blink my way, not that I blamed her. She was grieving, after all.

Aileen knew the law, and she knew it well. She had no grounds to dispute them as her son, the youngest of the Kelly’s, had openly confessed to his crime. But that didn’t mean she had to like it. So when she storms into the building an hour later, she overlooks her sons and comes at me with wide flashing eyes, hissing at me like a feral cat down to brawl.

Standing at five feet five inches with a slim frame, her frizzy red hair pulled into a sloppy ponytail, and a crisp pair of the greenest eyes you’ve ever seen, she is a force to be reckoned with. Her black sweats and oversized black sweatshirt tell me she’s come straight from her bed, and I’m guessing a large part of her fury stems from the frightening feeling she must have felt when her phone rang at 3:00 a.m.

Aileen confirms this when she strides toward me, raising her hand and pointing her finger at me in warning, while speaking through her heavy accent, “You’ve sent one of my boys to an early grave, Julius Carter, and you’ll take another over my dead body. Mark my words, boy.” She looks up at me, although it feels she’s looking down her nose at me in loathing. “I am having none of this.”

Before I have a chance to respond, the buzzer goes off overhead, and before anyone has a chance to move, I look to Braden and calmly advise, “I would answer that if I were you.”

But Aileen barks a laugh, glaring at me in disbelief. “Think you be dishing out orders, do you, boy?” Years of smoking have caused lines to form around her mouth. She looks to her son, and forewarns with narrowing brows, “You answer that and you’ll have me to deal with, sonny Jim.”

I get the power trip. I’m in her building, having just shot her son, and now I sit here with my gun lowered, but that fools no one. I’m quicker than any of these mutts.

Taking a deep breath, I turn to the mature woman and speak without a hint of malice, despite how hard it is to pull off. “Your son pulled a gun on my woman, planned to kill her right in front of me. What would you have done, Aileen? I only did what I had to, and as you can see...” I jerk my chin over to the opposite wall, where Connor sits against the wall, clutching at his wounded shoulder while wincing in pain. The hand with the hole in the center of its palm rests against his outstretched thigh, shaking. “Connor lives.” I glare at the injured man. “Which is more than he deserves, I might add.”

Aileen blinks at me in stunned disbelief. “That’s what this is all about? A woman?” She glances over at Alejandra and scowls. “Over this tramp?”

Alejandra’s cheeks blaze bright red. She opens her mouth and a flurry of Hispanic curses I don’t completely understand fly out. And, by God, it makes my dick want to salute her.

“That *tramp*...” I reach up, pistol in hand, using it to scratch at the itch on my brow. My voice is low and dangerous, as I return, “...is my wife.”

The buzzer goes off a second time, longer than the first.

I see the exact moment she loses her fury. It slowly oozes out of her, being replaced by a sheepishness that would have made me laugh were the situation different. “I see,” is all Aileen responds with.

My patience is worn thin. “Unless you want your son to die this night, by all means, ignore the nurse who waits outside.”

Braden looks to Shane, who shakes his head. Shane is smart, he knows his place, and unless their mother gives the go-ahead, they would do nothing.

Aileen’s eyes narrow at me in suspicion, searching my face for any sign of distrust. She finds none, and with a discreet nod to Braden, he sets off down the hall to let Aida in. We sit in silence, watching each other, waiting for the assistance I’ve promised. Footsteps sounds down the hall, and when Braden returns with the short, round woman holding a black duffle, I smile at Aida’s irritated expression. “What, you didn’t hear me buzz?”

I don’t bother standing, and I know Aida will understand why. I’m not turning my back on any of these Irish bastards. No way, no how. I rest my stare on Aileen, letting Aida know where the blame lies. “We heard you.”

Aida waddles farther into the room with a sigh, resting her duffle on the desk, opening it and removing medical items. She completely ignores the Kellys and asks, “What did shit-for-brains over here do to get himself shot?”

Alejandra answers coolly, “He tried to kill me.”

That’s when Aida turns, recognizing Ana with a surprised smile. “Well, lookie here.” She lets out an unimpressed snort. “You’re all clean and not at all dead.” She rolls her eyes at Alejandra. “I couldn’t at all have predicted this turn of events. Oh, wait.” She pauses a moment, raising her brows in mock surprise. “Yep, I did too.”

Alejandra doesn’t smile, but her eyes crinkle in the corners.

Aileen can’t take her eyes off Alejandra. She blinks thoughtfully. “I know you. You’re the one everyone’s talking about. Gambino’s girl.” A cruel smile stretches her lips. “You killed your husband.”

“No, I didn’t.” Ana responds too quickly, her cheeks flaming.

“Technically,” I cut in, “Ling killed him.”

Aileen shakes her head, eyeing Alejandra hard. “Your husband died but a heartbeat ago, and you’ve already taken vows to this one here?” She inclines her head to me. “Have you no shame, child?”

Aida straightens at that. “Taken vows?” Wide-eyed, she looks at me in shock. “Married?” She snorts in amusement. “That was fast, Mr. Carter, even for you.”

Alejandra pushes off from her place, leaning against the desk, and starts for Aileen, when I reach out to clutch her wrist and pull her back to me, wrapping an arm around her shoulders, across her chest, holding her to me.

My anger spikes, but the warmth of my wife's body has a calming effect on me. "I don't believe that's anyone's business." I pin Aileen with a stare. "Especially not yours." Without turning to face her, I state, "Aida, don't you treat him. Not yet." I spare a glance at Braden. "I came here for help. A deal was struck, and Braden offered his services in return for a favor of his choice. As far as I'm concerned, Connor's life became forfeit when he pulled a gun on my wife. Now the choice is yours, Aileen." I pause for a moment. "Lose another son by my hand, or surrender Braden's favor in return for Connor's life."

Braden lets out a loud, forced groan. "Fucking *hell*." He throws out a hand to where his injured brother sits, looking more than exasperated. "Kill him then. I don't even like him that much!"

"Fuck off, you stupid git," bellows Connor from the floor.

Aileen barks out, "Shut your bloody mouth, Brae." She points to Connor. "That's your blood there. You'll not speak about your brother that way, understand? Family is everything."

Shane closes his eyes tightly and moves to cover his mouth, but nobody misses the way the way his shoulders shake in soundless mirth.

Aileen sighs, reaching up to pinch the bridge of her nose in annoyance. "Why'd you do it, Con?" She drops her hand, glaring at her son. "I never thought you'd do something so stupid."

Connor grimaces as he shuffles to sit tall. "I didn't know they was married, Mam." He turns his dark gaze on Alejandra. "She's got a bounty on her, this one. I thought to collect."

A bounty.

Fuck.

People did ballsy things for money. This was one other thing I did not need on my plate right now. "How'd you get wind of this bounty?"

Connor grins, but it wobbles. "A Gambino fella, the brother of the one *she* had murdered. He's been making the rounds, leaving photos of her about, hoping someone will be desperate to cash in."

"Are you?" I ask evenly. "Desperate to cash in, I mean."

Connor Kelly attempts a shrug. His face turns white, and he lets out a growl of agony. "I didn't need the money, but here she was. I took it as a sign. Can't ignore a sign like that, not when it falls into your lap so prettily."

Alejandra asks the question that plays on my mind, "How much am I worth?" I run my thumb over her collarbone, a gentle caress that says I'm here.

Connor blinks tiredly. The loss of blood is starting to weaken him. "Put it this way, love. Someone wants you very, very badly."

The room becomes solemn at that feebly delivered statement. Aileen takes in her ailing son, and agrees with a nod, "All right, Carter. Braden's favor for Connor's life." She swallows hard, an expression of sympathetic suffering having her look much older than her years. "Now, fix him."

Alejandra adds then, "You won't tell a soul we've been here."

Aileen scoffs at her. "I've been in this world a lot longer than you, m'dear. I know all the unwritten rules. In fact, I could teach you a thing or two about loyalty."

But Alejandra doesn't budge, not intimidated in the slightest. "Then I'll have your word if you don't mind." Before Aileen manages to make her vow, Alejandra inserts, "Just so you know, if you do break your word, it's not Julius you'll have to worry about." Without an ounce of emotion, Ana announces, "I will gun down your entire family, shoot them all dead, if you put mine in danger."

Aileen watches Alejandra closely, deeming the threat very real. "You would too, wouldn't you, lassie?" She leans back against the wall and replies tiredly, "You have my word. None of the Kellys will speak a word." She looks about at her sons with meaning. "Ain't that right, boys?"

All three mumble at the same time, "Yes, Mam."

Aida waits patiently, and I signal her with a nod. As she approaches Connor, she utters the very same words she said to Alejandra on the day they met. "I hope you're a tough one, because I don't tolerate bullshit. Especially the self-inflicted variety."

I don't miss the subtle smile that graces Alejandra's beautiful face.

FORTY-ONE

LING

They don't make it back to the house till after dawn. I stand by the kitchen counter sipping at my coffee as though I'd just woken up when they enter, feigning vigilance. Little do they know I haven't slept at all.

I mentally cringe at the sight of them. Julius leads the way, holding *her* small hand in his and pulling her tired body along, taking care not to rush her. The delicate flower. She blinks sleepily, her eyes fluttering closed of their own accord.

They move to walk past me as if I'm not even there.

Because to them, I'm not.

When I cough lightly, Julius turns to face me and yawns while pulling Alejandra close, fitting her into his side, where she closes her eyes while wearing an expression of serene calm. "I thought you'd be sleeping."

It hits me. That's all I am right now.

A side thought.

The knowledge stuns me.

My, how things have changed. This small woman yields a large amount of power over a man I thought too smart to be treated like he is.

"Hey," I begin, but he cuts me off.

"Hold on a second," he mutters, ushering Alejandra off into his bedroom.

Their bedroom, I should say.

Ugh. The thought has my veins sizzling in liquid heat.

He returns looking stressed and tired, seeming half the man he was a fortnight ago. "What's up?"

I think carefully about what I'm about to say. I don't want to come off needy. I just want to state facts. Clearing my throat, I kick off. "What happened to us, Julius? You don't talk to me. You don't even look at me anymore. Things were good around here until *she* came along."

The answer I'm hoping to get never comes. Instead of being told I am an irreplaceable part of this team, his brows furrow in confusion. "What is this? Are you quitting?"

Me, quit?

Does he even know me?

I play to win. Always. "No, I'm not quitting. Just hoping this change isn't a permanent one is all. I miss the way it used to be."

My concerns pushed aside, he sits on a stool at the kitchen counter and runs a hand over his face. "I don't know what's happening, Ling, and I don't know if things will ever be the same. But right now, we've got more important things to deal with." He sighs. "Alejandra has a bounty on her head."

"More important things to deal with" is what he says. More important than *me* is what he means.

"Right," I say without feeling. "So, what are you going to do about it?"

"We," he utters and raises his head to rest his weary gaze on me. "What are *we* going to do about it," he states. "I can't do this alone, Ling Ling. I need your help."

I'm losing my only friend, and it breaks my blackened heart. This is not the Julius of four years ago. Hell, this is not the Julius of a month ago. I don't know this guy, but the Julius I know would never let a woman lead him by the balls.

All I can do right now is offer him a forced smile as he falls apart over a stupid cunt of a woman, and offer, "Okay, boss man. What are we going to do about it?"

I fume in complete silence.

Look at him.

Look at what she's done to him, to one of the only men I've ever admired.

Damn her. This is not going to end well.

She is going to get hers.

The bitch is going to pay.

FORTY-TWO

ALEJANDRA

Julius is quiet on the best of days, but the recent change in our relationship has me seeing a different side of him. Today, he has reverted back to the old Julius, the one who kept his other side hidden from the prying eyes of the world. He is closing himself off to me, and it doesn't just hurt; it makes me angry.

How dare he give me something so beautiful, something I was scared to invest myself in, and then take it away only moments after I begin to cherish it? I am worried I'll not be able to function in a world where his indifference eats away at me like a plague.

First, I thought it was all in my head, but as the day progressed, it became clear that perhaps his issue lay in me.

When I woke in the early afternoon, after having spent dusk till dawn with the Kellys, my first thought was to find Julius, wrap my arms around him, to be close to him. Reaching out under the covers, my fingers found his, and in a lazy but tender move, I wrapped my index finger around his, linking it as I stroked his thumb with mine.

Eyes closed, I smiled into the pillow, and my body went limp at the comfort I found in waking up next to this man.

As soon as I moved to shuffle closer, Julius slid out of bed without speaking a word and strode naked to the bathroom, his cock stiff with morning wood.

My stomach coiled at the unusual change in characteristic.

Had I done something wrong?

Flipping onto my back to stare up at the ceiling, I thought about it with a frown.

I wasn't exactly sure. The only thing that came to mind was my dangerous flirtation with Connor Kelly the night before. But Julius was a straight shooter. If I had done something he didn't like, he would tell me.

Or at least, I thought he would.

He certainly made it clear that communication was going to play an important part in our relationship, and there would be no room for misunderstanding.

In saying that, I wasn't completely unaware of the current situation I had put us in. It was stressful, and the only time I truly felt at ease was when I was here, alone in bed with Julius. It was our time away from all the shitiness my life had wreaked on his.

And Julius was my champion. He took it all without complaint. I owed him so much that I steeled my unruly emotions and put a lid on them.

Everyone was entitled to a bad day. I certainly had a fair share of my own.

I would allow Julius this one day, but if when he awoke the next morning he remained withdrawn, we were going to have words. And if having words meant throwing a vase to force a reaction, I would do that, because Julius was worth fighting for, and throwing vases sent a solid message. I would tear the goddamn world apart to make things right with him.

We ate our late breakfast in silence. I nibbled at my toast while he shoveled cereal into his mouth. He read the newspaper, and I took the opportunity to look at him shamelessly.

After showering, he threw on a pair of charcoal-colored sweatpants and not a stitch more. He walked right past me without so much as a glance, and the indifference shook me to my core. Now I saw things I hadn't seen before, or better yet, failed to notice. His handsome face looked strained, a two-day growth had set in that I ached to run my fingers over, and his full, kissable lips were stretched remarkably thin.

