



TORCHED

BOOK FOUR | THE FIRE SERIES

BILLIE LUSTIG

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

If you made it this far, you know this isn't that dark.

If you made it this far, you like the scenes that may or may not make you blush.

If you made it this far, you're basically confessing that you're into this shit anyway.

If you made it this far, I did something right with these characters.

Thank you.

PROLOGUE

ONE YEAR EARLIER

She gasps as my palm connects with the olive skin on her ass, my other hand gripping her black hair like she's a fucking wild mustang. Her knees press into the tacky red silk sheets of the bed, as I keep pumping inside of her from behind. Looking up, she stares back at me through hooded eyes in the mirror in front of us.

I slap her again and the sound echoes through the room, followed by a cry from her red painted lips. Her dark eyes piss me off even more, driving the need to burn my palm into her skin.

“You filthy little whore,” I growl. My neck and shoulders stiffen as I thrust inside of her like she's a piece of meat. Every push is rougher, deeper, more punishing. “Say it!” I order.

“I'm a filthy whore!” It comes out as a whine, the muscles in her face growing stern as she keeps moaning. I don't know if she's enjoying this or if she's really in pain, but I don't even fucking care. She's mine to use however I want for the next thirty minutes, and I'll use my time wisely.

I pull her hair as I keep slamming my dick into her, arching her neck so I can put my mouth flush to her ear.

“Next, I’m going to fuck you in the ass until you bleed.”

The horror flashes in her eyes for a brief moment, and I feel the corner of my lips lift in satisfaction. “You’d like that, don’t you?”

Her skin feels damp under my touch, and when she doesn’t reply, I continue my streak, chasing my release like a madman. Flashes of Cristina underneath me resurface in my head, and I try to outrun them by picking up speed. I never can, though. It’s like Cristina’s always there, lingering underneath the surface. I hate it as much as I welcome it.

The sound of our flesh colliding and the desperate whimpers leaving her throat reverberate through the room, fueling my desire to fuck her so hard, she won’t be able to walk in the morning. My jaw clenches as my release builds in my groin. With a firm grip on her hair, I finally fall over the edge and a loud roar erupts from my chest at the same time the door flies open. A concentrated frown forms as all my muscles tense, and I keep going, ignoring the scowl that sits on my brother’s face while release rushes through me like a damn cargo train. Loud, heavy, and rumbling. I give it a few more pumps, milking everything I have inside the condom, and I feel her body relax underneath me.

With my dick still covered by the whore of my choice, Jeremy follows behind Kane, his eyes quickly widening when he locks eyes with the sight in front of him.

“Damn.”

“You really gotta stop doing this.” Kane pulls a few bills from his pocket, throwing them on the bed.

“Doing what? Fucking whores?” I ask, sliding out of her. “No offense.” I shoot the woman a dull look, and she responds with a shrug before grabbing her trench coat to cover herself up, then the cash to get going. Her eyes swing to Kane, standing in the room with his arms crossed in front of his chest, then she’s swaying her hips toward him with purpose.

“If you ever need a good fuck, he has my number.” Resting her palm on his bicep, she volleys a fluttering gaze between the two of us, clearly having no clue who my brother is.

“Did he hurt you?” His chin dips, amused. Dragging his teeth over his lips, he offers her a seductive look like the sadist that he is.

“Only a little.”

Kane brings his face close to hers, an evil smirk slipping onto his cheeks. “I hate to break it to you, sweetheart. But I’m ten times worse.”

She gives me a quick glance, then shakes her head before strutting out like the fire of Hell is at her heels. *Smart girl.*

Our last name comes with the promise of some serious cash, but there’s also at least a 50/50 chance you won’t leave unscathed. And not in a good way.

I grab my clothes from the floor and start getting dressed, doing my best to ignore Kane’s gaze fixed on me like he

thinks he can make me talk with a single look. It's annoying the shit out of me, causing my ticker to tighten a little. He made no joke when he said he's ten times worse. I'm a fucking choir boy compared to what he pays whores to do. He doesn't get to judge me for having a different interest in getting my release than a few years ago.

Life changed.

I changed.

The way I want to fuck my energy away? Well, that also changed. I guess that's what happens when your girlfriend literally fucks you over and decides to sell your soul to the devil.

"What?" I glare while buttoning up my pants.

"You hurt the girl." The pitiful look on his face pisses me the hell off. I sure as fuck know he doesn't give a damn about the whore who just wet my dick.

"You heard her; it was only a little."

"Liam, you're self-destructive."

"Because I'm fucking whores? Damn, brother, you must be damaged beyond repair by now if that's the criteria."

"You know what I mean." His eyebrows knit together, giving him a stern look that's nothing like him, but funny enough, I've been seeing it more and more lately. I don't know when I died and he became the sensible brother, but he sure as fuck seems to be taking an interest in the role by trying to scold me. It's fucking annoying as hell, and call me naive, but

I'm fucking sure I wasn't in his business like he has been with me for the last year.

"I don't know what you mean, Kane. We've been fucking whores since our dicks started working. Not sure why all of a sudden it's an issue." I pull my shirt over my head, covering my damp chest. When the fabric covers my shoulders, my eyes connect with the judgment in his once more, and I prematurely roll my eyes, knowing exactly where this is going.

"It's not. It's an *issue* because you're fucking whores that are a fucking copy and paste of Cristina Reyes," he counters, accusingly. "You have been for the last fucking year. I shut up for a long time, thinking it might help you get this shit out of your system, but you're only becoming more obsessed."

I snort. "I'm not obsessed." Yeah, maybe I'm a little obsessed, but not in the way he's implying. I'm obsessed with killing the wicked witch. Slowly and painfully. Emphasis on painfully.

"You used to fuck a whore every other weekend. Now, after Cristina, you've been fucking whores five times a week. You're *obsessed*, no way around it."

"You fuck a different whore every night."

"But I'm not fucking whores that look like my ex."

"That's because someone would first have to want a relationship with you," I mutter, pulling a face.

"Funny."

Kane stands in front of me like a fucking smartass who invented the fucking wheel. He might be a genius when it comes to the business side of our lives, but I'll be damned before that manwhore of a brother of mine gets to tell me there is something wrong with the number of whores I fuck in a week.

I hold his gaze, every muscle in my back tensing. My nostrils flare with every exhale, causing my chest to expand as I inhale. Jeremy is awkwardly shifting beside him, trying to break the tension by clearing his throat, but we keep glaring at each other like wild dogs, waiting to see who will snap first.

“Look”—Kane’s gaze softens just a tad, and I take it as a cue to grab my leather jacket from the bed to put it on, though my grimace never leaves—“I know she hurt you.”

“She didn’t hurt me!” I interrupt.

She destroyed me with full intention, and for that, my frustration has been growing more and more every day. It’s not the part that she betrayed me. I’ve been around for a long time; being part of the world that we are, making tough decisions comes with the territory, no matter who you screw over. No, it’s the part where I allowed myself to have feelings for her. The part where she made me doubt my judgment. *That’s* what’s fucking with my head.

“I know she hurt you,” he continues, “but fucking girls to death that look like her isn’t going to help that.”

“You’re right,” I snarl. “Killing her will.”

“You told me not to kill her!” The frustration blazes in my brother’s arctic eyes.

“Five minutes after I found out that whatever I felt for her wasn’t real! Before I knew she fucked me over! Used me like a fucking dog and then tossed me aside!” The rage is clear as I shout at my brother, my hands longing to smash something. “I didn’t know what the fuck I was saying, Kane!”

“Well, you sure as fuck know now. Do you want her dead?”

“Fuck yeah!” I’m leaving out the part where I first want to torture her for screwing me over, but yes, I want to see that cunning little bitch burn. Literally. I’ll bring Salem in the 17th century right to her doorstep. I want to show her that betraying Liam Carrillo only has one outcome; pain. I won’t rest until every last member of the Reyes family wishes they never messed with the Carrillos.

“Fine! Then we’ll find her, and we’ll blow a bullet through her head. Make her pay. Make Junior fucking Reyes pay. We’ll make every single member of that family regret what they did. Let’s fucking finish this war because you’re not going to like what I’m about to say next.” Kane shoots me a conceding look, reading my mind, before it changes into an annoyed one.

“What?” My gaze shifts back and forth between Jeremy and Kane. Something is sitting on their chests that triggers their reluctant expressions, like they expect me to snap in the next few seconds.

“Frank Reyes stole our stones,” Kane explains.

“He did *what?*” I growl.

LIAM

PRESENT DAY

I've dreamed about this moment. Visualized it. Thought of possible situations and scenarios of how it would play out. Each and every one of them started with my gun aimed at her head before I forced her on her knees, begging for mercy as I stayed calm and collective. But right now, staring into her big brown eyes, I feel anything but that. The pesky position she has the woman I love in keeps my feet frozen to the floor, but inside it's like a herd of wild beasts is ready to break through my chest.

Goddamnit, I love Imogen.

I'm in love with her, and I haven't even told her yet.

The only relief I feel is the hate I have for Cristina. Part of me has always been fearful that she could convince me of her innocence the moment she stood before me. But now I know for certain Cristina Reyes will never convince me of anything, ever again, other than the amount of evil she possesses in her hateful, voluptuous body. She radiates a wickedness that only has a place inside the gates of Hell.

“Hey, Liam.” Cristina’s voice is sultry, smooth like honey, but annoyingly sticky, her lashes fluttering in a taunt like she doesn’t have a care in the world. It takes me right back to the time we first met, the entire memory now overshadowed by a cloud of thunder. I try to swallow the tightness in my throat away, fully aware of the tiny smirk that’s cut on her red lips and what it means. They stand out against her olive skin and her black hair framed along her face with big waves. She still has a stunning appearance, but I can’t see past the ugly personality it comes with.

Not anymore.

Her arm is wrapped around Imogen’s neck, a gun pressed against my girl’s head, filling me with fear.

“Cristina.” I acknowledge her with my molars grinding before I lock my gaze with Imogen. The angst in her eyes holds my heart in a tight grip, and I try to shoot her a comforting look. But I know the anger radiating from my skin makes me fail miserably. Time seems to slow down, my senses registering every tiny change. The contrast of the happy feeling I had a minute ago, now replaced by heat and discomfort in a split second, is leaving me hanging on a very fragile thread. It’s taking everything I have to not react impulsively to get Gen from Cristina’s grasp without thinking about the safest way to do it.

“Are you insane?! Let her go, Cris!” Callie yelps.

She takes a step forward, but Kane holds her back with a rumble leaving his chest. Cristina only pushes the barrel

harder against Imogen's temple, making her squeeze her eyes shut. Clearly, Callie still likes to believe there is room for reason when it comes to Cristina Reyes, the girl she grew up with to believe was her cousin. But let's be fucking honest. Cristina has as much reason for things as she has empathy. There is nothing other than mayhem and darkness within her.

“Really? That's the welcome I get, Callie girl?” Cristina pouts, but the glint in her eyes is undeniable. “I thought you'd be happy to see me. I heard you've been looking for me, *abejita*.”

“Don't call me that!” Callie snaps at hearing the nickname Frank Reyes had for her. “*You* don't get to call me that, *traitor*.”

“Traitor? You're the one who betrayed us for these two. You could've been on top of the Reyes clan.” Her chin nudges toward Kane and I, my brother holding the same rigid stance as me.

Callie takes another small step forward, her arms crossed in front of her chest, with a devilish grin that shows how she doesn't let anyone intimidate her. Her energy seems to grow in situations like this; she never cowers. Reminding me of that first day we officially met, when she was standing in front of our entire team with a scowl that made her appear ten feet tall. “Why would I want to be on top of the Reyes clan when I'm already on top of the Carrillos?”

“Oh, that's right. You're fucking '*dumber*' over there. Sorry, my bad.” Cristina dramatically rolls her eyes. “I really thought

you were smart enough to fall for Liam, at least. But no, you went for caveman Carrillo. It's a shame, Liam would take you to fine dining, court you a little, give you a foot massage after a long day." There is a dreamy look on her face, almost as if she has regrets, before her expression hardens in a snap second. "What do you get from Kane? Takeout and the promise to be fucked whenever he pleases?" There is a clear disdain in her voice, the words almost spit into Kane's face with her brown eyes laced with a dare. She wants to challenge him. For him to lose control, like I never allowed him to when we were together.

My brother has more self-control than that, though. He just stands there like a colossal statue, ready to step from his pedestal at the right time.

"Let her go, Cristina," I command. My hands are balled into fists, the corner of my mouth lifted with a glare. Completely focused on Imogen, I notice her chest moving up and down in an exasperating pace, as if she's mentally telling herself to keep breathing while Cristina keeps her front pressed against her back.

"What? No." She snorts as she drags out the word, brushing my comment away. "Imogen is fine. Aren't you, sweetheart?" Her hand glides into Gen's hair before she twists her head to the side. A groan comes from Imogen's throat, followed by her face scrunching in a pained expression, and Callie and I both take a step forward.

“Tsk-tsk. I wouldn’t do that if I were you.” Cristina smiles, locking her arm tighter against Gen’s neck, making it harder for her to breathe. I can see it in the slight struggle Gen makes in order to get some more air into her lungs. The sight guts me in the worst way.

I want to kill her. I want to pull every hair from Cristina’s sadistic head until she’s crying like a fucking baby. But the past has taught me not to underestimate her. Not when she’s holding the only woman I care about in her manicured claws. “What are you smiling at, big guy?” She nods her head at Kane, and I spin my head to face him.

He lets out a chuckle, folding his arms over his chest. The way he’s looking at her is diabolical. It’s one of the rare moments I like the fact my brother has psychotic traits that can match the level of crazy we are facing right now.

“I’m just thinking about how much I’m going to enjoy torturing you. Skinning you, like I did with Fernando. Maybe pull out some organs while you’re still awake before I hang you on Plaza de España. You remember Fernando, don’t you, *Crissy?*”

The briefest flash of discomfort crosses her face, but it’s barely noticeable, followed by a vicious glare from calling her *Crissy* before she returns her unimpressed stance.

“Meh, Fernando was a two-faced fool who followed Junior around like a puppy dog hoping for a bone. I’m glad you got rid of him.”

“What the fuck do you want, bitch?” I say, with force this time.

I’m done entertaining her. If there is anything I know, it’s that you don’t play games with a Reyes. You figure out what they want and go in for the kill. Don’t be tempted to give them mercy or even redemption, because it will not end in your favor.

“*Bitch?* Now that’s not very nice, is it, Liam?” She throws me a sad face, one I know is fake as hell. I failed to see it the first time, but I know now nothing is real when it comes to Cristina Reyes. It’s all one big game to get what she wants.

“What the fuck do you want, *bitch?*” I repeat, the corner of my lip lifting in a snarl.

“Really? We can’t even catch up for a minute? We have a past, after all.” Her lashes flutter.

“One I’d erase from my brain if I could.”

“Come on, baby. We also had good times.” Pursing her lips, it only makes me want to punch her face until her cheeks match the color of her red lipstick.

“Answer the damn question, *Cristina,*” Callie growls. Her voice still holds a little patience, unlike mine.

“Oh, Callie. Sweet Callie. Why so snappy? I’m still your cousin, aren’t I?” The sparkle in Cristina’s brown eyes shows a clear vision of the psychotic lunatic that she is.

I’m so glad Callie turned out to be adopted.

“You set me up with Ronnie Distucci, knowing he was gonna force my hand the second he found out it was me. You are *nothing* to me.”

“We just needed you out of the way for a while. Couldn’t risk you dying with that big inheritance waiting for you at the end, now could I?”

Callie snorts. “I thought you were better than Junior, but you’re just as manic as he was.”

“It was just business, Callie girl. Nothing personal.”

“You gave me a job that drove me into the hands of the biggest mob boss in New York, so he could keep me as his until I turned twenty-five, all so you had access to my billion dollars after you *killed* me. It doesn’t get more fucking personal than that, you bitch!”

“Oh, that’s right.” Cristina rolls her eyes. “I forgot how touchy you always get. You know, if you had a little less morals, we could’ve been a great team.”

Callie takes another step forward, her sea-green eyes shooting daggers while her hands ball into fists. I notice how my brother’s entire stance grows more tense. His energy is heated like lava, ready to destroy anything on his path to protect Callie.

“*They* are my team.” She points at Kane and I, without looking back before snapping her finger forward. “*Imogen* is my team, and if you don’t fucking release her within the next ten seconds, I swear I will throw you half dead in the ocean,

enjoying the sight of the Mediterranean sharks finishing you off for me.”

“Oh,” she purrs. “Dark. I love it.”

“Yeah?” Kane charges her with lightning speed, pulling his gun from his waistband with a vicious glare as he aims it directly at Cristina’s head. I quickly trail his move until we’re both standing just two yards in front of her, both ready to end her in the blink of an eye. The sudden motion has her jerking Imogen a step back, and she shuts her eyes in agony as Cristina pulls her hair in the action. The scream of Callie, along with the sounds of Jeremy replacing our team strategically, makes my heart race until the silence returns. Callie’s idea of feeding her to the sharks sounds like something I’d highly enjoy under the delight of a bowl of popcorn and a good glass of Bourbon, but I’m not going to risk Gen’s head on it.

“What about a bullet between your eyes? Will you love that too?” Kane rumbles after a few moments of silence. This time it’s deep, threatening, and just as menacing as his reputation.

Cristina’s smile is replaced with a firm stripe as she holds Kane’s glare with narrowed eyes, her nonchalance simmering down a few levels even though she holds a straight spine. It doesn’t surprise me, but it makes me suspect holding Gen hostage isn’t the only thing she’s got up her sleeve. She’s outnumbered; she knows that. These ports are guarded, both with a dozen of our own men and half a dozen men of harbor

security. There is no way she got us surrounded by her team, but some could be outside our perimeter.

“Careful, Kane,” she muses with a tiny sneer that ignites an uncomfortable feeling in my gut. “I suggest you take a step back if you want to keep your wife happy. And you know, I don’t know? *Breathing?*”

“I’ll take my chances.” Kane’s finger tightens around the trigger, his permafrost eyes acting like invisible lasers as he peers at the *she*-devil in front of us. His way of telling her he’ll shoot her before she can blink.

“Kane,” I warn as I keep my eyes locked with Cristina’s smug glare. Whatever he’s feeling, I’m feeling it ten times worse, considering she’s holding my girlfriend in a headlock, so I get it. But he can’t take any risks. I won’t allow it.

“Kane.” Callie’s uncertainty tells me she has the same feeling before she takes another careful step forward. “Take a step back.”

“Why would I do that, baby?” His growl replies to Callie, but his attention stays fixed in front of him as the three of us watch Cristina’s wide grin before she finally shows her hand.

“Because I got your precious *Babushka*.”

LIAM

TWO YEARS AGO

My eyes capture her the second she steps over the threshold, casually flipping her black hair over her shoulder. When I run the length of her body, I part my lips at the luscious curves that sway their way to the bar. Her brown eyes are dark, framed by thick lashes that are naturally hooded like she's born to seduce. Like a Greek immortal, her entire posture filled with allure and elegance. A vixen, like Peitho, Goddess of Seduction.

Unintentionally, I fixate on her as she slides down on a vacant stool at the bar, gracefully pulling down her black pencil skirt before she does. Long legs make my dick twitch while I lick my lips. I watch without shame as she takes off her black trench coat, then orders a glass of Blue Label whiskey, which has my brows lifting in surprise.

I expected her to order a martini or a glass of red wine, but her order makes me wonder what sorrows she needs to drink away.

“Boss, are you still there?” Jeremy waves a hand in front of my face.

“What? Yeah.” I snap my attention back to him. He purses his lips, an amused smile hidden in the corner of his mouth as he rears his head to whatever caught my attention in the first place.

“She’s hot,” he muses.

“Fucking smoking,” I agree. Like a brunette Jessica Rabbit.

“You wanna cut this meeting short?”

I volley a look between the new investment opportunities Jeremy got from the accountant and the beauty sitting lonely at the bar. My shoulders lift with a cocky grin in answer, spreading my arm over the back of the corner booth. Those papers will still be there in the morning, but I’m pretty sure the girl at the bar will be out of my sight if I don’t make my move.

“Right.” Jeremy shakes his head with a smirk, reading my mood, then finishes his drink in one go. “We’ll finish this tomorrow. Don’t forget you have a call with Franklin Wolfe in the morning.”

“Will Kane be there?” Jeremy slides out of the booth to get on his feet, then gathers the paperwork in front of him.

“To discuss the legitimate side of the business?” He shoots me a flat look.

“Right, stupid question.” There is a lot my bad boy brother is good at. Walking on the right side of the law isn’t one of them, though. He gladly leaves these things to me, even though he sees the value of investing to make our dirty money clean as a whistle. He just can’t be bothered to get involved

with it. Not when living up to his reputation and fucking whores is higher on the list. He'll want to be part of it when we visit with all four of the Wolfe brothers for a night of poker and drinks to discuss the side of our business that isn't allowed in broad daylight. But when it comes to laundering our money with actual ventures and start-ups, he'll have fallen asleep before you can finish your sentence. I keep telling him to grow up and find himself a nice girl to spend more than one night with. He replied by throwing a knife at my head. In his defense, he's pretty accurate with those things, but it still pissed me off.

“Good luck.” Jeremy tilts his head to the woman of my interest as he offers me his hand, and I rise to take it before I throw my jacket back on and drop a few bills on the table.

“Thanks, I'll probably need it.” She radiates a natural level of defiance that makes her even more tempting to pursue. The best things in life will make you work harder. Especially black-haired beauties who nurse a glass of expensive whiskey while sitting lonely at the bar.

Their loneliness might be inviting, but it's also a clear warning no bullshit will be tolerated. No, this is the kind of woman that refuses to waste her time with any low-life knucklehead trying to hit on her. You need to show her you're worth it from the first second she lays her eyes on you, and I intend to do just that.

“Pretty sure you will.” Jeremy lets his gaze linger on her for a few heartbeats. “She looks like a lot of work.”

“Good thing I’m not afraid to get my hands dirty.”

“I’m certain that’s not what they mean when people say that.”

“Have a good night, Jer.” I slap his back, sending him on his way, and he takes off with a snicker, the folder of papers tucked below his black denim jacket.

My feet take confident strides until I’m close enough to smell her heavy perfume, a potent mix of something vanilla and rosy that’s instantly embedded in my brain. The scent reminds me of a field of flowers at my grandmother’s house where we used to play as kids. All I need is a fresh breeze flying through my dark blonde hair, and she could make me feel right at home.

“You look like you’re looking for trouble.” Without asking, I take the empty seat beside her, lifting my hand to grab the attention of the bartender, and make my order before I twist my neck, finding her dark eyes looking up at me. The fatigue is overshadowed by the expression of curiosity she’s sporting. Her hair is voluminous, looking soft and shiny while framing her oval face. Her cheekbones are sharp, but softened by the plump skin on her cheeks, her entire appearance making me wonder where her roots lay.

“What makes you say that?” Her Hispanic accent widens my eyes in surprise. She speaks softly, her tone smooth, but there is a directness that screams *woman in control* like I predicted, and it turns me on, solidified by the shiver that rolls through me.

“A gorgeous woman like you, all alone in a bar, dressed like that?” I glance down to where her silky legs appear from under her burgundy skirt. Up close, I notice they are slightly tanned, making me believe she’s from somewhere in South America, if I’d have to go by that and the way her words roll from her tongue. “You’re either trying to drink away a heartbreak, or you’re looking for trouble.”

Her interest piques, as she turns her knees to face me, brushing them softly against my hips.

“Dressed like what? Exactly?”

Smiling, I lift my glass to my face, holding it mid-air as I avert my gaze. My dick already noticed the deep cleavage of her black silk blouse, showing the swells of her breasts that begged to be touched, but I’m a gentleman. A criminal one, but a gentleman, nonetheless.

“Like you’re ready to conquer the world,” I tell her, taking a sip of my drink.

“Maybe I am.”

“What?”

“Looking for trouble.” Her attention swings back to her glass, swirling the leftover ice cubes around the liquor with a *ting*.

“Or maybe you’re thinking of a way to conquer the world.”

“Or maybe I just had a rough day.”

“Wanna tell me about it?”

Her dark gaze finds mine again, her brows a little furrowed, as if she's trying to find my angle. She takes her glass from the bar, keeping her eyes staring at me from the top of the rim as she pours the entire thing down in four gulps.

“Only if you buy me another drink.” Delicately, she puts the glass back on the bar, a smug smile on her red lips. They are plump, shiny from lipstick, and I'd really like to know what she tastes like. If the vanilla isn't just something I imagine, but something I can let coat my tongue as it dances around hers in soft and sensual strokes.

Fuck, Liam. Settle down.

“Straight to the point. I like that.” I finish the contents of my glass in one go, then order another round. “I'm Liam.”

The bartender gives both of us a refill, and I hand him a twenty-dollar bill.

“Salud.” She raises her flesh glass, then puts her lips against it. It doesn't go unnoticed that she doesn't tell me her name in return, but I refrain myself from repeating the question.

“Where are you from?” I tilt my head at her, my eyes traveling lower to her curves and wanting to feel them under my palms.

“My accent gives it away, doesn't it?” Her voice pulls my attention back.

“Pretty much,” I answer, honestly.

“Spain.”

Not that far off.

“Beautiful country. What part?”

“Granada.” The way she pronounces her native regions is sexy as hell, each syllable tingling its way up my spine.

“What are you doing in New York? Pleasure or business?” Her English is perfect, but her accent tells me she’s not born in the States.

“I moved to New York a few years ago. More opportunities in the States. I’m a real estate agent now.”

My eyes narrow at that answer, since I actually thought she was a lawyer or something, someone who makes a living fighting her way through with her wits and believes. Though now that she told me, I can see it when I look at her complete outfit, with shoes that look like fine Italian leather. It also grows my respect, though, knowing she’s here to pursue her dreams.

I know it’s nothing more than a smoke curtain for a lot of people, but there are also a lot of people who can make it work for them. By the look on her face, I’m assuming she’s on the winning side of the coin.

“Good for you. Upper East Side?”

“Mostly the Meat District.” Her lips stay together, but she allows a small smile to travel my way. “What about you?”

I want to give her the answer I give every other person asking me: I’m an investor. In what? Everything. But for reasons I can’t explain, I don’t want to lie to her. I want to

show her the real me, instead of the fabricated persona I created to improve our influences in the city's corporations. As if I'm wondering if she has the potential to be more than just a casual flirt for the rest of the night.

"I do a little bit of everything." I settle for vague.

"Sounds cryptic. Are you a broker?" She takes a sip of her drink, leaving a lipstick stain on the glass before her eyes lower to the rest of my suit.

"Why?" I chuckle. "Do I look like a broker?"

"That. Or a lawyer."

Oh, I'd suck as a lawyer, sweetheart. I'd probably be a lawyer for the gangsters in this city, finding a way to bend the law just enough for us to make as much money as possible. But I don't want to scare her away, not knowing what kind of wood she's carved from, so I keep my mouth shut.

I bring my glass to my lips. "I'm neither."

"You say that with a hint of contempt." A dark eyebrow cocks, and I feel a little busted when she adds, "Like you don't like the law."

"I didn't say that."

"No, but I can still hear it." Perceptive. "You're a bad boy, aren't you, Liam?" The worst there is, sweetheart. "You dance on the wrong side of the law, wearing a suit to convince everyone you're not." I look for her disdain for the knowledge she seems to be getting just by observing me in the last couple

of minutes, but when I don't find any, she has me even more intrigued.

“What do you know about the wrong side of the law?”

The bright chestnut in her eyes grows stale, her jaw ticking, but I don't think she notices herself because she's doing everything she can to keep a straight face. Finally, she exhales loudly before fixing her gaze to the glass in her hands. “More than I wish.”

“How come?”

“*No, no.*” Her accent seeps through thicker than the moment before as she shakes her head, a reprimanding finger pointed my way. “I'm not showing you all my cards.”

I expected that answer, invoking a grin that shows my teeth.

“Okay, just one, then,” I try. “What's your name?”

As she stares at me, the golden specks around her irises remind me of fireflies in the dark night. I bet they'd show some green on a hot summer day, and a strong urge to want to experience her gaze in every season overwhelms me. The tension between us becomes palpable the longer our eyes stay connected. Something in this girl enchants me, like she has the actual possibility to put a spell on me and make me submit to whatever makes her happy. It's dangerous as hell, but I can't look away for the life of me.

“I think I'm going to keep that one for myself for a little while longer,” she ultimately says, then twists her chin back to where her hands are nursing her glass.

“You’re going to make me work for it?”

“Who says there is anything to work for?” I can hear the judgment etching through, like she has more than just herself to consider, and my heart drops to my stomach, giving me a weird sensation I’ve never experienced before.

“Ouch, is this the part where you’re going to tell me that someone already beat me to it and that you’re married with a bunch of kids?”

“You want to get married, Liam?” I ignore the avoidance of my question, simply because I’m scared she will cut this conversation short. And if I’m honest, other than business meetings, I haven’t had an interesting conversation in weeks. She’s keeping me on my toes without even trying, and fuck me, I seem to be thoroughly enjoying it.

“Someday, yes.” Kane keeps telling me I need to put it out of my head. That there is no room for a family in our line of work. I know he’s right, but that doesn’t mean it’s what I want. I had dreams of becoming rich and powerful, just like Kane and I had planned, but unlike my little brother, I also had the desire to one day start a family of my own.

“Kids?” she adds.

“Yes.” I’m a little stunned by my own honesty, but it feels good to tell someone. To not hide the fact that I want more than just an endless stream of money and the power it comes with.

“So, are you? Married?” *Please say no.*

She clears her throat, ignoring my question once more as she glances at her watch. My gaze follows hers, and I see it's a vintage Rolex. I admire her taste. It's classic and beautiful, like her.

"What I am, is late," she informs me, sliding off the stool.

"For what?"

"My appointment."

I cock my head at her with a challenge. "You're bluffing."

She smiles, putting on her jacket. "I came here to kill time because I have a meeting across the street."

"Then why would you walk in here?"

She takes a step forward, vanilla now seeping deeper into my nose while bringing her mouth close to my ear. Close enough for her breath to fan the skin on my neck, and I swallow away my desire to turn my head and connect my lips with hers.

"Ever heard of hard to get, Liam?" she whispers, with an inkling of seduction this time. It's tiny, barely audible, but more than enough to tighten the fabric between my legs. "Wouldn't want to show them I'm all eager and willing to pay if I can also fake disinterest to give myself a better negotiating position."

"You're smart." I pause, slowly twisting my neck to find her eyes again. "I still think you're bluffing, though." Her lips are only a few inches away now, the flowery tones of her perfume hitting my brain like ecstasy.

“Maybe I am. Maybe I’m not,” she taunts, then takes a step back as she tightens the cord of her jacket around her waist. “Thank you for the drink, Liam—?”

“Carrillo,” I share, regretting it the second I see her eyes show more white than the second before.

“Carrillo.” There is some recognition in the way she looks at me, but I can’t decipher if it’s just because it’s spoken all over like we’re one of the politicians ruling this city, or if it’s because she has more info than she lets on.

“Have a good night, Liam Carrillo.” She spins to walk away, but I jump from my stool, holding her back by her elbow.

“Wait. You really aren’t going to give me your name?”

“Maybe some other time.” I respect her for the indifferent stance she’s trying to keep, but I can see an interested woman from a mile away. She’s just as into me as I am her. All I have to do is convince her to meet again.

“Let me take you to dinner,” I offer, a hopeful glint boring into her eyes. But all I get is a coy smile, before she softly tugs her arm out of my grasp.

“Adios, Liam *Carrillo*.”

IMOGEN

PRESENT DAY

“**B**ecause I got your precious Babushka.”

I gasp when the smug declaration slides into my ears, the jerk of my body an automatic response to escape this bitch’s grasp. I hate the fact that I didn’t put up much of a fight when she strolled into my room like I invited her to come braid my hair. I was too shell-shocked to do anything until I was looking into the cylinder of that damn gun.

“Na-ah. Don’t, *Genny*.” The barrel pushes my head to the side even more.

My neck feels strained as the muscles stretch, adding to my discomfort, but it’s nothing compared to the dread I’m feeling when I look at the despair on Callie’s face before I see the transformation happening that she’s known for. She can stay calm and level-headed, not letting anything faze her. But if you really piss her off, she switches to survival mode, ready to go to war. My mam used to tell me I have the same ability, but so far, I haven’t seen it yet, leaving me to believe that was only reserved for Callie’s gene pool on our Irish side. It’s like watching a marvel movie and Bruce Banner is about to

become Hulk at any second. Her rosy cheeks are now flushed like a tomato, her eyes hardening with each breath she takes. But it's the fury in her eyes that is most captivating, frightening me if I didn't trust they will always have my back.

"I swear to God"—Callie takes a few ominous steps toward Cristina, not going any farther when Kane doesn't allow her to pass him—"if you hurt my grandmother, Kane and Liam will be the least of your worries."

"Ugh, you're always so dramatic, Callie girl." She smirks. "Tell you what... how about I take little Genny over here in exchange for your *Babushka*?" The silence that follows is sharper than a machete, and I just try to let my eyes tell Callie she doesn't have to answer that.

"Huh?" she says when Callie doesn't reply, but holds her stare like the warrior that my cousin is. "What do you say? Babushka for Genny. Or I can just shoot Genny now, and then you'll realize you'll have no chance but to listen to me until I give the old nag back to you."

"You wouldn't do that." My eyes lock with Liam. His jaw is set, his deep blue eyes almost as dark as the night. A soft ocean breeze makes his blonde strands dance, exposing the deep frown on his forehead. Tears fill up my eyes when I can see the worry etched in his gaze. I hate seeing him tormented like this, but what I hate more is that the same woman who plagued him before is now doing it again. It increases the anger I feel for her.

A flat-out rage that is tempted to kill.

“And why wouldn’t I, my *sweet* Liam?”

“Because you want to live.”

I can hear her snicker only because her mouth is so close to my ears.

“You want to live, and you know that if you kill Imogen, I will kill you. Right here. Right now,” Liam adds. “I will do everything that’s necessary to get Babushka back. But I will not hesitate to do that without you if you hurt Genny, and you know it. Hurt her,” he pauses, a slight challenge in his stance while he takes a tentative step forward, “and you will sign your death certificate.”

The silence in the air is pregnant, the wind seizing every movement that’s made. From the corner of my eye, Jeremy grabs my attention, slowly shuffling his feet behind Kane, Liam, and Callie with the rest of their team. Their guns are aimed and loaded, a stern look on each of their faces, but I give him a pleading look to stand back. I’m not willing to find out if Cristina is bluffing.

“Let them lower their guns,” Cristina demands, her gaze volleying between the three in charge. “Now!”

It’s eerie how quickly this girl can switch her moods, her amusement just as believable as her anger, even though it’s only seconds apart. It shows how truly twisted she has always been.

“Lower your guns.” Callie’s voice booms over the deck, her eyes never leaving Cristina’s. “How do I know you have my

grandmother?”

Cristina sighs with annoyance, pulling her phone from her pocket while she keeps the gun connected with my scalp. The move releases some pressure from my neck, allowing me to breathe freely, and I suck in a lungful of air. “I knew you were going to say that.” With a few taps, she waits until Liam’s phone pings in his pocket. Reluctantly, he takes it out and taps the screen, and the moment he sees the evidence, it’s clear on his face. He offers Callie an expression of pity as he shows the screen to her and Kane.

“Fine. What do you want?” Callie takes the lead again, fury coming from her eyes.

“I thought you’d never ask!” Cristina beams, bringing back her happy self again. She lets go of me, directing me to the lounge set to our left, with the steel still cold against my hair, before she gestures for me to take a seat. With a straightened spine, I throw her a glare until I look straight into the barrel, then I twist my neck, trying to find comfort in Liam’s gaze on me.