My heart clenched in sadness.

He was different today. He held himself differently, wore his features differently... he was just *different*. He was colder than he had been the day before, seemed unkind even.

My heartbeat stuttered, and my hope had receded.

It appeared all the progress we had made was gone.

Was he just now realizing I wasn't worth the trouble I brought?

Shit.

I feared that most of all.

My plan was to show Julius how appreciated he was in hopes to fan the flame of desire he once held for me. The old Alejandra allowed people to walk all over her. The new Alejandra would tear the moon from the sky to provide a beacon of hope, and light the way for her beloved.

And Julius would have moonlight.

I wondered whether he knew the extent of what I would do to make him happy, what I would do to keep him safe. I thought my stance was obvious.

I was crazy about him.

This relationship of ours was a two-way street. I didn't expect a free ride, nor did I want one. I desired to be an active member of our team, and I would show him my worth, given the opportunity. And as this sometimes cruel, often apathetic existence had taught me, in order to get shit done, at times, one must dirty her halo.

Placing the partially eaten toast back onto my plate, I asked carefully, "Will you send the video to my father?"

He didn't need clarification of which video. My father needed to know his son and only heir was dead. But rather than looking at me, he shook his head. "No. It's better to keep your father in the dark for as long as possible."

"How long?" I queried, unable to believe he would wish for my father's alliance with the Gambino's to continue, given the death of my brother.

At that sullen question, he looked up at me from the newspaper. His eyes narrowed on me ever so slightly, and he muttered a hard, "As long as it fucking takes." He gave me a once-over. "It's not like you're on a schedule. All you got is time." Under his breath, he murmured, "Thanks to me."

It was an insult, and it did as he meant for it to do. Hurt forced a crimson flush up my cheeks.

I decided that today was definitely not a day for defiance, and so I bit my tongue.

I wanted to tell him that he'd gotten himself into this marriage not only willingly, but he had put me in a position where, to save my life, I dared not object. I wished to remind him that Gio was my issue to deal with and that if he couldn't handle it, to let me go so I could do it on my own. My tender heart battled with mentioning that I loved him very much and was so very sorry for all the issues my being here had caused him.

But nothing good would come of battling with my husband over something as trivial as hurt feelings, not in the situation that we found ourselves in. Regardless of the way he had spoken to me, I was eternally grateful for all he'd done for me.

Dinnertime came and went. We ate the thrown-together pasta I had cooked in order to appease the beast, and he ate quickly, scooping heaped forkfuls of food into his mouth as if he couldn't get away from me quick enough. I gazed at him longingly as he retreated to his office, shutting the door behind him with a light slam.

A sigh escaped me when I sat my butt down on the sofa and lifted his laptop to rest on my thighs, opening the lid. Julius had given the password to me the day before and told me to order whatever I needed on one of his many credit cards. I spent the evening buying clothes and makeup online, having them sent to the PO Box he had also provided.

The more I bought, the more at home I felt. My inner turmoil abated with every additional purchase.

Julius wasn't going to do anything rash, I was sure of it. Hell, he married me, moved me into his home and told me to stock up on things I wanted and needed. He was having a bad day, was all. It wasn't as if he was going to throw me out on my ass.

I laughed at myself, chuckling at my unfounded nervousness.

Staring down at the open web browser, I contemplated doing something very stupid, something that would make Julius mad if he ever found out. But as the minutes passed, the compulsion that gripped me only held on tighter, and I knew I was going to do it—screw the consequences, should there be any.

My email login keyed in, the blinking curser dared me to make a move.

A single click was all it took, and when my inbox opened, my heart beat faster. Guilt had me looking out for any signs of approach, but with Julius tucked away in his office and Ling being God knows where, I held onto my bad decision and ran with it.

I clicked *compose*, typed in my father's email address, and then wrote two words before hitting send.

I'm safe.

My heart begged me to add so much more, irrelevant little details, but my brain forbade it. I logged out as quickly as I had logged in then went on

another designer website and ordered some more clothes, pretending that my life wasn't falling apart around me.

When light fingers brush the stray hair off my forehead, my eyes open with a start and I gasp, jolting into a half-sitting position from where I lay on the sofa. The only indication I was asleep is having been rudely awoken.

I slump in relief when I find Julius sitting by me. His voice is just above a whisper. "Hey."

My mouth is dry, and I swallow hard, blinking drowsily. "Hi."

It's been a long few weeks. My mind aches. My body aches. My bones ache. My goddamn soul aches. I'm exhausted in every sense of the word.

As I take in Julius's soft expression, my selfish thoughts fade to nothing. "You okay?"

He glances over at me, and rather than answer with words, he trains his gloomy eyes on mine and shakes his head slowly.

Julius has thrown me a lifeline. I hold onto it, onto the optimism it brings.

Shuffling forward, I climb into his lap, facing him, and place my legs on either side of his. I reach up to cup his warm, stubbled cheek lovingly, inching closer to coax his lips with mine. His warm mouth neither welcomes nor rejects me as I press soft, closed-mouth kisses onto his full, tempting mouth.

He doesn't respond to my touch, but his groin tells me he enjoys my attention.

What bothers you so, my love? Why won't you speak to me, cariño? Let me help you.

My hands slide down his neck to cup his shoulders, and I squeeze, explaining quietly, "I need to believe everything is going to be okay." He shakes his head at my naivety, but I don't budge. "Go on. Ask me if everything is going to be okay."

With a light sigh, I refuse to show he's broken my spirit. He holds me, his fingers gently stroking my back, and semi-sarcastically, he asks, "Is everything going to be okay, Ana?"

I blink, throwing him a look that tells him he's clearly nuts. "How the hell would I know?"

Clearly surprised at my answer, he lowers his face, resting his forehead against mine in a show of closeness I silently preen under, and chuckles softly. With his face so close to mine, I clutch at his neck and hold him close, while whispering, "Everything is going to be okay. I promise."

I mean, I can't possibly promise something like that, because, quite frankly, the circumstances have all the hallmarks of a situation that is going to end in tragedy.

But Julius doesn't call me out. Instead, he feeds the lie, as if he realizes how much I need for him to play along. "I know, baby."

He reaches up, gripping my chin between his thumb and index finger, and assaults my mouth with a deep, punishing kiss that tastes like utter desperation on my lips, like a good-bye.

I don't like it at all.

"Come for a drive," he states roughly.

I lean back to look him in the eye, and he searches my face quietly. Making the inch across, I press a long, soft kiss to his stubbly cheek and mutter, "Of course."

I'll be glad for the diversion. Lord knows Julius needs one.

We drive for a long while, hours even, but I don't question Julius on where we're going. I'm just happy he wants me with him.

The roads are relatively deserted, being the early hours of the morning, and I like it that way. No honking horns or bright lights beaming in through the windows, completely uncrowded, free to drive at your own pace. Peaceful-like.

I begin to doze, only to be jostled awake when the car comes to a sudden, jarring halt.

Frowning at the abrupt stop, I look around, blinking blearily. The dark and desolate highway breathes chills down my neck, and the skin on my arms breaks out in goose bumps. I turn to Julius, who looks out at the road in front of him. We sit there a while with the car still running. The longer we sit, the faster my heart beats.

Just as I open my mouth to ask him what we're waiting for, jaw steeled, he orders an emotionless, "Bounce."

What?

My heart shrinks in on itself.

No.

My breathing comes in faster, and the blood rushes out of my face, leaving me pale and cold. This can't be happening.

Sitting up in my seat, I ask a hushed, "What?"

His expression impossibly hard, he repeats himself, "Bounce." I don't move. I don't believe him. He doesn't mean what he's saying. His words come out hoarse, as he utters a callous, "Get out of the car, Alejandra."

I'm still sleeping. This is all a dream.

My body stiff with shock, I blink over at him, unable to speak. But I don't need to. Julius speaks for the both of us, and it rips me to shreds. "Didn't think hard enough about what it meant to be your husband. Never dealt with this kind of headfuck before. Every day you're with me is a day distracted. No." He shakes his head. "You gotta go."

Oh, my God. He changed his mind.

I'm officially a returned bride, and he wants a full refund.

"We're married," is all I can think of saying, my stunned disbelief obvious. "I'm not a dog you can return to the shelter because it doesn't fit your lifestyle, Julius."

Look at me.

He continues to avoid my gaze, speaking in clinical directness. "You'll still be my wife, in name. Granted all the protection that comes with that. But I'm done. You need to bounce."

Look at me.

"Why are you doing this?" My rational tone abates, only to be replaced with sheer confusion. "Was it something I did?" My panic rises to new extremes as I huff out a shaky breath and try to reason with him. "You said I didn't have to be afraid of you." My panic turns to anger, as I cry, "That you'd stab me in the fucking front, Julius!"

My body begins to tremble in the leather seat.

He can't do this!

But something tells me his mind is already made up on this matter.

Look at me, you fucking coward!

His eyes remain on the road ahead as he shakes his head lightly, his eyes closing for a moment. And I've had it.

"*Look at me, goddamn it!*" My shriek almost rattles the windows of the big, black SUV.

He takes in a deep breath and finally turns to face me. His eyes glacial, he mutters, "Get out of the car."

"No," I tell him, my manner one of disbelief.

There is no way he's getting me out of this car. He'll have to drag me out.

"Get out of the car, Ana." His tone is deceptively calm.

"No!" I yell, my panic turning to fear.

Why is this happening?

Slamming his fist down on the steering wheel so hard that the horn blares into the open night, the veins in his neck bulge, as he roars, "*Get out of the fucking car!*"

I shake my head fervently, watching him pant in frustration, his lip curling. My quiet voice trembles. "No. No, I'm not going. I want to stay with you." I begin to cry. "Please," I beg on a shaky whisper. "Please, Julius. Don't make me go. I want to be with *you*. Just you."

My fear turns to cold, hard dread when he exits the car, moving around to the passenger side, *my* side. I frantically look for the locking mechanism, but can't see a damn thing in the dark.

The door at my side opens an inch, and I let out a gasp when Julius reaches for me. I fight to save myself, gripping the door handle and pulling hard, attempting to close the door, but his hands get in the way. Panicked, I shout a broken, "You said you'd never leave me. You said it was you and me. *You and me!*" The tears come hard and fast. This is really happening. My throat thick with emotion, I choke out, "Oh, God, please don't leave me, Julius. I need you."

He grips my arm and yanks hard, but I hold onto the seat, and all that manages to leave the vehicle is one of my shoes. He pulls at me, and growls, "Let go."

"You're all I've got." My heart continues to race, and my vision blurs as big fat tears trail my cheeks. I clutch at the grab handle that sits above my head, one foot in the car, the other out.

His arm comes around my waist, and we scuffle momentarily, the sounds of our struggle echoing into the darkness. But my foot slips out of my shoe, launching me backward and out of the car. I fall into a heap onto the gravel at the side of the road with an unladylike screech, my thigh aching as the small jagged stones cut through my black yoga pants. I hiss out in pain and

try to regain my composure, but it's too late. Julius turns and walks away as if he doesn't even care. And that's where I've fucked up.

At one point, he did.

Without looking back, he moves around to the driver side and gets back into the car, locking the doors behind him.

My mind is a mess. Reaching up, I grab a fistful of my hair in bewilderment and close my eyes, muttering, "This isn't happening. I'm dreaming. This is *not* happening." Tears stream down my face and my chest heaves as I fight to take in a full breath through my body-wracking sobs.

When the low hum of the passenger window being opened sounds, my eyes shoot open and a small sliver of hope shines.

A black duffel is thrown out the window, along with my other shoe.

Julius stares unblinking, before stating, "You're free, Ana. Fly away." His gaze darkens, eyes hooding. "Fly *far* away from here."

My arms come around me, and I hold myself tight in the cool air. Instead of pleading, I open my mouth and out comes heartbreak. My voice small and broken, I confess a hoarse, "I love you."

But the window is already closing, cutting off my declaration.

The car switches into gear, and when I move to rush toward it, my foot catches a stone, and I let out a pained gasp, falling to my knees in the dirt. The SUV moves away with such speed that gravel sprays beside me, and I have to raise my hand to protect my face from the stray pebbles being launched like missiles as the wheels spin for a second before the SUV takes off, screeching down the road as Julius regains control of the vehicle.

A mute numbness radiates through me. I stare after him, still in a state of shock. Melancholy soon follows.

So, that just happened.

Taking in a hitching breath, I stand, slipping my shoes on and reaching up to finger my now messed-up hair. Gripping the duffel in one hand, I reluctantly begin to move, hoping Julius might return, but knowing damn well he won't. I throw the duffel over my shoulder, shuffling along the road, refusing to cry. I pass one block, then the next, and finally pass a third, when I turn toward the bright yellow and white flashing lights.

Vacancy.

With a sniff of despondency, I take a moment to swipe at the tears that rest on my cheeks, wipe my nose on my sleeve and walk toward the place

where all of this started.
The Sunflower Inn.

LING

I watch her stumble into the trashy-looking motel and smile at how fucked up she looks.

Didn't see that coming, did you, bitch?

My phone rings in my lap, and I answer it without looking to see who's calling.

"Watch her," are the only words spoken before a gruff Julius hangs up.

When she makes it inside the building, I search my contacts and dial.

As the phone begins to ring, I wonder if this will all be worth dying for.

Bet you won't see this coming either.

A harsh smile settles on my lips.

Fuck it.

If you're going to go out, go out with a bang.

FORTY-THREE

TWITCH

*New York,
Two months into contract.*

I knew Claudio Conti was going to be a pain in my ass even before I started looking for him. The problem? The asshole was a lush, and he loved to show just how wealthy he was. He had properties all over, most of which were secluded and private in every sense of the word. His security team was all ex-military. Everybody knew he was married, but nobody knew his wife. She didn't have a name and was seldom seen. He rarely let people into his inner circle, and most of those he did ended up dead. Outsiders were considered a threat—man, woman or child. He didn't trust anyone.