“I want the Florentine diamond.” The way she blurts it out suggests she’s ordering a *gelato* or something, and I have no clue what she’s talking about. My confusion is shared when I notice the same expression on Callie’s face.

“Good for you,” Kane opts at the same time Liam says, “So does half of the world.”

“What is the Florentine diamond?” I question, as Callie and I turn our focus on the two brothers.

“Go on, tell them,” Cristina urges.

Kane glares at her, probably hoping she will melt through the deck within the next few seconds, but obviously he has no luck. We probably have more luck that she gets picked up by a giant eagle that’s in need of a snack.

“It’s a diamond that was once in the possession of the imperial family of Austria. It has been lost since 1918. Rumor is, it was stolen right after the first world war, but never located ever since. It’s light yellow with a double rose cut, worth around \$750,000 at the time,” Kane informs.

“How much would that be now?” I ask.

Kane locks eyes with Cristina, his mouth pinched, before his gaze drops to me.

“\$2.3 million.”

We’ve all had enough expensive jewelry in our hands to not let out a gasp of shock, but still, \$2.3 million is a lot of money.

“Why do you want it?” Callie nudges her chin with narrowed eyes.

“Because with Junior gone, and you being a Carrillo now, she won’t get a cut of your inheritance if you die.” Liam answers for her with a look that says he sees right through the vicious black-haired women behind me. “She needs the money.”

“So what do you need us for? Go get that damn diamond,” Callie grunts.

“I doubt she knows where it is,” Kane says.

I feel Cristina shift, a dreamy sigh of delight flying through the strands of my hair.

“Who knew you also had a brain? Ding, ding, ding!” She jolts with enthusiasm. “You’re on to the next round. Story time! Once upon a time, there was a king—”

“Save the theatrics, Cris.” Callie’s eyes are spitting dangers as she cuts her off, and I can imagine all the things she’d like to do to Cristina right now. She’s just about ready to raise hell like a fucking fire dragon.

“Oh, boo, Callie. You are no fun. Fine,” she concedes, probably rolling her eyes behind me. “Frank Reyes had the diamond.”

“What?” I blurt at the same time we all show our confusion.

“It’s been missing for a century. And here you are, telling me that it was in Reyes’s possession the entire time?” Kane rebukes. The look on his face tells me he doesn’t believe a word she’s saying, his eyes showing nothing more than boredom.

“Actually, it was never missing,” Cristina clarifies. “Frank’s grandfather, Emilio Reyes, fought in the second war. His *amigo*, Benjamin Walker, was a US soldier who had the diamond with him as insurance. Apparently, his brother brought him to the States in the 1930s and when he died in a car accident, Walker found the diamond. After the war started,

he figured he could use the diamond to trade his life if he ever got captured by the Germans.”

“So how did Emilio get it?” Callie frowns.

“Emilio found out Ben had a very valuable diamond, so he killed him and took it.” Cristina’s tone lacks any emotion. “Flash forward a few decades later, fifteen years ago, Frank Reyes allegedly gave it to his mistress as a promise he would leave your mama someday and they would be together.” Callie’s brows knit together at this new piece of information about her mother’s marriage to Frank. “What? You thought Jacky was the love of his life because he stole her from your real daddy? Think again, *Callie girl*. The only reason he was with your mama was to get a foot in with the IRA. He never loved your mother, nor did he actually *like* her.”

“Well, I guess it was a marriage of mutual hate after all,” Callie defends.

“Maybe,” Cris snickers. “But still, your mama couldn’t stand the fact that dear old Frank was seeing someone else on the side. She could handle the whores he was fucking, but she hated that he basically had a second wife.”

“What’s her name?” Callie grits out.

“Loranne Almos. They met in Miami when he had a meeting with her daddy, who was a big shot at the Miami airport, a perfect location for him to set up shop for his *trafficking* business.” She emphasizes the word as if we don’t already know the dirty business they are in and she needs to spell it out in code. “She was only seventeen at the time, but

Frank didn't care. He started seducing her the minute he laid eyes on her, and soon he was flying multiple times a year back to the States to go and see her. Her daddy didn't really like him fucking his teenage daughter, but obviously, dear old Franco didn't care. He made it clear he wasn't afraid to end the man if he kept him from his daughter. Called her the love of his life. Her dad died of a heart attack a few months later, though the circumstances might be a bit shady. Something with food and some wine." I catch her looking up at the sky, as if she's counting the stars. "Or maybe it was pills? Oh, who knows." She laughs enthusiastically, even though no one bothers to join in. "After that, Frank got free range to do to sweet Loranne whatever he wanted." The mocking tone of her voice brings me goosebumps, wanting nothing more than to punch her teeth from her snarky mouth.

"Why haven't I heard about her?" Callie questions.

"Ah, yes." Cristina continues, not a care in the world. "Like every good love story, a tragedy happened. When you were about eight years old, Frank was gone for two months. Your mother couldn't find him, and my mother refused to tell her where he was."

"I still remember that," Callie whispers, more to herself than to anyone else. "My mother went nuts."

"Turns out, Loranne was in a car crash. She was paralyzed from the neck down and they put her in a coma for six weeks before they woke her up. She has been a vegetable ever since. Such a shame, experiencing your twenties like a puppet."

“What does any of this have to do with the diamond?” I’m sick of listening to this bitch.

“Patience, *Gen.*” She presses the barrel roughly against my scalp again, pushing my head a little forward. Her lighthearted tone quickly switches to a growl that makes it more than clear she hates me just as much as I hate her. “As I was saying,” she keeps going, her calm voice back in place. *Lunatic.* “Loranne is no help because, well, the woman is probably happy when she can eat without drooling all over herself. But I heard a conversation between my mother and Frank that he gave the diamond to Loranne right before the accident.”

“So, go to Loranne,” I scoff.

“Will you shut the fuck up?” I can feel her glare burning through my side.

“I will if you get that gun out of my face and get to the fucking point!”

“Don’t make me shoot you!” she seethes while I see Liam and Callie tense in front of me. They both shoot me a pleading look, knowing the unpredictability that Cristina possesses, and I press my lips to a flat line, silently conceding.

“Anyway,” she proceeds. “I can’t go to Loranne, because she doesn’t even know where the diamond is. When Frank realized she was a sitting duck, he told my mother he took the diamond back to Spain and hid it somewhere only a Reyes can find it.” A knowing look is coming from Callie, and she briefly closes her eyes.

“A story,” Callie discloses.

“You know how much Frank loved his secret messages,” Cristina confirms Callie’s suspicions.

“He never told me a story about a diamond.”

“Well, of course, he didn’t. He’s not stupid. But I’m sure he told you *something* that will lead to where we can find the diamond.”

“He didn’t tell me that many stories, Cris! Junior was his favorite, remember? Hell, he even liked you more than he liked me—”

“Can you blame him?” Cristina interrupts.

“So, why don’t you find it out yourself? Maybe he sold it!”

“Nice try and all, Callie girl. We’re talking about a diamond that is worth more than 2 million. If he sold it, we would’ve known and there is no way in hell Frank would leave that thing hidden without leaving any clue after his death. But I’m not his daughter.”

“You’re the last Reyes,” Kane adds, glancing at Callie.

“You want access to his shit,” Callie concludes.

“And you’re the only one who can get it,” Cristina agrees.

“Oh, fucking hell.” Callie rubs a hand over her face, then throws Cristina a scowl. They keep staring at each other for a few moments; Callie’s eyes looking like they are processing this new piece of information about the family she grew up with. “Fine! We will help you get that diamond. But you better

take that gun off my cousin's head, right now!" Her finger is pointed viciously in our direction. "And if I find my grandmother with as much as a missing hair after this is done, I will gut you myself."

"*Claro.*" I feel the gun lift from my scalp, and I twist my head a little, locking my eyes with Cristina holding up her hands, the gun hanging loosely from her fingers. My lips are raised in a snarl, my palm aching to connect with the smooth skin on her cheek. As I feel the pounding in my heart increase, I slowly feel my legs move, ready to get up.

"Gen." My attention is switched to Callie, my scowl meeting hers. A slight shake of her head tells me to back off, and I lift my chin in defiance, but don't defy her. With tense shoulders, I still get up, ready to close the distance between Liam and me instead.

"You can go now." Callie dismisses Cristina with a flick of her hand in the corner of my eye, but it is Cristina's reply that has me stopping in the middle of the deck, still at least two yards away from Liam.

"And miss out on all the fun? Nah, I think I'll stay."

I spin around, ready to shove her off this yacht myself, but I'm quickly caught by Liam, his strong arms snaking around my waist.

"Don't." His whisper in my ear calms me down, but not enough to wipe the glare from my face. That bitch is smiling at me with an evil glimmer in her dark eyes, an arrogance

traveling over her entire aura now that she's got what she wants.

“You can get a fucking hotel. I don't want you on my yacht.” Kane's voice booms over the deck with certainty. I'm happy to know we are on the same page, but she wouldn't be Cristina if that would scare her away. She's used to working with broody men and raised with psychopaths. Kane Carillo doesn't scare her until she's 100% sure she's got nothing else left than to give over to his mercy. Today is not that day. We all know it.

“Yeah, I could. But I don't want to.” With her hips rocking from side to side, she takes sensual steps forward until she's directly in front of Kane. “I'm staying, Carrillo.” The tension becomes electric between the two, both of their jaws set in stone. Kane is at least a foot taller than her, peering into her eyes as if he's willing her to get struck by his arctic gaze. But she just keeps her chin lifted, both their chests moving slowly up and down. Cristina's black hair softly dances on the evening breeze, her skin-tight black jeans showing every curve of her confident womanhood.

“I think your *wife* will agree with me,” she finally pokes. “You know, with me being her last living relative and all.” She doesn't wait for his reply, instead expanding her cheeks to a beaming grin. “Now that we have that settled, where is my room?”

Her head swivels on her shoulders until it reaches Liam's. His arms are still around my waist, my weight still hanging

securely against his. “In your room?”

“Not even if you paid me,” Liam quickly grunts.

Cristina fake pouts, her head tilting. “What about you, Gen? You want to have a sleepover? We can do each other’s nails, braid our hair, maybe dish a little about Liam’s dick?”

I shake my head, not ready to handle this. Not even knowing how to reply to that. The entire situation has me lost for words. I don’t want her to get the best of me, but she does. She pisses me off so much; it restricts my throat, making it hard to speak while my chest cracks in a way that has me struggling to breathe. I wish I had something snarky to throw back to her, but I’ve got nothing other than a rock settling in my stomach, making it hard for my legs to keep carrying the weight.

Tears form in my eyes, but I refuse to show her my frustration, so I do the only thing I can do—I wrangle myself out of Liam’s arms and I get the fuck out of there.



As soon as I reach the empty hallway that leads to my bedroom, tears of frustration are blurring my vision while my luscious dress waves around my legs with each step.

I was so excited to wear this dress, especially now that Liam and I finally made things official. Tonight should’ve been a perfect night, but instead it turned out to be the birthday party from hell.

That fucking bitch!

I hate her!

Liam asked me a few weeks ago if I wanted to start carrying a gun, now that he got me familiar with them, but I didn't want to. Not feeling comfortable enough for that, arguing that I was with him every moment anyway. The second I saw Cristina enter my room, I regretted that decision. Regretted that I knew there wasn't a firearm near, and I had no other option than to comply with her wishes.

I never thought Cristina would kill anyone. Let alone me. Cristina always unsettled me when we were younger. She used to visit Callie in New York, and though I never feel comfortable with her, I wasn't scared of her either. But now that I've learned all the wicked things she pulled against Callie, against Liam, I wasn't so sure and from the moment she had me in a headlock, her gun connected with my head, fear was palpable on my skin. My blood rushed through my ears, my skin felt like it was burning, and my heart was beating so violently I thought it would stop within minutes. And now I hate myself for giving her that kind of power over me.

I'm not the same girl I was a year ago. I can stick up for myself now. I can fight. I know how to shoot, but still, I froze like a fucking deer in headlights the moment Cristina set her wicked gaze on me.

"Gen!" I hear Liam's heavy footsteps behind me, but I keep storming through the yacht, not ready to have this

conversation without the comfort of our own room. Especially since Cristina is still a lot closer than I want her to be.

“Baby, wait!”

“What for?” I spin on my heels, meeting his worried gaze as he takes the last determined strides to place his hands on my hips. I stare at his ocean blue eyes, a softness looking back at me.

“You’re freaking out.”

“Wouldn’t you?” I screech, pushing him off and continuing my path. “In fact, why aren’t you?”

“It’s gonna be fine, I promise.”

“That female personification of the devil just had a gun to my head, holds Callie’s grandmother captive, God knows where, and she’s just announced she’s going to stay until we get her some fucking diamond! Don’t you get it, Liam? Nothing is fine! Nothing is going to be fine!”

He’s right. I am freaking out. This is the woman who recruits girls for their human trafficking network. She tried to kill the man I love without as much as a blink of an eye and here she is smiling like there is no harm done while she’s asking, no, *demanding*, our help to get a two-million-dollar rock because her original plan of killing Callie and taking her inheritance didn’t stick and she needs money.

She’s a fucking psychopath. Forgive me if I don’t sleep well, knowing those are running around freely on the boat I’m stuck on.

Finally, I reach the door of our room, storming through it and turning around when Liam slams it shut. With a swift move, he grabs my wrist, yanking me past his body until my back is pressed against the hard frame.

My lips part at the sudden move, but when our gazes collide, I close my eyes, my emotions capturing me like a tidal wave with nowhere to hide. I let my head rest against the wood of the door, my tears now unable to hold back. With one hand wrapped around the small of my back, he tugs me close against his chest. Automatically, my arms move up around his neck, and I bury my face in his shoulder.

And I let go.

All the tension, the stress, the anxiety I've been feeling in the last hour, vibrates through me with agony, my sobs getting louder the more I think about what could've happened. What a bad position I found myself in.

"I got you, baby." Liam soothes me in his arms, his lips on my hair while I keep staining his shirt with my tears. "It's gonna be all right."

"How?" I sob after a minute. "How is it going to be all right?"

"We will fix it. Like we fix everything." His tone is matter-of-fact, only adding to my insecurity. Liam lowers his head, pressing his forehead against mine.

"You know she can't beat us, right?" *I really don't.* "The Reyes family has tried to overthrow us multiple times now.

They never succeeded.” *He has a point.* “They are not going to succeed now. We will get Babushka back.” *Will we?* “Come on, baby. What is this really about?”

Air deflates from my chest as I stare down at him, letting his words slowly settle in my foggy brain. What is this really about? I don’t know.

Or maybe I do know.

“I couldn’t defend myself.”

“What do you mean?”

I don’t want to look him in the eye, embarrassed to confess how easily Cristina had been able to get to me. “She just strolled into the room, and I let her get to me without as much as a fight. It was like stealing candy from a baby! I’m not cut out for this shit, and now she’s going to be walking around the yacht?” I shake my head. “I’m not sure I can handle this.”

“Hey.” His voice is booming, almost a bark, enough to snap my head up to look at him. “Don’t you dare talk like that! *Ever again.*” Blue eyes stare back at me with a shred of anger, though they’re filled with something I would describe as love. Fuck, I hope it’s love. “Just because she caught you by surprise doesn’t mean she’s better than you. She’s not. She’s nothing more than a worthless piece of shit without a heart. She’s *nothing* compared to you. Yes, she had the upper hand tonight, but it doesn’t say anything about your capability. I’ve taught you how to fight myself. I taught you how to shoot. You can take her any time of day, easily. But only if you believe it. So none of this bullshit anymore, you got me? You are a

warrior, Imogen Payne. And there is no chance in hell you're going to let that scum get to you, okay?"

His words ease the cold sweat on my back, my heart going back to a moderating pace. He's right, I know he's right. But it's hard to suddenly change your way of thinking, especially when Cristina has always been the older one. The one who showed us who to do our make-up when she'd go out with us on rare occasions. The one who taught us where to hit new targets. I don't want to say I looked up to her, but she sure as hell looked more together than I felt.

Still do, I guess.

But I brush that thought away when Liam's lips fall against mine, his scorching temperature soothing me like a hot bath after a long day. His hand explores my back, stroking everywhere with intent, and I sink into his body. When I'm wrapped up in his arms, I feel pretty together. In fact, I feel like I'm on top of the world when he's treasuring me like I'm the most precious thing.

He gives me the confidence I've been lacking most of my life, not just wanting to save me, but giving me the tools to save myself. I can do this. I can kick Cristina's ass if I want to. I can kick *anyone's* ass if I want to. He's right. He taught me everything I needed to know. Just because that she caught me off guard, doesn't mean she will again. She won't. I won't let her. Next time she wants to hurt me, I'm ready for her.

Pleased with my own thoughts, I moan into his mouth, my tongue swirling around his with urgency as I start to undo the

buttons of his shirt.

“Wait, wait.” Liam breaks loose. “As much as I want to fuck you against this door, I need to know you’re okay. You got this?”

I swallow, thinking over his words for an honest reply. “I will be.”

“You got this?” Liam repeats.

“I got this.” I smile, those three little words causing a thousand butterflies to move through my stomach. I can do this. With Liam by my side? I can do anything.

“Good.” He kisses me, hard and crushing. “Now, hold that thought.”

He takes a step back, my arms annoyed by the lack of touch when he starts to redo his buttons.

“What? Why?”

“Because Cristina is walking around our yacht as we speak. We need a plan.”

“Okay, so what do you suggest?”

“I don’t know.” He grabs my hand. “But let’s find Callie and Kane first.”

CRISTINA

TWO YEARS AGO

The cold drift of the air conditioning makes my skin shiver as I walk into the St. Regis. The brisk air inside is a slight attack on my senses after I walked the last two blocks in the May warmth that unexpectedly heated up the city over the last few days. You can see it everywhere, how everyone is getting completely into summer mode, me included. I love summer in the city, simply because it reminds me of the hot summers of Granada and how I would spend the whole season outdoors as a kid if we weren't playing inside the caves. I love the feeling of the sun burning on my skin, warming me from the outside in.

I like the States. I like the endless possibilities this country provides, but I would lie if I'd said I didn't miss my country like a long-lost relative that holds a permanent place in your heart.

Heads are turned as I make my way to the King Cole bar, lifting the corners of my mouth a little as I continue my path. My black hair bobs in waves over my bare shoulders, and I

glance down at my skin-tight black dress that's hugging all my curves in all the right places.

I guess I picked the right outfit.

But who am I kidding? I knew this was the perfect fit to demand some attention the second I enter a room. The perfect dress to grasp every male's eye in the bar without any more effort than strolling through the room.

I take a seat on the bar, assessing the area for any familiar faces, then turn my gaze to the bartender when I can't find any.

"Blue label, please. And make it a double." I grab a twenty-dollar bill from my purse, throwing it on the bar top before I take off my black leather jacket and drape it over the stool next to me. The bar is remotely crowded, like you would expect on an early Friday night. Voices, mostly men, are carried through the area, but with my neck cocked and my ears pricked up, I check if the voice I hope to hear tonight is here yet, but take a deep breath of relief when I can't detect it.

I glance at my watch.

I'm early enough to make this happen smoothly, so there shouldn't be any setbacks.

"Anything else?" the bartender asks, switching the bill with my order.

I shake my head, lifting the glass to my lips. The soft notes brush over my tongue, and I take in all the sweetness of the honey as it slides down my throat.

"I got a date." I flutter my lashes at him, with a coy smile.

He looks young, not a day older than twenty-one, but he holds himself with a confidence that sells his entire stance, and I can't help respecting him for it. The mischief in his brown eyes, holding my attention with ease. Normally, I wouldn't waste a second of my time with someone like a fucking bartender, but my gut is telling me I'll be sitting here for a while, so I might as well make the most of it.

“Damn, girl. And here I thought I might actually stand a chance.”

Oh, mierda. I resist the urge to roll my eyes at his puppy behavior and instead conjure a teasing grin that is received with a lick of his lips.

“Could still be the case. I haven't met my date yet.”

“It's a blind date?” His blonde eyebrows lift, a sudden challenge etched in his expression.

I hum, taking another sip of my drink as I slowly draw with my finger on the wooden surface. My head is slightly tilted as he rests his elbows on the bar top, moving his juvenile face closer to mine, and my smile widens even though I keep my lips pressed together.

He's just a boy, but I still enjoy how easily he's already eating from the palm of my hand.

I love the hold I have on most men. How I can lure them in with a small flutter of my lashes, an innocent glance, and a sweet smile. They assume they are the stronger species of humans, but really, they are the weakest. They are so quickly

distracted by the female assets that they don't even know they are being manipulated in any kind of way. Tell them what they want to hear, and you can get almost anything you want. I learned that when I was young and Junior would send me out to distract the shop owner in our little community so he could raid the store with as much as he could carry. I was seven. He was ten. We were the little *bribones*, rascals, until we grew up and the town understood we were the children of the Reyes brother in every way, quickly following the path our fathers carved out for us. Junior was trained to eventually take over, and the older I got, the more I've been using my feminine skills to get whatever I wanted from any human with a dick hanging between his legs in order to keep the family business running smoothly.

“Are you nervous?” bartender boy questions.

“A little.” *Not one fucking bit.* Nerves are for the weak. The ones without a plan and a spine. “I mean, wouldn't you be? What if he is a complete *pendejo*?”

“I hope he is.”

I throw him a fake shocked expression. “That's not nice.”

“I don't care.” He shrugs, straightening his back before he shoots me a wink. “Especially if that means I get to take you out after my shift.”

Smooth boy. Little does he know he wouldn't stand a chance against me. Not in life, and certainly not between the sheets.

“I don’t think you have anything to worry about, though. I mean, look at you.” He waves his hand over the length of my body. “No guy in his right mind is going to stand up a girl that looks like *this*.”

“What is *this*, exactly?” I wonder, amused.

“Hot as sin.” He blurts out the words with a passion, covering his mouth with his fist. “An exotic beauty. You’re like a dream come true. Where are you from anyway?”

“I live here. But I’m originally from Spain.”

“Ay, *guapa*.” For some reason, he rocks his hips from left to right, a wide grin cut in his cheeks. I keep my smile in check, though inwardly, I’m rolling my eyes at the dumbass.

He doesn’t lack any confidence, I’ll give him that. But no matter how good he might know to use his adolescent dick, there is no chance in hell I’ll ever be riding it. I need a little more than that. You know, like an adult body.

“I bet that’s the only Spanish word you know, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, pretty much.” He smirks.

“How do you end up at St. Regis?” I’m curious because if he’s working here for female attention, he’ll probably come up empty-handed or he has a serious thing for cougars. This is not the place your typical twenty-one-year-old hangs out on a Friday night.

I can see him working as a promoter, charming the girls on the street to come to any club in the city. But instead, he’s working at one of the most prestigious hotels in New York.

“The pay is better than any other bar in the city and the tips are *grande*.” He expands his arms until they can’t go any farther. “Hey, hear that! Another Spanish word.”

I blink for a brief moment, then recover my stance and smile sweetly, even though my bones are filled with annoyance at his lame joke. I swear half of the human population is *stupido* and over the years, I’ve created a severe lack of patience for it.

“Ah, so you’re charming me for tips?” I ask, right before someone else demands his attention on the other side of the bar.

“Definitely, but I’d rather get that date,” he says, as if I agreed to any date in the first place. Another wink comes my way, and I fake a chuckle at his abrasiveness with little appreciation. I like people who are bold and aren’t afraid to go after what they want. Life isn’t going to hand you out anything. You need to take it and destroy anything that tries to come between. “What’s your name?”

“Cristina.”

He extends his hand and I grab it as I keep my gaze fixed on his charming smirk.

“Nice to meet you, Cristina. I’m Bart.”

I nurse my drink for at least another forty-five minutes, my gaze flicking between Bart and watching him work as I let time slide away until finally, I hear a loud, familiar voice thundering out a laugh behind me.

Right on time.

It's not directly next to me, but loud enough for me to twist my body on the stool to see where it comes from. Running my tongue along my teeth with satisfaction, I try to keep my smile hidden as Liam Carrillo comes into my peripheral. I wait a few seconds until he's aware of my presence, then I turn my head back to the bar, before I sigh dramatically when Bart points to my empty glass to keep up my shield of indifference.

“You want another one?”

“I don't know. I think he might not be coming.” I pout, my gaze fixed on my empty glass, like a heartbroken girl, while I patiently wait for the man of the night to join the party. “I guess he really was an asshole.”

It's one of the things I learned at an early age. We all want what we can't have. I only have to feign some level of disinterest and men will come to me like bees to honey. But give them a sprinkle of your attention and they will be bored within minutes. It's why I know exactly how this night is going to play out.

“A very dumb one,” Bart offers, then takes my empty glass from the bar. “Come on, one more so you can decide if you're going to wait for my shift to be over or go home.” You have to appreciate his persistence and maybe, just maybe, he's making it tempting to get myself a little boy toy for the night.

He's ballsy. I like it. But sorry, babe, not in my plans for tonight.

“This must be fate.” The deep grumble of words purrs my insides alive, just because I’m getting what I want without him even realizing it. I purposely wait a few seconds before I let my head rear to the voice that’s now sounding fairly close to me.

I fix an inquiring expression on my features as they hit Liam Carrillo’s deep blue eyes. They are dark indigo, like the depths of the ocean, the blue popping even more with his dark blonde hair that’s perfectly styled. He’s a handsome man, I can’t deny that. But a little too slick for my taste. I want my men, rough. With rugged hands and vicious glares, who aren’t afraid to choke me when they drive their dicks inside of me for my pleasure.

Liam Carrillo looks like a successful businessman, one that doesn’t take no for an answer when it comes to a deal, and I heard he even doesn’t mind blowing a bullet through your head if you try to defy him, contrary to his little brother, Kane, who is a fan of torturing and maiming his victims. But after some deep investigation into the oldest Carrillo’s sexual interests, he’s not exactly someone who will ask you to think outside of the box.

And I happen to live outside the box.

“You believe in fate?” I ask, a little contempt in my voice.

Fate is for people who are too scared to take action and decide their future will be what they want it to be, but I bite my tongue. As much as I’m sure shutting him out completely will only add to his desire, I want to keep him a little bit

motivated. Arguing about him right off the bat isn't going to do that.

“Two times in one week? I believe that is a sign that you should let me take you on a date.”

“Because you ran into me in a hotel bar?” I cock an eyebrow while he holds my gaze with a smirk that matches Bartender Bart's. In fact, he could be the third Carrillo brother if they had a long-lost relative strolling around somewhere.

They don't. Thank fuck for me, because two of them is already enough for this world.

“I never come here, but the one time I do, I run into the girl who hasn't left my mind in the last few days.”

“I hardly doubt that.”

“It's true. Your rejection cut me deeply.”

“You're Liam Carrillo. You'll survive.”

“Have you been asking around about me?” he asks when he notices how I pronounce his name like it holds some value.

“Maybe.”

“Hey, asshole. You're late,” Bart interrupts him with a scowl, and I sit up straight, surprised by the boldness of this kid. Clearly, he doesn't know who he's talking to, unlike at least half of the people in his bar. A snicker travels out of my mouth before I shake my head.

“This is *not* my blind date.”

“You’re waiting for a blind date?” Liam’s eyebrows glue together, a hint of possession in his voice as he crowds my aura some more, catching a whiff of his fresh cologne.

So easy.

“I was, but I think I’m heading home now.”

“Better luck next time, babe,” Bart offers. His features soften now that his attention is set on me.

I can feel Liam’s gaze drilling into my side as he volleys his head between Bart and I, probably trying to figure out what the relationship is. Bartender and patron, nothing more. But let’s keep that information to ourselves for a moment.

After all, a jealous Liam Carrillo will probably give me more than a turned down one.

These alpha males don’t do well with rejection, but they certainly can’t handle when they think another man is trying to snake away their next conquest. Although, it is a little pathetic he thinks this young kid actually stands a chance.

He must not have as much confidence as he radiates when entering a room.

“I fucking hope so, because I’m not getting any younger.” I sigh. “I just want a man who wants to be my best friend, you know? Someone to cuddle at night, have some babies.”

“A white picket fence and a dog?” Bart reads my mind. Or at least the headspin I’m going for. There’s not a chance in hell I will ever have some kids running around. Or a dog.

They are disgusting. Both of them.

“Yeah, is that so much to ask?”

“You’ll find it, I’m sure,” Bart replies.

Liam shifts next to me, and I expect him to cut off the conversation, but his intense stare just keeps burning through my skin. I ignore it as if my life depends on it. It’s loaded, though. I imagine him holding back to keep his mouth shut, as I am to give him a glare to keep up my wall of disregard.

“You sure you don’t want to wait until my shift is done?”
Bart gives it one last shot.

Sorry, kid. You’re not the one I’m here for.

I rummage in my purse for my wallet, then hand Bart a few bills. “Thank you, but I’m going to call it a night.”

“You sure?” Bart gives me a final hopeful glance and when I nod with my smile still in place, he pretends to take off his hat for me. “It was a pleasure to meet you, *Cristina.*”

I slide off my stool, pulling my jacket from the other to put it on, giving the broody man next to me a side glance. Liam looks amused yet irritated at the same time before his cheeks expand, showing his white teeth.

“So, it’s Cristina.” My name rolls off his tongue like it’s a delicacy, and I roll my eyes as if I’m bothered with the fact that he now knows my name.

“There goes my plan to stay anonymous for you.”

With a cocky grin, he rests his back against the bar. “But why would you want to stay anonymous for me?”

“Because, unlike me, you gave me your name. It doesn’t take long to find out what your last name means in this city. I thank you for your interest, but I’d like to stay out of trouble.”

I set my feet in motion to stroll past him, but he grabs my elbow and I hold still.

His presence in my personal space clogs my organs, the response of my body being nothing more than the desire to break his arm, but I tug it away.

“I think you’re lying. I think you love trouble,” he says.

“I *think* you don’t know me,” I scold, shifting my head so I can look at him.

Our faces are only a few inches apart, his gaze dropping down to my lips, and I intentionally part them to hold his attention. I always enjoy this push and pull. The part where I pretend I’m not interested, only to have them chasing me like a bunny on a hunt day.

Like I said, so easy.

“I know,” he concedes, his voice low and demanding. “But I’d like to change that.”

Of course he does.

“Thank you.” I smile. “But I have to decline.” I softly tug my arm loose, then count the steps as I set my heels in front of the other. A smug feeling settles on my chest, my inner self

squealing in delight. It's like a drug, giving my head a sense of euphoria that isn't comparable to anything else. There is nothing more satisfactory than knowing a man wants you in every way possible. Enough for them to forget about reason, only focused on settling the lust you've ignited inside of them.

I have a feeling the bad boy in the city wants me exactly like that.

When I reach the pavement, I make big strides to walk the few blocks to where I need to be, but to no one's surprise, I halt when my name is called out behind me.

Jackpot.

"Yes?" I turn around, surprise written on my face.

Liam charges his body toward me with big steps. His shoulders are broad, the fabric of his suit complementing his physique, looking intimidating if you're on his bad side. But he doesn't scare me, nor does he try to scare me, for that matter. He just wants to hold my attention, pinning me down with his intense stare, and he succeeds.

Because I want him to.

"Have dinner with me."

I keep quiet, pretending to think over his request.

"I want to get to know you. Let me show you I'm not just the man everyone paints me to be."

"You're not a good man."

“I’m not,” he admits. “But only to people who deserve it. Give me a shot.” There is a desire in his eyes that’s not just sexual, lifting my chest with a light and giddy feeling.

“Please.”

“Why?” I ask, not willing to give it to him this easily. I want to see just how much Liam Carrillo will work for it. How much he will show his hand without even knowing.

He searches my face as if he’s contemplating how much he wants to share with me.

“Because I think the things we want in life are not that far off from each other.”

Pretty damn much, I see.

I narrow my eyes at him, showing him an expression of confusion.

“What makes you think you can give me what I want?”

This time, the ghost of a smile in the corner of his stubbled jaw is a little cocky, but he still manages to keep his pragmatic stance in check, showing the powerful man that he is while still expressing his vulnerability.

I did my research. He’s not the scary one out of the Carrillo brothers. He’s the most sensible, but that doesn’t make him any less lethal. But luckily for me, he just showed me how much I’m up for the task. Proving just how to penetrate the usually impenetrable armor that allows him to control the underground in this western world.

“Because I know it’s what I *want*.”

World domination? Maybe. Probably not what he’s talking about since he already has that.

For now.

“Fine.” I give in with a big huff. “Dinner. But don’t get your hopes up.”

I take a step back to break loose from his energy, then nudge my chin at him.

“Have a good night, Liam.”

“Wait, how do I reach you?”

I volley a mischievous grin his way, walking backward as my heels continue to tap the curb. “You’re a smart man. You figure it out.”

Without waiting for his reply, I turn my back toward him, my hips waving from left to right with the confidence that I know has him staring at my ass. I smile at my victory at this turn of events.

“I’m going to get that date, Cristina,” he calls out to my back.

Oh, I know, Mr. Carrillo. Can’t freaking wait.

“Just let me know when and where!” I chuckle without giving him a second glance. I feel his eyes cutting through my back for a long time until I reach the safety of the next block to turn left, sucking in a deep breath to drop my stance.

The giddy feeling that makes my stomach flutter makes it hard not to squeal, completely delighted about how easy this next step was. I thought it might take me a little while longer, and I even figured he might not notice me.

But it all went the way I told Junior it would. I guess I made a pretty good estimate of what makes Liam Carillo tick.

With my smile still in check, I continue my way down Fifth Avenue, waiting for the cathedral to come into sight. I notice the black sedan parked in front of the immense building, and I turn around to quickly scan the street behind me before I open the door and hop into the back.

Settling into the leather seats, I wave away the curtain of smoke that hits me in the face.

“*Joder*, Junior. Couldn’t you at least crack a goddamn window?”

Like the asshole that he is, he just smirks, blowing out another cloud of smoke my way.

“Hey, Crissy.”

I let my shoulders hang with a roll of my eyes, not willing to put in the energy to plant my fist in his side at his annoying behavior. Resting my head as the car takes off, I watch the street pass by from the safety of the tinted glass.

“How did it go?” Junior switches to Spanish like he always does, too lazy to perfect his English like me, but stubborn as I am, I reply in English.

“Like a well-oiled machine.” I turn my head toward him, instantly frowning at his outfit. “What the hell are you wearing?”

“¿*Que?* It’s a suit. What’s wrong with a suit?” He glances down at his three-piece suit, and I just hold still at the black man bun on top of his head.

“*Nada.* Except the fact that you don’t wear a suit, *ever.* And it looks a bit weird with your man bun sitting on your head like a turd.”

“A turd?” He watches me, amused. “*Joder,* you’re becoming a true Americana.”

“*Callarse!*” I shush him, not appreciating his assumptions. “I’m not American. I’m just playing the part so we can keep doing what we’re doing, my *dulce primito.*”

“*Primito?* I’m older than you are, Cris. There is nothing little about me. Or sweet, for that matter.”

That’s an understatement. It wouldn’t surprise me if the devil is looking at Junior Reyes to perfect his game.

“Don’t I know it.” I mockingly roll my eyes. “Where are we going that has you dressed like you’re Scarface?”

“We have some meetings with potential clients that have expressed interest in switching from the Carrillo brothers to a new supplier.”

“Oh, goody.” I cock my head, giving him a stern expression. “I’m not going to sit back and look pretty. We’re in this together.” Or as long as I fucking need him anyway.

“*¡Claro!* You get a seat on the table, I promise.”

“Good.” I know Junior is the one who’s officially taking over from Frank, his father, and my uncle, but when they asked me to join the deeper side of family business, I made it perfectly clear I wasn’t going to be anyone’s sidekick. I want a leading role or I’ll just start my own business. I’ve been recruiting girls for long enough and there is no way in hell I’m taking orders from any man, not even Junior. I want to call the shots, sitting on top like the boss I was meant to be.