It was hard to track down a man who didn't want to be found.

Most people had somebody they confided in, someone I could break open to reveal every dusty little secret they held in the dark, drafty corners of their mind.

Conti only had one of those, and he was all but untouchable. His name was Emil Barone, and he kept his shit tighter than a virgin asshole. Conti only had one loose end, and it was Emil.

Wherever Emil was spotted, you could be damn sure Claudio Conti would be found close behind.

There was his wife, but I didn't know her—nobody knew her—and it seemed she was inaccessible. For all intents and purposes, the woman was a ghost.

We arrived in New York some days ago. I asked Happy to contact a few old associates for me who might know of Conti's current whereabouts, but nobody gave him the time of day. That was the problem with being out of the game. No one considered you part of their world anymore, and Happy's contacts were dwindling. I could call Nox, but he told me straight up that he

was out, and I didn't want to bring shit to his doorstep, not after all he'd done for me. There was one person I wished I could call, but couldn't.

Julius was still part of the underground. He and Ling were their badass selves, going from town to town, making judgment on people who had fucked up enough for grown men to have to call a couple of so-green-they-were-barely-sprouting counselors to take care of business.

I was secretly proud of him. I knew he'd make it through after I'd gone. I'd have told him if I didn't think it was necessary to keep him in the dark.

He and Happy were both my friends, but Julius was my brother. No competing with that. I would do everything in my power to protect him. It was crucial that he believe me dead. Otherwise, no one would. His reaction to finding out I had passed away needed to be genuine.

It fucking blew that I couldn't contact him. If one person could find out where Conti was, it would have been Julius. Having Happy call him asking about Conti would raise way too much suspicion.

Part of me thought he would be here in New York. It's where the majority of his properties are, not to mention his place of business. I don't doubt he has more I don't know about.

Conti was one of the old-schoolers. Sure, he was only in his thirties, but his pops taught him the lay of the land. The Contis took money from small businesses, and in return offered protection. That didn't mean they were going to protect anyone from diddlysquat; it merely meant that the small business would be protected from them, the Contis, for a while.

Extortion was a way of life for these guys, but with the bigger, franchised business taking over, the mafia had little pull anymore. There weren't many "little guys" to extort, which meant less in the pockets of the mob.

Conti branched out into weapons and assassins for hire. The man abhorred drugs. Didn't want anything to do with them. Thought they brought dirty money. It didn't matter in the end, because the two forms of business they took on were both in demand, which meant Conti was sitting pretty.

He was somewhat of a precious man. Got overwhelmed easily. Didn't even keep his own schedule, needed someone to do it for him. And Emil was that person.

Black asked me whether it would be in our best interest to hack Emil Barone's smartphone. I told him it couldn't hurt, but I wasn't fool enough to

believe a man like Conti would allow for his schedule to be available digitally. No, these men dealt with pen and paper, and after a while, those papers got burned.

They weren't stupid. They were brought up better than that. No trace would be left.

Now, having ran surveillance for four days straight, we set ourselves up across the street from a popular nightspot Conti is said to frequent. Some burlesque joint called Bleeding Hearts. It's a Friday night, and I'm feeling lucky.

Black wasn't happy with my lack of knowledge on this guy.

I told him to fuck himself. What, did the asshole think I was holding out? If I had anything more, believe me, I'd be using it to find Claudio.

As we sit at a rickety table under the dim lights of the café, biding our time and sipping on our third coffee of the night, Black and I watch carefully through the window. Even though you can't see inside very well due to the glare from the neon lights beaming across the way, you can see out just fine. This spot was chosen well and is very much to our advantage. We move to seat ourselves in a secluded corner of the joint. Black pulls out his binoculars and peers over the way.

Hours pass, and the line to this Bleeding Hearts place ends up going for miles. And we have nothing to show for our time.

Black sighs. "We're literally acting on nothing more than a whim here."

"Yeah," I respond sourly, because it sucks balls.

Black nudges my shoulder lightly, moves to stand, and states, "This is a waste of time. C'mon. We're out of here."

We walk out of the café, and I reach up to adjust my hoodie. Having done another laser session to remove the tattoo on my cheek, I make a subtle effort to cover my scab with a Band-Aid. I run a hand over the stubble on my chin that I'm dying to shave.

Something in my gut makes me turn. Lazily looking up at the club from under my hood, I pause midstep.

Emil fucking Barone.

He walks out of Bleeding Hearts close to a familiar face, speaking animatedly to a man I used to know.

Sasha Leokov.

A good man, Sasha is. He's Russian, built like a brick shithouse. Stylish. Not much of a talker. He used to be a runner for a firm that called themselves Chaos. I only dealt with him a few times on business, but from the looks of Sasha, he's irate. And my curiosity spikes.

Black notices my stillness and turns to look at the man himself. Under his breath, he hisses, "*Gotcha.*"

Sasha was always so cool, calm and collected that my head tells me it would take a lot to make a man with his emotional composure angry.

What is Emil saying to him to make him so mad?

So when Sasha quits his tirade and sees Emil out of the club with nothing more than a turn of his back, prying minds inquire, "Black, who owns that club?"

He blows out a long breath, his features bunching in thought. "Some kid called Leokov. Keeps to himself. Lays low. Pays his taxes."

Of course he does.

I chuckle to myself, keeping a close eye on Emil. "Do you know who Leokov's closest friend is?"

Black shrugs and throws me a look that says he really couldn't give a shit.

I will make him give a shit. This is fucking important.

Emil curses, shaking his head, then shoves his hands into his pants pockets before heading down the street.

Black's on it, watching Emil with a hawk's eye. "Follow the white rabbit."

When Emil is approached by another man, I let out a low, "Well, fuck me dead." I grin and mutter to the man beside me, "You sure you don't want to know who Leokov's right-hand man is?"

Black, knowing when he's fucked up, shakes his head. "I guess it wouldn't hurt after all."

As Emil looks around, I lower my face, and reveal, "Viktor Nikulin. You know who that is, right?"

Black's response comes in the form of a silent nod.

Emil Barone keeps walking as Maxim Nikulin seeps out from the shadows to join him. They walk in time without speaking a word. When they both get into a fancy-looking sports car and move to drive away, I

panic. “Fuck. Black, follow ‘em.” I rush toward the white-guy sedan, throwing the passenger door open, and shouting, “We’re gonna lose ‘em!”

Black gets in, starts the car and we’re off, following far behind enough that neither man would notice.

This could be my lucky night.

If number four and five on my list are in business together, I won’t just kill both birds with a single stone.

I’ll collapse a fucking mountain on their heads.

“You’re losing them,” I grunt, and Black flips me the bird. I let out a low growl. “Get closer. You’re losing them.”

“I’m not losing them,” Black states confidently, but I see otherwise.

“Yes, you are.”

“No, I’m not.”

My temper rises. “Yes, you fucking are.”

Black glances at me before returning his eyes to the road. “Trust me, Falco. I’m not.” He pauses a moment, before confessing quietly, “I know where they’re going.”

Huh?

“So,” I begin carefully, not sure what to make of Black’s tone. “Where are they going?”

From way back, we watch the expensive sports car turn into a closed off property, rich-looking. The whole place yells wealth. Big and daunting, it’s somewhere I would choose to reside.

“Who lives there?”

Ethan Black jerks his chin toward the property. “That’s the home of Evander MacDiarmid. Originally from Glasgow, he immigrated as a teenager with his father. They started the street gang, Highland Steel. Gained a somewhat cult following around these parts. Their crimes were the stuff of legends. They got serious, became one of the biggest firms in New York.” Black looks to me with a dark expression. “We need to back off. We know where this place is now, but MacDiarmid is not on the list. I can’t very well call in my men because one of your guys and another’s lap dog are in there.”

I know that, and it eats me up. Leaning back in the chair, I look up at the inside of the car roof and clench my fists in annoyance. “What do you

suggest we do?”

“We wait,” he returns. “We know they’re both in the state. I’ll put a passport alert on Conti, but we both know he won’t need it, being that he flies privately. We’ll follow Emil to wherever he goes and put men on him. We’ll catch up with them another time. It’s not happening tonight, Twitch.” I feel his eyes on me. “I’m sorry. I know you wanted this to be over.”

My voice gruff, I tell him, “No, we do this right. Another week ain’t gonna kill me.”

Black breathes a sigh of relief. “That’s good. Besides, I wouldn’t like to upset MacDiarmid’s wife.”

My brow furrows at that rather baffling comment, but I take the bait he set. “Why? Who is she?”

In the moonlight, a small smile tugs at Black’s lips. “Your sister, Manda.”

Surprise has me sitting up all the way.

Well, smack my ass and call me a bitch.

FORTY-FOUR

ALEJANDRA

At what point do you give up in life?

I've survived so much already. Losing my mom at eleven. Given to an abusive husband at eighteen. Married to and rejected by another at twenty-four.

The hardest part of losing someone isn't the good-bye, but rather learning to live without what they provided, and constantly trying to fill the void they leave behind when they go.

I'm not even mad at Julius.

Not really. Just hurt.

But I'll try to push aside the gaping wound he caused. As the thought passes, my chest tightens unbearably, and another bout of tears takes hold of me, immobilizing me.

As soon as I walked into the reception area of The Sunflower Inn, a young man sitting behind the counter shot up out of his seat and rushed over toward me, wrapping his arms around me at the very moment I lost the use of my legs.

"PawPaw," the man in his late teens called out as he held me, lowering me to the ground to sit on my bottom then stepping back.

I must've looked a sight, because when I raised my hand to tell him that I didn't need any help, his eyes widened and he let out a low curse. That was when Duane appeared from out the back. He took one look at me and his shoulders drooped, a look of sadness crossing his weathered face. He came to kneel by my side, taking my cold, dirty hand in his, patting it in a fatherly action that had a sudden rush of emotion wash over me. Lips trembling, I lifted my free hand to cover my eyes then turned my head to the side as another torrent of tears escaped me. And when I cried, this time, the part of me that was rational and held me together broke free and was swept away as the flood of salt water streaked my face, dripping off of my chin.

Duane squeezed my hand. "Been worried about you, Miss Ana. The state of your room... and you weren't there... well, Jimmy and I thought the worst." I chanced a glance up at him through my fingers and Duane's eyes widened, as he whispered dramatically, "We thought you were dead."

I couldn't help it.

Duane thought he was being quiet.

He wasn't.

A short bark of laughter escaped me as I explained, "I'm sorry about the room. Whatever damage, I'll pay for it." A thought crossed me, and I grudgingly removed my shaking hand from his, reaching for my duffle. Unzipping it, I reached in, took out a wad of cash I had originally taken from my home with Dino and handed it to him.

He looked down at the bundle in his hand and blinked in shock. "I can't take this, Miss Ana."

With a light sniff, I took hold of his wrist, and told him, "I have no need for that money, Duane. Fix the room and..." I went quiet. "And maybe you'll lend me another for the night?"

His stunned disbelief turned to anger. "Dang it, girl. Of course you can have yourself a room." He stood, held onto the money and my stomach went lax in relief. He pulled the young man to his side and told me, "This is Wyatt, Jimmy's boy. Wyatt, this is Ana." He pinned his grandson with a light glare. "She needs our help."

Wyatt's eyes roamed my form, but not at all sexually. His jaw rigid, he looked angry for the state of me. With a single nod, Duane reached up to ruffle his hair. "Good man."

The young man stepped forward and held out his hand. I stared at it a moment before I took it, and he helped me up, wrapping an arm around me in support. Duane went behind the counter and took a set of keys off the wall, throwing them to Wyatt, and he caught them without even looking. Next thing I knew, I was being escorted to the room closest to the reception.

Wyatt opened the door and helped me inside to sit on the bed. "Ma'am, is there anyone we can call for you?"

I shook my head slowly and whispered, "I don't have anyone."

And I didn't.

Not anymore.

He stood looking down at me, his eyes hard. “Ain’t no man got the right to put his hands on a woman.”

I agreed with him. “Yeah.”

When Wyatt squatted down in front of me, I saw so much of his father and grandfather in him that I felt like I knew this family better than I knew my own. “You need something? I’ll be happy to get it for you,” he asked.

A reluctant smile spread my lips, and I dipped my chin. My eyes no longer tearing, I finally saw the state of me. My ripped pants and dirt-streaked blouse mocked me. “I need clothes.” My slight smile intensified. “But I wouldn’t torture you by sending you to get them for me.”

He stood, his words firm. “What size are you?”

And I silently knew he needed to do this for me. I peeked up at him. “A petite zero.”

On his way out, just as I was about to tell him to take some money from the duffle, he turned and walked backward, reaching into his pocket and bringing out a wad of cash I was sure Duane had slipped him.

He stood at the doorframe and ordered, “Don’t open the door for anyone.”

This late teen showing the strength of a man made me smile again. “Okay.”

Wyatt looked down at the ground, a frown on his face as he battled internally with himself. “I think we should have a password, ma’am. For when I come back.”

“Sure,” I uttered in a placating tone.

He stood straight and looked me in the eye. “I’ll knock twice and say I have a delivery for Miss Zero.”

“That will be fine, Wyatt,” I conceded. After all, he was only trying to help me.

Reaching out to pull the door shut behind him, he poked his head in. “PawPaw— I mean, Duane wants a word.”

He was waiting for my approval. The sweetheart.

I inclined my head in silent permission, and Duane pushed open the door, striding in, holding a folded bundle of clothing. He looked mildly uncomfortable about his offering, slapping it down on the bed and declaring, “Figured you’d need something to sleep in, darlin’. These are

Wyatt's. His thinner than both Jimmy and me—who, by the way, is proper chuffed to know you're breathing."

My smile was genuine, more so when I caught his light flush. "Thank you so much, Duane. You've been too kind."

He was already off, clearly bothered by the praise. With a wave of his arm, he turned away to exit. "Don't think on it. Now, lock up after me. We don't want them bad guys coming to get you again."

I made my way over to the door, standing with my hand resting on the handle. "Thanks again, Duane." I closed the door halfway, looking him in the eye. "But the people who got me the last time were the good guys."

The look on his face as I shut the door on him said it all.

I was sure I left Duane wondering about what the bad guys would do once they got a hold of me, if the good guys were the ones who had caused so much damage.

An hour passes and Wyatt is yet to return from the store.

It doesn't matter though. The clothes Duane brought me will suffice for the night. I lie in the stiff but clean bed, wearing one of Wyatt's soft cotton plaid shirts and nothing else.

The yoga pants I wore just hours ago were now littered with holes. My shirt had buttons ripped off it. The only thing I could reuse was the bra and panties, which I washed in the sink with shampoo and hung to dry over the shower curtain rod.

Before I showered, I turned on the bathroom light, and my feet took me to stand in front of the mirror hanging over the vanity.

I was shocked by my reflection.

Not only was my face covered in dirt, mud-streaked from my tears, but the corner of my lip had split, bleeding right down to my chin. I definitely looked worse than I first imagined, and the shower was calling my name.

I felt grimy with the fine dust from the gravelly road coating my hair and small pebbles hiding in and between my clothing.

The water was scorching when I stepped under the spray, but I needed it to be. I needed to feel cleansed in the way that only hot water could provide. The scrapes and cuts on my legs throbbed, as did the split in my lip, but after I was done, the shower had proved to be a form of therapy. I felt better about this whole situation.

My almost impossible goal is to find Gio and murder the son of a bitch in cold blood. I don't know how long it will take, but whatever it is, it is. When my life is free of baggage, I will find Julius and show him I'm no longer a woman to depend on a man, that I don't *need* him but *want* him. That my heart will belong to him no matter what his choices are.

I will be loyal, to the death. At the moment, loyalty is all I have to give.

Now, as I lie here, contemplating life's mysteries, a knock at the door sounds. And I stop breathing.

Another knock. But still, I don't rise.

When the voice sounds, my heart jumps.

It's definitely not Wyatt.

"*Jesus*. C'mon, Alejandra. I saw you go in there," the husky feminine voice accuses. "Let me in. It's fucking cold."

I move to slide out of bed but stop, sitting on the edge.

Her tone harsher, she hisses out, "If I have to guard you like a fucking hawk, I'm going to do it in comfort, bitch. Now let me in."

Watch me?

Well, that has my attention. Could it be that Julius sent her to keep watch over me?

I'm not brave enough to hope. But I am bold enough to move toward the door. When I stand behind it, I call out, "What do you want, Ling?"

She lets out a trying growl. "I just told you. Shit. Let me in, will ya?"

I know it's a stupid decision, and I roll my eyes as I do it, but I unlock the door and throw it open.

The attack I expect never comes.

She strides inside without sparing a glance at me, rubbing her arms then breathing in her hands for warmth. She grunts in annoyance. "It's so much warmer in here, and he wants me to spend the night in the goddamn car? I don't think so, boss man."

That confirms my initial suspicion. Julius sent her.

And my heart soars.

I knew he was acting strange, out of character, and this is why.

He never wanted to leave me.

"Ling," I huff out in irritation. "You can't stay here. You need to leave."

That's when she turns to look at me. And I'm surprised at her reaction.

Her face softens as she takes me in, looking me up and down with a shake of her head. “Oh, Ana.” She moves toward me, but history has told me not to trust this woman—not fully, anyway—and I take a step back, away from her.

Undeterred, she throws me a look of utter sympathy and states, “You’re bleeding.”

For once, her high heels don’t click, muffled by the soft carpet as she moves closer to me. I don’t move from my spot. When she gets to me, she reaches up, and I try not to flinch. But the slap I think she’s about to deliver never lands at my cheek. Instead, she cups it gently, running her thumb over the corner of my mouth where I’m hurt.

She holds up her thumb to show me the small bloodstain there then slowly brings it to her red-lipped mouth. Her pink tongue darts out and laves the pad of her thumb, and my heart begins to race.

I’m uncomfortable with Ling’s sensuality, have been from the beginning.

Her face lowered, she puts her thumb into her mouth and sucks a moment before letting her arm fall by her side. Then she speaks, “You remember what I told you after the club that night? About what I would do if you took Julius away from me?”

I think hard, trying desperately to remember her wording.

“...if you take him from me, what happens as a consequence of that will be your fault, not mine.”

After a long moment, I nod, because it doesn’t sound like a threat any longer. Now, it sounds like regret.

Taking a single step closer, she looks me in the eye. “I’m sorry.” When I search her expression, all I see is genuine remorse.

I open my mouth to respond, to tell her it’s okay, that from now on, we’ll tolerate each other for Julius’s sake. But she stuns me.

Reaching up, she takes hold of my elbows, gripping them tight in silent apology, then leans forward to place her lips on the corner of mine, kissing me there. I still, unsure what to do. The last thing I want is to offend her. An offended Ling could end my life. A second passes and she pulls back far enough to rest her forehead against my temple. “I’m sorry, Ana.”

This sorry is different. Colder somehow.

And when she raises her head and speaks again, my heart stutters. Her eyes glacial, she utters, “But you brought this on yourself.”

Turning on her heel, she strides out of the motel room, leaving the door wide open.

The evening breeze is cool and, as it passes over me, chills me to the bone.

I wrap my arms around myself, rush toward the door, gripping the handle and moving to close it, but I never make it.

The door swings inward so fast it's as if a bomb has exploded on the opposite side of it. I'm thrown backward onto the floor, the door hitting my head along the way. Stars dance behind my eyes as I fight to stay conscious. The shirt now gathered around my waist with my ass completely bare, I hear him.

I hear him and die inside.

"Hello, Alejandra."

Before even having the chance to look up at him, my body begins to tremble in dread as I fight tears of utter terror.

This is it.

This is the end.

He found me.

I'm screwed now.

My first reaction is to cover my bare bottom, and as I shuffle around to do just that, Gio laughs, low and rough, as he moves toward me. "No need for that. I've all but eaten off of it before."

I scuffle backward in a lame attempt to get away from him, but he grips my upper arm and pulls me up with little to no effort at all. I grit my teeth in an attempt to control my breathing, but my chest heaves.

He looks at me and frowns in confusion, tilting his head in thought and speaking on a whisper. "What does he see in you, I wonder?" He shakes his thoughts off. "Same thing my brother saw in you." He looks at me from under hooded brows. "Nothing but ass."

I bite my bottom lip to silence the whimper threatening to escape.

He grips my arm, squeezing hard enough to bruise. "How long did it take before you fucked him? A day? Two?" He looks down at me and chuckles quietly. "I s'pose I can't blame you. It's all you know. Isn't it, Alejandra?"

"Please," I pant, and I feel stupid for it, because I have no idea what I'm pleading for. A quick death maybe.

His face softens, but only marginally, and he shushes me. “Hey. Quiet now. It’s okay, Ana.” He pulls me close, his front to my back, and locks me in with a firm arm around my shoulders. “It’s okay. You’re coming with me. And we’re going home.”

I can’t fight, not now, not without one of us ending up dead, and that would more than likely be me. I’m smarter than to let pride kill me. So I don’t fight. I let him hold me, and I do it without complaint.

Gio leans down to place his cheek next to mine, rocking me softly. “I missed you, you know?” His free hand slides down my right side, running over my hip to clutch at my right hand. “So, married again, huh?”

I nod slowly, submissively, and he brings my hand up to look at it. He turns his head into mine, to gauge my expression. His brows rise. “No ring?”

I shake my head and stay quiet, although I’m screaming on the inside.

He releases me a moment to reach into his pocket before bringing his arm up around my shoulders once more, holding me tighter than before. When I spot what he holds in his hand, a petrified sob escapes me. My body trembles so hard that my teeth chatter.

I await what is coming as icy, cold dread rots like road kill in the pit of my stomach.

Gio speaks directly into my ear, his breath warming my neck, and I shudder at the feeling. “You know, in the eyes of God, you’re nobody’s bride, Ana. You betrayed your husband, and to be honest, I think He would be livid to know you’ve taken another. I mean, you’ve clearly proven you’re not wife material. Who are you to shit all over the sanctity of marriage?” He pauses a moment. “When I marry your sister, you better believe what happened to Dino won’t happen to me. I won’t allow it.” I feel his smile stretch at my cheek. “I’ll kill her first.”

His fingers close around my ring finger on my right hand, and he jerks it upward in front of my face. “Now, I’m going to make sure everyone knows your sins, and if that fucking *scimmia* Julius ever gives you a ring,” his laugh is pure evil “I’d like to see you try to wear it.”

The gardening sheers he holds come closer toward my hand, and although I plan not to fight, my body goes into preservation mode, and I lash out, kicking and growling through pleading cries.

But he's bigger than me. He's stronger than me. He's more of a psycho than I am.

Nothing will deter him.

"No, Gio, don't. Please." My sobs are pointless. I try to pull my hand out of his hold, gasping out a weak, "Oh, God, no. Please don't."

But the shears inch closer, and I gasp out tired, hopeless cries, knowing what's coming.

As he rests the open, shining, polished blades around my finger, I still. And when he squeezes them closed in one swift movement, my ring finger lands on the floor in front of me as thick red blood oozes down my knuckles, coating my hand.

So I do the only thing I can.

I raise my head to the heavens, my body quivering in distress, and screech out my agony.

FORTY-FIVE

JULIUS

Two days later...

My eyes rimmed red, with a four-day growth on my jaw, I speed up the long road to the address I obtained in ways that did not please me.

This is not a smart move, not in any way, shape or form. In fact, I am almost entirely sure I will be leaving this residence in a body bag. Hell, I even called Tonya before I arrived, just so I could hear her voice one last time.

What I am doing is reckless. That in itself is so very unlike me, but I am a man mourning.

Arrangements have been made. My sister will be a very wealthy woman when I pass on.

Because my wife...

I look across at the white rectangular jewelry box resting on the passenger seat, and the thought of what it contains makes my chest seize. Again and again, over and over, and it will continue to do so until I get this over with.

My wife is dead. I'm almost sure of it.

When Ling went offline, I knew something was wrong. She'd never turn her phone off, not when I needed her. The motel room was trashed, and the owner of The Sunflower Inn, Duane, had been knocked unconscious—his grandson Wyatt had told me.

Only one thing was found in the room, and I knew then that Alejandra was gone.

In my soundless grief, I wondered about my partner.

I know Ling has her issues, but she's not completely stupid. Ling is reckless, not foolish. She knew abandoning her post would mean I'd kill her, and I'd not hesitate in doing that shit. Not when Alejandra was

involved. Now, the situation as it is, in the span of a day, I've lost two women I care about deeply.`

I've searched high and low for Ana, not at all courageous enough to hope to find her alive, but to retrieve her body and give her peace through a burial.

My self-loathing is at a high. This is my fault. Unexpectedly, I may have pulled a Twitch.

I got too confident. Got too cocky. Started to feel invincible. And it would have been fine if I were the one to suffer, the one to die, but I wasn't.

She was.

Right now, feeling as I am, raw and torn and broken, I understand why Twitch did it. I understand why he stepped in front of that bullet.

To save my little sparrow, I would have done the same. I would have done *anything*.

Yes. It's my fault. I can't lay the blame on anyone other than myself.

Ana was loyal to a fault. She would have never left me to find Gio on my own, and so, in an attempt to keep her out of harm's way, I cast her out. I had the best of intentions at heart. I left her safe and with protection, and I would come to claim her when the danger had passed. After all the shit she'd been through, she deserved a life filled with love. And that was something I could give her given the right circumstances. But she was a distraction I did not need as I went about my mission and, because of my decision, I am the true cause of her demise.

It will be something I have to live with until the day I die, which will hopefully be soon enough.

I never told Alejandra how I felt about her, or even how she made me feel less disconnected, that she made me feel human again. Part of me wishes I had. The other part wishes I'd never met her at all.

The expectation of love versus the reality is two completely different things.

The expectation is that it's all hearts and roses and feelings of warmth, kisses and long-lasting embraces filled with hope that life will be forever beautiful. But beauty doesn't last. Never does.

Even roses have thorns.

The reality of love is being terrified of disappointing your partner, setting yourself on fire to keep your loved one warm and believing you have the

ability to prevent bad things from happening to them. And the moment you realize you don't, your soul leaves you in a most painful way, piece by piece torn from you, and love becomes an eternal enemy.

It took a day of tailing, but I managed to get my hands on one of Gambino's boys. I persuaded him to give up details of a certain meet that was happening right now at the house Vito Gambino is sure has been kept a secret. I know Gambino's man hasn't told him I'm coming. I know this because he's currently drugged and locked in the trunk of my car, missing an ear, as well as the tip of his tongue, and smelling of his own piss. He was smart enough to yield when he did. I don't know how much longer I would've kept civil.

Unlike Eduardo Castillo's home, this one does not have a monitored front gate. There is no head of security here and bar the eight-foot fence, little from stopping anyone who wanted to enter. We're out in the greens. Gambino's next neighbor is miles away.

I know.

I checked.

Vito Gambino's confidence in his men is admirable. It's a shame it's going to be the cause of his expiration.

When I reach the gate, I dig into my jacket pocket and pull out my cell. I dial the number, and he answers right away. "You sure this the place?"

My voice is rough from lack of sleep. "This is it."

"Righty-oh," he responds, his tone conveying his lack of confidence. I get it. There are going to be a lot of important people here today. He adds, "Well, I'm here. Ready to go when you are, my friend."

"Good," I say tiredly. "That's real good."

With my car still running, my finger taps the disconnect button, and without another thought, I turn my body to peer backward and throw my car into reverse, backing up a good distance, far enough to take in the property before me.