“We have to be careful in this meeting, though. We don’t want anyone leaking that we’re after the Carrillo connections just yet. Gotta lay low, but test the waters a bit.” His dark eyes give me a knowing look, as if I’m not aware of what is at stake.

“I know, Junior. I’m not stupid.” We made the plan together. In fact, I set up most of the line and allowed him to feed it to his father so he would see how this could benefit us. He agreed, but he told us to arrange it ourselves, giving us a way to show our worth for the future.

“So, we’re on track with your new *primo*?”

“As a matter of fact, we are. It won’t be long before I indeed have a new *boyfriend* eating from the palm of my hand.”

He gags.

“What? This was part of the plan.”

“*Si, yo se.* But that doesn’t mean I have to like it. You’re my *primita*. I don’t want his filthy paws all over your body.”

You and me both.

“It’s just a body.” I shrug. Sex is great, but it also doesn’t mean shit to me, and if it gets me what I want, I’ll happily use my body to get there. “Just focus on the endgame. It will all work out.”

“It can’t be that easy, Cristina.” There is a reprimanding tone in Junior’s voice that I’m not appreciating, and I snap my glaring expression his way. “This is Liam Carrillo. Not to mention that pitbull little brother of his.”

“It never is, but I have this under control. You can take a shot at it if you don’t believe me?”

“No, I know you do. I’m just saying. These men are powerful. Don’t let him get any control over you. Don’t let him get under your skin.”

The worried look Junior shows softens my harsh features. It’s moving, really, since Junior doesn’t care for anyone in the world other than himself, but every now and then, he graces me with the small level of affection. Other than himself, I’m convinced I’m his favorite person, all rooted in the undeniable bond we share. When growing up, it sometimes confused me that we were thick and thieves, but he had not even some form of a relationship with his little sister, Callie, other than terrorizing the shit out of her.

After I found out the truth about our family, I realized that might be exactly why Junior and I have always been close. But it also gave me a lot of resentment, considering the house I grew up in. Junior was the golden boy of Frank. I was the bad

daughter of Miguel. He got everything he wanted. I got beaten for breathing. Junior tried to protect me from my father's wrath, but he couldn't be around the entire time. He couldn't see all the ugliness hidden underneath the surface.

Yeah, Junior got the better end of the deal.

I grab his hand, his dark gaze finding mine. It's like looking into a mirror, his dark eyes the same color as mine, our hair black like a raven. "There is no man who can ever get under my skin, Junior. You know that." It's not even a bluff or wishful thinking. I'll be dead before I let anyone get inside my head like that.

"I know, just checking. I don't want those *pendejos* corrupting my family."

"Don't worry. I got this." Those Carrillo brothers walk around like they are invincible, but they have another thing coming. They might not know yet, but within a few months and with a little investment from my side, we will control the Carrillo empire without anyone brave enough to stop us.

LIAM

PRESENT DAY

I drag Gen behind me, keeping her close because I have no desire to run into Cristina. Ever again. But certainly not today.

I felt my heart almost jump out of my chest when I saw the face I've been trained to hate for so long. I want to hurt her, seeing red until I locked eyes with the fear in Gen's. I hated that more than I could ever hate Cristina. It gutted me, sinking my organs straight to my heels.

I resent the fact that Cristina has our backs against the wall, and we need to get back the upper hand. As soon as possible.

With big strides, I march us into the conference room, interrupting Callie and Kane, whose eyes fly to ours in a snap second. There is distress on Callie's freckled face, even though she keeps her features mostly in check, her hands on her stomach, as if she's soothing her unborn child, though she's anything but showing yet. My brother, however? Well, that's a whole different story. He's glaring into the room like he's about to burst out of his skin, the veins in his neck all pumped up from anger.

“She needs to fucking go,” I blurt, letting go of Gen’s hand so I can shut the door. I can’t put it any other way. I don’t care how many favors we need to call in to get Babushka back without trading anything with that she-devil, but whatever happens, she needs to be removed from our lives. The sooner, the better. Preferably six feet under.

“She needs to fucking die!” Kane adds, his temper on full display.

“Not if it puts Babushka in danger!” Callie rebukes while Imogen takes a seat on one of the white leather chairs around the big table. “We are not putting her in danger. She’s all the family I have left, Kane.” The last sentence leaves her soft pink lips a little pleading, and I can instantly see my brother melt under her gaze. A hot breath deflates his broad chest, and he sits at the head of the table, Callie and I following his move until all four of us are all seated.

“I know, baby girl. We won’t let anything happen to your grandmother,” Kane offers.

“Thank you.”

“Where is Jeremy?” I ask when I can’t find him.

“Shutting down the boat and making sure this place isn’t flooded with the biggest criminals in Europe in the next thirty minutes. The last thing we need is to let Cristina make this into a networking event,” Callie explains.

“So,” Gen starts, her blue eyes volleying between the three of us with expectation. “*What* are we going to do, though?”

“Comply.” The word leaves a bad taste in my mouth, but until we have a better plan, there isn’t really any other option.

“Yeah, I’m not on board with that,” Kane says flatly.

“It’s far from ideal, I know that.” I lock eyes with my brother’s stern expression. “Trust me, it’s the last thing I want to do, but we don’t have any other option until we find Babushka.”

“We can’t trust *her*.” There is judgment in Imogen’s eyes as if there is something unspoken aimed at me. It creates a painful crack in my torso, and I give her a deep frown.

“I will never trust her ever again. I want her gone just as much as any of you do.” My voice is a tad clipped, even though I try to give her a comforting smile, but her gaze falls to the tabletop. A bad feeling creeps up my spine, making it impossible to fixate my focus anywhere but on Imogen’s face.

She doesn’t trust me.

She thinks Cristina can still get a hold of me.

“Okay, so we need the Wolfes. Reign might be able to trace Cristina’s steps and find out where she’s hiding Babushka,” Kane suggests. His gaze is set on mine, burning a hole into my head, but I can’t tear my eyes away from Imogen, willing her to look at me and tell me I’m wrong. That I’m misreading this and that she knows I wouldn’t ever get involved with Cristina ever again. In any kind of way.

Kane clears his throat, and I finally look up at him.

“Yeah, that sounds like a solid plan,” I agree, then look at Callie. “Besides, it’s you. He will do anything for you. But Cristina can’t know we are contacting Reign or she’ll know we’re trying to find your grandmother behind her back. That will take out the deal and put any of us at risk. We can’t have that.”

“What about the diamond?” Imogen asks, mainly to Kane and Callie, still avoiding my glances that come her way.

“We need to know if it’s true, either way. If not to give her, then for anyone else can come for it if they find out it’s linked to the Reyes family. The world doesn’t know Callie is not a born Reyes. They will come for her to get to the diamond,” Kane explains.

“Yeah, we need to find out if what Cristina told us is true and make sure we know where it is.” Callie conjures a sarcastic smile on her cheeks. “Before I have to fight off any other ambitious treasure hunters that aren’t my cousin.”

“That’s no joke, Callie.” Kane scowls. “You’re pregnant now. I’m not risking your safety. You’re staying under my watch twenty-four-seven. And Cristina can’t know. It will make you even more valuable for her, knowing there is another life she can endanger for leverage.”

“I can still defend myself,” she scoffs.

“He’s right, though, Callie. We can’t let the world know you’re pregnant just yet, and certainly not Cristina. You’re the hotheaded wife of Kane Carrillo. It gives you a certain level of respect. I’m not as good at this whole shit as you guys are, but

I'm pretty sure there will be people who will see it as a weakness and will try to poke whenever they can." Gen's reply makes me proud, seeing the strong woman that she doesn't realize she is.

"Exactly," Kane agrees, then leans on the surface to point his index at his wife. "You're not leaving my sight. *Ever.*"

Callie volleys a look between us all, finally stopping at me with a hopeful glint.

"Liam?"

"Don't look at me, Callie. I know I'd do the same if you were my wife." If this was Imogen who was being at risk, I'd be tempted to lock her in the cell we once kept Callie in and keep the key in my pocket just to make sure she was saved from Cristina's grasp. But the world doesn't work like that.

I can't help but glance at Imogen, looking for what's going on in her mind. There is fatigue etching her pretty eyes, her breathing heavy, as if she has a hard time keeping up with the conversation. I know she's somewhere else in her head, probably worried about how the next few weeks are going to be stressful with Cristina strolling into her life. I want to take away her worries, but I know it has to wait until we're alone.

Grinding my teeth together, I push away the deep need to fix this right here and right now, letting her know that whatever she's thinking, it's not true. But I know she won't appreciate me calling her out in front of Callie and Kane. Not after the night she just had.

“Fine.” Callie throws her hands in the air. “But that doesn’t mean you get to cut me out of anything. We’re in this together. *All of us.*” The last words are aimed at Kane, but she still glances around the table.

“I agree,” Gen suddenly adds, her chin high. “I know I haven’t been involved with most of the business you do. But I don’t want to sit this one out. I want to participate. I’m not going to sit by and hope for the best while that bitch is trying to terrorize us.” The fierceness in her voice is surprising, but instantly turns me on. Finally, her eyes find mine with fire, staring back at me with a warning. One that silently tells me to back off and not dare to fuck this up for her, or exclude her while claiming to want to keep her safe. An unnecessary warning, because I know my girl is capable of far more than she knows herself.

“We’re all in this together,” I concede, my eyes beaming from the small smile she finally gives me while Kane complies with a grunt.

“Okay, now that we’re all on the same page. How are we going to defeat the bitch in the meantime?”

“You need to find out if there is any truth to her story. We need to see Frank’s lawyer and get through his belongings,” Kane clarifies.

His explanation forms a dreadful expression on Callie’s cheeks.

“You mean go to Granada?”

“Yup.”

“I’m not going to Granada with Cristina. I don’t know what other skeletons my father was hiding, and I sure as fuck don’t want to share them with her. Good or bad.”

“No, we take a team and go to Seville. Cristina can stay here.”

That causes Imogen to sit up straight with wide eyes. “What?”

“You want to leave her here? With Genny and Liam?” Callie cocks an eyebrow, and I briefly close my eyes at the disaster I can already see playing out.

It’s not good. It’s not even salvageable. It will probably end with me strangling Cristina and Imogen walking on eggshells until I do.

“It will be good for them to keep an eye on her, make sure she isn’t up to something. At least if she’s here, we know where she is.”

“She’s gonna torment the hell out of Liam,” Callie argues. “And Genny.”

“He can take it.” Kane locks his blues with mine, his eyebrows lifting a little in a dare before he moves them to Imogen. “And so can Gen.”

When she rears her head to meet his gaze, he shoots her a comforting smile that warms my chest. I like that Kane wants to give her the feeling that she’s competent. What I don’t like is him leaving us with that wicked witch of the Mediterranean.

“Can you?” Callie challenges. It’s not even her trying to be rude. But she’s genuinely asking if I’m up for it, and I can’t blame her. I did try to strangle her and all, caused by a wave of anger that was rooted by the same woman we are now inviting into our home.

“Are you doubting me, Red?”

She shrugs. “Not necessarily doubting you, I just don’t want her to be able to hurt you any more than she already did.”

Fair enough.

“The only way Cristina Reyes can ever hurt me is by hurting the people I love.” I can feel Gen giving me a side glance, but she doesn’t turn her head my way, pissing me off some more. “I will never let that happen.”

Callie holds my gaze for a few moments, then nods in agreement before she fixes her expression on Gen. “What about you, Genny? She’s gonna try to piss you off.”

“I know.”

“Doing her best to create a wedge between you two.” Callie flips her attention between the two of us.

“I know,” Gen whispers, lifting her eyes to Callie with a determination that has satisfaction showering me, then twists her attention to me. “She can try.” I release a breath from my lungs that’s painful, but also filled with relief. “I can handle it. I can handle *her*.”

I can feel her annoyed stance still directed at me, but the pride I’m feeling by hearing her words only lifts my cheeks

wider with every second. I love how she's finding the confidence inside herself to know she can handle Cristina. That she can take her.

"I know you can." Callie smiles, her proud look finding mine. "Okay, so Kane and I will take a small team and head to Seville and see what we can find."

"Yes." I nod. "Then you'll fly to Boston and see what Reign can find out."

"While the two of you will keep Cristina on this yacht and make sure she's exactly where we want her to be until we have found a way to get the diamond or Babushka back. Whatever comes first," Kane says.

"Can't we just lock Cristina somewhere on the yacht?" I half joke.

"She probably has someone with Babushka she needs to check in with. It would mean putting her at risk if we take Cristina captive."

"Yeah, I figured. It was worth a try, though."

"We can always just handcuff her to the deck." Imogen shrugs, a playfulness in her eyes.

I snicker, but Kane gives both of us a slight scowl. "As much as I agree with the two of you, Callie is right."

"Relax, Kane," Gen says. "I'm joking. I would never do anything that can risk Babushka's safety. One can dream, though."

“Trust me, Gen.” Kane leans forward, a wicked grin on his expression. “At some point, it won’t be a joke anymore, and we can all live out our frustration on that little witch. I promise you.”

She laughs at that, a comfortable energy surrounding the two of them. “I’m gonna hold you to that, Carrillo.”

“That’s fine.”

“Look what the two of you are doing.” Callie gives Kane and I glare with her arms crossed in front of her chest. “You’re totally corrupting my girl over here.”

“First off, Red.” I give her a cocky grin. “She’s *my* girl. Secondly, we didn’t corrupt her. We just let her find her true self.”

We all laugh at that, Imogen sending me a grateful look that erases any upset I felt moments earlier.

“Okay,” Callie glances between the three of us. “I guess Kane and I got a plane to catch.”



I brief the team and set up the logistics with Jeremy before I stroll around the yacht back to my suit to find Imogen. Her sweet fragrance welcomes me the second my feet hit the fluffy carpeting of the room, trailing me toward her like a sniffer dog until I find her washing her face in the bathroom.

“Hey, baby.” I waste no time to hold her, covering her back with my chest as I dive my nose into her neck.

“Hey.”

It’s not an annoyed *hey*, but it’s not a happy one either. It shows that same hesitation and insecurity she gave me in the conference room.

With a groan, I grab her hips and spin her to face me. “What was that?”

“What?” Her blue eyes peer up at me with innocence, the purity of her soul reflecting under the artificial light.

“You don’t trust me.”

“Liam—”

“You think I still have feelings for Cristina,” I cut her off.

An intense scowl sets the skin around her eyes. “No,” she barks with force, her blues turning darker. “That is not true.”

“Then what is it?” I know there is something, because gone is that vibrant girl I fucked in the pantry this afternoon. This girl is... lost. Like now that there is another pawn in the game, she needs to find her place again. But there is only one place for her on this board.

She’s the motherfucking queen.

“I’m not happy Cristina is here, Liam.”

“Neither am I,” I counter. “But I can see that’s not the only thing on your mind.” I reach my hand up to brush my thumb along her cheek, trying to have patience with her even though I want to scream at her to tell me what’s wrong. Not because

I'm angry, but because I can't stand seeing her walk around with a dimmed light.

“What is it, Gen?” I press, my tone soft and encouraging.

“I trust *you*. But I don't trust *her*.” Her sigh is pregnant. We all have our history with Cristina Reyes and none of it is rainbows and unicorns. “I don't want her around me. And I certainly don't want her around you, because I know she'll be trying to mess with your head.”

“She can't. Not anymore.”

“I know that.” The look in her eyes is genuine. “She hurt you too much to make you doubt her intentions ever again. But I hate the fact that she's going to try. That she's going to try to create tension between us because you know it will happen. She lives for that shit. You can see it in that shit-eating grin she has plastered on her face.”

“I know.”

“Well, I don't want that. I don't want her bursting my bubble!” She sounds more frustrated this time and her eyes turn glossy.

I slam her against my chest, cupping the back of her head as I rest my chin on top of her blonde hair. Her scent has my eyes shutting while I find the words I need.

“Hey, it's gonna be okay. She can't burst our bubble because it's ours. The only ones who can burst it are you and me. And I sure as fuck am not going to. Are you?” I take her face in my hands quick enough to see the chuckle falling from her lips.

“No.”

“Good.” I smile. “She can’t touch us, baby. She can’t touch *me*. And I will never let her touch you.”

Her eyes speak unspoken words before she asks in barely a whisper, “Are you sure?”

“I’ve never been so sure in my life. Do you want to know why?” She hums. “I know Callie, Kane, and even you, are all worried that Cristina will be able to pull me into her spell again. I don’t like it, but I can’t blame ya’ll. The witch had me in her grasp deep. But the reason that will never happen again?” I pause, making sure I have her full attention. “Is *you*.”

There is a slight lift of her eyebrows as her eyes search mine.

“When I look at you, I can’t even understand why I ever liked anything about Cristina. She’s nothing compared to you, in any kind of way. She’s everything you’re not, and I fell in love with you, Imogen Payne. And only you. You are my ray of sunshine on any given day, and she is nothing more than a thunderstorm I will always try to avoid. You are *it* for me.”

Her lashes flutter shut as if she’s taking in the words with every fiber of her being. Then, as my gaze roves over her every feature, I watch her smile grow wide, reaching ear to ear as she opens her eyes. And she says the words that have my worries melting away, even if only temporarily.

“I fell in love with you too.”

“I mean it, baby. She showed me everything she can never give me because my benchmark is now set to unreachable expectations. No one will ever be able to surpass you. Once you’ve seen true beauty, it’s that much easier to discover the ugliness. And you, my sweet girl, are nothing less than a goddess.”

“Oh, please,” she huffs, her smile still in place. I grab her hips and twist us both in one swift move as I set her butt on the sink. Stepping between her legs, I grab her neck with a possessive grip.

“You are gorgeous, Imogen Payne. In every fucking way possible. From deep in your heart, to your eyes that I could stare into all day. It will be a cold day in hell before I’ll ever let you go. You are mine. And I don’t want anyone else.”

The kiss that follows is urgent, filled with longing, and I’m content when I feel her hands snake to the small of my back as she moans in my mouth.

“I don’t want anyone else either,” she whispers against my lips. Our tongues tease each other in small strokes, our breaths mixed as one. “You’re the only one I want.”

“I better be.” I softly bite her lower lip. “Because I will start amputating the hands of anyone who dares to touch you.”

“Liam.” She pulls back, her eyes widening to show the whites. “You sound like Kane.”

Laughter bubbles from my belly while I keep her tightly pressed against my body. “Just because my little brother is the

violent one doesn't mean I'm the sweet one. Who do you think taught him everything?"

"YouTube?"

"That too." I laugh, biting her neck, resulting in a squeal that makes my stomach flutter. I love hearing her laugh, and I can feel her loaded energy dissolving under my hands. It gives me a sense of pride, knowing I can do that. That I'm important enough to her to be able to change her demeanor. I press another kiss to her lips, then hold her face so I can keep our eyes locked.

"I mean it, though."

"What? That you'll kill anyone who touches me?" she says like a smartass.

"Yes, that too. But no, not what I was talking about. I mean, about you and me. I want it all with you, Gen. You're my future. I want to move in with you as soon as we fix this shit. I want to build a life. I want to help you get that dream of your own business. I want to support you in whatever goals you set for yourself. And eventually"—I wait tentatively, wondering if this is maybe too soon, but it's been resting on my tongue for a while now, and I don't think I can prevent it from slipping out any longer—"I want you to have my babies." Her pupils dilate, but she's beaming in a way that urges me to keep going. "I want you to be the mother of my kids."

"Kids? As in plural?"

"Yeah, four."

“Four?” she screeches.

“Three.”

She shakes her head. “You forget I have to push these kids out. Two, *maybe* three.”

“That’s fine. Two was my aim anyway.”

“But you just said four!” She swats my chest, a lighthearted smile coming my way.

“Don’t you get it, babe? This was a negotiation. You always gotta aim high, so you get to the point you actually want to be.”

“That’s evil!” She laughs, indignant.

“It’s how the world works.”

“It’s bullshit.” We both laugh, and I press a kiss to her forehead. My lips linger there until she grows quiet, letting the air escape her lungs with something that I can only interpret as satisfaction.

“I want that too,” she clarifies, her head facing mine again. “Kids with you. A life. A future. I want it all, and I’m just worried something will go wrong. Cristina tried to kill you once. What if she will try again?”

“She won’t. But if she does try, it’s a good thing you know how to fight now.”

“That’s not funny!” She scowls with a laugh, thinking I’m joking. I’m dead serious, though. Yes, Cristina tricked me. But this time, it’s not just me she’s up against. It’s all four of us.

Kane and I are dangerous together, lethal in any way and form. But the four of us working as a team? We're indestructible.

"I mean it. Now, she's not just fighting me. She's fighting you. She's fighting Callie. She's fighting Kane *and* me. The four of us together are smarter than she is," I say in a matter-of-fact tone. "She has no clue what she's gotten herself into."

Gen stares back at me, thinking over my words for a few beats.

"We're in this together," she says, though it sounds like she's saying that more to herself than to me.

"We're in this together," I repeat.

"Promise?"

There is hope in her expression, and I know she still doesn't fully believe it. But I'll take anything I can get, knowing there is truth in every word I'm saying. There is no other outcome out of this situation than putting Cristina where she belongs. Somewhere in an unmarked grave next to Junior.

"I promise." And I seal it with a kiss.

LIAM

TWO YEARS AGO

She was hard to reach. It took me two days to find out what realtor she was working for, and after that, it took me six phone calls to find her assistant to make an appointment. I never got her to the phone personally, but her assistant assured me she was looking forward to it. For forty-eight hours, I've been wondering if she would actually show up, given the fact that she hadn't been easy to approach in general. No, this woman made me work for it, and it only made me want her more. But I was happy to see her leave her office building the minute my driver parked against the curb before she hopped in with a tiny smile.

Her entire appearance isn't as open as I want her to be, as if she's still hesitant about going to dinner with me. But I take her showing up as a win, thinking she just needs a while to really get comfortable around me. After all, I have no idea what she's heard about me, but the fact that she knew my name probably doesn't bode well.

I stare at the exotic woman next to me, mesmerized by her beauty. Her long black hair is braided at the back of her head,

accentuating her slender neck, her taut lips covered in red lipstick like the other times I've seen her. She's wearing a deep red dress, almost the color of blood, the thick fabric hugging her hips like it's glued to her skin. I trail my gaze down her long legs until I reach her black Louboutins, not even a little surprised by her expensive taste in shoes. Giving her one single glance quickly reveals her opulent taste.

"Are you nervous?" I ask as I watch her fumble with her Dior bag.

She smiles, but doesn't meet my eyes. "Maybe a little."

"Hungry?"

Her shoulders slump a fraction with a heavy exhale.

"Starving." She finally turns her head toward me. "So, where are we going? Jean-Bernadine? Tottori? Square Park?"

She blurts out a few of the best restaurants in the city from the top of her head and suddenly, I'm glad I made a reservation for the number one at the moment.

"L'Aranceto," I disclose with a pleased smile. "Although I could do with a burger as well."

A laugh finds its way into the car, mirth etched on her face, but the disdain in the sound is hard to miss. I watch her, amused, even though I wasn't really joking.

"You're serious?" Her eyebrows move to her hairline when she notices she's the only one laughing and a hint of awkwardness passes through the car. I wasn't wrong when I figured she was a woman accustomed to luxury, and the

expression of horror on her face tells me exactly that. Though I'm still surprised. I love myself some fine dining, but I'm definitely not against a burger and some fries either. Maybe a milkshake or two, along with some relaxed conversation to get to know each other. Something less uptight than a five-star restaurant.

"No, I'm kidding." I chuckle, trying to save the moment. I shouldn't have expected anything else. She's not like any other woman. She's sophisticated. Independent. A real boss lady, wanting and demanding nothing less than the very best from everywhere and anywhere around her. I can only appreciate that kind of mindset.

"Oh, great," she huffs. "Because *por un momento*, I thought you were tempted to take me to Wendy's or something."

"I'm guessing you're not a burger person?"

"I'm not a person who likes to eat shit for dinner, *no*."

I swallow, offering her a coy smile. "Fair enough." I appreciate food in all forms. I'm the guy who is willing to eat crickets on the Chinese market before sitting down at a five-star restaurant, but Wendy's is just as high on the list if I'm feeling it. Sometimes I forget some people can't appreciate junk food even as a treat.

She stays quiet, as if she doesn't know what to say anymore. I give her a few side glances, unable to ignore the serious look on her face. It's as if there is a big curtain hanging between us, thin, but not thin enough to break through, translucent but not enough to really see her for who she is.

Like she's somewhere else inside her head.

This is not going the way I expected this to go. I'd expected her to be nervous, but still eager to be here, like any other woman I take to dinner. But instead, she's sitting here like she's being forced by the big bad wolf, just waiting for me to eat her alive.

Don't get me wrong, I want to. Just not in the way I think she's letting her mind wander to. It makes me wonder if I offended her in some kind of way.

"Thank you for coming to dinner," I try to thaw the icy atmosphere.

"You're welcome."

I get a smile from her that seems genuine, but as quickly as she faces me, she turns her head back again. Fully focused on the streets passing by. A defeated feeling creeps its way under my skin. She's a woman in control; I can see that in the way she carries herself, but she's giving me the feeling she doesn't want to be here. But she doesn't seem like the kind of woman that does anything against her own free will.

It tests my patience, because I want her to open up to me and I'm used to taking things without asking, or demanding, what I want. She's a puzzle that I need to crack. A mystery for me to solve, but I have no idea if I need to use full force or a more delicate approach.

Whatever it is... I have the next few hours to figure it out.

A few minutes later, I escort her through the restaurant as we follow the server to our table. My hand is on the small of her back, her vanilla perfume tempting me to brush my nose through her hair while I explore every inch of skin that's now covered by fabric. Even though she had a closed off stance in the car, she now carries herself through the room like she's floating. Her chin up in confidence, grasping everyone's attention without effort as I notice the many men craning their necks to follow her movements.

She's mine, boys.

The restaurant is dimly lit, big chandeliers hanging overhead with a piano player filling the room with a background melody.

I help her into her chair, order a bottle of their finest wine, then sit down across the table with a grin on my face.

She still looks awkward, almost as if she's intimidated, but I'm not completely buying it anymore. There is nothing insecure about this woman. If anything, she's more self-assured than any other woman I've met.

"I feel like you have the advantage here," I start.

"*Por que?*" I narrow my eyes at her use of Spanish, a little confused why she would assume I understand it, even though I do. The basics, that is. Leaning my elbows on the thick tablecloth, I make my shoulders broad, my attention zeroing in on her dark brown eyes.

“Because you know who I am, but I know nothing about you.”

She rests her back against the soft cushion of the chair. Her lashes flutter, a little coy, as if she’s shy. “What do you want to know?”

“Do you have any siblings?”

“No, I’m alone.” Her head shudders on her neck. “I think it’s the main reason I want a big family.”

My eyes widen at her full honesty this early in the conversation, but I can’t help but feel a level of appreciation as well. “You do?”

She shrinks in her seat, an embarrassed flush pinkening her cheeks while she brings her hand to her heart. “Too soon? I’m so sorry. My mother always tells me I’m too direct for my own good. She says I scare people away the moment I open my mouth.”

My heart pounds in my chest, but in a good way. In a way that has me showing her teeth and grabbing one of her hands from across the table.

“I like direct,” I tell her, briefly covering my palm over her delicate fingers to encourage her. They’re so soft, meant to be touched, way too precious to do anything that isn’t of value. I don’t see this woman cleaning the dishes, but with the look shining in her eyes, I can definitely see her as a mother. “You want kids?”

She holds still, her gaze dropping to where I'm touching her hand as if I'm burning through her skin, the discomfort quickly creeping in again, so I let go. When I release her hands, she swallows, a hint of a smile dancing under the chandelier light.

"*Si*, at least four kids. Maybe even a dog or two. It was always quiet growing up." The server lets me taste our wine, before he pours us both a glass and we both take a sip, our eyes staying locked over the rims.

"Do you want a family?" she asks.

"I never really thought about it." That is not completely true. "In my line of work..."

"Right." She takes another sip, disappointed, her eyes scanning the room before she fixes them on me again. "Is it worth it?"

"What is?" Curiosity tilts my head, because she's showing a hint of condescension on her pursed mouth.

"This." She waves her hand around. "The power. Is it worth it all?"

No. Yes. Sometimes. Most of the time. Two years ago, I would've given you a full-hearted yes. But lately I feel like I'm running around in circles, and I don't know why. Something is missing in my life, and I can't figure it out.

"That depends how you look at it. I have everything my heart could desire."

“But is that really true?” Her tone holds just enough judgment to not be offended, but I can still detect her incomprehension. “Isn’t there something else you’d want more than power?”

“Like what?”

She holds still, a reluctant look on her face. “Love?”

I hold her gaze, keeping my lips pressed together.

“I don’t know.” She takes another sip, softly shaking her head, then shrugs her shoulders, seemingly disappointed about my lack of an answer. “I guess we just have different dreams. I want to make a career for myself, build my wealth steadily, and then, at some point, work less to focus on building a family.”

“I can still have that.” I don’t know why I answer her as if I want *that* with her, but for unknown reason, my heart beats awfully loud in my chest as if it wants to weigh into the conversation.

“You could,” she offers. “But you have to admit it wouldn’t be safe to raise kids in your environment.” Her gaze trails off, a pained expression etched on her features. She looks troubled, long lost in thought, like she was in the car. It grips my heart, growing the desire to fix whatever has her looking like she’s being mentally tortured by something unknown to me.

“There is that look again.” I give her a kind smile. One that hopefully shows understanding and enough faith for her to

open up to me. Because I desperately want to know what's going through her head right now.

“What look?”

“Like something is on your mind.”

She sighs, but she doesn't realize that's an answer enough for me.

“You can talk to me.”

“Can I?” She scoffs with a dare. “You're Liam Carrillo. Your reputation precedes you.

“Yet, you're still here,” I counter. That has to count for something because if she really thought I was that dangerous, she wouldn't have been here unless I made her. Though I'm not opposed to blackmailing people to get my way, it's not how I tend to get women to have dinner with me. I don't have to when they line up for me at the snap of my fingers. “Why?”

“The truth?” Her voice grows tired and small, as if she's bracing herself for this conversation. “I don't know. Maybe because I hoped that you'd prove to me that not all men are *pendejos*.”

She exhales through her nose, hurt etched in her dark brown eyes. She looks like a woman who was hurt more than once, having lost faith in men altogether.

“Who hurt you?”

“No one.” Her gaze drops to the tabletop. She holds it there for a few beats, then her lashes fly back up. “But I'm not who

you think I am.”

I can see she isn't sure she did the right thing by starting whatever her declaration might lead to. Her entire attitude grows harsh, putting up a shield to protect herself, but her eyes can't hide the hint of hope I see flashing through. Still, a feeling of apprehension makes my spine shiver as I crane my neck with a straight face.

“Okay,” I concede, folding my arms in front of my chest. “Enlighten me.”

Our eyes stay locked, mine filled with anticipation, hers filled with uncertainty. Like she's waiting for me to grow angry and hurt her in any kind of way.

“You're scared of me.” It's not even a question I'm asking, it's a statement. She's scared of how I will reply to whatever is resting on her tongue.

“I'm not scared of anyone.” She sends me glare. “But I am scared you will judge me for things that are not in my control.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Because everyone does.” Her pained tone tears me apart. She releases the words with a fierceness that indicates this has been built throughout the course of her life. She's not just some scorned woman who got her heart broken one time. No, this goes deeper than that. This goes back to her past. Her childhood. *Her family.*

“Who are you, Cristina?” I rumble with a flat expression.

She takes a deep breath, and I can feel the burden of whatever she's about to tell me settle in my bones long before she actually speaks the words I never expected.

“My name is Cristina Reyes.” My heart stops. It literally stops for about two seconds before it continues to beat with a heavier drum this time. *You have got to be kidding me.*

“Daughter of Miguel Reyes,” she proceeds as rage bubbles up my throat, my jaw set so hard it hurts.

“Niece of Frank Reyes.”

My fingers ball into fists.

“First cousin of Ju-”

“Junior Reyes,” I grit out.

I can't hide the distaste I hold for the Reyes family, especially Junior Reyes. They are the biggest mob family in Spain, and they have been trying to poach some of our clients. But it's the intel I got a few years back that they are into human trafficking that officially solidified how I feel. I'm a rancorous criminal, and I don't shy away from pretty much anything to grow our empire in every way we can. But I draw the line with selling people like they are livestock. Selling women. It's disgusting. Crossing a line that no human should ever cross, let alone experience when they are on the other side of the coin. I'm not sure if I believe in Hell, but I do believe there should be one for people who feel like they have the right to take people's choices, like they are nothing more than cash to be exchanged. Junior Reyes is the epitome of evil.

A sociopath who has no values whatsoever, just like the rest of the Reyes family.

They have no morals, and even if they wanted to do business with us, I'd walk away before they could even lay out an offer.

"Si." She nods, her lashes covering her eyes for a moment when she sees the fire in mine. "This was a mistake."

Her chair shifts backwards to get up, the screeching sound on the marble floor lifting the hairs in the back of my neck. She tries to bolt as fast as she can, but I snatch her wrist before she's fully on her feet.

"Sit down." The command leaves my lips on a growl.

"You're judging me, just like everyone else," she hisses. "I'm leaving."

"Sit down," I tell her again, calmer this time, as I tug her arm a little. Cristina holds my gaze and I soften mine to ease her mind. "I'm not judging you."

Yet. But I'm not happy about this piece of information either. I will her to sit down with my blues drilling through her, and I watch her chest move up and down with heaving breaths before she finally sits back down.

I relax my muscles as much as I can, resting my body against the stool.

"You knew who I was when you agreed to dinner. Why?"

She takes a minute to think about that answer, the look in her eyes growing sadder with every passing second. “Because I asked myself if I would’ve agreed if I had a different last name,” she says, “and didn’t have to be scared of you hurting me for being a Reyes. The answer was yes. So, I took my chances.”

“Why?” My guard is up, but I’m also still mesmerized by this woman. There’s something in her that keeps me fixated.

“Because you intrigue me, even though I should quickly run the other way.” She pauses on a rough swallow. “Because I don’t want my last name to prevent me from having the future that I want. I broke all contact with them when I moved here.”

I don’t know if there is any truth to her explanation, but I sure as hell hope there is. She’s taking a big risk telling me her last name, but in a way that seems completely in line with her character. She doesn’t mess around. She’s straightforward. I have no issues painting a picture of her telling her family to go fuck themselves, and considering the way they treat the human race, I think it only makes Cristina that much more appealing. Like she’s the only fresh apple on a full tree of rotten ones.

“Your family and I aren’t on good terms,” I announce, as if she doesn’t already know that.

“Neither am I. They disowned me when I refused to join the family business.”

“Refused?”

“I might look like a harsh bitch, and yes, at some point, I figured I’d be part of the family business,” she confesses as I cock an eyebrow, “*but* I drew the line when I found out they were kidnapping and selling women.” Her tears well, voice lowering with every word, chin dropping to the floor in shame. “I could look the other way when I thought it was still harmless stuff like cannabis and other drugs. But I can’t when it comes to human rights. That’s just not okay.” Our eyes collide again, agony lacing through hers. “That could’ve been me if my last name wasn’t Reyes.”

I nod.

She takes her napkin from the table, dabbing under her eyes. “Besides, I don’t want to look over my shoulder for the rest of my life. I’ve always wanted to be a realtor. So I moved to New York city and became one. Junior wasn’t happy.” She shakes her head and I feel my neck tense at his name. “I’m ashamed to admit, but we’ve always been close.” She gives me a side glance. “But it’s also the reason I could escape my past. He let me go, fighting my father and uncle on it.” She brings her attention back up, this time her confidence resurfacing. “I’m grateful that he helped me, but we haven’t spoken in years. My last name is Reyes, but I’m no longer a member of that family.”