I should be thinking about the cost of what I'm doing, not just for me, but for all involved. But I don't. I don't give a damn anymore.

This is the end of the road. The final stop. The last call.

I'm so tired. But I have a score to settle.

My hand moves the gear into drive. With a curled lip and a raging mind, I push my foot down on the accelerator, pedal to the metal. The blood roars

in my ears as the wheels of my car spin, causing dirt to fly up and around the vehicle. A moment passes, and I jolt as the car begins to move, the sounds of the hard working engine echoing through my body. My chest vibrates with every rev, each one stronger than the next. Closer and closer, my target ascends, and when it's right there in front of me, I grit my teeth and steel my grip on the steering wheel, anticipating the impact.

Boom.

The sound makes my ears bleed as the SUV crashes through the tall wrought iron gates, my car sliding out to the side from the collision. Taking my foot off the accelerator, I steer into the slide and correct the move with no effort at all. Accelerating once again, I make my way down the cobblestone drive all the way down to the main house.

The commotion has brought men running out of the house, guns in hand, waiting for a fight. But they won't get one. Not right now.

I'm fighting a different way today.

When the men aim their weapons at me, I raise my arms in surrender, and call out, "I need to see Eduardo Castillo."

Just as the name is spoken, he steps out of the house and glares at me. "Julius Carter, the fuck are you doing here?"

"I need you to vouch for me," I tell him, watching the horde of agitated-looking men around him. "I need to speak today, and since I wasn't invited, I need you to vouch for me."

His eyes narrow at me harshly. "Why should I? You mock my family by your presence, bringing nothing but trouble, then you marry my daughter without permission." His lips thin. "Give me a reason to not kill you where you stand, Carter."

When I open my mouth, the magic words fly out. "You're looking for Miguel, right?"

Castillo's eyes light and he searches my face a moment, before revealing quietly, "Yes. He's been missing a week, unreachable. It's why we're all gathered here today, to put out a search for him." He takes in my solemn expression, then asks a hopeful, "You know where he is, yes?"

I voice my response sensibly. "Yes. He was taken."

"By who?" Castillo inches closer to me, eyes wide, desperation lining his question.

Feeling somewhat like a caged animal, I fight the urge to lash out. My hands still in the air, my dead eyes meet his, and I calmly utter, “Vouch for me.”

I’m not saying another motherfucking word without a guarantee of some sort.

He looks at me a long moment before turning to Vito Gambino, and telling the other man, “I vouch for him. He has the right to speak as my guest. Turn him away and show me a grave disrespect.”

Gambino looks mad as hell, but when his eyes reach mine, with a single look of fury, I silently dare him to say a word against me. Gambino jerks his head back to his men. “Put ‘em away. Let’s hear what Mr. Carter has to say. After all”—he smiles darkly at my wrecked SUV—“he did throw away a hundred grand just to get our attention.”

As the men watch me distrustfully, I announce loudly, “Actually, I have something you’re going to want to see.” When Gambino looks down at me as though I’ve officially outstayed my welcome, I go on, “But I need to bring another guy in. He’s waiting for me to signal him in. He won’t advance until I call.”

Castillo looks confused. “See?”

My words come out slowly, meaningfully. “You’re *really* going to want to see this.”

Without a moment’s thought, he nods in consent. “Bring your man in.”

Taking one hand, I lower it to retrieve my cell and make the call. Not a minute later, a black Jaguar XE appears at the end of the drive, making the slow descent to where the gathering of men have amassed outside.

The tinted window lowers and Braden Kelly sticks his head out, smiling. “Someone order a pizza?” When nobody cracks a smile, Braden’s grin falls from his face, and he mutters out the side of his mouth, “Tough crowd.”

He exits the car, and his brothers, Shane and Connor, step out. Connor’s hand is still wrapped up tightly in gauze, the gunshot wounds I awarded him still fresh. Shane leans against the car, while Connor moves to sit on the hood.

Vito Gambino objects. “You said one guy, Carter.”

It’s Connor who responds, and he does this with a fuckload of heat. “If you think we’re going to let our baby brother into a locked house with the

likes of you, and not be here to make sure he exits in the same condition he arrived in,” he scoffs, “you’ve lost your mind, old man.”

Gambino takes offense just as Connor meant for him to. “Why, you little fuck—”

But Castillo speaks over him, looking to the Kelly boys. “I know your mother, Aileen.” He tells them quietly, “She’s a nice lady. Runs a tight ship. Holds her family close. I like her.”

Shane, ever the diplomat, inclines his head, and his gratitude is genuine. “Thank you. We like her too, most days.”

Connor, who hasn’t stopped glaring at Vito Gambino, finds his sense, and explains, “Listen, we’re not going in with Braden. We’re just going to hang out here, completely in view. When family is concerned, we take safety seriously. I think you boys can understand that.”

Vito cools his jets with a long sigh, shaking his head. “Let’s get this over with.”

He calls all of the men into the house, stopping to whisper into the ear of one of his soldiers, and when the entrance is almost clear, two soldiers come to stand directly across from Connor and Shane. As I enter the house alongside Castillo, I hear Connor mutter to one of the men, “Well, aren’t you pretty in your fancy suits.”

We enter the parlor, the room where the meet was in full swing before my unexpected entrance, and Braden gets to work, setting up his laptop by the big screen TV on the wall and plugging wires into it. He gives me the thumbs-up when it’s ready to go, and I move to stand beside him to address the men of the underground.

“I don’t know some of you, but most of you will know me. Those of you who don’t will know my name in the very least, know my position.” I pause to look over the crowd of many faces. “The video you’re about to watch is disturbing. No sugarcoating it. But I need you to remember we’re men of code. I ask that you watch the video in full and think before you react.” My glare is deadly. “I have the reflexes of a cat and can shoot faster than any of you motherfuckers. I got the backing of thirty of the deadliest men and baddest bitches in the continental US, one of my recent acquisitions being Aileen Kelly. Not only did I put her youngest son in the ground, but also, I shot two holes in her middle son just days ago.” My gaze passes a smirking

Claudio Conti, and I want to pistol-whip the jerk. Just for the record, I add, “As far as y’all are concerned, I’m untouchable. Remember that.”

I step forward to place my hand on the shoulder of Eduardo Castillo. From his place by Vito Gambino, I look down at him, before saying, “Maybe you should sit with me.”

His gaze narrows slightly, but he follows me to a leather sofa occupied by two soldiers. When we approach, they stand, making room where there wasn’t before. Eduardo sits, and I look around the room to watch the tens of men both sitting and standing in silence.

Showtime.

With a discreet nod to Braden, the screen lights up, and he moves to my side, kneeling by the sofa. Smiling, Braden leans in and whispers, “Thought I’d spice it up a bit, ya know? For entertainment’s sake.”

Before I can ask him what the hell he’s talking about, “Turn Down for What” by DJ Snake and Lil Jon blares through the speakers, shocking me as well as the men around me. Although I want to knock him the fuck out, it’s too late to turn back now, and with a clenched jaw, I let the video play.

Eduardo Castillo moves to object, but with a shake of my head and my hand firmly on his knee, his furious expression moves to watch the movie that will make grown men weep.

For the first twenty seconds of the song, Braden has made the video almost like a video clip for the song. Second long clips of Dino and Alejandra kissing in bed show up on the screen.

At the twenty-second mark, when the beat drops, the clips change dramatically.

Dino slapping Alejandra. Gio kicking her in the ribs. Ana gagging on Gio’s dick then vomiting all over the floor. Gio gripping her neck and rubbing her face into the puke. Dino tying Ana to the bed. A close up on Ana’s tear-streaked face. Gio fucking Ana roughly in the ass as Dino masturbates close by. A close up of Ana’s tortured features.

It goes on and on, and every short clip makes me want to shoot up this entire room, wanting nothing other than to destroy the sickness that lives inside the Gambino men.

A quick glance around the room shows the video has hit its mark. Men, *hardened* men, watch with their mouths gaping. They’re stunned.

Halfway through the song, the clips change, and Eduardo Castillo watches his son and heir, Miguel, be disemboweled by a trusted ally. Gio straddles Miguel and throws the hunting knife into him again and again, and he does this with a smile.

A choked scream sounds over the music, and without a single thought, I take the older man's hand in mine and squeeze. My silent message to be strong. It'll be over soon.

The end nears and I close my eyes, having seen enough.

At the crescendo of the song, as the music dims, I hear the sounds of grown men growling in anger and some sobbing like babies.

My eyes snap open, and I stand before anyone is able to react.

The Castillo family is barely holding it together, by a mere thread. The Gambino men have retreated away from the head of their family, hoping to blend into the background.

I hold up my hand in front of all the men, asking for silence, and when I get it, I train my eyes on a now pale Vito Gambino.

"Now, you ask yourself if you can still call what Alejandra Gambino did to her husband a punishable offense. You all called it murder at the time. I'm asking you now, how many of you still believe that?"

Not a single hand rises.

"I don't know about you, but I would call Dino's death self-defense on Alejandra's part." My voice hoarse, my anger begins to show. "This beautiful girl was thrust into marriage at eighteen-years-old. She was assured her husband was a good man, and when it turned out he wasn't, she shut her mouth about it, because she was told—" I turn my stare to Castillo. "—that it was her burden to bare. That sacrifices were necessary for the sake of family." My face pained, I hiss, "Six years she dealt with rape and torture. I ask you, is this how we're treating our queens nowadays? Because I was taught we respected our women." A moment of silence. "How did this happen? How did we leave one of ours feeling like she had no choice but to save herself?"

At my unforgiving words, Eduardo Castillo slides from the sofa to the ground onto his knees, his head lowered, body slumped, blubbering like a little baby.

The men remain silent, but more and more of the room venture to stand by Eduardo Castillo's side in a show of support.

Vito Gambino stands and tries to speak, but can't seem to find the words. Finally, he manages a heartfelt, "My friend, my *brother*, I didn't know. I... I..." he stutters. "I didn't know. I swear it."

Castillo stands, tears in his eyes, and spits, "Friend? You are no friend of mine. I am ashamed to be connected to you and your *filth*." He begins to sob. "No more. It ends here. It was a mistake to see this through." He sobers a moment, to get out, "I take full blame. As of this day, let it be known we are no longer indebted to each other, Gambino."

Gambino pales further. He knows if he doesn't get out of here now, he's not leaving. Period. "Eduardo, I don't know what to say. I'm sorry you feel that way." He edges toward the door, but the entire room takes a single step closer to him, and some of Gambino's men attempt to follow their retreating leader. The others know their fate and wait patiently for the ball to drop.

Two of Castillo's men move to block Vito from the open doorway, and when he realizes he's trapped, Vito blurts out, "Just ask Alejandra. She'll tell you I didn't know. *I didn't know!*"

"I can't do that," I tell him. I reach into my pocket and retrieve the white rectangular jewelry box. I move to throw it at him, and he catches it.

Swallowing hard, Vito opens the box and, closing his eyes in disbelief, lowers the box, and the severed finger falls to the ground in the view of the entire room.

I reiterate my previous statement. "I can't do that, Gambino, because your son got to her, and although I don't want to believe it, deep inside I know she's already dead." If that didn't hit him, this will. "He killed my wife, my wife whom I loved very much. On top of that, my partner is missing. The only thing I found of her was a pricey heel outside of her open and abandoned car. If you knew my partner, you'd know why that goddamn shoe is the reason I'm assuming she's dead too." I take a deep breath, and reply on an exhale, "I only had her for a second, old man, and he took her away from me." My throat thickening with emotion, I tell them all, "She was finally happy with me. And, by God, she deserved to be."

Defeat lines Vito's leathery face as his shoulders slump. "Wait, please. Let's be reasonable."

I take a step back, pushing the crowd with me. "I am being reasonable." With a jerk of my chin toward his chest, Vito glances down and sighs. Five gleaming red dots appear there, and I tell him, "See, I'm reasonable. I'll

make this quick.” I clear my throat and announce, “Anyone not directly related to the Gambino family should make a move. This is not going to be pretty.”

With a quick glance to the surrounding windows, I spot my men. All carrying semi-auto machine guns, thanks to my pal Titus, Marcos Demitriou, Titus Okoye, Lars Odegard, Luka Pavlovic and Elias Munoz all wait solemnly for my signal.

I may have called in every marker I was owed to get them here, but as my eyes meet theirs, I incline my head in appreciation.

I take a moment to lower my head and rub at my eyes.

I’m so very tired of this life.

As men file out, they offer their condolences to Eduardo Castillo over the deaths of his children. The Gambino soldiers are cornered by the Castillo’s like stray sheep, and at the look of their frightened faces, a sick sense of satisfaction radiates through me.

Finally, in the quiet of the midafternoon, we paint the Gambino house red.

FORTY-SIX

ALEJANDRA

Gio fits himself behind me, his clumsy hands gripping my waist tight enough to bruise, and when he presses his body into mine, I fight the shudder of disgust that wishes to be freed.

He wants me to scream for him. He craves my fear.

But he doesn't know me anymore. I'm different now. I'm no longer the same person I was yesterday.

The man sitting in the corner of the room, watching Gio do his thing, chuckles, laughing at my lack of dignity, and I hate him. But that chuckle fuels something inside of me. It's with great strength that I burrow deep into my mind and hide there, in my happy place.

A mere moment into the assault, his phone begins to ring, and with a harsh sigh, he slides out of me, moving over to the wooden table to answer it.

I don't know what is being said, but whatever the news, blind rage takes hold of him. I hear the cell crash onto the floor. He cries out, clutching the sides of his head, his chest heaving.

My heart stutters a single moment before it calms. Gio may not know me anymore, but I still know him. Whatever has hurt him, it's going to be me to take the punishment.

I know it's coming and mentally prepare for it. I accept it.

With bright, eager eyes, he approaches the place I'm tied, naked and spread eagle, to a poorly made Saint Andrew's cross that splinters my ankles and wrists. He pants as he rushes to stand in front of me. I can't lift my heavy head at the moment, so my gaze falls on his fast deflating erection.