“Why would I believe you?” I want to. I really do. Not just because I see the pain sitting inside of her like a parasite, but also because this woman has caught my attention for longer than any woman before her. I don’t just want to get her between my sheets. No, I want to get to know her. I want to

know what makes her tick. What drives her. I'm even curious about what she will look like in the future. If the years will make her softer as she works for all her dreams.

“Because you're sitting here, having dinner with me.” She leans forward, her tone hushed but strong, but I can see her eyes pooling again. “So you must see something in me. I just hope it's everything that doesn't come with being a Reyes. That, for once, someone can look past the family I grew up in. I'm here for *you*, Liam.” Another tear rolls down her cheek. “Nothing else.”

“Don't cry,” I soothe. She has a grip on my heart, and I just want to comfort her with my arms around her body. I should be careful, not put my trust in her just yet, but nothing she has said has made me wanna get up and leave. She captivates me more every second I'm in her presence.

“I'm sorry.” She tries to muffle her sobs. “I just hate carrying a name that's tainted. I know it's tainted. I'm sorry.”

“Stop apologizing.”

“I'm s—” she cuts herself off, wiping away the wetness below her eyes. “Maybe we should just call it a night.”

“Why?” I ask, before I can catch my own words. “Because your last name is Reyes? I'm not that easily scared, sweetheart.” Kane is going to kill me, but words keep leaving my mouth. “I like to think of myself as a fair man. Judging you for the crimes of your family wouldn't be fair. I want to get to know you, and I mean that. I hope you feel the same.” Part of me hopes she says no, just so I can take the easy way,

push away the level of intrigue I'm feeling for her, and get on with my day. But the other part is happy when she gives me a sweet smile, her eyes still a little moist but radiating a level of gratitude that has my heart racing in my chest.

“I do.”

IMOGEN

PRESENT DAY

“Don’t let her get to you,” Callie whispers in my ear with her arms strongly wrapped around me. I swallow away the agony the size of a bowling ball in the back of my throat, trying to get rid of the dread that’s weighing down my entire body.

I hate the fact that Cristina is going to be this close for the next few days. At least with Callie around, I felt like she acted like a human wall in a way. Cristina has a level of respect for Callie that’s been there since they were little. But me? I’m positive Cristina will do everything to make my life miserable, and I’m not sure I have the energy to keep up with it.

Not that I have a choice.

I take a deep breath to get rid of the moisture in my eyes, then let go of her with a wide smile.

“I’ll be fine.”

Callie’s freckles are darker under the morning sun, her blue-green eyes beaming at me with a level of confidence that’s somewhat overwhelming.

“You bet your ass you’ll be fine.” Her tone is soft, yet filled with complete fury, leaving no room for argument. “We’re two peas in a pod. You’re my *sister*. I know you don’t think you’re as strong as I am, but Gen, you’re stronger.” I snort. “I mean it. You find a way to smile through anything.”

“That’s not strong. That’s deflecting with humor.”

“It is when the alternative is crying in a corner.” She grabs my shoulders with force. “You are better than Cristina, Gen. In every way. *Remember that.*”

“I will. You just go and find a way to get Babushka back.” It feels daunting as hell, but this is the only way to approach this situation. Head on, fearless, and faking it until we make it. As much as the thought of crawling into a corner sounds appealing right now, preferably with a chick flick and a chocolate bar, I’m not going to let that witch take over my life.

“I’ll be back in a few days.” Callie tugs me against her chest one last time before I watch her get off the boat and walk along the docks toward the car that’s waiting for her and Kane.

Kane and Liam are resting their backs against the vehicle, listening to Jeremy tell them something, while I watch Callie descend the walkway.

With my hands on the railing and the sun burning my back, I give her one last wave before fixing my gaze on Liam. He traded his classic dress shirt for a bare chest and sweats, clearly deciding to take the day to relax instead of work. It’s a rare sight when he’s not inside the comfort of our bedroom, but man, I’m not complaining. His skin is bronzed from the

summer, his blonde hair lighter on top, standing out even more against the rest of his body. But it's his eyes that always pop. They are dark blue, but they seem lighter as he locks his line of sight with mine, a lustful expression coming my way.

I keep my lips pressed together, not allowing the smile that wants to curl my lips to succeed as I clench my thighs. It's like I can read his mind from ten yards away, dirty thoughts flashing through his eyes and into my mind with an invisible chord.

That is, until his eyes narrow, his smile dissolves, and his shoulders tense.

“He's quite the looker, isn't he?” Cristina's voice rips me from my focus on Liam like a chainsaw on an easy morning. Loud, screeching, and un-fucking-welcome.

I try to keep my body composed, my eyes still cutting through Liam's as I decide to ignore her.

“I know why you fell for him.” Her tone is sweet, with a hint of regret seeping through that ticks me off, because I know it's bullshit. Cristina Reyes only regrets her plan to take over the Carrillo business, because she didn't succeed.

“You don't know shit, Cristina.”

“Actually, I do.” I don't have to twist my neck to know there will be an evil grin coming my way. “I'm the one who was there first, remember?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

She slides a step to the right, putting us shoulder to shoulder. “I bet it kills you inside, doesn’t it?” The whisper that enters my ear makes uneasy goosebumps trickle down my spine. “To know he fucked me like he’s fucking you. To know he touched me, long before you were on his radar. And to know that he was ready to start a family with me.”

“He doesn’t fuck me like he fucked you.” I snap my head her way. “You want to know how I know that?” She holds my gaze with a dare. “Because he fucked you like the whore that you are. You don’t mean anything to him.”

She snickers, her dark brown eyes searing mine. “Are you sure about that? I mean, we all know how Liam fucked a long string of whores before he met sweet little Imogen Payne.” Her index finger runs the length of my upper arm, taunting me. Her head cocks to the side, her expression vibrant, with her cheeks perked from her smile. She truly looks like the devil in disguise, and it wouldn’t even surprise me if she would be set to fire any second now. All we need are horns sticking through her black hair and she’d be Lucifer’s wet dream.

“So what if he fucked whores?”

“Oh, *niña*, didn’t you know?” she says when she sees my frown. A lot of men fuck whores. I have yet to find one who hasn’t, so I don’t know why it’s a big deal.

She giggles.

Diabolical bitch.

“He didn’t just fuck any whores,” she explains. “He only fucked whores with black hair.” Nausea makes it hard to breathe. “He demanded that they wear red lipstick.” Heat overwhelms my body as she moves her painted lips closer to my ear. “He fucked whores that looked like *me*.” The emphasis is meant to cut deeply, and I do everything in my power to not let it affect me, but it does. It slices through me, creating a hole in my chest that’s big enough to be filled with that pesky insecurity again.

Tapping into my acting abilities, I keep my face straight while dying inside.

“I guess he made you feel more than you wanted him to believe if you kept tabs on him all this time.”

“Would that bother you? Make you jealous? To know that I want him back?” My heart drops to the deck, jaw grinding my molars together. “Who do you think he’ll pick if he gets to choose from the both of us?”

“We both know you don’t want him back,” I growl.

“I do, Genny. I loved him, but Junior made me hurt him. I’m here because I want a second chance. And I’m not going to let you take that away from me. I’m sorry.” Everything in her tone can easily be mistaken for truth, and I have to admit, she’s good. If I didn’t know who was standing in front of me, I’d believe her.

This is Cristina Reyes, though. She’d sell her mother if it got her what she wants.

“You’re not fooling anyone on this yacht, Cristina.” Our faces are only three inches apart. “Liam will never take you back.”

“We’ll see.” She shrugs, her smirk never faltering.

She rattles me, and I hate it. It makes me furious because it’s fucking with my head. My heart yells at her that Liam loves me, but my mind keeps throwing pebbles to get my attention, saying shit like ‘*what if he still has feelings for her?*’ and ‘*what if she’s right?*’

“You get the fuck away from her before I snap your neck!” Liam booms as he makes his way back to the yacht with big strides. Cristina instantly takes a step back, shoots me a wink, and then throws her hands up in the air before offering Liam an innocent smile.

“We’re just talking, Liam.” There is a hint of indignance in her tone, and I’m amazed by the level of nerve this girl has.

I keep staring at her, flabbergasted. She switches from devil to angel within a split second, giving every word she utters so much credibility it’s eerie. It’s not just the fact that I know she’s a skilled fighter, ready to defend herself when it’s necessary, but it’s that this woman can convince anyone of anything. I understand why Liam fell for her lies, because if I hadn’t known about what she tried to do to Liam and Kane, or how she knew Callie was sold for the night, I would’ve believed every word she said.

Cristina Reyes is a siren.

Gorgeous, mesmerizing, and lethal in a way that catches you by surprise every time.

If I want to play this game, I need to find a way to be outsmart her.

And when I lock eyes with a scowling Liam before he pushes his body in front of me to block me from Cristina, I'm determined to find a way.

This man is worth fighting for.

This man is mine.

"I don't believe a word that's coming from your snake mouth," Liam grunts.

Cristina sighs, her features showing defeat. "We're going to be together for the next few days. I really don't want to fight, Liam. Can't we just try to get along?" Her hand reaches out to stroke his arm and I see red.

Darting past Liam, I push him to the side, then shove her a few steps back with my finger pricking in her chest.

"Touch him again, and I will kill you."

She slaps my finger away, her true character slipping out. "Touch *me* again, and I will make you wish I'd kill *you*."

Liam pulls my arm, sheltering my body with his, as he squares his shoulders before peering down at Cristina with contempt.

"Stay away from her, Cristina," he shouts before he guides me back inside.

I see her narrowed eyes trailing behind us as we step over the threshold, and I let Liam take me away, but not before I flip her off with a glare.

Insecure or not, I need to get over it and own my shit. She will not get what she wants. She will not get Liam. Cristina Reyes will not bring me down. If she thinks I'm not going to put up a fight, she's got another thing coming.

My day will come, you evil bitch. And you'll wish you never pissed me off.



I wake up from stumblings on the deck above us, probably the kitchen staff, and I stretch my arms above my head with a big yawn. Liam's chest is sticking to my back, his warmth dampening the rest of my body.

I feel him stir away behind me, followed by a lingering kiss below my neck.

“Good morning, babe.”

“Hmm, morning.”

I settle closer against him, enjoying being the little spoon as I glance around the room.

I want to say that I kept the attitude the last time I saw Miss Evil on the deck. But I haven't. For the last forty-eight hours, I've been mostly cooped up in this room, trying to process everything that's happened. I admit it's also a way to avoid running into Cristina, mainly because I need to get my shit

together before I'm ready to face her again. It's like walking out of that door means walking into a war zone. I'm prepared physically, even though I know Cristina wouldn't dare to hurt me because it would mean she'd lose any chance to find her precious diamond. But I'm not completely there mentally.

"Are we going up for breakfast?" Liam asks.

"I don't know."

"Baby, you haven't left this room in two days. At some point, you have to get out."

I wiggle myself out of his arms, not appreciating the judgment in his tone before I get up.

"I'm just going through some shit, okay?" Like the one where you need to make sure you're ready to get stabbed in the back twenty-four-seven. Grabbing one of his shirts from the floor, I cover myself up.

"I know. So am I. I'm not happy with having her here, but avoiding her will only show her that she has the upper hand."

"It's not that!" It's totally that.

"Then what is it?"

"I don't know!" My outburst results in a concerned stare hitting me like bricks. I don't want him to worry about me. The devil herself in our personal space is more than enough worry for both of us. But I haven't found the bravado to stroll the yacht with a level of confidence that I feel I need to have before I'm confronted with Cristina. She knows how to piss me off, and push just the right buttons to dip into my

insecurities. I need to find a way to put up a brick wall first before I can be in the same room with her again.

Luckily, I'm saved by the bell when my phone rings, and I glance at the screen.

Callie.

"It's Callie. I have to take this."

"Gen."

"I'm fine," I tell him, walking backward to the bathroom. "I swear."

Locking the door behind me, I suck in another lungful of air before I answer the phone.

"What's up, Callie girl?"

"Genny! How are you?" The tension leaves my back when I hear Callie's chipper voice, pleased she sounds happy.

"I'm good."

"Are you?"

"I am, really." I smile at myself in the mirror, noticing the fatigue in my eyes. You're a shit liar, Imogen Payne. I'm not fine. I'm not fine on this yacht. I'm not fine with Cristina being here. And I'm not fine with Callie being in a different country. "Do you have any news? How is it in Spain?"

"Actually," she begins, dragging out the word. "We're in Boston."

"You're *what*?"

“Turns out Cristina was right. There was evidence in a safe deposit box that suggests he has connections to Loranne Almos. I found an old postcard from her. Reign is running a background check on her as we speak. I didn’t want to call him, because we never know if someone is listening, so we flew to Boston yesterday. Which feels like today for me. Time zones and all that shit. I’m calling from a secure line right now.”

“Does Liam know?”

“He does.”

“That son of a bitch.”

I stare at my reflection as my eyes narrow. We’re supposed to be in this together, yet he fails to give me an update about what’s happening. Defeat showers me as I come to the only conclusion that comes to mind: he doesn’t trust me. The realization has tears filling the corners of my lashes.

“In his defense, he said you had a lot on your mind, and he didn’t want you to worry any more than you have to.”

I know it sounds sweet, how he wants to protect me, but all it does is make me feel like I’m not included in this and that fucks with my head. Why wouldn’t he want to share this kind of information with me?

“It’s no excuse. He should’ve told me.”

“He should’ve.” Callie pauses, but I can sense more coming my way. “But, Gen, what’s going on?” I know she’s not asking

without reason, probably worried about me after Liam told her I wasn't feeling well.

I pinch the bridge of my nose, then bring my gaze back up to stare at myself. The girl staring back at me seems bleak, lacking the vibrancy that I'm used to.

"I don't know," I breathe. "I just don't know."

"It's Cristina, isn't it?"

I want to say no, but I can't hide anything from Callie, even if I wanted to. She's the one I trust with my life and lying to her feels a hundred shades of fucked up.

"She says she wants Liam back."

"She's lying," she quickly counters.

"You don't know that."

"I do. The only reason she's pretending to want him is to fuck with your head and from what I got from Liam; it's working." Leave it up to Callie to shoot me in the heart with the truth. "So, she got her first tick of the list complete."

"What's that?"

"Get under your skin." I purse my lips as I let the words sink in, unable to argue with them without Callie blurting *bullshit*.

"The second one is her taking your man off your hands."

"What is that supposed to mean?" I scowl.

"She's going after your man, Gen. Doesn't matter if she really wants him back, which she doesn't, or if she's just doing

it to get Liam back on her team. Either way, she's going after your man."

Anger travels deep inside my organs, my body vibrating at the thought.

"The question is," Callie continues. "Are you going to let her?"

"You think she can do that? After everything that's happened?" I see what she's doing, but I can't deny it's working.

"Doesn't matter," Callie rebukes. "Are you going to let *her*?"

"No." The answer falls from my tongue before I can even hear it in my mind.

"You sure? Because that's exactly what you're doing right now."

Screw my cousin for poking me like this.

"You staying in your room all day to avoid her will only make her feel more powerful, thinking you're too scared to face her."

"I'm not scared of her!"

"She'll grow more and more convinced that she can seduce Liam again. It's not like she hasn't done it before already." Callie continues, undisturbed.

"Over my dead body."

“In fact, I think she’s sitting somewhere on the upper deck right now, gloating, because she still hasn’t seen your face in two days. You’re playing right into her hand, Gen.”

“Fucking hell, Callie!” I huff, running a hand through my messy hair. “Are you serious?”

“You are my cousin, but so is she. I know her, Gen, and I know you. You think by keeping your distance until you’re ready, you’ll be stronger when you do face her. But she’s only enjoying this way more than she should. She loves the effect she has on you. She lives for this shit. She *wants* you out of the way. You’re only making it easier.”

I know she’s right. My eyes stay collided with the ones reflected back at me. The light blue turns a little icy as I hold my own gaze. I’ve been playing into Cristina’s hand by keeping myself clear from her, when really, I should’ve been in her face so much she’ll grow sick of me. Until she understands there is no getting rid of me unless she kills me.

“Fuck,” I mutter, thinking about my childish behavior for the last couple of days.

“You finally see it now?” Callie questions, amused.

I do. I’ve been hiding like a scared kitten when I should’ve been prancing the entire yacht like a goddamn panther. Like I own the place. Because I fucking do. This is *my* family she’s messing with.

My life.

My man.

“I fucked up, didn’t I?”

Callie chuckles through the phone. “No, you didn’t. This thing isn’t over yet, Gen. We still need to find Babushka and we still need that diamond. It’s not over until we find both of them.”

“So what do I do?”

“You wear your hottest dress, fix your hair, put some make-up on, and show that bitch who’s the woman in charge. You taunt her, make her life miserable until she’s regretting every second of even thinking about messing with you.”

“She thinks I’m scared of her.”

“She does. But that’s a good thing. She’s underestimating you. Show her, Genny.”

Show her what I’m capable of. Show her that she doesn’t mess with me and get out on top.

“You’re right.”

“I know I am.”

“I got this.” There is more of a battle-minded tone in my voice that lifts up my spirit.

“Fuck yeah, you do!”

“She’s nothing!”

“Useless!” Callie pitches in.

“Nothing more than a bitter, vile woman with a strong desire for power.”

“She’s pathetic, really.”

“She is,” I agree, still staring into the mirror. Slowly, I can see the life creeping back into my expression, determination creasing my forehead.

“Are you ready?” I can hear the smile in her voice, laced with a sense of pride that has me straightening my spine when I reply, “I’m ready.”

“Good. Now get out of that room and own that shit.”

“Okay!” I jolt, nodding.

“I’ll call you as soon as Reign has anything, okay?”

We say our goodbyes and hang up, and I give myself one more glance.

This is my life, and Cristina will not get to me.

With force, I throw the bathroom door open, clashing against Liam’s chest.

His blue eyes widen as he catches my arms, holding me in place.

“Are you okay?” He searches my face with that same worry I left him with a few minutes ago.

“You didn’t tell me Callie and Kane flew to Boston.”

His face falls. “I’m sorry. I just thought—”

“You thought I couldn’t handle being part of this. But I can!” My eyebrows furrow as I bore my glare into his with my chin held high, pricking my index finger against his chest. “I

refuse to be on the sidelines any longer, Liam. From now on, you inform me about everything.”

He nods, a mix of guilt and surprise in his expression.

“We are in this together. I’m part of the team, and you better treat me like that!” I continue, holding his gaze with a renewed fierceness. “We don’t need to *protect* Imogen. You got it?”

“Got it.”

“Good.” I keep my scowl in place, even though a smile lifts his lips.

“For the record, I didn’t tell you because I didn’t want to give you any more to worry about. I’ll never think you can’t handle this—*bullshit* situation. You’re just as strong as Callie, Gen.”

I am. We have the same Irish blood running through our veins. I’m just as strong as Callie, and it’s time I start acting like it.

“I know.” I press my lips against his, tugging his hips closer to mine. The warmth of his breath combined with his strong hands immediately trailing underneath my shirt gives me that last inkling of courage I need. *I fucking got this.*

I break the kiss and then shoot him a wink before I walk past him. “Get dressed.”

“Where are we going?” He frowns.

“We are going to breakfast.”

LIAM

TWO YEARS AGO

I know he's there before he makes himself present. I can feel it in the way his eyes burn through my back, my body responding to that familiar energy I've known all my life.

Fixing my tie in the mirror, I stare at my reflection. My face stays straight, keeping the long exhale that's lingering on the surface tightly at bay.

"You're going out with *Cristina Reyes* again?" Kane almost spits out her name, and I lock my eyes with his in the glass.

"Got something to say, Kane?" I saw this conversation coming way before today. I've been anticipating and dreading it just as much since the moment I told him she was a Reyes.

He didn't get angry. He didn't yell or throw knives through the room like he does most of the time when he's pissed off. No, instead he just gave me a disappointing glare before he walked away. When it comes to Kane? That's worse. When he goes silent, he's really raging inside like a hurricane of lava. When he doesn't try to rile me up? He's probably contemplating a way to *not* kill me when everything inside

him has the desire to do so. It's a rarity for Kane to stay silently angry, and it's one of his traits that's reserved for me.

Because I'm his brother and he respects me and my decisions. But I also knew he wasn't going to keep quiet forever.

"Other than the obvious?" Kane grunts.

"Which is?"

"That you're the biggest moron alive for dating that... *that...whore.*" His lack of finding the right description for her is another way to show me his respect, because I'm sure deep down he wants to call her way worse than *whore*.

"You're overreacting, Kane." I finish up my tie, then grab my suit jacket from the hanger next to the mirror.

"Did you miss the part where her last name is *Reyes*?" he mocks. "You have a temporary brain freeze or something? Malfunction because your thick skull is too tight?"

I turn around, putting on the jacket, and am greeted by a glare cut into his sharp features. There is a thick stubble on his tightened jaw, his light blue eyes looking more icy than usual.

"Real mature." I button up the rest of my suit, then slide my hands in the pockets of my pants, at the same time Jeremy slips beside Kane and into the room.

"At least I'm not born yesterday, like you are," Kane mutters.

“What’s up, Jer?” I ask. He gives me a nudge of acknowledgment before he hands me a file. “What’s this?”

I open it without waiting for either of their responses and a frown knits my eyebrows together. Inside are pictures of Junior Reyes with multiple of our distributors, clearly doing more than just “hanging out.”

“Is he poaching again?” With a pinched mouth, I lift my eyes back to Jeremy. He’s throwing me a guilty look. “What?”

“We think they are doing more than that.” Jeremy straightens his spine, his dark blonde hair glowing a little under the chandelier of my bedroom. “We have reasons to believe they aren’t just poaching a few of our clients.” He quickly glances at Kane. “We think they are planning a coop.”

“A coop?”

Jeremy nods. “They’re going after the clients that are most strategic first and word on the street is they want to take over.”

“Take over what?”

“Our business!” Kane snaps. “Our empire! Our *fucking* life!” He takes a step forward. “Don’t you see it? She wants to distract you.”

“She has no contact with them!”

“You don’t know that!” Kane shouts.

“I do!”

“How?!”

“Because she said so!”

“Right and the Reyes are known for their trustworthy behavior?”

My hand lifts, pinching the bridge of my nose, because I realized my mistake the moment the words rolled off my tongue. The Reyes are anything but trustworthy. I’m definitely not debating that, but my mind doesn’t seem to register that Cristina is one of them. I don’t fully trust her, but there is something about her that keeps my attention. Every time I tell myself to stay sharp, and keep my distance, she does or says something to lure me back in. Like the other day when we were walking toward the restaurant and I saw her neck crane, staring at that toddler that was wobbling down the street. That tender look on her face is burned into my membrane. Or the smile she gave me when I brought her favorite chocolate mint ice cream when I stopped over at her Chelsea condo to watch a movie. Not to mention that time she told me she was volunteering at the shelter with her mother.

I know I’m a criminal. I walk through life on the wrong side of the law, and I don’t obey like a sheep just because a bunch of old men in a fancy building have decided on it. Because, like most of this population, I don’t agree that a few hundred men can decide what’s best for millions of people. Really, when you think about it, the law is subjective, but I still like to believe I’m a decent guy. That I have morals and can separate right from wrong. Just because I’m not a saint, it doesn’t mean I’m the devil either. I feel the same about her. I’m positive she has seen horrible things, and maybe even acted out on some for the sake of her family, but it doesn’t mean she’s like her

cousin. It doesn't mean the name Reyes automatically assigns her a moral deficit.

“She's nothing like them. They banished her, Kane.”

“I thought she left?” he scolds, his temper showing that he's no longer playing indifferent.

“It's both, okay? They banished her because she refused to join the family business, and she left to start over in New York.”

“She's dirty! I know it! She's going to bring us down.”

I hold his gaze with a pinched mouth.

“I'm telling you, Liam. That woman is going to be our downfall. She's nothing special! Fucking ditch the bitch! There is plenty of pussy in the world.”

“Not like her!” I rebuke, hating myself for showing my cards. Showing him that though I tried to push them away, I have feelings for her after spending the last couple of months with her.

“Oh, fucking hell.” There is dread dripping from Kane's voice, and he gives me an incredulous look. “Please tell me you're not in love with her, Liam.”

“I'm not in love with her.” *I think*. “But I do have feelings.” I volley my attention between Jeremy and Kane, Kane glaring like a mad cow while Jeremy gives me a gaze of pity. Both stabbing me deep in the chest. I can feel my throat turn dry, my chest suppressed under what feels like the weight of an elephant.

“Why?” Jeremy questions. There is no judgment in his question, but I can still see he’s on Kane’s side for this one.

I rub a hand over my face, not knowing how to explain this to them without them thinking I’ve completely lost my mine. Maybe I have, though.

“I see myself in her,” I begin, figuring my brother won’t let this one go anyway. “Someone who wants more than the life she made. To escape and settle down after her dues are paid.”

“The only way a Reyes can pay their dues is taking a permanent trip to Hell.”

“I want more than this, Kane. We have all the money in the world. More than we can spend. But we have no one to share it with.” Confusion hits Kane’s eyes at that. “I don’t know what I’m doing it for anymore, and I want more.”

“What more is there? We are fucking kings of the world! When we arrive, doors open. You can buy any fucking thing you want. There is no more!”

I know he doesn’t understand. We agreed that we would never marry and have kids, simply because it didn’t fit our lifestyle. The world we live in doesn’t allow us to have weaknesses, and neither of us ever had a wish to have more than your regular hook-ups.

“I want a family, Kane.” But I’ve changed. It has been crossing my mind more in the last year and ever since I met Cristina, it’s been popping in my head weekly. I want more. I want a family. And Cristina seems to be the one girl who can

give me both. I just always assumed there wasn't any girl who could handle the kind of world I operate in. To be strong enough to deal with some of the uncertainties it comes with. The risk. The fear. But she can.

"A family?" Kane croaks out, a little lost for words, it seems. "You want a family?"

"I understand that, Liam."

"I don't," Kane adds.

"I do." Jeremy continues, cocking his head with sympathy. "But she's not it."

"You checked her out, Jer! You confirmed she has no contact with the rest of her family in Spain."

"Just because I haven't found any proof, doesn't mean she's not contacting them in a different way."

"You two only say that because her last name is Reyes." My finger rises accusingly.

"You're damn right!" Kane huffs, but Jeremy shakes his head.

"No. I'm saying it because I feel like she's hiding something. Like she's not who she says she is. The timing is suspicious, and I haven't found anyone who can back up the story of her being disowned by the rest of the family."

"That doesn't mean anything," I argue, becoming increasingly frustrated with this conversation. I crack my neck,

keeping my anger in check, but really, I'm ready to walk away from this before I hurt someone.

“No, you're right. But it also doesn't mean it isn't *something*.”

“It means she's fucking playing you!” Kane growls out, almost on a whine.

The coarseness of his words makes me boil over, my hands balling into fists. Without thinking, I charge him, grabbing his shirt as I push him against the doorpost.

“Just because your sorry ass is incapable of loving anyone, doesn't mean everyone is! She isn't fucking playing me!” I roar at his narrowed eyes. “Either fucking take the effort to get to know her yourself or *shut the fuck up!*” I let go of him with a shove as I storm into the hallway.

“Liam!” I hear Jeremy behind me, but I keep stomping forward, fueled by adrenaline. That son of a bitch is judgmental as fuck, but I'm not going to let him talk to me like that. He can either make an effort or go bark at someone else.

“Leave me the fuck alone!”



I don't feel the fatigue taking over every muscle in my body until I ring the doorbell, leaning my upper arm against the doorpost above my head. I should've seen it coming. In fact, I did see it coming. I knew Kane was going to corner me at some point and ask the questions that were sitting on the tip of

his tongue for weeks now. Or more accurately, the accusations. I mentally prepared myself for it, or at least I thought I did. But clearly, not enough. As much as I was convinced I was going to go head to head about him, giving Cristina the trust she deserves... my mind felt more dread with every step I made toward her condo close to Central Park.

Unlike my brother, I don't want to judge someone by the family they come from, for the simple fact that Kane and I come from a deadbeat dad who left us before Kane could walk, and a mother with a thing for substance abuse who wasn't fit to take care of us long before she finally died when I was twenty-one. You could argue that we are first-class scum, rats from the street, yet we worked our way up to the elite of New York. On both sides of the law.

I want to believe Cristina deserves a second chance. A chance to build a life for herself outside of the fucked-up family she comes from. But even though I know that's what I believe, and want for her, I can't completely get rid of Kane's reasoning either.

Until she's right in front of me.

The door opens, and I stare into Cristina's deep brown eyes.

As soon as she lifts her gaze to mine, her bright energy coming at me in waves, she wraps me around her finger without even trying. All I see is a girl who's strong enough to take care of herself, strong enough to break loose from her toxic family, and I respect her for it.

“Hey,” she says, worry pinching her mouth when she looks me up and down.

“Hey.”

“Are you okay?” Her slender hand pulls me in by my tie, and I hear the door shut behind me.

“Kane doesn’t like you.”

Her eyebrows raise, though it’s not by surprise. More in a way of expectation. Like she already knew he wouldn’t like her.

“I’d be lying if I said I didn’t see that one coming.” She lets go of me, then prances back into the living room, where she picks up her glass of wine sitting on the dining table. I watch her luscious curves tempting me with every step forward, her long legs begging me to peel the skin-tight dress from her hips. But her expression of contempt when she turns around, keeps me rooted to the spot.

“Did you expect anything else?” Her red lipstick stains the glass as he takes a sip.

“He doesn’t even know you.”

“This is how it always goes, Liam. As soon as anyone hears I’m a Reyes, they either want to run or kill me. I guess your brother is the latter.”

“It will be fine. We just have to show him who you really are.” I close the distance between us, pulling the glass from her hands and putting it back on the table.

She shows me her cheek, not wanting to look me in the eye, but I take it as an invitation to leave a trail of kisses down her neck.

“He’ll warm up to you. I know he will.”

“I’m pretty sure he won’t. This is Kane Carrillo we’re talking about. He’s vindictive as fuck.”

“I know.” I smirk, continuing the same path until I reach her collarbone with my lips. “He’s my little brother. Who do you think raised him?”

“You’re not vindictive. You give me a chance.” I pull my head back to find her eyes. They are laced with hope and question, the sight alone tucking my heart.

“He will to; he just needs time.”

“Do you promise? Because I don’t want to lose you, Liam.” Her glossy eyes conjure my mouth into a flashy smile.

“Do you like me, Cristina Reyes?”

She dips her chin, a little embarrassed as she nods. “I do. I like you a *lot*.”

The confession expands my chest, a shiver running down my spine of something I assume is attraction. Because I feel the same.

I place my finger underneath her chin, forcing her to look at me.

“I like you too. *A lot*.”

“Really?”

“Really.” I show the truth in my words by crashing my lips into hers, pulling her hips against mine. I can feel her red lipstick rubbing off on my mouth, but all I care about is feeling her. “What time is the reservation?”

“Eight.”

“Let’s skip it and order some pizza.” My hands slide underneath her dress, wanting to feel her heat covering my dick.

A laugh bubbles from her throat as she swats my chest. “I don’t eat pizza.” She glances at her watch. “But we have ten minutes.”

“I can work with that.” I lead her over to the table, planting her ass so I have full access between her legs, as I start to rub her center against my bulge. Our lips never disconnect, our tongues dancing around each other while I quickly take off my clothes and she runs her hands through my hair.

Each moan turns me on even more, each shift of her hips grinding over my dick, making me harder by the second. When I’m standing in front of her with a bare chest, I pull out of her grip, unbuttoning my pants after I kick off my shoes.

“Take your clothes off,” I order.

I want to fuck her on the table, her back flat against the glass surface, while I slap her tits and choke her with my hand. I want to see the tears in her eyes as I make her come instead of just hearing her like I have every time before. It’s like a challenge I need to succeed in because so far, it’s clear that

Cristina likes to be fucked from behind as I pull her hair as hard as I can.

But I want to see the expression on her face when she comes undone. I want to see her features tense when she mewls with every thrust. I want to remember more than her black hair waving in front of me when I'm alone at night and touching my dick with her image.

She pushes her dress down her body slowly, revealing the black pieces of lacey lingerie that have me licking my lips. Her sultry look burns through my skin until I'm fully naked in front of her and pulling her to my lips once more.

“You're so sexy.”

She hums in agreement, while her bra flies through the room, then she's lifting her hips to take off her thong. She strokes my throbbing cock and I push her back down, her legs hanging on the edge of the table, her pussy greeting me.

I hold her against the surface, rubbing the tip of my dick between her folds, already enjoying the anticipation of burying myself in her heat. I slip inside, shutting my eyes when her warm walls enclose around me.

“Fuck yeah!”

“No, wait,” she huffs, and I hold still. She quickly lets my dick slide for her pussy, then turns around, giving me her ass before she glues her front to the table. “Fuck me, Liam.”

Aggravated by the change of position, I stare at her plump ass, her black hair spread out over her back. Part of me wants

to spin her around again so I can look her in the face, but the other throbbing part between my legs decides to just take her as she's willing to give herself to me.

So I comply with her request.

And I fuck her from behind until she's screaming.

LIAM

PRESENT DAY

I glance at Imogen, who's holding my gaze over the rim of her glass. There is mischief in her baby blue eyes, and the need to drag her over this table and strip her naked grows by the second.

"Stop looking at me like that," she scolds, though she's unable to hide the ghost of a smile, as she licks the red wine from her lips.

"Like what?"

"Like you don't understand why *that* is your dinner"—she points at my pasta filled plate while I take a bite—"instead of *me.*"

"That's because I don't," I reply, chewing my food. "I don't see why I can't have both."

She cocks her pretty head, her blonde hair falling to the side.

"I can be dessert."

"I like the way you think. But I'm not having dessert in the bedroom," I dare. "I want dessert right here." I press my index

finger to the table, and my dick is growing painfully when the image of a naked Gen spread out over the glass table makes its way into my head, completely losing my appetite for actual food.

She gasps, a little shocked, but she can't hide the intrigue that is lacing her eyes. She's not completely on board, but she's not fully against it either. Gen has a darker side, a bold side, one that she only lets out when she's with me. And I love her even more for it, knowing she's saved that part of her personality for me to cherish.

"Liam!" She gives me a reprimanding tone while her eyes carefully trail the rest of the room to see if anyone heard me. I don't care if anyone did. This is my goddamn yacht and if I want to fuck my girl on the dining room table, then that's what I'm going to do. "You can't say stuff like that."

"But I can execute it?"

"What? No!" she scolds, but it's followed by a giggle. "What if someone sees us?"

"Who cares?"

"I care!"

I lean forward, pushing my plate to the side as I stare into her eyes.

"You act sweet and innocent," I rasp, "but deep down, you want me to fuck you on top of this table. Deep down, you want to know what it feels like when you're being watched while I spread you wide. Don't you, Blondie?"

She swallows hard as heat flushes her neck all the way up to the apples of her cheeks. She is at a loss for words while the air electrifies, tension crackling between us, while I wait for her to give me anything. A starting gun to cross the table and take what's mine. Slowly but surely, her lips curl, and I anxiously stay in my seat, knowing she's about to concede.

But my lustful mood is interrupted when the door to the hallway flies open and that screeching voice from the wicked witch of Europe uncomfortably slides into my ear.

“Ah, you two started dinner without me?” Cristina yelps.

Imogen closes her eyes, her smile now forced as Cristina takes the seat at the head of the table.

“Oh, yum, pasta! Do you mind?” Her eyes move from my plate to mine before she grabs my plate without waiting for my reaction, and then starts eating with my fork.

Imogen is looking at her with disgust, and I do my best to not swipe the plate from the table as a whole.

“I'm sorry.” Cristina's gaze travels back and forth from mine to Gen's. “Were you two in the middle of a conversation?”

Cristina's sarcasm snaps Imogen from her uncomfortable state, clearly deciding she's not going to get under her skin when she rolls her eyes at her. “What are you doing here, *Crissy?*”

Cristina's entire posture freezes, probably wondering if she can stab Imogen with her fork for calling her Crissy, but I

can't help the snickers that instantly roll out of me. I assume she knows she's outnumbered because Cristina pushes the plate forward after a few bites, then sighs. The smile that follows is supposed to be sweet and charming, but I know it's bullshit. I've seen that fake smile more times I can remember.

"I actually wanted to talk to Liam." Her neck spins to mine.

"About what?" I ask, uninterested.

"Alone."

"Nice try," I scoff. There is no way I'm giving her the satisfaction of excluding Imogen. "Whatever you want off your chest, you can spit it out in front of both of us."

A tiny glare comes my way, but she quickly dissolves it, probably thinking bees and honey and all that crap. "I want to apologize."

"I hardly doubt that," Gen pitches in.

"I do." Cristina's puppy eyes never leave mine. "I'm sorry, Liam. I never wanted to hurt you. I loved you."

A shiver as cold as the arctic raises the brittle hairs on my arms. I'd been waiting for those words for months before she betrayed me, dying to know if her feelings were as genuine as I thought mine were. But she never did. I can't deny it's stroking my ego, making me feel on top this time, but it's only short-lived.

"You can't love anyone but yourself, Cristina."

She shakes her head. “That’s not true. I cared about you. I still do.”

There are crocodile tears that make her eyes glassy, and with my lips in a firm stripe, I wonder how I ever fell for that pretty face. I now remember this is what she did. She played the damsel in distress more than once, failing to fix whatever problem she was facing.

“You’re not seriously doing this, are you?” Gen snaps, tearing Cristina’s attention toward her.

“Doing what?” she questions innocently.

“You’re trying to play with his feelings. Pretending you love him, so he will take you back.”

“I do love him! And I do want him back!” Cristina adds, clearly ready to battle with Gen for my attention. Before Gen, I’d be thrilled to have two cats fight over me; I’m man enough that I would enjoy that. But after everything she’s put me and my family through, and being fully aware of Gen’s frustration, all I want is to kill the undeniable third wheel.

“No, you don’t! You just want to get between the two of us!”

Cristina keeps her stance steady and calm, just like she did when she first met Kane. It’s like my memories and the present are being glued together, but this time I see it for what it’s worth.

Nothing.

“I understand you’re in love with Liam and that this is something that will make you feel threatened, but I can’t help loving the same man as you do.” Cristina keeps her chin high and her features soft, as if she’s the epitome of class.

I snort, but both girls ignore me.

“I’m not threatened by you!” Gen groans, her eyes menacing as her jaw ticks. “I’m annoyed by you. But don’t think I’m threatened by you, *bitch*. He will never go back to you. Why downgrade when you already got the upgrade?”

“Because most of the time, the new version is just one that’s shinier and less functional,” Cristina snarls.

“Enough!” I throw my fist on the table and both their heads snap toward me, yet I hold my glare set on Cristina. “Whatever bullshit you’re trying to feed me, it’s not working. I was blinded the first time; you get a pat on the back for that. Well done, you tricked me when no one else could. But it won’t happen again. And if you threaten my girl one more goddamn time, you will wish you were never born, just like Junior did. In fact? Have you ever found him?”

The corner of Cristina’s mouth lifts with a snarl. “I never expected you to be so cruel, Liam.”

“And I never expected you to shoot me in the back, Cristina.”

“There are no records of Junior. You already killed him. You didn’t have to wipe him from the system and make it seem like

he never existed.” She seems genuinely hurt by that, but I’m not buying it.

“Don’t you get it? He didn’t. Junior Reyes is nothing more than a myth. Something that might have happened, or it might have not. As far as I’m concerned, Frank Reyes had no biological children, which means the Reyes lines stop with him.”

“So, that’s what you get for messing with the Carrillos?”

“Actually,” I say with a laugh, feeling proud, “that was Callie’s idea. She’s clearly a better criminal than the two of you were. No wonder Junior hated her.”

“Callie might be smarter than Junior, but she’s definitely not smarter than me.”

“Well, I was already wondering how long before you would show your real colors. You kept up your act for six months, but you can’t even keep it up for ten minutes now? You’re slacking, girl,” Imogen sasses.

I can see all the hateful things Cristina wants to do to Imogen because they are flashing in front of her eyes, but she’s controlled enough to keep her mouth shut.

“What do you really want, Cristina?” I ask, annoyed more than anything that she interrupted our nice dinner.

“I told you. I want you back.”

“I thought you wanted the diamond. Which one is it?” Gen argues.

“I want the diamond because I need money.” Cristina’s sad tone slips in again. “With Junior gone, I don’t have access to any of the Reyes accounts because Callie is the beneficiary. That diamond gives me the chance at a new start. A fresh start.” She shoots me a pleading look, still trying to tap into my empathy.

“I believe you,” I say, forming a victorious smile on her cheeks. “But I know you, Cristina.” Her face falls. “You might have tricked me for months, but you failed to understand, it’s also why I know you better than anyone. I know how far you’re willing to go. I know there is more than just that diamond. There is always more when it comes to you.”

“There isn’t. I swear.”

Her word means as much as a pile of shit, and I scold myself for being so blind to her. She really had me by the balls, because I thought we had something good. That there was potential for a future. But now, sitting at this table, I know there is only one future for me.

She’s blonde with blue eyes and has a smile that makes my heart falter every time it’s directed my way.

I smile at Gen, trying to comfort her with a single look. It takes her a few moments to find my eyes, but when she does, she smiles back. Though there is a wariness in her eyes that wasn’t there before Cristina barged through the door.

“What’s that saying? Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me? Cut the act, Cristina.” My tone is menacing, and it’s all she deserves. “It’s not cute anymore. It’s

just *pathetic*.” I turn my focus on Gen as I get up from my chair and reach for her hand to help her up. “Now, if you will excuse us? I lost my appetite.”

Imogen purposely ticks over her half-full glass, the contents spilling right onto Cristina’s blue jeans before she shoves her chair backward with a loud gasp.

“Whoops, I’m sorry.” Gen folds a hand over her lips. “I’m sure one of the staff can help you clean that up. Have a great night, *Crissy*.”

The loud groan that comes from Cristina reverberates against our backs as I lead Imogen out of the room and into the hallway. There is a smirk on my lips that I probably can’t wipe off for at least a few days, my brain probably collecting fuel from the memory that just embedded itself into my brain.

With big strides, we keep walking until we’re in our suit, and I slam the door before I throw her back against it. Cupping the front of her neck, I press my body into hers, my dick even more eager to bury inside of her.

“You are so goddamn sexy when you’re going all bitch on her.”

“I am?” Gen asks, surprised.

“Fuck me, Gen. I love you. You’re gorgeous, but you being so fearless and ready to snap her head off? The only reason why I didn’t fuck you on that table is because I know you don’t like an audience. But let me tell you something, *it was really fucking hard*.”

I love the carefree chuckle that comes from her throat, her eyes filled with pride.

“I’m happy to keep you entertained, Mr. Carrillo.”

Her new nickname for me has me moaning against her lips. “Oh, you make me so horny for you, baby. But you know what would turn me on even more than you calling me Mr. Carrillo?”

She hums in question, her sizzling lips brushing over mine.

“Mrs. Carrillo.”

Her lashes snap up, the same lust I saw at dinner now back in its full glory.

“Can’t wait for that,” she says, before stealing my breath with her kiss.

CRISTINA

TWO YEARS AGO

I'm waiting in the restaurant, a little anxious because I know Kane will not make this easy on me. Liam made it perfectly clear that Kane doesn't like me, but though the feeling is mutual, I don't want him taking Liam away from me. A lot stands or falls with this night, and I can't wait for it to be fucking over.

I'm not the nervous type, but I've been plucking the bread in the basket for five minutes, my napkin perfectly draped over my lap and my ankles tucked underneath the chair. I chose a black dress for tonight, one that's tight enough to show my curves but conservative enough to make me seem more respectable. I don't want to give Kane a reason to think I'm some kind of skimpy dressed gold-digger. But the more minutes pass, the more I regret not going for something a bit looser since it feels like the fabric's hugging me tighter with every move like a Boa constrictor.

Get a grip, Cristina. Kane Carrillo's got nothing on you. He can bark all he wants, but I grew up in the hills of Granada. I've grown up surrounded by street dogs. This big-mouthed

criminal can't fucking rile me up. No matter how infamous his reputation is.

Finally, I see both brothers walk into the room. They are hard to miss as the energy changes immediately, and every head spins in their direction. Their big strides are almost in slow motion as everyone fixates on their arrival. Liam is dressed in a gray dress shirt with his sleeves rolled up, and Kane's wearing a black t-shirt that almost looks like a unity with his tattooed arms. I can understand why people look up to them. I can understand why women would want their attention. They are a force to be reckoned with in every move they make, and I'll be smart to remember that. But like I said, I'm not impressed by barking dogs. It's when they start biting that my senses shift to high alert.

I wipe the breadcrumbs off my fingers, before I get up to plaster a wide smile on my lips, my hand sticking out in front of me.

“Kane, so nice to meet you. I'm Cristina.”

His intense energy stops in front of me, a smirk on his lips, and a glare in his eyes. Like I'm offering him a big bowl of *mierda*, he glances down to my hand, then snickers before taking a seat on the table.

I suppress the snarl that's itching to lift the corner of my lips. “That went well.” Liam steps in, pressing a kiss to my lips as his hands land on my hips. I count to two, then softly pull my mouth from his.

“You look gorgeous.”

“*Gracias*. Are you sure we should do this?” I give Kane a side glance, his light blue eyes still glaring at me as if he can turn me into ice.

“No. But hiding you from him would be even more stupid.”

“Right.” We take our seats at the table, and I’m a little surprised when Liam takes the seat next to his brother instead of the one next to me. An apologetic expression coming my way has me pressing my tongue to my cheek as I release the air from my lungs. I notice there is a slight dare in his eyes. As if he wants to test me.

Didn’t see that one coming. I thought Liam was on my team, but this indicates he’s on his brother’s, which is not something I was counting on. He was supposed to sit next to me, so we could form a front against his brother. After all, he’s the one who doesn’t trust *me*.

Not the other way around. Sorta.

I silently let Liam know I don’t appreciate this gang up, then suck in a deep breath to address the life of the party.

“So, Kane. How are you doing? I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“You can stop.” He nods. His arrogant ass is slumped in his chair, one of his arms draped over the back, while a shitload of something devious travels across his features.

He almost reminds me of Junior, that psychotic trait he can have. The one where he can smile at you like you’re the sweetest thing he’s ever seen, but then tear you apart the next second. I’ve only looked in his intimidating gaze for ten

seconds, but I can see it clear as fucking day: Kane Carrillo isn't just a dog. No, he's a vicious one. One of those breeds that will go for your throat and never let go, putting their jaw on lock.

I'm in deep shit, because the way he talks to me, I'm convinced he's decided to go for my neck.

"With what?" I ask with a kind smile while Liam hisses at the same time, "Kane!"

"This act. The one where you pretend to be into my brother. You suck at it."

I brace myself, knowing this is the time I prove my worth. "It's not an act, Kane. I genuinely like your brother." I like him a helluva lot more than you, at least.

"This isn't exactly *trying*, Kane," Liam warns with closed eyes.

"I'm not trying shit, Liam." His words are aimed at his brother, but Kane's eyes stay connected with mine. Sharp, glaring, and deadly if he gets the chance to wrap his hands around my neck, I'm certain. "I'm just calling this *puta* out on her bullshit."

"*Put*a?" I scoff. "I was raised amongst men that are far scarier than you are, Kane. If *puta* is all you got, I consider it a compliment."

"What's your angle?" He leans over the table, and I mimic his stance.

"I don't have an angle."

“You’re full of shit.”

“You’re paranoid.”

“I’m not blind.”

This isn’t going anywhere. Fighting him will only make him angrier, and if he’s angry, he will not let this go. He will find a way to destroy me and as much as I would love to play this little game with Kane Carrillo, I don’t have time for this.

“I like your brother.” It’s not even a lie. I like Liam. He’s handsome, he’s sweet, and he’s nothing like all the other criminal men in my life. Including Kane. There is a softness in Liam’s personality that makes him human.

“*Bullshit!*” Kane booms, loud enough to make everyone in the restaurant look our way. My gaze cuts from the corner of my eye to see every set staring at us now, before trailing back to Kane. “You are up to something, and I’m going to find out what the fuck it is!”

“Kane! That’s enough!” Liam finally sticks up for me, alleviating the weight on my chest. I understand he can’t go fully against his brother, since they already have more than enough friction about me, but it would’ve been nice if he had my back just a bit more. “You said you wanted to get to know her, not drill her like a fucking cross hearing.”

“And you don’t know me well enough if you thought that was true.”

Guilt washes Liam’s face, but I can’t really blame him. I guess if I was him, I would’ve tested myself as well. But I’m

not going to play their game. Not when my game is way more fun. If there is one thing I've learned growing up around barking dogs, the quieter you are, the louder they sound, and the more they look like rabies-infected strays.

The louder Kane yells, the more composed I look without even trying.

I relax my shoulders, letting my back fall against the chair as I give the pitbull in front of me a coy smile. "I know why you don't trust me, Kane. In fact, I can't really blame you. Growing up around Junior, I can understand why people are scared his sick behavior rubbed off on me. But to be honest? I'm so sick of everyone judging me for my last name." I keep a steady voice, doing everything in my power to not throw my glass of water in his face just for the hell of it. Just to make sure I look like the woman attacked by one of the most well-known criminals in the city. He's making a fool out of himself, and I'm only going to add to the dramatics by keeping my head cool. "I like Liam. And if Liam likes me back, I'm not going to stop dating him just because you have an issue with the rest of my family. I moved here to start over. Not to start a war between the Reyes and the Carrillos. Romeo and Juliet might be the most romantic love story of all time, but it's not exactly my style."

"Actually!" His grin is wide and wicked as he darts forward and jabs a combat knife down on the table next to my hand. I jolt in my seat, my heart jumping with me. "That's the best comparison, the only difference being in *this* story?" His eyes darken. "Juliet will be the only one that *dies* at the end."

I swallow, my heart pumping like it just got off a rollercoaster.

“Leave her the fuck alone, *jackass*.”

Something inside of me snaps, a string just cut loose by the menacing glare he’s giving me. He means it. I know he does, because I mean the next words that roll off my tongue just as much.

“You threaten me again, and I will rip your throat out with a smile on my face.” Unlike Kane, my voice is calm and collected, but when he snickers sinisterly, I understand he doesn’t care one bit.

“Ah, see, she’s crawling to the surface.”

“You don’t scare me.” I pick up my glass of wine to keep my hands busy, then take a big gulp. The fruity redness burns through my throat like a whiskey with how worked up I am.

“That’s your first mistake,” Kane snarls. His eyes turn almost black, his shoulders expanding even more as if he’s literally turning into a monster in front of me. The air’s thicker, the lump in my throat growing as I grind my teeth together. Never giving him the satisfaction of showing him the slight fear that he might actually kill me with an audience. “You should be really scared, *Reyes*. Because I’m the last one you want to see before you die. And if you double-cross my brother, you *will* die.”

“Kane, that’s enough!” Liam gets up, his glare drilling down at his brother, who keeps smiling at me like a fucking lunatic.

If there was any chance to win Kane over, I know now that option is useless. I need to put my focus on Liam, because he's clearly the only option.

"Watch your back, Reyes," Kane whispers, then gets up. His entire body comes forward, hanging over the table until he's only an inch away, pulling my glass from my hands. "Because I sure as fuck will be watching it." His breath flies over my cheeks, lifting the hairs on the back of my neck before he straightens his body and finishes my drink in one big swallow. Then he throws the empty glass on the table, connecting with the porcelain of the plates and shattering into a dozen pieces.

"Disgusting," he spits. "Just like you. Have a great night, *perrito*." He turns his body toward his big brother. "I'll see you later tonight."

"Just leave, asshole."

Kane does exactly that, leaving with their right-hand man and most of their team, while two of their men stay seated at the bar of the restaurant. My glare stays locked with their backs until they're out of sight, and I finally push out the breath that was trapped in my lungs.

Joder, I didn't expect Kane to be this angry. Sure, I knew I was going to have to win him over, but I didn't expect him to declare war before we could even order. Or call me a fucking *dog*. I need more eyes on him because I'm sure he's watching my every move after the way he just introduced himself.

"I'm sorry, baby." I lock eyes with Liam. "I really thought he wanted to get to know you."

“I didn’t.” A server comes to pick up the broken glass, but I swish him away. “Your brother has some serious anger issues.” I try to hide my raging heart or the desire to snap at Liam for not sticking up for me. But I have to be really careful right now, so I stick to my disappointed stance. There is a big chance half of this restaurant will report back to Kane if I turn into a raging bitch as soon as Kane has lifted his heels, just to get in the crime lord’s good graces, and I need everyone to see he’s the maniac attacking an innocent woman. Not the criminal that is correct for not trusting his brother’s new girlfriend.

“He does,” Liam concedes, offering me a slight smile. “Let’s just order, and then we’ll head to your place and crawl into bed. We’ll deal with Kane some other time.”

You’re damn right I’ll deal with Kane some other time. In fact, he’ll have no idea what he’s signing up for. I might be a woman, but this woman doesn’t let anyone intimidate her. I will get back at him for embarrassing me the way he did, but Liam is right. Not now.

“I’m really not hungry anymore.” I am fucking starving, but I don’t really feel like looking into Liam’s face and pretending everything is fine. The adrenaline is still pumping through my veins, and I need to get out of here. There is no way I can keep up this sweet smile when I want to snap at everyone just to release my roaring energy.

My lips curl and I muster out a tear. “I’m tired. I just want to go home. *Alone.*” That’s probably not what he wanted to

hear, but since I was just verbally attacked by his brother, I'm sure he'll forgive me. I'm not in the mood to put up with Liam either.

“Don't cry.”

“This is stressing me out, Liam.”

“I understand.”

I shoot him a grateful look, then get up to gather my things, Liam never taking his eyes off me.

“Are you sure?” he questions once more with relentless puppy eyes that fill me with irritation.

One final time, I conjure a smile before I round the table and press a kiss to his lips. It's gentle enough to make him believe everything is all right, but long enough to fire up that manly testosterone that's always in the mood for pussy.

“This wore me out. I'm just going to run a bath and go to bed, okay? I'll call you in the morning,” I say, before I walk out of the restaurant.



The truth is, Kane Carrillo doesn't wear me out. If anything, he ignites a fire inside of me that no man ever has been able to do. In the worst way possible. He makes me want to kill, to torture. The entire time I had to endure his smug grin, combined with the cold coming from his light blue eyes, I wanted to slice his neck and watch him bleed to death.

I'm not scared of Kane Carrillo. The only fear I hold is that he manages to convince Liam that whatever the fuck we have isn't real, demolishing all the time I've invested in this shit. I can't have that and I need to find a solution for this, *rápido*.

With a scowl set on my cheeks, I stomp down the street, thinking of a way to fix this. The most ideal solution would be to win Kane over somehow, but the permanent look of disdain on his face when he entered the restaurant tonight tells me that will be not even worth a try. Maybe we can create something I can help him with. Maybe a fake threat I can bring to his attention and that way gain his trust.

I need to call Junior and see if he can think of anything. Although I doubt the thickhead will have any better ideas than me. He might think he's the brain of our duo, but unless men stop thinking with their dicks, that'll never be the case.

I pull out my phone from my golden clutch and dial Junior. Each ring adds to my aggravation when he doesn't pick up.

"*Joder*," I mutter, shoving it back where I found it.

"Is he hard to reach?" A man finds his way directly in my path, and I freeze on the spot, my eyes narrowing as I run them down his body. He's broad. Tattoos cover both his arms, not a blank space left on his mocha-shaded skin. A thick beard covers his entire jaw, but I imagine it to be sharp when I think of what he would look like without the hair on his face. It's a deep brown, darker than the light brown that sits on top of his head, but not as dark as his eyebrows that are raised in question.

“Excuse me?” I try to decipher if he’s a friend or foe, hoping his attire will give me more clues, but other than his combat boots, nothing about his black shirt and dark jeans screams recognition.

“Your cousin.” He points to my phone, now hidden in my clutch. “Junior, right? He didn’t pick up his phone?” There is something hypnotizing about his green eyes that makes the air change around me. Electrifying, and clarifying, while at the same time making it hard for me to breathe. His gaze shamelessly trails up and down my entire stance, goosebumps appearing as if he’s touching me. When he lets his eyes drop, he locks his gaze with mine once more.

“Do I know you?”

“No,” he clarifies, taking a step closer. “But I know *you*.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes.” Another step. “Cristina Reyes.” Step. “Niece of Frank Reyes.” Step. “Cousin of Junior and Callie Reyes.” And then he’s nothing more than a few inches away from me, evading my space like he belongs there. Normally, I wouldn’t tolerate anyone in my personal space without my permission, but for some reason, my feet stay rooted, and I can’t will them to take action.

“You know, your cousin has a big price on his head.” The man smirks, and boy, I wish he hadn’t done that. A swarm of something flies through my stomach, my heart drumming with a force that makes me believe it wants to jump out and into his

arms. But the sizzling feeling in my bones has me almost high as a kite, just sensing his vibrant energy so close to mine.

Sucking in a deep breath, I square my shoulders, lifting my chin to appear unaffected by this man's consuming energy.

"Is that so?"

He hums.

"Is it a big one? Can I buy myself a yacht if I turn him in?" I joke, feeling bold.

"Probably not. But enough to rent one for a few weeks."

"That doesn't cut it for me."

He takes another step closer, close enough for me to feel his breath on my lips and, unintentionally, my gaze drops to his. "No?"

"A girl like me has big needs."

"Big needs, huh? Anyone able to fill those big needs?" There is a playful glint in his eyes that could be mistaken for ill intentions, and I'm not sure which one it is, but I stay in place, too mesmerized by his tongue licking his lower lip as he waits for my response.

"Not so far."

"Not even Liam Carrillo?" I should've kept a straight face, but he caught me by surprise and even though I keep my features as still as possible, he still detects the slight widening of my eyes. "Yeah, I know all about the interest you keep lately. But I can see how your body responds to him."

He's been watching me?

“He doesn't make you feel things that you haven't before.” I swallow as our breaths mix, clouding my brain even more. “He doesn't make your thighs clench with need.” *What the fuck is happening?* “He doesn't make you desperate for more after he's fucked you.” He tilts his head a bit back to lock our eyes. “Doesn't he?”

“Who are you?” I croak out, unable to say anything else.

“Are you part of it?” he asks, his gaze still drilling into my body. “Are you part of their network? Rumor is, you're the recruiter. You find the girls and tear them from their homes to sell them like livestock. Is it true?”

I look for the judgment in his words, but even though he doesn't seem particularly happy with it, I can't find any other than an attempt to taunt me.

“Silence is a virtue. I guess it is.” With a smirk, he takes a few steps back, chuckling. “I'll see you around, Cristina.” I watch him move toward a car on the side of the curb, an all black new Mustang. The windows are tinted, making it impossible for me to see who's behind the wheel.

“Are you a bounty hunter?” My brain manages to still ask before he lowers himself into the car. Our eyes collide, his grin expanding.

“Something like that.”

He gets in and the roaring engine attacks my senses. I can't see his face through the glass, but I can still feel his gaze set

on mine, pinning me in place. And for what feels like forever, my feet stay completely cemented, until the car is long out of sight and a cold breeze wills me forward.

What the fuck?

IMOGEN

PRESENT DAY

I sit against the doorpost of the bathroom, staring at my phone while I look at the picture of Callie and I a few years back. We're out in the club and the picture is blurred, but our smiles are clear as day.

Our lives have never been completely carefree, but it's funny how part of me wishes we could go back to those moments. To just relive them one more time, appreciating them more now that we know how even more fucked up the world really is.

I'm not as bothered by Cristina being on the yacht as I was before. In my mind, she shrank to pea-size proportions, and I finally realized I have no reason to be intimidated by her. If anything, she just keeps showing how sad and pathetic she is when she tries to feed us lies like wanting Liam back.

She doesn't want him. I don't need anyone confirming that, not even Liam. I can see it in the depths of her dark eyes; there is nothing but lies and defeat. She has no clue what love is, and with her frame of mind, I doubt she'll ever get it. Everything is conditional with her. It must be very bleak and

lonely living your life like that, and sometimes I even feel sorry for her. But never for long. Not when I am fully aware of what she did to Callie and how she tried to kill Liam. And especially not when she's trying to piss me off with her taunts. I'm not surprised I'm her favorite person to torment, not when she wants to convince Liam that she wants him back, but it still makes it that much harder to not strangle her every time she catches me alone.

“Why are you staring at your phone like your puppy just died?”

I glance up at Liam closing the bedroom door behind him. He's wearing basketball shorts and a tank, his forehead still damp from his workout. As I take in his delicious body like he's cake on legs, a giddy feeling makes my chest twang. The past few days definitely haven't been as carefree as most of our time together, but waking up next to this piece of man and knowing he's all mine sure as hell keeps me smiling as much as I can.

“And why are you sitting on the floor?” he adds, bending over to give me a kiss.

“I like sitting on the floor. I just got off the phone with Callie.”

“Any news?” He walks into the bathroom, and I hear him turn on the shower.

“Nothing yet.”

“Thought so. Jeremy has no clues that lead to Babushka either. I hope Reign can work his magic soon.”

“Yeah, me too.” If there’s anyone who can find Babushka before we need to trade her for that diamond Cristina is after, it’s Reign. I remember back in the day how he would get dirt on people for Ronnie Distucci in a matter of seconds. Give the man a device with an internet connection and he knows where you’re born and what you had for dinner when you were fifteen before you can blink. Cristina must be playing a good game if Reign hasn’t found Babushka yet.

Liam reaches for my arm as he stands in the doorway, softly tucking me back on my feet with a soft expression.

“Come here. What’s wrong, baby?” He holds my face in his hands while I pull him against my chest with my fingers clasped around the fabric of his shorts. He smells sweaty, but I can still detect a hint of his musky scent coming through, and I suck in a deep breath of contentment. I’m tempted to ignore his question as I arch my back toward him.

“Nothing. I guess I just miss Callie,” I confess, and he pushes a strand of my hair behind my ear. “It would just be easier to have her around, you know?”

“I understand. I’m sure they will be home soon. Are you sure that’s all?”

I nod. “Yeah, I’m just having a day.” Really, I’m a little frustrated that we have no idea when this whole Cristina bullshit will be over, but I quickly remind myself that at least

I'm not alone. At least I have Liam who does a pretty damn good job of keeping me occupied.

“You want me to make it better?” Liam smirks.

“What do you have in mind?”

He replies by pulling my shirt over my head before he dives into my neck.

“A lot, baby.” I moan when I feel his lips touch the sensitive skin, then moving lower toward my nipples, each kiss more feverish, causing my thighs to clench together. I close my eyes, cataloging every inch his lips touch. It's like his lips are a magnet to the parts that ignite all the good feelings in my body, and the moment he touches it with a goal, I'm gone. Drifting off to a utopia that's controlled and owned by Liam Carrillo.

“I hate pink.” Liam pushes my pastel bra down, taking my breast into his mouth. “But I love it when I'm peeling it off your body.”

I slip my fingertips under his shirt, grazing with my fingernails, waiting for the groan that comes with it. I know he loves it when I push my nails into his skin, clawing him like I'm visibly staking a claim.

I am. I want my marks all over his back every time he walks on the deck with a bare chest. I want the world to see who he's fucking at night, but mostly, and I know it's petty, but I don't care; I want Cristina to see. I want her to have a visible reminder of the girl Liam gave his heart to, a silent *fuck you*

and evidence that her plan isn't working. But I think Liam wants it too because I haven't seen him walking around without a shirt this many times the entire summer.

“Hmm, tell me what you want to do to me,” I hum against his hair while I run my hands through it. It's still damp, but I don't care. Moving my head to the side, I revel in the shivers that tremble through me as he swirls his tongue around my nipple. His hands explore every inch of my body, leaving goosebumps in his wake when he moves them to another place. This man fogs my head within seconds, completely corrupting me in every single way. He makes me want to do stuff with him I've never done before, like have sex in public, or even that goddamn dining room upstairs. The first time he mentioned it, I was looking at him like he was crazy, but ever since he planted that seed in my head, I've been picturing myself butt naked on that glass table while he runs his tongue through my folds.

The man is responsible for my dirty mind, I swear.

I'm not complaining either, though.

“How about I'll talk you through it?” He drops to his knees, dragging down my yoga leggings along with my panties, demanding me to step out of them with a tap on the thigh. I pull off my soft pink sports bra, throwing it across the room so that I'm standing completely naked in front of him. With my back still pressed against the doorpost, my knees are slightly bent, waiting in anticipation for his next move with a coy expression. I like being his dirty girl. I like the one who obeys

his orders, knowing they are nothing more than a way to give me pleasure. Before Liam, I never found a man who could give me the best of both worlds. They were either too set on making love to me, every move tender, or it was nothing more than sex. Rough, fast, and over quicker than I wanted.

But Liam? Liam's way of pleasuring me balances on a fine chord of something between lust and love. He can cherish me with the tips of his fingers, lick me tenderly with each flick of his tongue, before he fucks me raw until I'm on the brink of exploding. He knows exactly what I want without me telling him, and I think it's the reason why I have no issues letting him take control as soon as our clothes come off.

“Spread your legs and show me your dripping cunt. Because I know you're dripping for me, Blondie.” He glances up at me with hunger, before he smiles directly at my pussy when I follow his command. A lick of his lips has me swallowing, eager for him to kiss me between my legs. But instead, he likes to tease me some more, pushing two fingers into his mouth, coating them with his saliva. “Stand still while I rub your slickness all over your sweet pussy. You're not allowed to move, got it?” His blue eyes have darkened to the shade of the night sky when he looks back up at me again, and I nod my head, up for the challenge, as my lips part.

Boy, was that a mistake.

He runs his wet fingers through my folds and instantly, my legs want to buckle down in defeat, silently wishing I wasn't standing against a doorpost but lying on the bed. Every muscle

in my body wants to sink into a soft mattress and relax completely under his touch, but the fact that my lower body is tensed up to stay in place only adds to the sensation of every swipe of his tongue.

“Oh, fuck.”

“Stand still, baby. Let me enjoy what’s mine.” He softly circles my bundle of nerves with his thumb, and I gasp. “Stand still and I’ll reward you.” Liam chuckles while he keeps sliding up and down my entrance.

“Fucking hell, Liam.” My senses are all prickled alive to a level that already has my quads aching, and my center begging him for more. I close my eyes, resting my head against the wood as I enjoy every moment of his touch while I try to keep my body as still, knowing I’m close to failing. I feel him slip another finger inside of me, my walls stretching around him as he works his way around me like he needs to paint every part of my pussy with his saliva.

In his defense, he does. He needs to keep going, keep moving, while I hold myself up with my hands above my head. I feel naked and exposed, yet worshiped like a goddess at the same time. I’m still amazed by the response my body has to this man, even though we’ve been sleeping together for months. It’s like he has the code to my body, one single key in possession of Liam Carrillo and no one else.

His fingers dip in and out, alternating by circling my entrance at a burning pace that makes me want to scream for

him to go faster, but I keep my mouth shut because the feeling is just so damn good.

“You like that, baby?”

I let out nothing more than a moan. I think. I don't know what's leaving my mouth at this point, completely lost for words.

“What about this? Your dirty cunt likes this?” Before I can reply, I feel how his tongue spreads me wide as it moves flatly from bottom to top until he reaches my clit. My legs falter, my head snapping forward with big eyes. He has me gasping for air while he keeps fingerfucking me, then encloses his lips over my throbbing clit.

“She loves it,” I huff, then plead, “Fuck, don't stop.”

He softly sucks my sensitive nub. Everything around me seems to drown out. Every nerve in my body is set on high alert as my hands run through his sweaty hair. He keeps sucking and flicking my button at a steady pace and it doesn't take long before I feel the tension building in my muscles, euphoria right around the corner.

As if he can feel my need, he gives me a few more open-mouthed kisses between my legs.

“Use me, sexy. I want to taste you squirting on my tongue.” I glance down, catching him with his tongue hanging from his mouth and eyes that leave nothing to the imagination. He's there at my disposal, and I'm not going to be told twice.

I grab his hair like his strands are reins and start moving my hips over his tongue in the most delicious way. I angle each move so I get full stimulation with just one mission, falling from that goddamn cliff. He moans against my pussy like he's enjoying this just as much as I am, and when I drop my gaze down with hooded eyes, I see exactly that. The glint he's throwing at me is filled with nothing but pure amusement. I throw my head back when the sight of his tongue between my wet lips does me in.

“YES!” I scream, followed by a set of uncontrolled mewls as I feel trembles of pleasure slam through me, almost knocking me out while a splash of my juices coats his face. My lashes fly up, as another current pulls me under, the sight of his face shiny with my arousal taking my breath away. I don't think I've seen anything hotter than Liam Carrillo's face, completely soaked from my cunt. He catches me when my legs finally collapse next to his hips, before pressing a kiss to my lips with a big grin. His tongue pushes against mine and the sultry taste instantly has me grinding against his stomach. I need more. The way he enjoyed my pussy like it was a five-course meal, only made me hornier, now desperate to keep floating in this blissful wave. I need to feel him inside of me, pressing his entire body against mine.

“I want more,” I tell him breathily, in a pleased daze as he holds me up on my knees. The sound of my voice is faint, lost somewhere when it dropped to my stomach the moment he made me leave my body.

“You didn’t think I was done, right?” He wraps my legs around his waist, my soaking pussy staining his shirt as he lifts us both to get up. With big strides, he brings us under the shower, our mouths crushed against each other’s with a need that’s almost palpable. Like wild animals with the only mission to consume one another in every way possible. Or until one dies of a heart attack. I know I’m younger, but the way my heart is racing, so I’m pretty sure it’s going to be me. The hot water has me gasping against his throat before my back connects with the cold tiles, the heat of the shower covering my legs as he stands directly underneath the stream. He kisses me with immeasurable passion, the feeling of his clothes now soaked from the stream and glued to his body, turning me on even more. Fully emerged into our own bubble, I hold his face steady between my palms, my tongue rough and demanding against his.

“I want you so bad, Liam.”

“Good, because I’m not keen on being patient any longer.”

When he breaks loose, he puts me down, stepping back to take off his clothes. His eyes never leave mine, and I, being the horny slut that I am, feel how cold and alone my vagina is without his body heat in front of my entrance. With a seductive grin, I take out the handheld showerhead and spread my legs while pushing the button to turn it on.

His shirt falls to the floor with a thud and when his eyes fly back to mine, he stands statue still with a dark expression. One

that makes me want to be devoured by this man until I'm torn into pieces.

“What are you doing?” he croaks out.

“Entertaining myself while you're busy.” I shrug sweetly. I push the head between my legs, and my eyes roll to the back of my head when the stream hits my clit directly. It's still sensitive, but the stream has just enough water pressure to act both soothing as stimulating, and I quickly my eyes roll to the back of my head.

“Oh, damn!” I moan before my gaze collides with Liam and his heaving chest. The look on his face tells me he's about to come undone, and I enjoy every second of his lustful gaze on my pussy. I play with my breasts, while my hips wiggle for more, and finally, he snaps out of his trance to shove off his shorts. I expect him to take me and forcefully slide inside, but he's still standing there in front of me, naked and looking gorgeous as hell as I keep going, my clit already ready to lift me to that addictive high like I'm a fucking nymphomaniac. My eyes drop to his throbbing length, debating whether to get on my knees and suck him off or taunt him a little more as I wait for him to say something.