Panting, he utters, "They're all dead. All of them. They're fucking dead." His voice laden with fury, he grabs me by the throat and squeezes as he hisses out, "*What the fuck does he see in you?*"

The man in the corner of the room watches Gio choke me, the hand at my neck trembling with rage, and his eyes light in soundless excitement. He reaches down to grasp his crotch, and I just know this scene is turning him on.

I see that man and he sees me. At my unblinking stare, he blows me a kiss from across the room, and it shoots a hole into me, gaping and raw.

I'm so very tired of this life.

All I want to do is sleep. Sleep for an eternity.

Gio grips my neck harder, and I don't bother with the struggle my mind insists upon. What's the point? I can't win. Not now. Not ever.

With my air supply cut short, it's with great pleasure that I close my eyes. I close my eyes and find sleep. But before I do, I look into the cold, emotionless eyes of Maxim Nikulin.

FORTY-SEVEN

TWITCH

I sit on the large, leather-like throne and warm myself in front of the roaring fire at the hearth. I do this, and I wait.

When Black asked me where I was going, I told him I was going for a walk. I didn't tell him where, because from our previous night's stakeout, something told me he would've had a shit fit had he known my current whereabouts.

An hour passes, then another, and as I fight an irritated sigh, I decide standing and stretching my legs will help stop me from falling asleep. My arms come up high, over my head, in a stretch that pulls the plain black long-sleeved tee up, uncovering my stomach. My arms fall to my sides, and I shake my head in restlessness.

It's risky being where I am, in the den of a man who is a legend in his hometown. Not just that, it's also disrespectful to intrude on personal space as I am right now. Lucky for me, I never cared much about the whole respect thing.

So many people demand respect when they've done nothing to earn it.

I look around the impressive room, washed in firelight, and take in the screaming wealth. Persian rug on the floor, a Picasso on the wall, some of the finest whiskey known to man sitting pretty in crystal decanters that would likely cost a regular Joe's yearly salary.

I'm tired and thinking of leaving, when the door opens and in he comes.

I'm sure he's going to try to shoot me. However, I'm packing, and if he tries to off me, I wouldn't hold back in gifting him a hole in his shoulder.

It's not exactly how I imagined meeting my brother-in-law, but I guess it would have to do.

It only takes Evander MacDiarmid a moment to realize he's not alone, and just before he reaches his desk, he turns slowly to face me sans weapon.

I'm almost impressed.

Almost.

Sure is a confident fucker.

Dressed in a light gray suit, with a white shirt and gunmetal gray tie, and Italian leather dress shoes, he's a full head taller than me with a mop of brown hair slicked back, curling behind his ears. His hazel eyes piercing, his eyes wash over my features, and he relaxes, leaning back against his monstrous desk, crossing his arms over his chest and grinning. His heavy Scottish accent isn't something I expected. "You're a ballsy fuck, aren't ya?"

Slipping my hands into the pockets of my black sweats, my shoulders jump in a careless shrug. "So I've been told."

He lets out a soft chuckle before pushing off his desk and moving toward the bar. He turns back and asks, "Drink?" I jerk my chin in affirmative, but I am watchful and untrusting. He shrugs off his jacket before throwing it onto a chair. He pours two glasses, setting them down on his desk, then walks to the office door, opens it, and barks, "Fuck off," to the soldier he has posted there before slamming the heavy wooden door again.

Evander hands me a glass, and I gaze at him, watching closely as he takes the first sip before I lift the glass to my lips and taste.

Yeah, I'm paranoid. But that paranoia has served me well over the years. Besides, it wouldn't be the first time someone's tried to poison me.

"Oh, man," escapes me without thought. It's been so long since I had *good* whiskey.

His grin widens then he takes a mouthful, closing his eyes, savoring the taste. He swallows then smacks his lips together. "One thing the Scots do well, mate. Scotch whiskey. You cannae get better." He holds his glass high, assessing the color. "MacAllan. '72. Oh aye, it costs a pretty penny, but I'd rather swallow my own piss than drink some off-the-shelf shite." He lowers his glass then peers over at me through narrowed brows. "Mandy," he says, "told me you weren't dead, she did. I didn't believe her. Thought it was wishful thinking on her part. I know she wanted to meet ya."

Okay, then. Here we go. "You know who I am." Not a question.

He raises his hands in the air, eyes wide. "Only by chance, I assure you. Your da asked me to track you down for him when you moved to Australia to follow that lass a'yours. I got sources all over, see? His reach only goes so far as 'merica." He sips again. "Found you'd taken a bullet. Died."

Evander shakes his head. "Never seen my Mandy so blue. She couldn't believe it, and when she got your autopsy report, her happiness came back in spades. Absolutely convinced you weren't dead." He tilts his head. "Gotta hand it to her. She's a bit like Zep like that. Once they get something in their heads, forget about it. Nothing you say can change their minds."

Don't want to know my pops. I'll do almost anything to avoid the subject of him.

I almost understood all of what he said. "Zep?"

He blinks at me. "Yeah." He watches me carefully and speaks with just as much caution. "Your brother."

What the fuck? I have a brother now?

How many other siblings were going to come out of the woodwork?

"You didn't know."

Clearly thrown, I grunt out, "Any others?"

He tips his head back and laughs, openly amused. "Not that I know of."

"Good."

And the asshole laughs again. "Had a feeling I'd have liked you. You and me," he utters a semi-sober, "we're alike some."

"So, Mandy and Zep, huh?" I let out a long exhale, shaking my head. "Fuck me."

Evander's eyes smile. "You'd best call her Manda. I'm the only one she allows to call her Mandy. Thinks it comes off unprofessional with her work." At my raised brows, he fills me in. "She's a doctor, my clever girl, she is."

A doctor? Shit. Smart girl, indeed. That explains why she looked over the autopsy report.

He walks around his desk, pulls open a drawer and pulls out a cigar, holding it up to me. Never was a cigar guy myself. I decline graciously, and he purses his lips, surprised. When he pulls out a blunt, a sly grin crosses his face, and he extends his arm to me. "Homegrown. My own make."

When a man offers you a blunt, you don't refuse. Doubly when he tells you the shit is his own.

I take it from him and run it under my nose, inhaling deeply.

The pungent green smells so good it makes my mouth water. I want it so damn bad, but grudgingly reach out to hand it back to him. I'm not here for pleasure.

Evander inclines his head in understanding. "Take it."

The blunt is tucked away in my jacket pocket and, reluctantly, I lay out my plea. I run a hand over my mouth and blink down at that monstrous desk of his, choosing my words wisely. "I'm a proud man, MacDiarmid."

Then, nothing. That's all I got.

I don't know where to go from there.

Straightening in his chair, his brow furrows and he leans over the table, looking me in the eye. He gets me. "What do you need?"

"Two of your men are in my way. Conti and Nikulin. I need them to go away."

He sucks in a breath through his teeth, hissing. He looks torn a moment, before he utters, "And then what?"

"Then I get to go home." Simple.

"So I give you two of my hardest hitters, lose some major business along the way"—his brow rises in question—"and what do I get in return?"

My lips thin. This is the tricky part.

I don't want to bullshit this guy, so I don't. "I have nothing to offer you."

He stares at me a long moment before his lip twitches, a look of confusion marring his face. "Mighty fucking proposition you make, mate."

I sit in silence, cradling my whiskey, running my thumb along the delicate crystal, knowing very well I've just made an ass of myself. And it doesn't feel good. In fact, it fucking sucks.

Forever passes before he speaks again. "Listen, pal, I'm a married man. And sometimes that means doing things you really don't want to do for the sake of your missus' happiness." Tipping his glass back, he downs the whiskey and places the tumbler on the table in front of him then glances at me. "If Mandy finds out you came to me and I turned you away, she'd have my balls." He throws me a knowing look. "And I like my balls, Falco."

"Okay," I mutter, because something tells me he wants something from me.

"I'll help ya," he says with a firm nod. "But..." He pauses a moment. "... when you're done with all this, you're going to meet with Mandy, spend time with her, let her get you out of her system." He stands, bringing over the decanter of whiskey and pouring another then topping up mine. "You're going to act like she's the best thing to ever come into your life, because, fuck me, she will be. You're going to love her like a brother should. When

she calls or texts you, you will make time to answer. She's going to hug you, and you're going to hug her back. When she kisses you hello and good-bye, you will give your cheek willingly, because it will make her happy, understand?"

Although this makes me extremely uncomfortable, I'm happy in knowing my sister is well taken care of with this man. "I understand."

Just when the anxious part of me begins to relax, the door swings open, and a petite, curvy redhead in white satin pajamas shoots through it, sobbing hysterically.

Evander shoots up out of his chair and rushes over to her, wrapping his arms around her. "Mandy, sweetness, what's happened?"

She has yet to open her eyes as she rushes out, "Dad got a call from Julius. He and his guys wasted the Gambino's, because... 'cause—" Her voice breaks. "Gio murdered Miguel." Another bout of gut-wrenching sobs claw up her throat, and she keens, "Gio. He... he—" But she can't speak past the jarring pants. Finally, she chokes out, "He cut her finger off, Vander." Anger takes hold of her as she grips his shirt front and snarls out, "*He fucking took Ana.*"

Evander's body stiffens, and I spot his fury in the clenching of his jaw.

This news does not please him.

I think I just found a way to help out. Speaking quietly, so as not to spook my sister, I look to Evander MacDiarmid and ask, "Need another set of hands?"

With her back to me, Manda turns rigid before turning slowly to glance at the audience she hadn't expected. When she spots me, her eyes search my face before recognition lights in them. "Sweet Jesus."

I force a smile, but can't seem to make eye contact with the short woman. "Uh, hey."

Evander nods. "I do, but we've got an issue. Julius is going to want to be there."

Who cares? "So let him."

Evander shakes his head. "Julius *Carter*, you prat. Your best man, the one who thinks you're rotting away in a cemetery somewhere. The missing girl, Ana... she's his wife."

Julius... married? My Julius?

Fuck, I had no idea.

What the hell is he doing in the US? Last I checked, he was still living in Sydney, Australia. “Oh.”

Manda takes a step toward me, as Evander lets out a sarcastic, “Yeah, *oh* is right.”

She floats over to me, completely expressionless, and when she reaches me, looks up into my face, blinking away the tears that fell only moments ago. “Is it really you, Antonio?”

God, I fucking *hate* that name. My voice soft, I tell her, “People call me Twitch.”

“I know,” she mumbles in a haze, and her small, cold hand comes up to stroke my cheek. “I know.” Without warning, her lip quivers. “I’m sorry. I really want to be happy right now, but I can’t.” Her hand falls to her side, and she dips her chin, lightly pushing the crown of her head into my stomach, her body shaking with silent sobs, and she croaks out, “She’s my best friend.”

I look to Evander, who mimes a hug and jerks his chin to his wife. Without another moment’s thought, I lift my arms and hesitantly snake them around her tiny body. The second I do, I feel lighter, and in the corner of my eye, I see Evander nod in approval. I allow my little sister to cry into me a short while before I stroke her back and ask, “Where do we find them?”

Evander removes his cell phone from his pocket, curls his lip, and responds, “Like all good dogs, they answer when called.”

Well into the night, a few phone calls and threats later, Evander has the address of Gio Gambino’s private estate, the one he goes to do all matters of nasty shit. A plan is sprung, and MacDiarmid explains that it’s best to see what state Ana is in before he calls Julius to give him the address.

But this is Julius’s wife we’re talking about. And I can’t help but feel that my brother needs to know what’s what.

MacDiarmid, like so many others before him, will eventually learn that I don’t follow the path laid out for me.

I leave a trail.

As I excuse myself to the bathroom down the hall, I remove MacDiarmid’s cell from my pocket, dial the number and wait.

It rings twice, before he answers a gruff, “What?”

I want to say so many things to him, yet part of me wants to hang up without saying a word. “Ana’s alive.”

Shuffling, then a rough, “Who is this?”

“She’s alive, bro. Gambino’s got a place on Canningvale. She’s there, and she’s waiting for you.” A quick pause. “The fuck you waiting for? Go get her.”

“Who the fu—” I cut him off when I hang up.

I sit on the closed lid of the toilet seat and run my hands down my face, knowing a storm is brewing, and I’m willingly about to step into the eye of it.

Sometimes I wonder about myself. I really do.

God, help me.

FORTY-EIGHT

ALEJANDRA

My palms are sweaty, head swimming, with my long hair pasted to my dampened back, resulting in an itch that causes more agitation than it should, knowing I'll never be able to reach it with my hands tied.

Gio hasn't offered me food in the days I've been here. I don't know how many have passed, but when he ate in front of me this morning and my stomach rumbled loudly, he laughed to himself. "Not wasting food on a dead woman."

And there it was.

He planned to torture me until my last breath.

My stomach turned violently at the thought. The place inside of my head, the safe spot I escaped to, my happy place, had grown darker and darker until no light shone and there was no longer happiness there.

I had won a battle by framing Dino, but Gio would win the war.

In the end, the satisfaction of small victories was short lived and growing more and more stale by the second. Starvation has left me weak of both body and mind. Torture has broken my spirit. And I'm ready to die.

Craving it, more accurately.

I silently wish I could see Julius one last time, feel his kiss on my lips as I passed onto a higher plane.

It would be the happiest ending for me.

But people like me don't have their wishes come true. People like me die in the cool silence of the night, naked and alone, without a single soul looking for them.

People like me are dispensable.

We are nothing, gone in a wisp of smoke, carried away by a moonlight shadow.

My eyes are closed and my breathing labored, a large hand grips my chin harshly, lifting it up, higher than is comfortable. I try to open my eyes, but I

can't, and a memory of the beating Gio delivered only hours ago reminds me that my eyes are swollen almost completely shut. When something cold is pressed to my temple, my body breaks out into gooseflesh.