Anything.

But instead, he just stands there, clearly enjoying the show as I keep moving the stream up and down my heated pussy. His entire body is chiseled to perfection, his blonde hair covering half of his forehead in a wet look that I think I want to frame and put next to my bed.

“What are *you* doing?” I huff with my lashes low.

“Enjoying the view.” He blinks at me in awe, widening my smile.

My man likes it when I take control and tease him.

Good to know.

I keep going, flicking the stream up and down my pussy with a clear goal in mind, as my eyes never leave Liam’s. My breathes grow more shallow with each flip of my wrist, making it unable for me to stop.

“Liam,” I pant, “it feels so good.”

“Keep going, baby.”

“I don’t want to hold it,” I confess, already too far gone to miss a beat as I chase the explosion I’ve been working for.

His gaze darkens, his lip lifting in a hungry grin. “Don’t hold back on my account, Blondie. I’m enjoying the show.”

His tongue darts out, licking his lips slowly and with intention, the move pushing me over the edge as my head falls forward and my knees shake. I cry out my euphoria, feeling every nerve tingling, my skin trembling, before I collapse onto the wet tiles. A high-pitched tone erupts from my throat while I wait until my body lands, then I pull my head back up.

I’d expect to be completely spent, ready for a hot shower and a freaking nap, but the dark look in his eyes has me craving to set him off like he did me. To feel his seed on my tongue as I make him come undone.

“Get on the floor,” I command. His eyebrow lifts in surprise, but he obeys with keenness as he gets on his knees. His hard shaft is up in the air and ready to go and I lick my lips, just thinking about feeling him between my legs. The anticipation almost killing me. But first I want to taste him, my taste buds desperate to suck up his flesh.

“Put your back against the wall.”

He does as he’s told, watching my every move as I step toward him. I drop to the floor, enjoying the sight of this man waiting for me with as much built-up desire as I’m feeling. Without wasting any time, I raise my ass up in the air, feeling the hot water warm my spine in utter bliss before we both let out a groan of relief when I take him in my mouth. With long, even strokes, I run my mouth up and down his shaft, spurred on by every moan that vibrates from his chest. The desire between my legs is still throbbing, only growing even needier when he leans a bit over to rub his fingers over my swollen pussy.

I moan against his dick, the tip almost touching the back of my throat before I release it with a pop each time, then repeat the move.

“Oh, goddamnit, baby,” Liam grunts. “I’m going to come.”

I keep going in reply, silently telling him to give into his release, but he fists my hair, bringing my head up. My lips let go of his hard shaft with a pout, my hooded eyes looking at him with gooey eyes in protest.

“I wanna dump my seed inside of you, knowing it will be sitting there all day,” he says lowly, making a delicious shiver run through me. Then he pulls my scalp to direct me up and onto his lap. The sting is deep as he arches my back, like I’m a fucking bull he’s riding, but I enjoy every move. I want to be dominated by him, fully at his disposal.

“Sit,” he orders, reinforcing his grip to put action in his command, and I do as I’m told. I draw in a breath when I feel how easily my body adjusts to his firmness as I pull my lower lip between my teeth.

His hands wrap around my back, our torsos glued together. When his lips find mine, I slowly move my hips up and down. His sounds are feral, spurring me on like a bronco as I enjoy his cock gliding through my perceptive walls.

“You are so gorgeous,” he huffs against my lips, pushing my wet hair out of my face. Our bodies are completely melting together, our skin slick, only adding to the sensations. We move as one, kissing with every move like we can’t breathe without the other. The sound of the water collapsing against the tiles drowns out our moans, but the vibration of each one of them is felt in every muscle of my body.

My clit is brushed by every shift of my hips, and his grunts and groans are getting more desperate as I keep going. They act like motivation, feeding my urge to feel him lose himself inside of me. To unload the tension we’re both feeling. His hands dig into me with a bruising grip, telling me he’s close, and I throw more force into my hips.

“Touch me,” I cry.

His thumb connects with my clit as I grind up and down his shaft, and rapidly, my hips tense. “Make me come.” My plea is needy, and he’s nothing more than obliging when he cups my cheek, bringing his lips to mine while he circles my most sensitive spot with surgical precision. “Yes, keep going. Don’t stop. *Please, don’t stop.*” My movements are becoming more frantic, the tone coming from my throat filled with despair. All I can think about is how much I need this man in every single way. How he ruins me for every other man, completely claiming me with every touch of his hand.

Still sensitive from the first two times, it doesn’t take long before my legs are shaking, as my orgasm surges through me with as much delight as torture. His thumb leaves my folds as he lets me ride out my release, my up and down movements slowing a bit. When I come back from my high, my eyes lock with his. They are laced with lust, but also a sense of nothing more than pleasure that he can please me. Satisfaction I’m giving him indirectly. The sight of his expression is beautiful and makes me determined to let him shatter underneath my hips.

I press a harsh kiss to his lips, my forehead against his.

“You’re amazing.”

“You’re amazing,” he counters, biting my lip.

“I’m about to show you how amazing I am.” Without waiting for his reply, I move my body down his full length, each sway of my hips more scorching than the last.

“Fucking hell, baby.” He shuts his eyes. Resting his head against the tiles, he bites his lips, sweet little moans coming from his throat as I keep going. “Oh, God. You feel so good.”

“It’s Gen, baby,” I tease, latching onto his neck and biting his earlobe. The action causes him to shudder underneath me. My will to make him explode has me bouncing harder and harder, until his grunts turn into curses and mindless praise for me, and his hands on my body take hold, lifting me up and down at the pace he’s setting. My legs are burning, and right at the moment I think I can’t take any more, his teeth dig into my shoulder, a roar echoing in my ear. He unloads his release inside of me as I hold still to give him the final pumps he needs before he goes completely limp. His arms are still firmly circled around my back when he drags me to the floor, my weight on top of him as he tries to catch his breath with his body pressed against the wet tiles.

“Motherfucker,” he whispers in my ear.

Sassy as he makes me, I lift my chin, resting it on his chest. “Nah, it’s *Liam-fucker*.”

The full laughter that rumbles through him expands my chest and widens my cheeks until they can’t go any farther.

“You’re damn right it is,” he says before he presses a kiss to my forehead.

CRISTINA

TWO YEARS

I treated myself to some new heels yesterday, but the more steps I take down the pavement, the more I regret it. After a long day of events to look for potential models for the next shipment, they are fucking killing me, and my mood along with it. There should be a rule where \$500 shoes are instantly comfy. I want to walk on clouds for that kind of money *and* look fucking amazing. Though the latter I can still pull off wearing sneakers and a sweatsuit.

My phone rings in my purse, and I rummage through to get it.

Liam.

Yay.

With aggravation fluttering my lashes, accompanied by a big grunt, I conjure a smile on my face like I'm the happiest woman in the world. I hate that cliché is true, but I learned that *fake it until you make it* is a legit thing, so putting a smile on is the only option right now.

“Hey, baby,” I greet him through the phone while I keep my steps steady. The sun has already set, the twilight dimming the streets. A breeze makes my black hair dance while I roam the streets, just to make sure he’s not around somewhere before I start telling him shit. He surprised me more than once in the last few weeks, claiming to be *romantic*. He can skip that shit as far as I’m concerned, but *Cristina-who-broke-with-her-family* seems to really dig it. I hate her, and I can’t wait for the day to come when she can get buried again alongside her boyfriend.

“I miss you,” he drools through the phone, and my eyes automatically roll to the back of my head, before I swipe my cheeks back up into a swooning smile.

“I miss you too.” Ugh, I swear she’s disgusting.

“How about I pick you up and we go for dinner? We can watch that TV show when we get back?”

That TV show is the latest season of the Bachelor. I pretend to like it because apparently everybody is watching it now, but really it makes my skin crawl in the worst way. It’s pathetic how all these women fight to get a snippet of attention from some *hombre*. It’s like all these women like to be suppressed by men, always treating them as the superior species. A guy should fight for me. Not the fucking other way around. *Por supuesto*, now I’m stuck watching every *stupido* episode of that show while Liam is trying to be the supportive boyfriend. Just like he asks me how my day was every single day. In fact,

he should stop being so fucking lovey dovey because he looks like a goddamn pussy.

“No, not tonight. I’m tired.”

“Really? Rough day?” See! Told you. It’s not just the question, it’s also the level of sympathy it’s laced with. It makes me wanna barf.

“It was fine, but I’m just tired, and think I’m going to get to bed early.”

“You want me to come to join you? Need me to come make it better? Maybe a bottle of wine and a foot rub?”

Please fucking don’t. “Not tonight, okay? But maybe we can grab some dinner tomorrow?” I silently pray he will agree because my foul mood can’t keep up with his puppy behavior much longer.

“Ah, come on, sweetheart. We can—” His voice trails off when I hear a beep in my ear, and I lower the device in my hand to check the screen.

Saved by the fucking bell.

“I’m sorry, baby,” I cut him off. “Someone from work is calling; I really need to take this. We’ll talk tomorrow, okay? Bye!” I hear him mutter something through the phone, but I ignore it, anxious to end this annoying and pointless conversation.

“You don’t even know how happy I am to hear your voice,” I say after I answer the phone.

“¿*Por que?*” Junior cackles.

“Because I was on the phone with our blonde friend, and he bores me to death.” At first, playing Liam Carrillo was easy. I went on a few dates, let him stick his dick inside of me a few times, and voila, I was his girlfriend. Now, all I have to do was wait for the perfect opportunity to get him out of this city and isolated from his brother. But so far, he doesn’t leave the city without Kane and the longer we’re ‘together,’ the more serious he becomes. He’s suffocating me without an end in sight, and it’s starting to piss me off.

“Ah, *primita*, you don’t like your new boyfriend?” I’m sure he’s showing the whites of his teeth wherever he is, because the amusement is clear in his voice.

“Next time, you’re the one who’s going to do all the work.”

“¿*Que?* I am doing the work! I’m poaching wherever I can. All we need is to get them out of the way, and the transition should go smoothly.”

“That is, if we ever get him away from his obnoxious brother.”

“It will happen, Crissy. You have to hang in there a little while longer.”

“That’s easy for you to say!” I snarl. “You don’t have to kiss the guy—” My words die when I lock eyes with the man in front of me.

De-ja-fucking-vu.

He's standing broad, acting like a thick wall that isn't simply going to let me pass. His green eyes are freezing me to the spot, my throat turning dry while the blood seems to pump faster through my veins.

"Cris? Are you still there?"

"I have to go. I'll call you later." I hang up the phone, not sure what to do next.

A smirk comes my way, and I hate how handsome he is.

Who the fuck is this guy?

"You again," I say, putting on a mask of indifference as I take a tentative step forward. I have no clue what this man's game is. Is he after me? Following me? Do we have a common enemy in the Carrillos? Or does he secretly work for them and is he one big test? He seems like a threat, but not big enough for me to get into fighting mode.

"Me again." He mimics my move as he closes the distance until there isn't much more than two feet between us. This time he's wearing a black and gray flannel, flexing his muscles from under his rolled-up sleeves with every step. His woody cologne enters my nose and imprints itself into my brain, the scent forever linked to the bulk of a man in front of me. He looks dangerous, and even though I don't think he will hurt me, he makes me feel both unhinged and confused, which can be even more dangerous in the wrong situations. "How are you doing, Cris?"

"It's Cristina."

“Oh, I know. But I don’t care.”

“What do you want?” I blink, trying to keep my focus and my distance. My body’s reacting like a magnet, dying to press his body against mine. Dying to find out what his lips will taste like and how his bearded jaw would feel against my neck.

“How is your boyfriend?”

“Jealous?”

“Yes.” His honesty surprises me, and I narrow my eyes at him. Is he hitting on me? Is he really some stalker with an obsession for me?

“Why?” I swallow.

“Because he has no clue what you want.” A strand of my hair ends up between his fingers as he plays with it. “He has no clue what you *need*.” His words shiver down my spine. “But then again, that’s not really his fault, since you’re not really showing who you really are, are you? You’re just selling him the version that he wants to see. The woman that wants a loving family and a stable life in New Jersey. Tell me, babe. Do you really want to have kids?”

“Fuck no.” I realize my mistake even before both words have left my lips, my eyes widening a bit. What the fuck is wrong with me? I have no issues holding up my act when it comes to Liam Carrillo, but this stranger asks the right questions and gets answers from me that I’m not supposed to

give. Answers that are none of his business. Yet I share them with him like he's part of my inner circle.

He seems pleased with that answer. "He's boring you, isn't he?"

I fill my lungs with air, taking a moment before I make the same mistake and answer with the truth instead of the answer he deserves. "That's none of your business."

"True. But I'm just interested."

My mind has a hard time keeping up, but I stay calm, holding his gaze, waiting a few seconds before I roll my eyes. "I'm getting bored of this game. Just tell me what you want?"

He abruptly grabs my hip, tucking me against his chest as his lips find their way to my ear. The move has my heart pounding like it wants to jump out of my chest, and I freeze under his touch. My insides are burning like lava.

"Liar," he whispers. "You love this game."

This man sees right through me, and I don't even know who he is.

"But okay"—he lets go of me, a stern expression on his rugged face this time—"you want to skip the pleasantries? Fine. I want Junior."

I chuckle. "Good luck with that, but you'll never find him."

"Yeah, I will, babe. Because at some point, you'll have to meet up with him, and I'll be waiting for the moment. I found you, haven't I? I will find him too." He takes a smug step

back, a little swagger in his move. “Just think about it. You don’t need Junior Reyes, and you know it.”

“I will never betray Junior.” Though he is right. I don’t need Junior, Junior needs me.

“It’s not betraying him if he’s dead, right?” He’s about two yards away and still growing the distance with every step.

“Why do you want him dead?”

“I don’t. I want him alive until I’ve collected my money for him.” He shrugs. “After that? I don’t give a damn what happens to him. Have a good night, Cristina.” He spins on his heel, turning his back to me as he saunters down the pavement, leaving me confused on the streets once more.

“Who are you?” I finally manage to call out to his back.

But he just gives me a smirk from over his shoulder, ignoring me while I watch him disappear around the corner.

I need to find out who the fuck he is.

LIAM

PRESENT DAY

“Can’t sleep?” My attention snaps to the double doors, the sultry voice of the woman I hate welcoming me like an ice bucket on a winter’s day. With a silent sigh, I turn my focus back to my glass, not giving her a second glance.

The soft breeze of the night ruffles my hair a tad as I take another sip, letting the amber liquid brush my tongue. I savor its taste like it’s the most magnificent thing in the world while I do my best to ignore the rigidity that’s traveling into my muscles.

I’m trying to not let Cristina get to me. To not even give her the satisfaction of me hating her, implying that I care by giving her more of an emotion than indifference. But the fact that she’s strolling around our yacht, taunting Gen like she’s one of her personal toys—well, it makes it hard to stay calm and collected about it all.

“You’re going to ignore me now?” I can see her smirk from the corner of my eye, her long legs moving closer with every step until she places herself on the stretcher beside me. Her gaze burns into mine as I keep staring into my glass, her knees

facing my side to make it perfectly clear her attention is fixated on me and nothing else.

“Should’ve done that years ago.”

“Maybe,” she opts. “But then we wouldn’t have the good times either.”

“There was no good time when it came to you.” It was nothing more than a puppet show with me as the fucking one-man audience. I see that now. My ego wants to believe it was real, but my heart keeps comparing it with what I have with Gen. And it’s not even close to what I had with Cristina. Looking back at those memories used to cause me pain, but now they are just empty shells. Hollow and harsh. They may have looked pretty, but that’s all it was.

“You don’t believe that.”

“Every fucking word.” My head rears until I lock my eyes with hers. They glitter under the light of the moon, the dark of the night bringing out the little golden specks as they dance around her irises. They are laced with mischief. Once upon a time, they turned me on, thinking she was a wild child that loved to play. I adored her lack of shame and how she was classy on the street, but a hellcat in the sheets. But now, I see those eyes for what they truly are; witch eyes, that can compel you like a siren if you’re not being careful enough.

“I’m sorry I hurt you.” Her features soften, a hint of a smile smoothing her pinched mouth, and my nostrils flare at the sight of it. I don’t want her anymore. I don’t. But still, my mind wanders to the moments that felt real for me. When she

woke up in my arms or poured me a glass of wine after a long day, greeting me with a flashing smile when I walked through the door. I still want to dig into her brain and pick out all the moments we had to see if any of them made her as happy as they made me. If she had any doubts about betraying me the way she did.

“You don’t mean that.” I dismiss her, facing forward again. The sigh that follows from her chest is deep and heavy, and I close my eyes, trying to filter her out. My shoulders are tense, still on high alert with Cristina in my presence. I know she needs us, giving me the confidence she won’t try to hurt me, but this is the woman who sold me out to her psychotic cousin after I thought she cared about me. I don’t know how to feel. My mind ping-pongs like a pinball machine.

I hear her get up and my eyes lift to hers. She licks her lips in that seductive way I’ve come to know all too well, speeding up my heart rate as she reaches out to cup my cheek.

Vigorously, I snap her wrist, keeping her from touching me with a scowl set on my jaw.

Unbothered by my anger, she smoothly lifts her leg over mine, lowering herself over my groin until she’s straddling me. My organs feel like the life is sucked out of them, my pulse throbbing with velocity at her invasion of my personal space.

“Don’t you get it, Liam?” Her black hair frames her cheeks when she brings her face forward, close enough for me to notice the beauty spot on her cheekbone. I can smell a hint of her vanilla perfume, a scent that used to intoxicate me

whenever I brought my lips to her neck. Swallowing, I wait for my mind to get clouded, but luckily for me, it doesn't happen. "I mean every word of it."

"Bullshit," I spit, still holding a tight grip on her wrist.

The air whooshes from her lungs with a sad gaze, resting her free hand on my neck. Her touch feels scorching and dirty, but it also reminds me of how she felt when I was inside of her, and when she conveniently settles herself deeper onto my lap, I can't help my dick from stirring alive. Thumb strokes below my ear are giving me a hard time to concentrate, but I hold her attention, ignoring the small shifts as she starts to grind over me.

"It was Junior." Her voice sounds small and filled with regret. "He forced me to help him. You know what he was like." Boldly, she pushes her forehead against mine, sucking me right back into her arms without effort. I let go of her wrist, giving her free rein to hold my head as I place my glass on the table next to me. Her tiny movements are growing a desire between my legs I shouldn't feel, but I can't seem to fight it. And it's pissing me off.

"I do know what he was like."

"He threatened me. Threatened mí mamá. I didn't know what to do." I filter out the despair in her words as her face closes in on mine with every drift of her hips. My lips part, my breathing growing heavy at the sensation she builds inside of me.

“Tell me you believe me.” Her red lips hover above mine, our noses brushing. My hand slides into her hair, cupping the back of her head.

“Please, you have to believe me. My feelings for you were real. I’ve been wanting to see you and tell you for so long.” Her whisper is clear as she keeps going, my ears registering everything I ever wanted to hear from her. “But I was scared. You and I, we belong together. I never wanted to hurt you. But *he* made me.”

Her hair feels soft as silk between my fingers, and when I notice her gaze flipping to my lips, I throw her a longing look, followed by a ghost of a smile that’s hidden in the corner of my mouth.

“I’m sorry. I really am. Please forgive me.” Water pools in her eyes. “Please, forgive me and say we can start over. I want you. The only thing I ever wanted was you. Say you believe me.”

She’s speaking to the Liam of two years ago, and I believe her. I believe every word she says, my mind fogged by thinking, hoping, and wishing she is different. That she changed and deep down has a pure heart. I once believed it and it’s so easy to slide back to that feeling when she closes the distance between us with every passing second.

Our breaths mix, her eyes hooded when she darts out her tongue, licking the seam of my parted lips. “Tell me you believe me. Please,” she begs.

Our lips are nothing more than half an inch apart. I can feel her heat as she presses her body even closer, her chest flush with mine. The tight grip on my neck sparks my body alive while my dick is getting frustrated with the tease.

“I do,” I huff.

But doesn't she know *that* Liam, that version of me, is dead and gone.

I do believe her.

Almost.

Rigorously grabbing her black hair like she's an animal, I yank her hair with a speed that she didn't expect, and her eyes grow wide. With a force that's meant to hurt, I throw her off my body and onto the floor. Like a cloth being ripped off her, she shows her true colors when her vicious gaze finds mine, a glare that's meant to kill coming my way.

There she is.

She's hot. I'm not going to deny that. And if I didn't have Gen waiting for me to wrap her in my arms, I probably would've fucked Cristina on the deck, just because I can. But there is nothing, and I mean *nothing*, that will ever make me forget who this woman really is. What she's capable of, and the wood she's carved from. She's tainted, rotten to the core.

I once thought she was Peitho, Goddess of Seduction. But really, she's like Apate, the true personification of deceit.

“What the fuck?” she shouts, loud enough to crack her little act like an eggshell.

A lopsided grin has me peering down at her as I get off the stretcher, grabbing my glass to lift it to my lips. “You fooled me once, Cris.” I shake my head. “It will never happen again. Here, have a drink.” I swing the contents toward her face, then throw the empty glass in her lap.

“You asshole!” Her Mediterranean accent is on full display as she bares her teeth.

Like a viper, I lean on the stretcher to quickly grip her hair once more, forcing her face close to mine. My eyes radiate the ruthlessness she only knows from my baby brother, and I can see her fear growing when her eyebrows lift in shock. She doesn’t know me like this. She got the composed Liam. The one who’s down-to-earth and practical. The one who one day hoped to be the family man, but she made one mistake. She made herself believe the other version of me wasn’t there. The one who’s used to living on the darker side. It’s there. And the moment she betrayed me, she made sure that’s the only version of me she’ll ever get.

“The only reason I haven’t killed you yet is because you have the last of Callie’s family. But make no mistake, *Cristina*.” The emphasis of her name is filled with loathing. “You can’t play with me. Because you’ll never win. I won’t hesitate to torture you, tear you up, limp for limp. Stay the fuck away from me. And stay the fuck away from Gen. Do you understand?”

She stays quiet, holding my gaze with a level of defiance I’ll no longer tolerate from her.

“Do you understand?!” I bark, making her lashes flutter beneath me.

She nods, though her eyes stay narrowed.

“You better mean that, because if you try to upset her one more fucking time, I will take my chances of finding Babushka myself and make you disappear like we did to Junior.” I push her head from my grasp, and watch her suck in a breath as I straighten my back. She’s on her ass, her legs curled up in front of her as she watches my movements. Tilting my head, I look at the sight in front of me, enjoying it more than I thought possible. Gone is the confident whore who tried to torment me, and it feels good to find her scared for once.

“Goodnight, Miss Reyes.” I smirk, strolling inside with broad shoulders and a smug feeling, back to my girl and our warm bed.

IMOGEN

PRESENT DAY

I'm staring into the light blue of the Cote d'Azur, my thoughts wandering as I watch the small fish under the smooth surface. My arms are leaning over the railing, and I can feel the midday sunburn on my shoulders. Besides from Callie's home in Granada, I've never seen more of Europe than that before Kane and Liam stormed into my life, but I think I'm in love. I relish the many cultures that are mere hours away from each other, the different scenery, and all the foods that heighten my senses. It's so different from the States. I love New York, but I wouldn't mind taking yearly trips to Europe to discover everything else it has to offer.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Cristina's voice sounds thick as she approaches, her heels tapping over the deck as I catch her coming my way. Her white sundress contrasts with her olive skin, and black hair that radiates under the rays of sunshine, appearing almost a deep cobalt blue. Leave it up to the devil to dress like an angel. Irritated, I sigh, knowing she will ruin my day. I know I shouldn't let her get to me, but this girl has the ability to worm her way under anyone's skin until she shreds you from the inside out, and that includes mine.

Liam told me about the stunt she pulled last night on the deck. It shouldn't surprise me, but I can't help wanting to claw her eyes out for touching my man. I hated knowing she was in his lap, with their lips almost touching, but the fact that he told me before he wrapped me into his arms made me feel even more secure with him. With us. Liam Carrillo is mine, and I will be six feet under before she'll ever get him back.

I tilt my head, scanning the length of her body with a glare from under my sunglasses before I rear my chin back to the water in front of me.

"It's gorgeous. Don't jump in, though. Your toxicity might taint the water."

"You always were funny." She comes to stand beside me, her shoulder almost touching mine, pissing me off with how she sets herself on the edge of my personal space. Close enough for me to hate it, far away for her to be calling me out if I'd want to make a comment about it.

"You've always hated me, Cris. Don't stop now."

"I didn't hate you."

"You're full of shit." I keep my head still, not offering her another glance. Not sure what game she's playing now, but I'm not giving her the satisfaction of witnessing my annoyance more than she already is.

The sigh that leaves her chest is loud, almost sounding like a teenager begging for attention, which is probably an accurate resemblance even though the woman is a few years my senior.

I brace myself for whatever bullshit will slide into my ears, but freeze when her hands fall on my arm, her manicured nails pressing against my skin. With a glare, I drop my gaze to the point where her fingers are burning through me, then lift my head as I grind my teeth together. She shoots me a shocked look, then drops her hand with regret etched on her face, and I can't help but knit my brows together.

I have to remind myself what good of an actress she is. "I'm sorry." Cristina turns her eyes to the floor, ashamed, as I assess every inch of her body to find some honesty in her stance. She shuffles her feet a little, then sucks in a breath before her eyes lock with mine again. I can see why Liam fell for her. I can see why any man would fall for her. She's gorgeous. Her deep brown eyes look like little lanterns under the radiance of the sun. Her skin is smooth, almost looking velvety, tempting to be touched. Her hips are well-rounded, bringing out every alluring curve of her body, combined with her slim waist. She's not skinny. She's a grown woman, voluptuous, and beaming, with a level of confidence any man would desire.

But she lacks one thing that's clear on her deceiving lips; empathy.

I've known her long enough to know that's not something she was blessed with at birth.

"No, you're not."

"I am, Gen!"

"Don't call me Gen. I'm not your friend. You tried to kill my boyfriend." Snapping my head toward her as I lean in to

get into her face a little, my eyes shoot daggers. My heart beats like a madman, and I'm only half as certain as I pretend to be, but I refuse to let her think she can fool me. Or intimidate me, for that matter.

“I know!” Tears pool in the corners of her almond-shaped eyes, and I tilt my head as I wait for her to speak. “I know I can't rewrite the past, but trust me; if I could, I would. I never wanted Liam to get hurt. Junior made me.” She pauses, holding my gaze as if she's trying to tap into my feelings. “You know what Junior is capable of. I had no choice.”

I guess since her pathetic attempt didn't stick with Liam, she's now trying to throw it on me.

“Just like you had no choice when you knew Junior sold Callie for a night to Vernon Walt? Or that time you told us Summer Kent was an easy job, knowing Ronnie would come after us?” I want to be just as good of an actress as she is and tell her I believe her, just to mess with her head like she's trying to do with me. But I can't. Not to her. If she was any other person, if she was a job that I planned on releasing from her expensive jewelry, I could've done anything. I could make her believe I was naive, and that she's got me right where she wants until I strike for the objects of interest. I could convince her she was my new best friend. But Cristina Reyes ignites only one emotion inside of me, and I can't control it no matter what I do. Anger.

“A year ago, you probably could. Before I found out you've been the starting point of this entire shitshow. But now?” I

draw my lips closer to hers, my breath hissing into her face. “You can’t trick me anymore, Cristina. I see you for what you are, a vindictive bitch. You don’t care about anyone other than yourself. I just haven’t figured out what your endgame is yet, but I will. *We will.*”

She swallows, shrinking underneath my glare, and for just a split second, I wonder if she maybe is genuine after all. If she regrets being a pawn in Junior’s game. But as quickly as it’s there, it’s gone. I catch the slight squaring of her shoulders before her features harden into a wicked shit-eating grin that I want to wipe off her face.

Her feet take a step back as she starts a slow clap. “*Muy bien*, Gen. I always thought you were a little wallflower, but those Carrillo brothers definitely made you grow. Got you a backbone.”

It’s a gift to be able to show a sense of pride in someone’s eyes, along with a level of contempt that makes them unpredictable. I wonder if it’s because she’s just a natural psycho like Junior, actually believing her own words, or if she’s just that good of an actress. I’m guessing it’s both.

I watch her shred her skin of innocence into the witch I know her to be as she takes a step closer, her voice sultry and deep, with a clear want to intimidate me.

“Do you ever wonder if he thinks of me when he’s inside of you?”

“Never,” I scoff.

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

She nods, her lips pursed. “Do you love him? You do, don’t you?”

“None of your goddamn business.”

“Oh, poor Imogen. Loving a man whose heart is already taken. You never did have any luck with men, sí? Always fucking around with those corporate pencil dicks and now you have finally found a real man, his heart is already spoken for.” She makes my blood boil with her smug grin and devilish eyes. I want to claw them out and throw them into the ocean. “It must kill you inside. To know he still loves me.”

“Liam doesn’t love you.” Though I feel the truth on my tongue, a slight hesitation flickers in my heart, and I try to push it away. “Not the way he loves me.”

“That’s not what he told me when I was sitting on his lap last night.”

My eyes widen only slightly, briefly, while I swallow away the bad taste in my mouth.

“*Mentirosa.*” I didn’t learn a whole lot of Spanish in Havana, but I learned some, and “liar” is one of the words I can remember. I know she’s full of shit, but I still feel pebbles trailing down my arms.

“You don’t believe? I was on his lap last night.”

She keeps her stare locked with mine.

“I ran my hands through his hair, and brushed my lips against his, apologizing for my behavior. I want him, *Imogen*,” she says with disdain dripping from her tongue. “He was mine two years ago and it won’t take much longer before he’s mine again. At some point, he will be done with you. You’re nothing but a way to kill time.”

“Is that why I woke up next to him this morning? He couldn’t find the door to your room?”

I’m curious to see what she’ll say next, but when she opens her mouth, it’s quickly shut as Liam walks onto the deck.

“Hey, baby.”

He looks handsome as ever, his dark blonde hair shining in the afternoon sun, his tanned skin exposed at the lack of fabric covering his chest. He looks casual with sweat shorts on his hips, rubbing a towel on his dampened neck after the workout he must have just finished.

Cristina’s grin expands, her lashes fluttering at the sight of him as she tries to catch his attention, but to my pleasure, he walks in a straight line to me, his ocean blue eyes never deviating from mine. Like he hasn’t seen me in weeks, he presses my back against the railing before his lips find mine in a bruising kiss. His rugged hands land on my hips as they push underneath my thin camisole, a moan vibrating against my lips when he feels my warm skin on the tips of his fingers. I respond by running my hands through his sweaty hair, like Cristina claimed to have done last night, deepening the kiss as I part my lips. He eagerly dives his tongue against mine,

exploring every inch of my mouth with a grunt as we completely melt together, turning me on within a heartbeat.

The clearing of a throat tears me from his lips, giving Cristina a smirk before Liam slowly turns his head with a flat expression.

“Do you need anything?” It’s not a rumble of thunder, but it’s filled with boredom, amusing me more than it should. Liam’s attention isn’t a competition, especially since I know Cristina isn’t my opponent in any other way than the fact she’s our enemy; but still, it makes me feel good, knowing his eyes are solely on me and no one else, spreading heat up my neck.

Cristina crosses her arms in front of her chest, her jaw set as she throws Liam a look that’s meant to kill.

“I was just in the middle of a conversation with Imogen.”

“No, you weren’t.”

“I was.”

“No,” he rebukes with more emphasis this time. “Because I told you yesterday to stay away from her.”

“Yeah, she was just telling me how she’s going to get you back when you’re done with me.”

“Did she now?”

“Mmmhmm, she also told me she was in your lap yesterday.” I fake pout, like I didn’t already know what she was up to.

A chuckle falls from his lips, but it's menacing, bringing me chills and making my pussy clench at the same time. He snatches out his hand, grabbing her throat while the other one stays hooked around my body. Her black hair bobs with the sudden movement of her head as her eyes widen. She tries to keep an indifferent stance, her hands enclasp around his wrists while he slowly seals off her air supply. My hands rest on his chest, feeling his heartbeat bounce against my palm, and I can't hold back my grin.

“You were a hot body I enjoyed once upon a time. But you see what the problem is with human nature? We set a benchmark for ourselves with every new experience we get. Two years ago, you were my dream, but now, I know that was nothing more than a mirage. A facade. You know how I know that?” His grin is equal parts evil and breathtaking. The heat of his flesh doesn't leave mine while he 'deals' with this inconvenience, not even the slightest lift of a finger. Not waiting for any response coming from Cristina's restricted throat, he continues. “Because I got myself a real woman now. You're nothing more than a little girl, desperately seeking for validation. It's not attractive, babe. It's *pathetic*. Now, get out of my face, unless you want to watch.”

He pushes her off his hands, dismissing her as he dives into the other side of my neck. I bite my lip when his mouth connects with the sensitive spot below my ear, his small mewls going right to my pussy. I keep my lazy gaze on Cristina's, eyes shuttering closed with each possessive kiss.

She blinks a few times, trying to collect herself, her hands rubbing the bruising skin on her neck. I can see the confusion in her brown eyes, the shock that Liam laid his hands on her in anger. She probably brushed his aggression off last night away, thinking it was just a small display of frustration, but it finally hit her that she can't get under Liam's skin anymore. He will no longer give her that kind of control.

I'm enjoying every time Liam's open lips land on my neck; the fact that she's watching only adding to the sensation. She wants him. *I got him.*

Her shoulders go rigid and her eyes narrow as she swallows her defeat away with a glare that tells me she will kill me if she ever gets the chance. A year ago, it would scare me. Making me believe I was no match for anyone when it comes to self-defense. But now, after all these months with Liam, I welcome it.

And with a flip of my middle finger and a shit-eating grin, I silently tell her just that.

Bring it on, girlfriend. I'm ready for you.

She huffs, her eyebrows shooting to her hairline before she spins on her heel, and I watch her take off with a loud chuckle.

Liam grabs my chin, turning it to face him with a slight scowl. "Don't focus on her. Focus on me." It comes out as a command, but I can see the small smile hidden in the corner of his mouth, and it spurs me on to show him one of mine.

"Yes, sir."

LIAM

TWO YEARS AGO

“**T**his is some really good shit.” I glance at the tumbler in my hand that holds two fingers of a twenty-six-year-old Scotch, the appreciation settling inside of me as I swipe the residue off my lips. “Where did you get this?”

“Found it in my pop’s liquor cabinet when he died.” Jeremy smirks as we all sit around the top office of one of our investment companies. The big windows show the rest of the city by night, a few lights dimming the room comfortably enough for us to have been sitting here for a few hours.

“You think he saved it for a special occasion?” Kane inspects his glass with the same appreciation, sitting across from me, next to Jeremy, while I am slumped in my desk chair.

“Probably.” Jeremy shrugs. “But he’s been dead for two years now, so I doubt he’ll be missing it.”

“I like the way you think.” I raise my glass to him, taking another sip.

The unnecessary fireplace crackles in the back of the office, filling the silence in the room as we all stay lost in thoughts.

Kane and I haven't been in a good place. We've been avoiding each other unless business needs to be discussed and even then, we only talk about the necessities. It's annoying the shit out of me, but I'm also refusing to let him dictate my life. I know he thinks I'm a fool for wanting a family and all that shit, but I do. What does sitting on top of the world even matter if you're all alone? I love my brother, but we're not close enough for me to cuddle up against him at night.

I want that.

I want to share my life and find a reason to come home.

Cristina can give me that. But more importantly, Cristina *wants* that. We've been spending more time together, and I've noticed she has been hinting at areas to live in New Jersey. Enough for me to ignore the voices in my head coming from Kane and Jeremy, even though they still try to creep through every now and then. Especially when Cristina is in a mood, which basically means she's like a storming tornado, snapping at everything around her.

I'm used to it by now, knowing after just a few months when to leave her alone or try to cheer her up by taking her to her favorite places to eat or book her a day at the spa. She can be sweet and caring, but she's definitely not the easiest person to navigate.

But nobody is perfect, right?

We all look up to the door when a few knocks sound, waiting for whoever to enter.

“Well, look who it is,” Jeremy says, jovial. “Special Agent Hubbs, what can we do for you at”—he flips his wrist to check the time—“eleven pm?”

“Evening, boys.” The man saunters in with a confident stride, his head held high like he’s the boss in the room, even though he’s anything but that. He demands a level of respect we give him because he’s never given us reason to act otherwise. He’s dressed in a polo with a grey pullover on top, and some jeans, as if he’s coming from a casual night at the country club. His silver-gray hair is styled to perfection, one of the lucky men to still have a full head of hair at the respectable age of fifty-three.

“You come bearing gifts?” I point to the folder in his hand while Jeremy gives him his seat and plants his ass on the corner of my desk.

Hubbs shakes his head. “I’m afraid not.”

“Howard, I’m really not in the mood for bad news.” Kane rolls his eyes like an annoyed teenager before a glare settles on his face.

Special Agent Howard Hubbs is our guy at the FBI. He points out shit we should know in order to avoid mayhem in his city, and we pay him a hefty sum in return. We’ve all been co-existing on the fine line of the law for a few years now, and Howard here has definitely earned our trust. The last time he warned us about one of our warehouses being in the loop by the NYPD, we managed to clear out the place before the cops

showed up. He saved us a shit ton of money that otherwise would have been confiscated.

“I know, and if it wasn’t as serious as I thought it was, I would’ve waited.”

This piques Kane’s interest, and he rests his elbows on his knees. “What is it?”

“I’ve been doing some research about that Junior Reyes guy who you told me has been trying to poach your clients?” We all hum in agreement. “It seems like he has more information than he should.”

“How so?” Jeremy asks.

“He seems to even find clients that are hiding their involvement with you through shell companies. As if someone is telling him where to look.” His expression turns serious while he flips it between the three of us.

“What are you saying, Howard?” I ask, bringing my glass to my lips again.

The sigh that releases is heavy, as if he doesn’t want to speak the words out loud. “I think you have a mole.”

“No way.” Jeremy holds his glass mid-air, then shakes his head in denial while Kane’s jaw ticks and his face turns red.

The realization of Howard’s words slice through me, the heat of the Scotch now burning my gullet. Jeremy and Kane gawk at him in shock and disbelief, but I know Howard doesn’t come to us with shit like this if he isn’t positive. He

doesn't want a new player in the game just as much as we do, and he'll do anything to keep the peace in his city.

“Do you know who it is?”

Howard's head waggles. “That's the weird thing. They have meetings with people who aren't that easily found, as if they are avoiding your obvious allies, but I have no idea who's feeding them this information unless someone close to you is sharing it with them.”

Kane's head instantly snaps to mine with a glare filled with accusation. His light blue eyes are shooting daggers at me, and he kills my mood within seconds.

“What?” I bark, confused.

“You know what this means, right?”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” I actually don't. I have no clue what my brother is talking about now, but the look on his face gives me a good indication that whatever he's about to lay out on me, I'm not going to like it.

“It's that fucking *bitch!*”

“Who?” Howard frowns.

“Cristina Reyes.”

Ah, there it is. I shouldn't be surprised he finds a way to spin this on Cristina. He hates her guts and at this point, I'm not even hoping for them to get along. Kane not killing her would be a fucking win right now.

I rub a hand over my face. “Kane, don't even go there.”

“Reyes?” Howard asks. “Is she family of Junior’s?”

“His first cousin,” Jeremy explains reluctantly.

“And this dumbass’s girlfriend,” Kane adds.

The tension rises, a curtain of disagreement lowering between me and the rest of the room like we’re now on different teams. I hate this feeling. I hate not knowing if my brother has my back.

I keep glaring at him while I feel anger burning up my chest like hot lava, silently telling Kane I’m not having this conversation in front of the cop. Luckily, Jeremy takes the hint better than Kane does, who just keeps daring me with that vicious look in his eyes.

“Thank you for the information, Howard.” Jeremy gets up and holds out his hand to take the folder from him. “I will call you tomorrow.”

Howard gets up with a nod, locking eyes with Kane and I, but we’re both too busy to continue this pissing contest to wave Howard off. My chest is heaving, and Kane’s nostrils are flaring as I brace myself for what’s coming. Jeremy walks Howard out and when he closes the door behind him, Kane is on me like a feral dog.

“When are you going to fucking listen, you asshole?” He shouts loud enough for the rest of the floor to hear. “She is playing you! Have you been telling her shit?”

“No!” I pull my hair, sick of this power play we’re having over a fucking woman, but a tiny twang recalls every

conversation Cristina and I have had in the past months. Did tell her something she could use like this? I can't think of anything other than her occasional foul mood, and that makes me wonder if I know the real Cristina. Though it's not enough to let the inkling of doubt grow any bigger.

"I don't tell her anything about the business, Kane! You wanna know why?" I rise from my chair. "Because she doesn't fucking care! She just wants a family like I do! To have a life without this corrupt world we live in!"

"She's just baiting you! She doesn't want a family!"

"You don't know her the way I do!"

"Both of you, keep your voices down before the rest of the company starts whispering shit on the streets!" Jeremy scolds. We give him both a guilty glance, not appreciating being schooled, but also knowing he's right. The last thing we need is rumors that the Carrillo brothers are not seeing eye to eye. There is no better weakness for our opponents than knowing they can separate us because we are biting each other's heads off.

"Liam, I know you don't want to hear this, but if Howard is saying we have a mole, my first thought goes to Cristina as well." Jeremy offers me a look of sympathy.

"Based on what?"

"A gut feeling."

I cock my head at him with mockery.

“I know it’s not much. But you know I wouldn’t say this shit if I didn’t think Kane was right. Something doesn’t add up with that girl.”

I shake my head. “That’s because the both of you never liked her. You already decided she was bad news before you knew she was a Reyes.”

“That’s bullshit because we didn’t even know you were seeing her before that,” Kane sputters.

“Plus, I saw her the first day you met.” Jeremy gives me a daring look, his bright eyes dancing with seriousness under the dim light. “She was hot, yeah. But I figured she was good for a night. I never thought you would think she’s girlfriend material because...” he trails off.

“Because what?”

He hesitates to answer, clearly not wanting to piss me off even more, but when I widen my eyes in question, he finishes his sentence. “Because she looked like she was trouble. One of those chicks that is a good lay, but who’s also a whole lot of headache. Finding out her last name only added to that. You have to admit her last name makes her questionable.”

“Then why would she share it? Why not give me a fake last name? She’s a Reyes. I’m sure they can hook her up with a fake identity if she was plotting against us.”

“Because they know we do background checks on anyone who dares to come near us. They can’t risk us finding out she’s not who she says she is.”

“That’s a damn bold move if that would be true.” That would be ballsy, even for Junior Reyes.

“Look, it’s known you are merciful when people are honest with you.” Jeremy’s eyes bore into me with a level of intent that has his words hammering into my brain like nails while Kane still flares his nostrils next to him. “Ever considered she’s playing exactly that game?”

I feel stupid because the answer is no, but at the same time, I don’t want to hear this shit. Even though I do. Their reservations for Cristina, or flat-out dislike, only make me feel sorry for her that she’s being judged for the crimes her family’s committed. Since when is honesty a bad trait?

It’s bullshit.

She did nothing wrong. I have fun with her, and I know I should be smart. I don’t tell her shit about what we do and who we do business with. But she’s the company I’m keeping when the day is over, and I like knowing that I’m not alone at night. I like that I have someone who I can come home to that isn’t my brother or Jeremy. She’s not perfect, I know that. But neither am I. I’m a goddamn criminal, for God’s sake. It’s not like I can be picky.

No, but you also don’t have to settle.

It’s a thought that crawls in unintentionally, but I shake it away, as I keep glaring at the two men in front of me. “You are wrong about her.”

“I am not!” Kane roars with whatever is inside of him boiling over. “She is going to be the death of you! The death of us, Liam! I’m not going to let you do this!”

“You don’t have a fucking choice! It’s my life!” I shout back, sick of his childish behavior.

Kane takes a charging step forward as a vein pops on his temple, the desk still acting like a wall between us; otherwise, he’d probably go for my throat two minutes ago. “You mark my words, Liam.” His finger points my way. “She’s going to hurt you! And I’m going to kill her for it, right after I save you from that two-faced bitch! You’re gonna regret not listening to me!” He spins on his heel, slapping his glass from the armrest of his chair as he stomps out.

The glass shatters to the floor, and I wait for him to slam the door behind him before I lower myself back into my chair. My face buries in my hands, the fatigue hitting every nerve in my neck.

I sigh, then bring my chin up to Jeremy.

“I want more than just this, Jeremy,” I confess.

“I know,” he replies with a soft look. “But Cristina Reyes is not the answer.”

IMOGEN

PRESENT DAY

I settle in the heat that's surrounding my body, my eyes still closed as I sink deeper into the sheets. A strong arm is holding my back close to his chest, his mouth still pushing lazy kisses to my neck while I stroke the bristling hairs on his arm with my thumb.

“That was fun.”

“Fucking you against the door?” The mouth on this man. It's vulgar and fucking sexy the way he never shies from telling me all the dirty things he wants to do to me or the ones he has already done. And I'm pretty certain he has a very big list of things he still wants to do to me.

“No, you dirty fuck.” I slap his arm with a chuckle, causing him to tuck my ass closer against his groin. His shaft rests between my cheeks, the heat of the lid burning me in a way that'll probably get me horny again within the next five minutes. The man has ruined me to the core. “I meant tag-teaming her.”

“Oh, you mean, ganging up on her?” I feel Liam's tongue swipe over my collarbone, and I moan.

“Yeah.”

“I don’t remember any of that.” He keeps distracting me with his lips, dropping to the most sensitive places all over my skin. Pushing every button to fire up the muscles in my abdomen. “I just remember my girl showing she’s not to be messed with. It was sexy as hell.”

“Really?”

“Oh, yeah. I contemplated ignoring your lack of motivation to become an exhibitionist and just fucking you against the railing. Which, by the way, I still want to do, *if you’re game.*”

The thought makes my thighs clench, an image of my arms hanging over the railing and my nose up to the sun while he pumps inside of me now completely turning me on like he didn’t just fuck me into oblivion ten minutes ago.

“No,” I scold, but it’s too late.

“Nice try. I can see the excitement in your eyes, baby. One of these days, you’re going to concede.”

“Not gonna happen.” I press my cheek into the soft pillow to avoid his gaze while the corners of my lips lift all on their own.

“Oh, it’s gonna happen.” His hand spreads out around my stomach as he softly brushes his thumb up and down the swell of my breast, stirring my nipples alive. “Like a lot of things are going to happen.”

I hum, enjoying his touch with a lazy grin. “Like what?”

“Like you being the hottest MILF alive after you give me a bunch of babies.”

“We agreed on two!” I laugh as he continues.

“Like us getting off this boat and moving into my penthouse.”

“You know Kane is going to kill you if you call this thing a boat.”

“Kane can go fuck himself. Or Callie, whatever he prefers.” We both chuckle. “Or like the fact that you’ll be sharing the same last name as Callie one day.”

I scrunch up my nose, looking over my shoulder. “I really don’t like the name Reyes.”

He bites my neck, and I screech in his arms, trying to wiggle out of his grasp as he tickles me. “The name Reyes will be extinct as soon as this is over.”

God, I sure as fuck hope so. I’m not a hateful person and I don’t wish anyone harm. Although I did wish Junior all the fucking harm the universe was willing to give him, but in general? I’m not a resentful person. I don’t wish Cristina death. If anything, I want to know what made her who she is, because I don’t see the same empty soul I used to see in Junior’s eyes. There is something that’s causing her to lash out, a level of pain that can barely be explained, but I have no idea what it is.

It makes me understand that even though I don’t want her to die, there doesn’t seem to be another option to eliminate her.

She's hurt. The string that's causing her to know the good from the bad was already cut long before I first met her. It crushed her ability to feel empathy, creating a monster that we will never be saved from unless we end her. *Literally*.

But I still wonder if there is another way.

I spin in his arms, taking his hand to press it against mine in the air. Our fingers are spread out and glued together, my hand significantly smaller than his.

“Do you think she means whatever she says?”

“Who? Cristina?” Liam scoffs. “Not a chance in hell.” He studies the features on my face with a little frown peeking underneath the messy strands that fall over his forehead. “Why? Do you?”

I lift my shoulders. “I don't know. Sometimes. I just don't think she was born without a soul like Junior. I think they made her this way, and I can't help but wonder that if she was made this way, can't she change? Maybe be happy?”

Liam sighs before pressing his lips against mine. The soft cushions express nothing more than love, making my toes curl until he lets go.

The depths of his dark blue eyes peer into mine with a smile that makes my heart beat faster.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“This is why I love you.” He pushes a strand of my hair behind my ear. “You always see the good in people. No matter

how little it is. You smile your way through all the dark shit in this life. I don't even know how you do it."

I chuckle, remembering Callie saying the same, but this time, I don't disagree. This time, I'm starting to believe it might be what sets me apart from the rest. I don't allow myself to get pulled into the deep pools of despair and hate. I pick love and light every single time. Because I can't understand why anyone would choose any differently.

"I just do."

"I know." I settle my face in his palm. "And you are so beautiful doing it. But to answer your question; no. Cristina doesn't want me back. She doesn't regret anything. She's just sorry her plan didn't work out. Don't feel sorry for her, babe. She picked her path. The cards are dealt and her hand is shit. Don't believe her bluff." He kisses me again, and I pull him on top of me, wanting his love to seep through my entire body.

"I thought I wore you out." He laughs, eagerly brushing his lips against mine. I love feeling his weight on top of me, already writhing underneath him for more friction.

"Well, those babies aren't going to make themselves, are they?" I wink teasingly. "We have to practice, Blondie. *A lot.*"

He slips inside of me, and I gasp, my lashes shutting close while his mouth moves flush with my ear. "I couldn't agree more, baby."

CRISTINA

TWO YEARS AGO

The pounding at the door wakes me up, aggravation hitting me the second my eyes open.

“What the fuck?” I look at the clock beside my bed, my anger now reaching exponential proportions when I see it’s past midnight. I swear if this is Junior, I will hurt him like we’re still kids and he stole my pocketknife. That *cabrón* never cared for the time. Always showing up at my doorstep at ridiculous hours since I have had my own place just because he has shit to tell.

With a grunt, I step out of my bed and make my way to the front door. The pounding never stops, and my heart starts to race when I think about the man who keeps finding me on the street. I have a gut feeling he wouldn’t knock in the middle of the night because he seems to like the element of surprise, but I grab one of my guns from the kitchen drawer anyway.

I glance through the peek hole, my sight colliding with Liam standing on the other side. “Liam?” I open the door, rolling my eyes, and he burst inside over my threshold. I do not have the energy for him right now. But his expression is

troubled, and I put on my worried girlfriend mask, cupping his cheeks between my hands. “Are you okay? What’s wrong?”

He presses his forehead against mine. “Everything.”

Joder, this is going to take all night.

I guide him to the sofa, sitting him down before I curl into his lap. He hugs me tightly, and I let him bury his lips against my neck as I glare at the ceiling.

“You want to tell me what happened?”

“Kane,” he huffs against my neck.

Kane. Of course, Kane. It’s always Kane. I can’t wait to see the look on his face when he realizes I outplayed him.

“What about Kane?” I lock my eyes with Liam’s worn-out expression, feigning a little confusion because I already know where this is going. It’s so goddamn predictable.

“We had a fight about you. Again. I can’t keep doing this.” He shakes his head, and I suppress the urge to panic, seeing how he’s slipping from my grasp.

“Look, whatever it is, we will figure it out.”

“No, baby. We won’t! He hates you.”

“No,” I rebuke, “he hates the Reyes family. He doesn’t hate me because he doesn’t know me.” I know it’s a bullshit reason, but it seems to make sense for Liam because I got his attention. “I can win him over; I know I can. I should’ve put in more effort from the beginning. We will think of something, okay? I will take him to dinner. Lock me up in a room with

him. I can convince him that I'm not part of my family's wicked ways." Fuck, I'm such a good liar. I inwardly pat myself on the back while forming some tears in the corners of my eyes. "Just don't give up on us."

Our foreheads connect again, his breath fanning my face. "I don't want to."

"Then don't!" Kane really pushed him to the edge this time, because I can see the sparkle of doubt in his eyes, telling me to step it up. Whatever I'm going to do, it needs to happen fast. I can't keep Liam's attention for much longer if his shithead of a brother keeps corrupting his mind with stuff I don't want him to think about. Or figure out.

"Look, you need a break," I suggest. "You're tired. You work too much, and you need to reset. Let's get away for a long weekend. Just you and me. We haven't seen each other in a while, not really, so we can be together for the weekend and just relax." Hope flickers in his eyes, probably because I've been keeping our interactions to a minimum over the last few weeks.

"Really?"

"Yeah! I need a weekend off anyway, and my mom still has a house in Spain. It's a house in the mountains with a jacuzzi and everything. She isn't using it right now. Let's just go there and really disconnect for a few days."

He's still hesitant, so I press a kiss to his lips to push him over the line. This could be the perfect opportunity to finally execute the last part of the plan, something I've been dying to

do for weeks now. This was supposed to be a relationship of three, maybe four, months. We're getting to six months, and I'm fed up. I need to get fucked properly, and it's really hard to pick up good dick when Liam Carrillo wants to claim every free minute I have to offer.

"Kane won't like it."

"Kane is already pissed. We can use this weekend to find a way to win him over." When he stays quiet, I decide to bring out the big guns. "And maybe we can even see if we can start thinking about living together." I glance at his chest, trying to act coy as I let my finger trace the line of his neck.

"Are you serious?" He stretches his neck back, as if he's snapping out of his dazed state, and I nod. "You want to move in with me?"

Hell fucking no. "I think we could see if it could work. It would be just the two of us out there."

As he holds my gaze, the blood rushes through my head because I can't read his mind. I don't know where his head is, making it difficult to not squirm on his lap just to get some kind of reaction out of him. But I know I should keep my cool right now, not lay it on too thick, otherwise, he'll grow suspicious.

"Just think about it," I add, a little disappointed while moving my legs to get off his lap. "The house is ours whenever we want."

“No, wait!” He grabs my wrist, and I keep in the wicked grin that wants to spring free, knowing he’s taking the bait. He looks up at me through his lashes, exhaustion etched on his stumbled jaw. “Let’s do it.”



I wait patiently until he’s sound asleep, checking his breathing more than once before I slip out of the bed with my phone in hand. Walking into the living room, I quickly make myself a glass of Blue Label, then close the door behind me as I step onto the balcony.

I scroll through my phone until I find Junior’s number under the fake name I gave him. My eyes stay fixed on the hallway that leads to the bedroom as I peer through the floor-to-ceiling window, just to make sure Liam doesn’t come looking for me unexpectedly.

“*Ola, primitaaa.*” Junior’s voice echoes in my ear, and I roll my eyes at his theatrics. “¿*Que tal?* Isn’t it a bit late for you?”

I glance at the clock in the living room that says it’s a little after three in the morning, making me frown. “It is, which only makes me curious. Why are you still up?”

Junior lives at night, which means at 9 am, I would’ve expected him to be anything but chipper if I woke him up an hour after he went to bed.

“I had a little thing keeping me up.” I can almost hear the smirk through the phone and purse my lips in annoyance.

“Please tell me you didn’t fuck the merchandise.”

“Who else is gonna do it?”

“Whoever is buying them,” I snap back in a flat tone.

“Don’t worry, I didn’t break her.” His chuckle is devious, but I still feel the corners of my mouth curl a bit while I hear him bark out orders to whoever is with him. “Get her out of here and don’t wake me before it’s time for dinner. So, what’s up, *Crissy*?”

“The next time you call me that, I swear, Junior, I’m going to shoot you in the foot.”

“Just make sure it’s a toe I don’t need.”

“I’ll think about it,” I tell him, then take on a more serious tone. “Look, I need you to set it up.”

“¿*Verdad*?” The excitement is audible, and I nod.

“Really. But we need to move fast, because I don’t know how long I can keep him out of Kane’s grasp.”

“Tell me when.”

“This weekend. The whole charade.”

“*Bien*, consider it done. So, I guess that means I’ll see you this weekend?”

I haven’t been home for a long time, and I didn’t even realize it earlier. But now that Junior points it out, I feel a giddy feeling forming in my stomach as if my five-year-old self is taking a trip to Disney. But I also am aware of the hurdle we need to overcome first. No time to party just yet.

“If everything goes according to plan, my sweet cousin... you and I will be sipping sangria until we can’t walk by Saturday.”

“Taking over the world on Friday, getting wasted on Saturday. I love it.”

“See you Friday, Junior.” I smile before I hang up the phone, gripping the device tight between my fingers.

This weekend, we can finally end it. We can finally take what is ours.

I suck in a lungful of air, rolling my shoulders back, before I quietly slip back inside.

A few more days, Cris.

LIAM

PRESENT DAY

The tapping and ticking of cutlery echoes through the awkward silence in the room as we all focus on our plates to avoid an awkward conversation.

What do you say to the woman who tried to kill you over breakfast?

Thank you for not succeeding.

Thank you for not trying to kill me today.

I glance at Imogen every few seconds, just wanting to make sure she's okay, but after she clearly won Cristina's little power play on the deck the other day, she has been walking around with a new attitude. She shredded her old skin and holds her head high with confidence, her entire stance unbothered by the known threat that's living amongst us. She's bright and vivid, showing me that smile that I've become addicted to.

But the best part?

It's killing Cristina inside. She puts up a good act for the most part, but she's not good enough of an actress to hide her

frustration. I'm sure she had the intention of wrapping me around her little manicured finger and taunt Imogen as much as she could. But neither of us is giving her that satisfaction, causing her to let her pinched features slip through more than she wants them to.

“When are Callie and Kane coming back?” The sound of Cristina’s voice makes Gen and I stop with our next bites mid-air as we exchange a look.

“Why do you care when they are coming back?” Gen cocks an eyebrow.

“Look, you can quit the hostility, okay?” There she goes again, trying to play the ‘*genuine*’ card. She’s preaching to the wrong choir because we have already seen all the tricks she’s pulled. “I know you hate me, but I’m only here because I have no other option.”

“Taking Babushka hostage was the only option?” Gen cocks her head, amused.

Cristina huffs. “It was the only way you would be willing to work with me, and I need that diamond.”

“Forced,” I correct her. “We are *forced* to work with you. There is nothing willing about it. Willing would be throwing you off a cliff at shark alley.”

Cristina’s dark brown eyes find mine, laced with disappointment, as I take another bite of my eggs. Maybe there is even a bit of hurt. “You loved me once. You could do it again, Liam.”

Yeah, definitely hurt. Fake as fuck, but still. You have to admire her skills.

I tsk. “Don’t get your panties twisted, sweetheart. Liked you? Sure. Caught by your voodoo shit? Definitely. Love you? Not a chance in hell.”

“What about all the times you bought me flowers? Or the times you rubbed my feet after a long day? Or tried to comfort me when I was having a hard time?”

“Errors in judgment.” I take the last bite off my plate, shoving it forward before sending Gen a wide smile. It’s recuperated with a knowing one from her side, a sprinkle of laughter in her baby blues. They act like a beacon of light, as the only thing I need to convince myself of what love really is, because she’s the epitome of the word. Imogen shows me what unconditional love feels like every single day.

“Call it what you want, but you cared for me, Liam.” Cristina wraps her arms around her body, giving me a challenging expression, and I hold her gaze.

“I did,” I confess with a shrug. “I did care for you, but only because I put you on a pedestal when you dangled my pipe dream right in front of my face. One that you never actually wanted yourself. I didn’t want to see who you really are, didn’t want to open my eyes to the darkness, because I wanted to believe there was more out there.”

“There is more out there!” she cries.

“I know.” I turn my head toward Gen, my smile expanding with love. “Because I’m going to make her my wife one day.”

“She is nothing!” Cristina snarls, slamming her fist on the table. Fire is coming from her eyes, her painted lips twisted in a sneer. I expect Imogen to snap from Cristina’s dig. But no. I watch proudly as Imogen just chuckles, resting her back against the chair with a sweet expression. She pities her; I can see it in her eyes.

“You shouldn’t mess with love like that, Cris,” Gen starts. “Throwing the word around like it’s nothing. Because one day, you’ll meet that one person who can make your skin crawl in the best way. That person who will ignite a deep fire inside of you, one you’re unable to put out when they are in the room. With kisses and touches that will make your toes curl. But the path of destruction will still be there, and it will bite you in the ass before you can believe you’re worthy of that love.”

Cristina scoffs at the same time my phone starts to ring. “Right, and fairies are a real thing.”

“Mark my words, *Crissy*,” Gen taunts. “One day you’ll meet someone and you’ll know what I’m talking about.”

I see something change in Cristina’s eyes as she uncomfortably shifts in her seat, her thoughts appearing to take her away.

“Talk to me, brother,” I say, answering my phone. “Did you find it?”

I deliberately leave out the word Babushka, not wanting to let Cristina know that we are trying to locate her behind her back.

“Not the one you want me to have found,” Kane begins. “But Callie has an idea where we can find the diamond.”

“That’s good news. So where are we going?”

“South Reef Bay. Leave now, and I’ll see you tomorrow. Call me with Jeremy before you leave.”

He hangs up the phone, and I volley a look between the two women in front of me.

“Time for a field trip, ladies. We’re going to South Reef Bay.”

CRISTINA

TWO YEARS AGO

I look up from the suitcase on the bed when the doorbell rings, a deep frown cutting my features. I'm not expecting Liam until he picks me up tomorrow.

Curious, but also suspicious, I grab my gun from the nightstand as I quietly tap my heel toward the door and look through the peephole. I clutch onto the firearm, my stomach churning when I don't see anyone on the other side. Pressing my ear against the cold wood, I listen for any movement, but when I can't hear anything, I hesitantly open the door a few inches.

The left side of the hall seems empty, and I feel confident enough to open the rest of the door to check the other side.

Stupid Cristina.

Before I can peek my head out, a body slams against mine, a rough hand around my neck. I bring up the gun to shoot, but he's quicker, slamming it out of my hand while he pushes us back into the door, then slams it shut with a loud thud. I gasp for air as I try to process what's happening, but it isn't until my back is pressed against the front door, my entire space

crowded by the man that's covering my chest, that I can see the eyes that have visited me in my dreams. Those dark irises that can't decide if they want to be brown or green, a slight sliver of gold moving in waves as his eyes dilate.

"You," I huff against his lips that are awfully close to mine. The hairs on the back of my neck lift, and I curse my pussy for tensing between my legs, but it's undeniable. This man evokes something inside of me that fears him as much as I have the will to please him.

I don't please men. They please me.

"Hey, beautiful. How are you?" His breath covers my face, the warmth parting my lips as if my body wants to suck in his energy.

"You again! What do you want?"

"That's your first question?" A dark eyebrow moves up, accompanied by a wicked smile. "I thought since this isn't our first encounter, you would've wanted to know my name."

His body flush against mine is clouding my mind, making it that much harder to not melt into his touch, but I keep my muscles rigid.

"I don't care who you are," I grit out. "I just want to know what the fuck you want."

"Would you believe me if I say *you*?" Judging by the bulge that's gracing my clit right now, I believe his words are true. He can feel the tension between us, the sizzling desire to

remove our clothes to see if we can explode together. But I'm pretty sure that isn't the reason he's here.

"No," I lie.

"But it's true," he whispers, and it's sultry, his nose brushing mine. "I do want you. I want to know what your pussy tastes like on my tongue. I want to know how my dick feels deep inside of your tight cunt." My thighs clench, my neck suddenly warming. He grinds his hips, his dick rubbing over my clit through the fabric of my dark jeans, just enough to have my legs buckle underneath me. "I want to let my fingers roam all the holes in your body."

My lungs shut down.

Joder, where did this man come from?

"*But...*" He smirks. "It's a shame that Liam Carrillo already got the honors."

He abruptly lets go of me, and my legs disappear from underneath me, before he violently swings me to the floor.

A shriek sounds through the room, fueled by a hint of panic. I'm nervous. I'm never nervous, but this man makes me as nervous as a crack junkie in need of their next fix. Paranoid, not knowing why this man keeps showing up in my life. Normally, I know the motive of every person I deal with, but he's one big mystery causing me to not know how to act or respond.

"Who are you?!" I try to crawl toward my gun, completely flustered while I look up at him. That grin never falls as he

takes a few strides to my gun and kicks it to the other side of the living room.

“Whoever you want me to be. I can be your worst nightmare. I can be a dream come true.”

“Why are you here?” I don’t understand what’s going on. If he’s here to kill me, he could’ve done that the second he had me pinned to the door. If he’s looking for something, he wouldn’t waste any time by taunting me.

His smile finally falters, his head shaking with a look of pity. “I know what you’re up to.”

“You have to be more specific.”

“I know you want to take over the Carrillo pipeline.” He cocks his head, crossing his arms in front of his chest.

Fear showers my body while I do my best to keep my expression as flat as possible. I don’t know who this man is. But the fact that he knows about our plan means he’s powerful. More powerful than his attire might suggest. He looks like a bad boy with his dark jeans and leather jacket, but he holds himself like a man in charge. If he found out about our plan, it can only mean he has really good resources.

He nudges me to get up, and I concede, feeling more confident when I’m back on my feet. I walk to the kitchen island, desperate to have some kind of shield between this man and I, worried he has the ability to unhinge me even more. He strolls behind me, to the fridge, pulling out a bottle of water

before he comes to stand across from me. The granite countertop creates a safe amount of space between us.

“I have to admit,” he says, “I’m impressed.” I keep quiet. “Making Liam Carrillo fall in love with you so you can easily isolate him from his brother? Smart.” I blink. “At first, I thought it was Junior’s plan. That his sweet little cousin still had some morals, but I guess I was wrong. You don’t have any. Do you?”

I don’t know why his comment cuts through my flesh, but it does.

“I guess your daddy punched them all out of you, huh?” He brings the bottle to his lips, taking big gulps while I watch his neck bob with every swallow. It looks sensual, parting my lips while I keep fighting the pull I have toward this asshole.

“You don’t know shit about me.” I glare.

“Oh, I know everything about you, Cristina Reyes.”

“That still doesn’t tell me why you’re here.”

“I’m curious,” he starts again, ignoring me. “Are you really that evil? Are you evil enough to let someone fall in love with you, before you send a bullet through his head?” The pause he leaves is pregnant, and something tells me that whatever comes next will be to wound me. “Or are you just a hurt little girl, wanting to show daddy you can run with the big boys?”

“You asshole!” I shout, my anger instantly flying off the handle, sky high. “You don’t know me! You don’t know what

my life has been like! I run this business! Not them.” I slam my fist against the granite.

How dare he say that to me. Just because Frank Reyes is the gitano king, doesn't mean he's the brain behind it all. I'm not just another member of the family. I'm his most trusted advisor, the one who let our business double their worth in less than five years. I'm the one running this whole operation and soon everyone will know who I am.

He cocks his head, pleased. “Ah, there she is. Don't worry, babe. I already knew who called the shots in the family.” My shoulders relax at that, even though I still hate the effect he has on me. I hate that he has the ability to make me snap with a simple remark, then immediately relieve the tension with praise. He has power over me, and I don't know how to get rid of it.

“What do you want?”

“Answer my question,” he counters again. “Are you really that evil?”

“What do you want?” I repeat.

“Are you really that evil?!” His voice booms through the kitchen, my head rearing back from the force.

“YES!” I blurt. “Yes, I'm really that evil.”

I want to say no, to avoid the potential disappointment it can cause him, but the truth is, I am. I don't care about Liam Carrillo. I know what I want, and I want to add their pipeline to the Reyes empire before I take over.

I wait. My chin held high, ready for the adversity.

But it never comes.

“You’re honest, I like that,” he says instead. “But whatever you’re trying to pull, give it up. You’re going to regret it.”

With my lips in a firm stripe, I just keep staring at him.

“Walk away while you still can, babe.” The soft look in his captivating eyes gives me whiplash, blinking at him in confusion.

What is his angle? He doesn’t work for the Carrillos because if that was the case, I would’ve already been bleeding out right now. No, he’s part of something else.

“Why?” I ask, daringly.

“This is not going to end the way you want it to. It never is.” He shoots me a look that I can only describe as pleading, a genuine warning even, before he shrugs and makes his way back to the front door.

“Wait?” I call to his back. “That’s it? You came here blasting through my door to tell me to quit?”

He twists his chin over his shoulder. “You’re a smart woman. You do with it whatever you want.”

What the fuck?

Confused as fuck, I watch him step over the threshold with his broad shoulders, still tempting me to feel them wrapped around my body.

“Wait!” He holds still, twisting to face me. “Who are you? Who do you work for?”

I know it’s a longshot, because he clearly doesn’t want me to know, but I have to try. I need to know what I’m facing. If he’s with me or against me.

“Who I am doesn’t matter. But my name is Dax.” He shows his teeth, his eyes filled with mischief before he disappears out of my sight.

Dax.

Until next time, Dax.

LIAM

PRESENT DAY

“We’ll meet Kane and Callie at the safe house, but just in case, we have another one.” The look in Jeremy’s eyes tells me he’s thought this out, having a solid backup plan if Cristina tries to double-cross us in any way, because I’m sure she fucking will. “Kane didn’t want Callie to come, but she argued that it would be suspicious if she wasn’t there, and we don’t want to make Cristina think Callie is somehow not up for this mission. We all know Callie wouldn’t skip something like this.”

“No argument there, although I’m not liking it.”

“Neither is your brother, but we gotta work with it.”

“Fair.” I nod. “What about back-up?”

“The Wolfes sent a dozen men with Kane that will be on the island undercover. We won’t know who they are, but if anything goes south, they’ll be there to help us out.”

“Good.” There aren’t many men I trust in this world, but Franklin Wolfe is luckily one of the few I trust with my life. Not only does his younger brother have a history with Callie,

but he also has the reputation of being a righteous man. Ruthless, but righteous. He has never given us any reason to believe otherwise.

I get off the bed in the back of the jet, leaving Jeremy to arrange everything else he needs to before I shove the divider open into the sitting area.

“*Joder!* Why didn’t you ever take me on this thing, Liam?” Cristina is still gawking at the inside of the jet, like she has been since I left her five minutes ago, her filthy paws touching everything shiny and sparkly.

“Because I figured you’d prefer your broom wherever you go.” I drop myself into the recliner directly next to Imogen, a chortle coming my way before I link her fingers with mine and drop a kiss on her soft hand.

“Please take your seats, the captain is ready for take-off.” The flight attendant shows her pearly teeth, and we watch how Cristina lowers herself in the recliner across from us. I glance over my shoulder, watching Jeremy and the rest of our men on board take the seats behind us.

Take-off is easy, except for the stares Cristina keeps throwing our way, annoying me with a single look. Having her around on the yacht was shit. But being forced to share this small space with her is really testing my patience. Meaning, I have none.

When the seatbelt sign turns off, Jeremy and the men retreat back to the bedroom in the jet to work, and I squeeze Gen’s hand, twisting my neck with a smoldering look. “Come here.”

She holds my gaze for a few seconds, a smile haunting her lips as she takes off the seatbelt and crawls into my lap. Not bothering with who's watching, she swipes her tongue over the seam of my lips until I part them, then she softly pushes inside. We twirl our tongues together in sweet and tentative moves, languid and longing, while my palms roam the small of her back.