"Like that, do you?" I recognize the voice. I attempt to remove my chin from his hold, but he grips it tighter. "Calm down. I'm here to help you. Show a little appreciation."

My lips cracked, I try to lick them, but my mouth is just as dry. My neck painfully stretched, I rasp out, "Kill me."

I hear his smile. "I will, baby. Gambino's out like a log, and I'm going to slit your pretty little throat, spill all your blood with a single gash." He presses his lax lips to my cheek, and his breath warms me, as he whispers an apologetic, "I know I said I wouldn't, but I can't help it. I'm... I'm not normal. I love death, love watching it, love causing it. It's just who I am."

Right now, I don't care what he is, if he'll grant me this one kindness.

"Please," I all but beg.

The hand at my chin begins to shake, and Maxim Nikulin nips my jaw. "I'm sorry." His lusty voice trembles. "I need to do this. I *need* to."

The tip of the cool blade is pressed to the side of my forehead, just above my temple. I don't feel much of anything, just a dull pressure. A second passes, and the pain quickly follows. My mouth parts and I let out a low keening moan.

Maxim Nikulin shushes me. "It'll be over soon, but you have to be quiet. Just a little longer." His shaking hand makes a mess of my face. His quiet groan barely audible, he utters a clearly aroused, "Fuck yeah." The sharp blade slices into my skin, past my temple, down my jawline and over my lips, ending at my chin.

He takes a moment to view his handiwork before sighing in satisfaction, returning the blade to rest at the place where my head meets neck with one hand, while pushing my chin up with the other.

"It's almost over," he promises, and breathing in deeply, I take in my last breath.

Lost inside my head, preparing for what is to come, I miss the beginning of the commotion. Loud male voices shout and a struggle ensues, with furniture scraping along the floor, breaking and cries of pain filling the air.

It doesn't matter.

My decision made, my mind does me this one mercy, and I stop breathing.

Painful minutes pass and my lungs burn.

It figures that dying would take such a long time.

The ground below me is crumbling. The stars above me are falling, shattering on impact. The sea rages and I feel my ship capsizing, slowly sinking to the dark depths of the furious ocean.

But then an unfamiliar voice sounds into the darkness, a light guiding me home, and I'm being lowered to the cold ground. "Ana? Ana, fuck! Stay awake. Shit, wake up. Live, goddamn it!"

The voice sounds again, and although his voice is muffled as my consciousness fades to black, his words penetrate my frozen heart. "*Live. Come on, girl, breathe. Do it.*" He holds me tight, rocking my limp body, his pleading words whispered directly into my ear. "If you can't do it for Julius, do it just to spite those motherfuckers."

An inner struggle takes place, my mind fighting my body, and those words echo throughout my head for what seems like forever.

"Live, goddamn it!"

Then something strange happens.

"Come on, girl, breathe."

Something comes down hard on my chest, again and again, until finally, my eyes shoot open. My mouth widens in a silent scream and my lungs open up.

"Do it to spite those motherfuckers."

Lightning strikes.

And I breathe again.

FORTY-NINE

TWITCH

Sneaking up on a sleeping Gio Gambino was satisfying. Evander and I approached with caution, expecting the unexpected, but the asshole was actually sleeping.

When I pistol-whipped him across the head, he woke with a start, scuffling about, pulling off the covers and yelling, “What the fuck?” When he finally sat up, Evander switched on the lights to reveal a bloody-faced and manic Gio Gambino, gripping his grazed forehead like a pouting child. Gio locked his eyes on Evander and boomed, “MacDiarmid, you don’t come into a guy’s house in the middle of the night, let alone creep around his room, you ill-mannered fuck!”

With my half mask covering most of my face, Gio Gambino wasn’t able to see my lip curl, but he heard my growl, and when he looked over at me, his anger abated slightly, realizing he was in a scrape. Getting a hold of himself, he calmly asked Evander, “What’s this about?”

I kept my place, close to the foot of his bed, pistol in hand, while Evander moved about the room, speaking as he went. “I’ve always known you were a bad seed. There was always something not quite right about you. I wasn’t the only person who felt it, but you, being a Gambino, well, no one really wanted to deal with the violent temper tantrums that would come from bringing it up with your father.” He stilled then turned to face him. “Something about you is simply wrong.” He came forward, closer to the bed. “And when I heard that Alejandra Castillo was missing, there was no way I thought you’d done it.” Evander looked to me with a cool smile. “I thought, ‘He wouldn’t be so stupid. Not a chance he’d taken her.’”

My voice came out slightly muffled from behind the mask. “But he did.”

Evander nodded once in confirmation. “But he did. Mutilated her, too.”

Gio shook his head in disbelief. “That’s why you’re here? Because of her?” He laughed a short moment before his face contorted. He reached up

and gripped his hair with both hands, pulling in absolute fury, before roaring, “What the *fuck* does everyone see in her?”

“Where is she?” I asked, but we all took it for the demand it was.

Gio closed his eyes and inhaled deeply before exhaling slowly. “You have to understand, this is her fault. *She* caused this. She took my brother from me, and now she’s going to die for it.”

Evander frowned. “No, Gio. All she did was end the daily torture you and Dino conditioned her to take. Had I but known...” Evander’s words were quietly spoken. “Oh aye, it’s all come out now. No hiding from it. Your family has been completely wiped out for the disrespect you’ve caused. She didn’t do this, Gio. You did. If you need to lay blame on anyone, look in a mirror and you’ll find the man responsible.”

Gio shakes his head in disagreement, and I ask once again, firmer than the last, “Where is she?”

Gio’s eyes snap open. “You want her? Fine. Take her.” His lip curls in disgust. “Take her and get the fuck out of my house.” He smirks as if his words are some kind of personal joke. “She’s in the basement.” When neither of us moves, he blinks up at Evander. “Well? Take her and fuck off.”

From his pocket, Evander pulls out a pair of black leather gloves and puts them on then removes a pistol from inside his jacket. He asks me, “What do you do with a rabid dog?”

My response is simple. “Put it down.”

Evander inclines his head. “Sure, okay. But I’m not going to kill this one.” Gio’s eyes harden, and Evander grins. “No. I’m just going to muzzle it.” Then he lifts the gun and pulls the trigger, twice.

Gambino screams in agony as his kneecaps are blown to pieces.

Ignoring his yelps and cries, Evander and I hog-tie him like the pig he is.

I stand behind Maxim Nikulin, and my entire body shakes with rage. He has yet to notice he has company.

The small woman tied to the big wooden X is unrecognizable. Her face is swollen, her eyes are black and bruised, and now, because of this sick fuck, she has a jagged gash trailing the length of her face.

I don’t know this woman, but if Julius chose her, those are all the credentials I need to see. And right now, she’s being cruelly brutalized.

No.

That just won't do.

Pistol in hand, lightning fast, I snake my arm around Maxim's neck and pull him into a chokehold. Dropping the knife, he begins to struggle. He elbows me, pinches me, tries to move me in any which way, but all it does is fuel my rage. Before I know it, I'm throwing him into tables and knocking chairs down by slamming his head into them. The longer the struggle, the hotter the embers of my fury burn.

Maxim's fight weakens until all he can do is gasp for breath.

The plan was to let him pass out, tie him up, and then deliver him into Black's custody. But as I stand here with this madman choking in my hold, I look over at the broken woman he's marked, and I know, in this moment, I can't do what I originally intended.

I will break my promise to Black, and it will likely cost me my freedom, but I can't let Maxim Nikulin live.

The man in my hold falls in and out of consciousness, falling to his knees before me, and I follow him down. Head lolling to the side, I release him and lift my hands to either side of his head, grasping him tight. With a swift jerk, multiple snaps sound and I let go of him. He falls to the ground with a thud, his eyes wide open but crossed, mouth parted, his head slumping at an unnatural angle.

Without another thought, I make my way to the naked and scarred, unmoving petite female tied to the cross and loosen the knots at her feet and arms, letting her down to the ground.

My heart sinks. It doesn't look like she's breathing.

"Ana?" I gently tap her face. No. She's definitely not breathing. My panic rises. "Ana, fuck! Stay awake. Shit, wake up." My only thoughts are of Julius finding her like this. I growl out, "Live, goddamn it!"

My eyes close in dejection as her small, limp body lays on mine. She's so small. So tiny.

No. She's not leaving without a fight.

"Live. Come on, girl, *breathe*. Do it." I lay her down on the ground, place my hands together between her breasts and pump. I do this a long while, but... nothing.

No.

Julius can't lose another person.

Pulling her up onto me, I rock her body as if one would a child, and I beg her to not let my best friend bury another person he loves. I whisper in her ear, "If you can't do it for Julius, do it just to spite those motherfuckers."

"Twitch, I need you to hold her still," a soft feminine voice sounds, and I look up to find my sister coming toward us with a shot. Evander follows close behind. I hold Ana still as Manda opens her mouth and injects her under the tongue.

Then we wait.

Manda mumbles, "Come on." But a minute passes and nothing happens. "Come on, Ana! Fight, damn you!" Manda looks to me and orders, "Lay her flat on her back. Now."

I do as I'm told and watch in shock as my sister clenches the fingers of both hands together to make a giant closed fist. She lifts it high and brings it down hard onto Ana's chest. Teeth gritted, she growls out between blows, "You. Are not. Going down. Like this." She delivers another blow, then yells, "You hear me, Ana? I can do this all night!"

Four blows pass, and when Manda lands the fifth, harder than the others, I watch in amazement as Ana's body goes rigid. She opens her eyes as wide as she can around the bruising and takes in a gasping breath. And the moment that happens, Manda bursts into loud, noisy sobs, falling back against her Evander, who holds her tightly in support.

Ana's eyes close again, but her chest moves as she breathes deeply.

"Julius," she croaks out, holding her shaking hand out to a man who isn't there.

I move to take that hand, and that's when I hear him.

"I'm here, baby." With eyes for nobody other than his woman, Julius moves to kneel by her side, taking her good hand and squeezing it tight. "I'm here."

Her voice no longer working, she breathes out, "I love you."

And for the first time in my life, I see my brother cry. His shoulders shake in silent sobs as tears trail his cheeks and he lowers himself down to her swollen face, pressing soft kisses to her lips, and whispering, "I'm so sorry, baby. Love you. Love you more than a man should love his woman." His tired, trembling words cause a lump in my throat. "Thought I lost you. Wanted to die. Just take a bullet and blow myself out of this world." He sighs in relief. "We're going away from here. Moving away from all this

badness, okay? We're going to *live*, you and me. No more of this bullshit, okay?"

Ana's lips move, but no sound comes out. "*Okay.*"

Julius gets up to his knees and looks to Manda. "Thank you." He turns to Evander. "I owe you."

But when Julius looks to the third person, the stranger wearing the half mask, the one he swore was in the room, he doesn't find him.

I'm already gone.

FIFTY

JULIUS

Your wife is alive.

As I sit on the bed, looking down at the hogtied man lying bloody on the floor with the makeshift muzzle around his mouth, I keep telling myself the danger is over. I have her now, and I'll keep her safe. But I am a realist, and that real part of me knows that promising to keep somebody safe is not only stupid, but also an impossible vow to keep.

She's safe.

Then why doesn't my heart stop racing? It's almost as if I'm afraid to hope it's all over, that we're permitted to live a life free of repercussion.

If Ana is alive, that means Ling could be too.

"Where's Ling?" I ask him, and from around the muzzle, his lips turn up into a feeble smile, his dull eyes blinking softly.

He's close to passing out, and I need to act quickly if I want answers.

Making my way over to him, I pull down the cloth muzzle, freeing his mouth, and I crouch by him. "Listen, you got nowhere to go, and you might think this is as bad as it gets"—my eyes hood dangerously—"but I promise you that what I will do to you should you not answer my questions will make what you did to Ana a cake walk, you get me? Now, where's Ling?"

He blinks down at the ground, and wheezes out a hushed, "I don't know."

I'll get back to that. Right now, something that has been bothering me from the very beginning needs an answer. "You knew Dino didn't do it. You knew he didn't kill Raul. Why didn't you vouch for him?"

His speech slow and slurred, he murmurs, "And miss my opportunity at eventually being king? No. I loved him, but this was my shot at something big. I would've been stupid to guarantor for him. I hated losing him, but he was in my way when business was concerned."

That's honesty, plain and simple. I have no reason to doubt his answer.

I look down at this man with disgust. Although I want to bash his brains in and show him every bit of torture he showed my woman, she's alive and needs me to be of sane mind, because she has a long recovery ahead of her. When times get tough and her hope dissipates, she's going to need someone to leech off, and that person's going to be me, so I got to save all that good energy for when she needs it. I plan to be there, by her side, every difficult step of the way.

Nothing in this world was made right by two wrongs taking place.

I'm exhausted. I just want this to end.

"Tell me one thing, Gio, and I swear I'll make it quick." He glances up at me, eyes shining, as I ask, "How did you know where to find Alejandra?"

He smiles again, albeit weakly, and his eyelids flutter closed. "Got a snake in your midst, Carter." His grin intensifies, but his voice wanes. "A snake with bright... red... lips."

I hide my emotions well, but my heart stutters.

Motherfucker.

It seems the devil wears winged liner so sharp it can cut a bitch.

The mistake is mine and mine alone. I was a fool to trust a creature as feral as she.

Nothing would save Ling from the painful death I was going to deliver. I would have her head, hack her to parts, piece by piece, until there was nothing left.

Nobody fucks with my family.

Ling Nguyen will never see me coming.

Word will spread. She's officially a dead woman walking.

I lift my gun and shoot a smiling Gio Gambino in the head. And I shoot until there are no bullets left to discharge.

Right now, I got a wife to get back to.

"How's she doing?" My words are spoken quietly so as not to wake Ana.

Four days have passed, and Manda Rossi, Ana's best friend and doctor, gazes over at me with half-glazed eyes before turning back to peer at the small woman in the center of the king-sized hospital bed in the sterile but private room. Manda organized for the weeklong stay at the small private hospital, and I am grateful for the quiet. It's obvious that she's tired, but she stays, probably for the same reason I do.

We're both afraid we'll lose her again.

The monitors beep lightly, and the IV continues to pump fluid into Ana's frail body.

"She's bad, Julius." Her voice cracks. "Really bad." She clears her throat in an attempt to gain some composure in a situation that leaves us both feeling shattered. She tries to speak but shakes her head. I don't miss the slight quiver of her lips when she states a quiet, "I mean, she died. I barely brought her back." She turns and glances at me with a meaningful look when she utters a hushed, "She didn't want to come back. And she would've stayed dead if I hadn't managed to convince Vander to bring me along."

I look down at this no-nonsense woman and can't deny I see part of Twitch in her character. I'm undeniably sincere when I tell her, "I don't know what to say to you. Thank-you doesn't seem like enough."

My appreciation has her scoffing. The small, fiery redhead looks over at me, her gaze dark, and she all but spits, "Don't you *dare* thank me. I knew. I knew all along what they were doing to her, and I... she—" The first of her tears fall. She dips her chin and takes in a broken breath. Her tone tortured, she whispers a harsh, "I did nothing. *Nothing*." She lifts her tear-streaked face to look over at her friend. "Look what he did to her. I don't know if she'll ever recover from this. And if she doesn't, that'll be on me."

I understand guilt. I feel it standing here, right at this very moment. Neither of us is completely blameless in what happened to Ana. I would love to pin the blame on somebody—*anybody*—but I can't. If Manda knew about the abuse Ana took and did nothing, something tells me there was a reason for it. It's clear to me that Manda loves Ana.

The thought of losing the Ana I love is too much to bear, so I say the only thing I can think of. "She's tough. She'll make it through." But I don't sound as confident as I ought to.

Her list of injuries is extensive, the worst being her amputated finger, a fractured wrist, and a broken ankle, but Manda and I both know it's not the physical wounds we need to worry about.

How far can you stretch a rubber band before it snaps?

My feet carry me to her bedside. I slip my shoes off and slide in beside her, gently taking hold of her small, cold hand, and I rub at it, careful to avoid the IV settled in the back of it. Her left arm covered in a plaster cast

up to just below her elbow, the ring finger on her left hand missing, I want to roar out my anger when my gaze settles on her bandaged face.

Manda's friend, a highly sought plastic surgeon in these parts, came when called. He did all he could to save Ana's face from the deep gash Maxim Nikulin inflicted, but he advised us it would likely take more than one surgery to make it unnoticeable, and that all depended on how well Ana healed.

Doctors were afraid for Ana. She had developed a hardcore case of anxiety in our time at the hospital. When one nurse came in to top up her morphine, Ana took one look at the shot and started to sweat bullets while gasping for breath. She passed out cold and Manda suggested that perhaps it was better for everyone if Ana remained sedated throughout her hospital stay.

I didn't like it, but I comprehended the need for it.

Ana was scared to death at the thought of being hurt. Pain was her trigger, and it broke my damn heart to watch her go through her first panic attack.

When her hooded eyes open a mere slit, my chest aches from the sheer beauty of her living, breathing form. "Hey, baby."

She swallows hard then breathes out, "Hi."

"How are you feeling?" It's a stupid question, but one I am obligated to ask.

The heart monitor chirps as her heart rate spikes. "No more doctors," she whispers.

I hate this. "No, baby. Doctors are good. The doctors are helping."

Her lip quivers, she clutches at my hand like a lifeline, and when she croaks out a tearful, "Take me home. I just want to go home. Let's go home, Julius," my gut coils in misery.

The heart monitor begins to beep loudly as her distress rises, and I know it won't be long before a nurse enters with a sedative for my girl.

Three more days and I can take her home.

I frown at the thought.

But where is home?

I need to get Ana away from here. I need to take her somewhere we can do us, somewhere warm and comfortable and calm.

And I have just the place in mind.

The moment the nurse enters, I look my girl in the eye and make my vow. “You trust me, baby?”

Not a second of hesitation. Her answer is pleading, desperate. “Yes.”

Shit.

I don’t deserve this woman.

“When the doc says you’re good to go, I’m going to take care of you, and I’m going to do that somewhere far away from here. Okay?”

The nurse injects the sedative into Ana’s IV, just as she responds, “Okay.”

“You and me, babe,” I whisper, rubbing my thumb along hers.

The sedative kicks in and she loosens her grip on my hand as her lids flutter closed. Her tone dreamy, she mutters a soft, “You and me, babe. Love you.”

I know she can’t hear me any longer, but it doesn’t matter to me. I say it, because it needs to be said. “I love you, Ana.” And I fucking do. So much it hurts.

Crazy in love is a dangerous position for a sane man to be in.

The plans form in my head as I lay by my wife’s side and I plan to call to Lexi in the morning to give her time to prepare for our arrival.

FIFTY-ONE

TWITCH

“You disappeared on me. You know how I feel about that.”

Ethan Black is in a pissy mood, and I feel a mild sense of satisfaction in knowing that the longer he and his family are separated, the more irritated he gets. Maybe now he has some small understanding about how I feel.

It was a long night. I’m so fucking tired. I just want to sleep.

Agitation rattles me. I lift my head off the pillow of the cheap motel room bed, and grunt, “*Fuck*. I’m back, aren’t I?” With that, I throw my heavy head back down onto the thin pillow with a groan.

The quiet comes so quickly that I don’t question it. But when something is slapped down onto the bed beside me, I open my eyes to find a large yellow envelope there and Black, dressed in a suit and tie, standing with his arms crossed over his chest, looking down at me. He jerks his chin to the envelope.

I sit up, open it, and peer inside. My mouth parts in silent shock. I look over at Black before reaching inside and pulling out the passport, birth certificate, and current driver’s license. My brows furrow in confusion. “What is this?”

Black pins me with a stare. “I don’t know where you were last night or who you were with, but we got a tip off that led to Claudio Conti’s arrest sometime after 2:00 a.m.”

“No shit,” I mutter without implication.

Damn.

MacDiarmid works fast.

“Yeah. No shit.” Black’s not impressed. He blinks, watching me closely. “About an hour ago, a couple of NYPD cops discovered the body of Maxim Nikulin in a dumpster behind a club called The White Rabbit, along with the body of Gio Gambino.”

I feign ignorance. “Who?”

Black sniffs a laugh, shaking his head. He's onto me. He's also not amused. "Where were you last night, Twitch?"

I don't want to lie, so I improvise. "Wasn't anywhere near The White Rabbit, if that's what you're asking."

Black places his hands on his hips and sighs loudly before dropping his hands to his sides and meeting my eyes. "Antonio Falco, you are no longer under any obligation to the FBI. By one means or another, you've fulfilled your end of our bargain, and you're free to go."

A steady flow of shock numbs me from the toes up.

When Black lifts his duffle over his shoulder and moves toward the door, it's clear there will be no heartfelt good-byes.

Thank fuck.

Before he exits the room, he pauses in the doorway and turns back to me. "Not many people get a second chance like this, Falco." His brows rise. "Try not to screw it up."

"Not a chance," escapes me, and I mean it.

Black nods slowly in understanding. I worked hard for this moment. I wasn't about to fuck up anytime soon. He takes a moment, then utters a quiet, "Cherish every moment with him. You only get a few short years of them begging to be around you." A sad smile forms on his lips when he shrugs. "Before you know it, he'll be sixteen, and you'll be begging *him* to spend time with *you*."

It's good advice. I don't take it lightly. "Will do."

A moment of thoughtful silence passes.

"Good-bye, Twitch. I hope to never see you again." Black grins. "And I mean that in the best way possible." He lifts his hand in a lazy wave then lets himself out, shutting the door behind him.

Well, shit.

I don't know what to do with myself.

So I do nothing.

I tuck the yellow envelope under the pillow, lie back down on the cheap bed, close my eyes, and sleep as a free man.

EPILOGUE

PART ONE

JULIUS

The sun heats my skin the moment I open the door. Before I've even helped Ana out of the car and into the wheelchair, *she* throws open the door and peers down at us from the front door.

Wearing a pair of blue jeans and a loose white tee, her long brown hair trails her back as she walks out to meet us, barefoot and smiling like a fool. She reaches us and, almost completely ignoring me, she smiles softly down at Ana, who tries her best to smile around the bandaged part of her face.

Lexi reaches out without permission and takes both of Ana's hand in hers, squeezing her good hand tightly while holding the other gently. "Oh, Ana, it's so nice to meet you. I can't wait to show you around." Releasing her hands, she moves around the wheelchair and bumps me out of the way with her hip, throwing me a sly wink then reaching out to squeeze my hand in a silent but meaningful greeting.

We are welcome here.

Ana hasn't spoken much in the last few days, but something tells me that Lexi will help in that matter.

I work on getting our suitcases out of the black luxury sedan and listen to Lexi talk Ana's ear off. "My son, AJ, he's four and, given the chance, he'll talk your ear off, so it's okay to tell him you need space. He's good like that, understanding. Oh, and I had access ramps installed all over the house." She breathed out a soft laugh. "It's good to know people in the health service sector. I used to be a social worker, you know? So whatever you need, you just ask, okay?" As Lexi pushes the wheelchair into the house, she utters a confident, "You're just going to love it here. Welcome to Sydney."

I chuckle to myself at the tornado that is Lexi. I'm starting to feel okay with uprooting Ana against doctors' orders.

Lexi will be good for Ana. I feel it in my bones.

Things can only get better from here.
God...
They fucking have to.

EPILOGUE

PART TWO

LING

The cool night air has me battling a shiver. I clutch at my coat and walk faster.

As I approach the Vietnamese restaurant, I don't slow. I push the double doors open with both hands and relax slightly as warmth hits me.

I make my way through the kitchens and into the long hallway that I should not have access to. I suppose that's one perk of being the daughter of Ba Sang Nguyen. And speaking of daddy dearest...

Bracing, I push open the door to the conference room and let myself in. My heels click as I spot the short, gray-haired man sitting at the head of the table.

He frowns when he spots me. "You are not welcome here, Ling."

At hearing my name, the entire table of men turn to look at me, but I ignore them, instead glancing behind my father at my five brothers, but I single out the oldest, Van. "I'm not here to talk to you, Father. I just need a word with Van."

My father turns red, and sputters, "You dare?"

I look down at my brother's hand, still healing from when I pinned him to the wall at the club over a month ago. "I need to know what your decision is, and I need to know now."

Van peers around him at our brothers, and they all communicate in complete silence. A moment passes, and Van inclines his head.

Yes.

We're on.

I look from my brother to my father, and utter a passive, "I've come to claim my place."

My father looks up at me in disbelief before turning to glance at the men around the table. When he laughs, they dutifully laugh with him. He

chuckles a long while before sobering. “I wouldn’t give you a seat at this table, even if you begged.”

Well, shit.

Whatever would I do now?

Ah. I know.

“Oh, I’m not begging for a seat, Father.” I raise my pistol from inside my coat pocket and shoot my father in the head. He slumps in his chair, and I walk over to him, pushing him off. He lands on the ground with a dull thud. “I’m taking the motherfucking throne.”

I occupy the place he formerly sat, the head of the table. My brothers stand guard behind me.

A single glance around the room has me assessing the situation to come.

“Anyone got a problem with that?”

No one speaks. Not a goddamn soul.

“I didn’t think so.”

A slow smirk spreads my lips.

I’m officially an untouchable.

Yeah. How do you like me now, boys?

EPILOGUE PART THREE

TWITCH

The sky glows an intense orange as the sun lowers, setting for the evening. Bird chatter begins to silence, a peaceful hum in the air.

Nox sits by my side, holding his sleeping daughter tight. Quietly, he asks, “So, now what?”

I look over at the sleeping child on his chest, and my heart aches. I take a long pull of my beer then set it down on the table separating us. I take in the radiant sunset one last time before I respond.

Now what?

“I’m going home.”

THE END ...
FOR NOW.

a note from
BELLE

Hi there,

Thank you for reading the second book in the Raw Family series.

I hope you enjoyed Dirty as much as I enjoyed writing it.

This book means a lot to me and took much longer to complete than originally planned. The simple fact is, I wanted to deliver what you – the reader – deserved rather than a rushed version of what could have been great.

So much of my blood, sweat and tears are right here, in this book.

I hope you loved Alejandra and Julius' story and are looking forward to reading more about them in Raw: Rebirth, the end of the Raw Family series.

You'll be happy to hear that Raw: Rebirth will conclude the story which began in Raw. Meaning... yes. This book will be about Twitch, Lexi and AJ.

Read on for a small teaser from Raw: Rebirth and a quick look at the cover.

Thanks for reading. If you would take the time to leave a review for Dirty, it would be much appreciated!

Love Belle x



RAW: REBIRTH

The road to hell
is paved with good intentions.

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
BELLE AURORA

RAW: REBIRTH

Daddy's home.

AJ was a smart boy. He was only five years old but knew the value of a secret.

He didn't like keeping secrets from his mom and when he asked her if it was okay to lie, she told him that it was never okay to be dishonest.

It didn't make sense.

AJ had heard his mother lie before.

Why was she able to lie when he wasn't?

His mother explained that sometimes people told lies to stop another person from being hurt, that these were called 'little white lies'.

AJ thought about this.

His secret would hurt his mom, he'd been told, so it wasn't really a lie, he thought. Keeping his secret was more a 'little white lie'. As his mother tucked him in to bed, he smiled up at her. "I love you," he told her, and he meant it.

His mother's smile softened. "I love you more, honey," she responded quietly as she ran gentle fingers through his messy hair.

She blew him a kiss as she left his room, turning off the light and closing the door behind her.

AJ lay in his bed, awake and waiting.

He wasn't sure how long he waited but when he heard the window rattle then lift in excruciating slowness, he smiled excitedly.

His little white lie was here.

Daddy was home.