“Right. I need a drink.” Cristina's voice tries to catch our attention when I notice her get up from the corner of my eye. “You mind me raiding your mini-bar?”

I wave her off, not giving a shit about what she wants to do.

“Well, since you two are busy.” I hear her fumble with some kind of plastic, but don't bother to look away from my girl. “You don't mind me opening your Louis Roederer Champagne, do you?”

“No!”

I finally tear my lips away from Imogen, but the pop of the cork separating from the bottle is already audible in the air. *Goddamnit.*

“I'm sorry. Were you saving this for a special occasion?”

“What is that?” Gen looks over her shoulder while Cristina puts the champagne bottle against her lips like she's trailer trash. Which, to be fair, in my head, she is, but she has always acted like she's the fucking daughter of the Queen herself. It shows even more how frustrated she's getting, which is a win,

but I can't deny I'm annoyed she's now sipping my champagne like it's fucking Evian.

"A seven-grand bottle of champagne," I inform Gen.

Gen twists my head back to her with a seductive grin. "Let her."

The wicked glint in her eyes quickly makes me forget about the witch on board, and we continue to make out, ignoring her all together.

"I can understand why you don't want to give this up."

But this woman just keeps jabbing and jabbing.

"If I was living life like this?" A whistle slides in our ears. "I would fucking fight for it too. I mean, look at you. A yacht in the Mediterranean. A jet at your disposal. Not to mention, the shit ton of the houses you own. That place in Montana would've been a nice getaway location as well."

"You mean the one where we killed your cousin?" Imogen pulls her lips from mine, taunting her over her shoulder while I cock my head to look past her. Cristina traded the bottle for a glass, though the bottle is still sitting firmly in her hand as she takes another sip.

"Yeah, the one that was supposed to be a *safe house*." She makes quotes in the air. "I hope you did a better job getting a safe house this time, Liam."

"Why? Are you up to something again?"

"What! No!" She grips her heart indignantly.

“Could’ve fooled me.” I know she’s hiding something. I know she would never put all her cards on the table, but we still haven’t figured that out yet.

“It wasn’t all bad.”

“It wasn’t?” Imogen puts her legs on one side of mine, settling into my lap with her back resting against my chest. “Please, Cristina. Do tell this fascinating story.”

Cristina is sitting a little smug in her recliner, still sipping the expensive bottle. It reminds me of all the times she showed how high maintenance she really is, treating people like dogs and expecting everyone to bend to her will without as much as a “thank you” or a “please.”

“It wasn’t all fun.” Her gaze turns dreamy, her fluttering lashes aimed to the ceiling of the jet. “But we had our good moments. The ones that were real.” Her brown eyes cut through mine like a sharp blade, as if she’s trying to speak to my soul. She manages to, but not in the way she thinks. “Like when Liam brought me roses before our last trip. He said they reminded him of my red lips and it made my stomach swoop.”

“You mean like nausea?” Gen clips, rubbing her belly. “Because that’s what I’m feeling right now.”

“No.” Cristina keeps her eyes trained on me, and I feel the tension seeping into my entire body. Don’t you dare say it. “Like *love*.”

“Shut the fuck up, you lying, knifing bitch!” I groan, my voice loud enough to startle Imogen in my lap, before she puts

her weight against my chest to keep me from getting up and murdering the woman in front of me. “Don’t you dare pretend it was any more than it was! You set me up!”

Cristina sits still, her features straight, but I see the recognition in her eyes. I remember it. Because it’s the same empty, yet guilty look she gave me all those years ago.

LIAM

TWO YEARS AGO

I wait in front of the building, holding the flowers behind my camel pea coat. I quickly glance into the side-view mirror to check how I look, before I rest my back against the black town car. Flipping my wrist to check the time, I notice she is fifteen minutes late. A fall breeze brushes through my styled hair as I push away the brick in my stomach.

Kane and I haven't spoken in a week, and when I told him I was leaving half an hour ago, he waved me off without as much as a glance. At first, my mind went 'fuck him.' but when I got into the car and my chauffeur drove me over here, I had nothing but enough time to think about his suspicions. I hate the son of a bitch for fucking with my head, but he does. He still makes me doubt everything I feel. When I get back from this trip, I need to sit Kane and Cristina down and make sure they agree to being civil.

My attention snaps up when I hear a trolley over the sidewalk and Cristina walks out of the building. She looks like she's on her way to a night out, instead of a ten-hour flight. Her black hair hangs in fabricated curls around her face, all the

way to the swell of her breasts while her hips are covered in a purple pencil skirt dress, reminding me of the color of an eggplant. The doorman of the building trails her two big suitcases behind her as she makes her way toward me on her black heels, a reserved smile on her painted lips.

“You look gorgeous,” I tell her, then press a kiss to her cheek, knowing she doesn’t want me to ruin her lipstick. “Brought you these.” I hold up the roses.

For a split second, she doesn’t reply, but then conjures a smile to her cheeks. “Ah, thank you. You’re so thoughtful.” She briefly smells the roses, then gives them back to the doorman who’s finished putting her suitcases in the trunk.

“Bob, can you please put these in water for when I get back?” She hands him the bouquet without even looking at him, then slides into the car. The man stands there a little surprised, and I slip a twenty in his white glove.

“Thank you.” I nod, then take the seat beside Cristina before the driver takes off to the airport.

“You booked first-class tickets, right?” Cristina rears her head toward mine.

“Of course.” I never told her we have a jet, because I’m trying to avoid another discussion with Kane, but I kinda figured she wasn’t the girl that would settle for sitting in economy for the next ten hours.

“Great. I’m going to be sleeping the entire flight, so please find something to entertain yourself.”

I nod. But inside, I'm annoyed. I didn't expect her to stay awake for ten hours, considering it's a night flight, but this is our first trip as a couple. I surely wasn't expecting this cold attitude from her either.

“Are you okay?”

Her black brows furrow, but then she smiles sweetly, her expression softening, a little apologetic. “Yes, sorry. I'm just tired. I didn't sleep well. I really need this trip to take a break.” She reaches for my hand, linking our fingers, and the annoyance simmers away.

“Me too, sweetheart.”



Fourteen hours later, we arrive at the cabin in the Spanish Pyrenees. She told me it was a cute little vacation house her mother inherited from her parents, so I expected a quaint single bedroom lodge. In reality, it's a fucking mansion sitting on top of a mountain. The entire backside of the house has glass floor-to-ceiling windows, and the luxurious and spacious inside is decorated with a modern touch. The terrace leads to a pool that overlooks a green yard as big as two tennis courts.

I put our suitcases in the bedroom before I send Kane a quick update of my location, then head back to the massive kitchen. Cristina is standing in front of the black granite counter, pouring two glasses of wine.

“How are you feeling? Tired?” It’s late in the afternoon in Spain, but back in the States, it’s morning, and it’s fucking with my head a bit. I slide my hands around her stomach, hugging her from behind.

“No,” she scoffs, handing me a glass. “I slept the entire time. Besides, I don’t do jetlag’s.”

Chuckling, I accept the glass from her while my phone starts to ring in my pocket. “I didn’t know that was an option. It’s Kane,” I tell her, glancing at the screen. “I need to take this; give me a minute.”

“Kane? Can you hear me?” I walk toward the glass that looks out over the mountains.

“Liam!” The line sounds crackling, cutting off half of Kane’s syllables. “Where are you?”

“I’m in the mountains. I sent you the location.”

“-iam, a-y-there?”

“Kane? Can you hear me?”

“-eed to g- there!” There is an urgency in his voice, but I can’t figure out what he’s telling me.

“Kane, you’re breaking up. Can you hear me?”

“-isten to me! You need—”

“I need to do what?” I repeat, a little agitated. I listen for any reply, but instead, the disconnected tone slips into my ear, and I look at the screen.

No reception. *Dammit.*

“Everything okay?” Cristina bellows from the kitchen, giving me a questioning look as she rounds the counter to come my way.

“I couldn’t hear him. No reception.”

“We’re in the mountains, Liam,” she chortles. “Reception is always shit around here.” She slips her arms around my waist. “I’m sure Kane just wanted to know if you arrived safely. Or bitch about me, who knows?”

“Probably both.” I laugh with my palms on her neck, then press a soft kiss to her lips. “So what do you wanna do for dinner? Are there any good restaurants around?”

“A few, but they are at least thirty minutes away. I figured we could stay in tonight. Whip something up ourselves?”

I jerk my head back, a little stunned by her choice of words.

“Whip something up?” Cristina isn’t the type of girl that cooks. Nor does she “whip something up.”

“If you don’t mind?” she asks, looking coy. “After this long of a trip, I don’t really feel like leaving again. The help made sure the kitchen is stocked. I’m sure we can find something to eat.”

I narrow my eyes at her, a little amused, but also confused. We’ve been dating for months and she never has made as much as a sandwich. I’m surprised she even knows there could be food in the refrigerator because all she ever has at her place is bottles of white wine. I don’t mind cooking us dinner, but it doesn’t really seem in line with her character.

“Who are you and what did you do to my girlfriend?”

She slaps my chest. “Hush, we can go out, if you’d rather?”

“No, no, I’ll see what I can make from what we have.” I don’t feel like going out either, because unlike her, I didn’t sleep on the trip over here and my body is getting more beat by the minute. “I’m going to try calling Kane back, and then I’ll see what I can ‘whip’ up, okay?” I emphasize the word to tease her, and she smirks.

“Oh, good. You do understand that it means you’re cooking.”

I laugh, full-hearted, because I already saw that one coming from miles away. “I understand that if we want to eat more than a glass of wine, there is no other option.”

“Glad we agree.”



After a plate of spaghetti, we’re watching a movie on the couch, but to be honest, I’m not paying any attention. I can’t get a hold of Kane, and the more time passes, the more the anxious feeling in my stomach grows. We have a rule. We always answer each other’s phone calls, never allowing anything else to become more important than us staying in communication at all times. In the world we operate in, it’s not an unnecessary luxury to always know where the other is and the fact that I can’t reach him is starting to fuck with my head.

I have one bar of reception, but every time I call his phone, it goes straight to voicemail, and after this afternoon, I haven't heard from him. I tried getting ahold of Jeremy next, but the same thing. It's like both their phones are dead, which is something they would never allow to happen.

"Stop fiddling with your phone." Cristina scowls.

"I'm trying to reach Kane," I explain, getting snappy with her. I get that it's not fun for her to watch a movie with someone who's distracted the entire time, but I have a gut feeling something is wrong with my brother, and it's not going to go away until I talk to him.

"I'm sure he's fine." She waves my worry away.

"He always answers his phone, *Cristina*."

"We're in the mountains, *Liam*." She rolls her eyes. "You and your brother really need to cut that invisible chord at some point."

"Invisible chord?" I cock an eyebrow, not appreciating whatever the fuck she's insinuating. "That's my brother you're talking about."

"*¡Yo sé!* And you can't seem to break loose from him." I can hear the clear contempt she has for him. It's not new, but this comment about it definitely is. Not once has she disclosed that she thinks that Kane and I are too close.

"Why would I want to break loose from him? We work together. He's my family." I hope she didn't think that at some point I was ever going to choose between Kane or her, because

as far as I'm concerned, that's not an option. I will never give up my brother. He will find a way to tolerate Cristina, but if *she's* not willing to tolerate my brother, we've got some real issues.

"So? He hates me, Liam."

"He will get over it."

"We've been dating for months. Seems to me, he never will." She rolls her eyes at the same time the doorbell rings.

"Who is that?" My eyebrows knit together.

"I don't know. Probably the caretaker of the house."

I watch how she gets up and carries herself out of the living room. Her hips rock from left to right, and with every step, my body seems to react more to her departure. But not in the way I should expect.

No.

My heartbeat thumps.

A tight knot forms in my belly.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

An ominous feeling creeps up my torso like an unwanted snake, and my brother's scowl flashes in front of my eyes.

"She's playing you."

Making a snap decision, I fly my body to the edge of the couch toward my brown carry-on bag and pull out the gun that's tucked inside of it. I check the safety with my heart

racing in my throat, then sit back on the couch, the gun hidden in my palm underneath a cushion.

With pricked-up ears, I try to listen for any voices until I hear the front door slam shut again.

“Who was it?” I call out, as casual as possible.

She doesn't reply, but I do hear footsteps coming back to the living room. With a ticking jaw, I keep a tighter hold on the gun, an unnerving feeling washing over me with every step that follows. But it isn't until I look into the horrid, wolfish grin of Junior Reyes that my heart drops to the floor. I quickly bring up the gun, but my gaze flies all over the place when half a dozen men trot into the room from behind his back.

Oh, fuck.

“Liam!” He beams, the sound of his voice making my chest constrict like a building is crashing on top of it. He's the epitome of a punk kid with the leather jacket covering his shoulders, and the smug look on his scrawny face tells me he's feeling more confident than he should.

This is not fucking happening.

This is *not* fucking happening.

My mind tries to think of a way to get out of this situation, while my eyes keep glancing beside him to find out what happened to Cristina.

“Oh, she's all right.” He mockingly follows my gaze. “Didn't she tell you I was coming? I figured it was time we got to know each other. After all, you've been dating for

months now!” His Spanish accent makes my skin crawl, and normally, I have no issues firing back snarky comments about it, but I’m trying to wrap my mind around what’s happening.

Is Cristina in on this?

Is she lying on the floor, knocked out?

“What do you want, Junior?” I try to sound bored, but I can’t help that, for the first time in my life, I feel powerless. Stupid. Foolish. And fucking guilty. I should’ve listened to Kane. I should’ve listened to Jeremy when he warned me about the Reyes family and told me no good would ever come from them. They were right. I should’ve been more careful.

He smiles wickedly. “To see the look on your face when you realize you got played.”

Cristina appears from the hallway and comes to stand beside him. I look for something in her expression. Despair. Fear. *Anything*. But all I find is a dead look, her lashes blinking at me until I see the tiniest glint in her eyes. Heat flashes over my body when my gaze collides with hers, my throat almost too dry to say anything.

“What did you do?” I croak out.

My phone vibrates in my hand, and I resist the urge to quickly drop my gaze to it, not wanting to alert them of the fact that it’s still within reach. Instead, I rub my hand over my face, then glance at the device laying next to me on the couch.

KANE: 10 secs. Take cover.

What?

A jolt of adrenaline surges through my veins at the sight of Kane's text.

I lift my gaze, my eyes looking past the men standing in front of me, pointing their automatic weapons in my face from across the coffee table. All my senses go into overdrive while trying to keep my features flat. In the distance, I can hear a whooping sound of helicopter blades, but I refrain from the need to let my eyes scan for the source, hoping they are too occupied with me to listen to anything outside. Then I start counting in my head.

"You know you're starting a war, right?" I bring my attention to both of them. Junior's eyes are devilish, almost orange when they sparkle with nothing more than excitement at my question.

"Probably. But it will definitely be easier to win when one of you two is already dead and gone."

"You're going to regret it."

Seven.

Eight.

"I doubt that." Junior chuckles and points his gun at me.

Nine.

Ten.

I launch myself over the cushions and behind the couch, right before a chopper emerges from the cliff below the house. Glass shatters as bullets fly inside. Gunshots are loud enough

to drown out the sound of my heart that wants to pound outside of my chest, but the *whoosh* of every beat is thundering inside my scalp. The gun stays tightly pressed against my chest while I try to make out any shapes in the chaos, searching for anyone who's here for my head. Within seconds, the air is fogged with all the smoke from the constant gunfire, the room completely destroyed as glass scatters around me. I keep my head low while I keep scanning everything around my perimeter frantically. The chopper lands in the massive backyard, and I hear new voices enter the room when the gunshots have stopped.

“Liam!” I recognize Jeremy’s voice and release a pent-up breath

“I’m over here!” I peek over the couch, seeing the dead bodies of the men who were holding me at gunpoint less than thirty seconds ago before my eyes take in the rest of the room. The heavy sound of the helicopter blades is still audible, keeping the adrenaline pumping through my veins. The fear I felt in every bone of my body is quickly replaced by rage, my fury putting me back on my feet.

“Where are they?” I roar. I look for Cristina’s dead body, or Junior’s, preferably both, but all I find is Reyes’ men, bleeding to death. They are squirming on the glass shattered floor, some still trying to lift their guns, but not possessing the strength due to the fact that they are sifted with bullets. But I can’t find the two people I want to see bleeding in front of me.

“I don’t know!” Jeremy snaps his head from left to right, when one of our men calls out at the back of the house.

“They are escaping through the garage!”

As quickly as I can, I scramble through the living room, sprinting to the hallway that leads to the garage with Jeremy on my heels. I burst through the door, firing my gun when I see Junior reversing the SUV out of the open garage. The shots I fire leave pits in the bulletproof glass as I bare my teeth. Cristina is sitting in the passenger seat, calm as ever, her eyes colliding with mine in an unreadable expression. Junior smirks like a lunatic next to her as he maneuvers the car to the road.

I see the bastard wave from the corner of my eye, but I’m fixated on Cristina. On seeing any ounce of regret. But she just stares back at me with nothing. The brown in her eyes is almost black, and I know this exact frame will be forever in my memory.

Empty. They are empty and hollow, yet sharp enough to cut through glass. I can feel how they chip away a little piece of my heart before they take off, dodging bullets, and the truth of what happened hits me like a hurricane.

“FUCK!” My roar makes birds fly from the trees in front of the house.

She betrayed me.

IMOGEN

PRESENT DAY

I pull myself up, spurred on by Liam's roughed hands moving over my skin.

"We're here, baby."

Sitting up on his lap, I stare out of the small window over my shoulder.

With the six-hour time difference, the sun is about to rise in South Reef Bay when we land on the deserted airstrip. I've been snoozing in Liam's arms for the last two hours, unable to fully fall asleep with Cristina's eyes drilling into us. She probably hoped I would head to the back to get some proper rest, but she fails to understand I will ever leave him alone with her.

Not because I don't trust him. Well, I don't trust him not strangling her prematurely. But I don't trust her double-crossing in some way. I know Liam doesn't tell me everything, but he's been honest about it because it's better if I don't know every detail in case Cristina tries to pull anything.

I don't like it, but I knew it was the right thing to do.

The sound of a screeching yawn has my head snapping toward the witch on the plane, and I cock an eyebrow. She's stretching her arms above her head as a smirk spreads across her face.

"I really should buy myself a jet."

"I hate to shatter your dream, but you'd need a couple more diamonds to be able to afford that." Maybe her Uncle Frank still has some diamonds scattered around the world and she can go fetch those when we get her this one. Preferably in a few mines, tucked away deep and dark, where she will get lost within a few yards. One can hope.

"There are many ways that lead to Rome, *sweet* Imogen."

I roll my eyes at her derogatory tone, then slide myself off Liam's lap and into my own seat. Liam takes the time to greet me with a lingering kiss, nibbling my bottom lip as he puts on my seatbelt, then pulls back and puts on his own.

The flight attendant appears from the cockpit, strutting to the back of the plane to inform Jeremy and the guys to take their seats before she walks back. Her eyes lower to our waists, cocking her head at Cristina's.

"Miss, please put on your seatbelt. We wouldn't want you to fall out of your chair when we land." She holds her face straight, clearly not aware of the fact that we don't like the girl with black hair.

"Actually, we do. You're good, Cris," Liam chimes in, causing me to snort. Cristina scowls at him in reply, and I

wrap a hand over my mouth to stifle the laugh that's bubbling up. The flight attendant volleys us a shocked look, then nods to Liam before making her way back to the cockpit.

“Don't look at me like that. It's not a secret I want you dead,” Liam says.

“You know, at some point, you have to get over it, Liam.”

“Oh, I'm over it. I'm just waiting until I can get rid of the body.”

Cristina's eyes narrow while I feel the plane tilting and descending. I keep watching her with my eyebrows high, expecting her to counter with another snarky comment, but she just stares at him with a pinched mouth until we land.

When the plane is completely still, the pilot informs us we can leave the aircraft and Jeremy walks past us with big strides, mumbling a “morning” as he gets out to scan the area of the airstrip.

“Kane is not here?” Cristina questions when she glances out of the window.

Suspiciously, I squint my eyes, locking my gaze with Liam, who does the same.

“Why? Are you missing my brother, *Crissy*?” Liam taunts.

“No, just figured he would be here to pick us up.”

“We will see him at the meeting spot.”

“Which is where again?” she asks while I keep a suspicious eye on her. She's up to something; I can see it in that wicked

smile that's hidden in the corner of her perfectly painted lips. Sometimes I wonder if she has her lips tattooed in blood red, the plump cushions never leaving a smear of residue during the day. Whatever brand she's using, I'm sure half of female America would like to find out which one it is.

"You'll see when we get there," Jeremy replies before Liam can. "Ready, boss?"

Liam nods and takes my hand before he leads us down the small steps of the jet, toward the three SUVs waiting for us. He guides us to the one in the middle, while the rest of the men keep scanning the area and we wait for Cristina to trail behind us.

I settle my ass down in the leather of the seat, glancing out of the open door while Liam sets himself beside me. "What is she doing?"

"I don't know," Liam mumbles, staring at the door of the jet when she doesn't come out. A nervous feeling claws its way to the surface, showering me with a sense of caution that doesn't predict anything good. The feeling that Cristina has an ulterior motive increases when Jeremy shouts toward the jet, his M5 automatic weapon clutched against his chest.

"What's the hold-up, Reyes?" He booms. "Get your ass out of here."

"*¡Joder! ¡Tranquillo!*" She puts up her hand as she appears on top of the steps. "Give me a minute. It's fucking six am!"

“It’s noon in Europe,” Jeremy deadpans, calling her out on her bullshit.

“She’s up to something,” I whisper as Liam and I watch her descend the stairs with a whole lot of dramatics, like she’s waiting for her audience to snap pictures. Her black hair glistens under the first rays of sunshine, her brown eyes vibrant as if she’s enjoying herself.

“I know,” Liam concedes.

She finally gets in the car, and I glare at her.

“What, little Genny? I needed to grab my bag.” She lifts the Chanel in her hands.

“Sure, you did. Can we go now?” I ask Liam.

He nods to Jeremy, and everyone gets in the car. Jeremy takes the passenger seat of our vehicle, then our little convoy heads off down the airstrip.

The grass around the concrete is a bright green, the palm trees softly waving through the air from a soft breeze, conjuring a smile on my face at the thought of seeing Callie. It’s only been a few days, but I can’t wait to see her smile and wrap her in my arms.

We used to dream about going on tropical vacations together. Always gushing about how we wanted a beach, some cocktails, and hot men to drool over. We got what we wanted and then some, but I still want a trip with just us girls. One where we can gossip about how overbearing Liam and Kane are and how she feels about becoming a mom. Our lives have

changed so much in the last year. I wouldn't trade it for the world, but I feel like I need a minute to reflect. To soak it all in.

My thoughts are abruptly interrupted when I hear Jeremy curse.

“What is it?” Liam barks.

“We've got company.” I notice Jeremy glance in the side-view mirror, and I spin in my seat.

Four Jeep Wranglers are following close behind us, gaining speed with every yard to catch up. But it isn't until I notice the men hanging out of the window that my blood pulsates through my veins at an abnormal speed. They are holding AK-47s, all wearing balaclavas, and are clearly not here for a friendly chat.

“Who the fuck are they?” Liam booms. A mix of anger and worry cuts his face as he grabs his phone.

“I have no idea,” Jeremy shouts when the first gunshot sounds against the bulletproof glass, and I scream in reflex. “But they aren't messing around!”

“Kane! We're under attack! Pick us up!” he orders, then puts his phone in his pocket again, twisting his head to look over his shoulder.

“Get down!” Liam pushes my head down, and I do as I'm told while I hear Cristina shout for a gun. Her voice snaps me out of the first instinct of panic.

“What have you done, you bitch?” I launch at her, not giving a shit about what’s happening, almost pushing her next to the wheel. My fingers wrap around her neck, and I squeeze while her brown eyes widen to mostly whites. I feel her gasping for air as the adrenaline swirls around my organs. The rush that’s audible in my ears almost makes it sound, like I’m inside of a tornado, completely sealed off from the world around me, my only focus on the eye of the storm. Meaning, this bitch in front of me.

She tries to muffle something out of her closed throat, along the line of “I didn’t do anything,” while she tries to drag my fingers off of her, but I’m so done listening to every lie she spews. I’m so sick of risking my life because she’s a manipulative, selfish bitch. And I’m fucking over her putting the people I love in danger.

“Gen, stop!” I hear Jeremy scream in my ear, but I ignore him, transfixed on the *puta* in my hands.

“Gen, don’t!” Liam pulls me off of her, and she comes up for air like she was drowning. Coughs echo through the car while she rubs her neck, the car still going at full speed.

Jeremy hands me a gun, and at the same time, he handcuffs Cristina’s wrist together in one swift move.

“What the fuck?” she grates out. “You can’t do this, Jeremy! I’ll be a sitting duck!”

“Better than a fried duck, right?” I smirk, then check if the gun is loaded before I press the button to lower the window.

“That was fucking hot, baby,” Liam yells while he does the same with the other window.

“Thanks!” I beam.

He forcefully grabs my neck, pressing a bruising kiss on my lips before he releases me. “Shoot the motherfuckers.”

Gunshots fly along the car, putting pit holes in the doors and windows as I take several shots at one of the vehicles trying to drive beside us.

“*Ustedes estan locos!* Close the window!” Cristina cries. It’s the first time I’m seeing a hint of panic on her normally perfectly controlled features, and I’m enjoying it more than I should while I try to keep my attention on the driver next to our car. His window is open as he drives and shoots at us, and I focus on everything Liam taught me. I take a deep breath, squint my eyes, aim at his neck, and pull the trigger for the fifth time. His neck jerks and blood spatter splashes over the door while the car swerves to the right and off the airstrip.

“YES!” I shout.

“Keep going, Gen!” Jeremy booms with clear pride in his voice. The SUV in front leads us into town, and when I look through the back of the car, I see our following car running off the road, colliding with one of their Jeeps. Two are still following behind us, and I reload the gun.

“Get us to Main Street. They won’t dare to shoot us there!” Liam commands.

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” Jeremy argues.

“We’ll have to take our chances!”

The car speeds through every corner, leaving skid marks behind. Tires screech as we all lay low, and the driver takes us away from whoever is after us as we hold our guns below the windows. We reach the center of the little island town within a minute, and I take a deep breath, figuring this will be the moment where we can all recenter ourselves. But my hope is short-lived when I hear another bullet enter the already damaged back window.

“They don’t give a shit!” Cristina huffs. “You have to cut me loose!”

“Not yet.” Jeremy throws Liam the keys of her handcuffs when we speed into an alley, toward a deserted warehouse. My eyebrows knit together when I look inside, though I shouldn’t be surprised at what I’m seeing. A second car seems to be waiting for us in the form of a black van, and we all exit the cars as fast as possible.

“Go, baby.” Liam gives me a push, and I follow Jeremy. The men in the first SUV head into the back of the van, their guns aimed to cover us as I hurry inside with my gun close to my side.

When I take a seat on the hard bench, I look at the SUV I just came out of, my heart almost jumping out of my chest when I hear the Jeep close to the warehouse. Cristina has a hard time getting out of the car with her hands cuffed in front of her and Liam pulls her to her feet when she falls from the vehicle.

“Get up!” he shouts at the same time the Jeep enters.

“No!” Gunshots ring in my ear, the sound deafening, even though it becomes completely silent in my head. The entire scene plays out in slow motion, my brain registering Liam’s frantic calls.

“Go! Go! GO!” he shouts, waving his hand up and down. “I will meet you at the house!”

Jeremy protests, but Liam shakes his head, his eyes briefly finding mine.

“Get her out of here!”

“No!” My cries are hysterical, and I find the strength to get up, ready to jump out of the van. My legs are moving with frantic speed, even though it feels like they are held back by time, but the moment I want to jump off the tailgate, a set of hands grabs my upper arms. I’m roughly pulled back into the van, falling to my ass at the same time I feel the car moving forward.

“STOP!” My heart falls to the floor when Jeremy jumps in, closing one door behind him, then starts shooting the men exiting the Jeep to give Liam and Cristina time to get out of the way. My eyes are caught by the hunk of a man, a scruff beard on his jaw, and an appearance that makes him a human hulk. He’s huge, and he’s angry, with green eyes that act like lasers as he fixates his glare on Liam. A salvo of gunshots is attacking my ears, but my glossy eyes stay fixated on Liam as he scrambles out of the way until we round the corner and away from the warehouse.

LIAM

PRESENT DAY

“If you don’t want to die, I suggest you get on your feet and run, Reyes.” I pull her off the concrete while the gunshots are still flying around our ears, then push her toward an empty hallway.

“That would go a lot faster if I wasn’t handcuffed, Liam!”

“Not yet, sweetheart. Not until I know you’re not part of this.”

“They are shooting at both of us, asshole!” We find our way into the hallway, then take off as fast as we can, expecting the men who are after us to follow right behind. Cristina’s heels are tapping on the stone floor, and I whip my head around to look behind me.

“Lose the boots!”

“What?” she huffs as we continue to run forward.

“Lose the boots, or they will be able to hear whatever fucking way we are going!”

“My hands are cuffed and we’re running, Liam! How the fuck do you want me to take a seat and take off my boots!”

Okay, she's got a point, but I'm not going to admit that.

“Well, better run faster then, or they'll catch up to you, and I'm not in a saving mood.”

My only consolation is knowing that Imogen is safe and it's just me who needs to try to find a way out of this, but if I need to push Cristina in front of me like a human shield, I will.

No fucking doubt about it.

God knows she fucking deserves it.

I turn right into an empty office, and at the same time, I hear footsteps entering the hallway. We scurry in, close the door, and I uncuff Cristina. “Come on, out the window, quickly.”

“I thought you wanted me to lose the boots?” I swear this woman makes my blood boil.

“Suit yourself, then.” I don't give her a second glance, instead, climbing out of the window before I start running through the alley it leads to. The sound of clicking heels on the cobblestone tells me miss smartass decided to join me after all, but I refrain from looking back to be certain. After a few hundred yards, I jump over a three-foot gate, into someone's yard, hiding behind the tall garden fence that's surrounding the rest of the backyard, praying there isn't a fucking dog ready to pounce on me when I land. I scan the grass, waiting for any teeth biting my ankles, then allow myself to breathe when there aren't any. I shuffle quietly behind the bushes planted along the fence, staying close to the gate. Softly, I open it, then twist my gaze around to look out. When Cristina runs by, I

quickly grab her wrist, pulling her against me as I cover her mouth with my palm.

There is panic on her face, but I tell her to be silent as I drill my wide eyes into hers. I shush her, my hand still wrapped around her lips, her chest pressed against mine while I move us to the right, deeper into the yard and behind the bushes. Our hearts beat together as we wait for the sound of men passing us. Fully aware of the intimate position we're in, I continue to breathe, focusing on whatever my ears can register and not on Cristina.

When we are convinced we're alone, I let go of her lips, taking a deep breath as she throws me a coy smile.

“Thank you.” Her eyes look genuine, though I suppose that's not hard when you survived an attack by heavily armed men.

“Take off the boots.”

She moves to my side, lowering her ass between the soil as she takes off her boots.

“It's gonna be a little suspicious if I walk around barefoot,” she argues in a whisper.

“This is a Caribbean island. Everyone walks around barefoot.”

She sticks out her tongue like a toddler, and I roll my eyes.

How the hell did I end up with the woman I despise inside a yard in South Reef Bay, hiding for... who the fuck am I even hiding for? Cristina gets back up and we both try to look

through the wooden fence for a glimpse of whoever is after us. I find a hole that's big enough for me to see part of the streets, but not big enough for anyone to notice me.

I push my finger against my lips when two men trot up and down the sidewalk, followed by someone who seems to be the leader. He has a thick beard, with a body that isn't just fit, it's huge. It's broad. He steps forward with a weight that is felt in the ground, his eyes acting like a lighthouse while he scans the area around him.

"Who the fuck is that?" I whisper. Cristina pushes me aside, peeking through the small hole before she clasps a hand over her lips.

My anger is quickly flared up, and I grab her arm, pulling her ear flush with my lips.

"Who is it?"

Her chest slowly moves up and down, and she swallows before twisting her head to face me.

"Who is *he*?" I grit out. Her response indicates he might not even be here for me, but for her, and if that's the case, I will throw her over the fence now and get on with my day.

She presses her finger against her lips, pleading for me to shut up.

"Not now!" she mouths.

I grind my teeth, looking back through the hole as we wait for them to leave. Finally, they move on to the next street, and

I turn my glare on her, pushing the barrel of my gun underneath her chin.

“Speak,” I hiss.

“His name is Dax. He’s a treasure hunter. He’s after the diamond.” There is fear in her eyes while mine narrows to find the lies in whatever she’s saying.

“How do you know?” The name doesn’t ring a bell, but it could very much be true since there is big money to be earned in treasure hunting. With the number of treasures Frank Reyes seems to have hidden in his life, it makes sense for the Reyes family to be familiar with those who seek the same kind of fortune.

“He’s been harassing me to get that diamond for years. Even before you. He knows he can’t get any further without going through Frank’s shit. When Frank and Junior died, he came after me. I’ve managed to shake him off every single time.”

“Except now.”

“He must have been watching us.”

“Isn’t that convenient?” I cock my head at her, not convinced of her explanation.

“I’m telling the truth, Liam!” Her eyes turn glassy, frustration in her expression. Her black hair sits messily on her head from our narrow escape and for the first time since she strolled onto my yacht, her lipstick is smeared around the edges. She looks like she’s about to lose it, and it tugs on my

conscience just a little. Like a drop in the ocean, but it's still there.

“He’s been after me for years. Stalking me. Threatening me.” She takes a step closer, almost making it look like it’s not intentional.

“Is this supposed to make me feel sorry for you?”

“No!” she exclaims as loud as she can without revealing our position. “I just want you to trust me.”

“I’ve done that before. It bit me in the ass.”

Her eyes move from left to right as if she wants to make sure we’re still alone. “Look, I know you hate me. But I’m sorry, okay? I’m sorry for what I did to you. I’m sorry I let Junior pull me into his sick little games. I fucked up. And I’ve been feeling like shit for it ever since.” I hold her gaze, my mind trying to figure out her angle. “I know you don’t trust me, but please believe me when I say I’m not the same person as I was. I’ve changed. That night changed me. *You* changed me.” She presses her hands on my chest, looking up at me. The darkness in her eyes is lightening under the burning sun, and I let Gen’s words fly through my mind: ‘*Do you think she changed?*’ “I’m not here to hurt you or anyone else. Not even Imogen.” The name of my girl makes my jaw tick. “But right now, you need to trust me if we want to get out of here. I know what this man is like. He’ll torture before he talks to you. I’ve escaped him more than once.”

I realize I might be putting my fate in the hands of the devil, but it seems like I don’t have any other choice. I can call Kane

right now to pick me up somewhere, but I have no clue where I am, and I have no idea where Dax and his crew might be. I need a solid place to hide and enough getaway time to make sure Kane can send a car safely. I'm not risking them following us back to the safe house and putting Callie and Imogen in danger.

I dip my chin toward Cristina. I don't want to put my trust in her, but if I know one thing? I know it's Cristina Reyes who wants to live above all. If this guy is really after her, she's going to do anything in her power to stay out of his grasp.

“What are you suggesting?”

A smile splits her face, a sense of victory in her eyes. “We need to blend in.”

IMOGEN

PRESENT DAY

“He’s going to be fine.” Jeremy tries to comfort me.

“You don’t know that!” I snap. “He could be lying dead on the floor for all we know!”

“He’s not, Gen. I promise. He’ll get out of there.”

I want to believe him. I’m doing my best to keep it together, but I’m freaking out.

“Who was that anyway?!”

“I don’t know.” Jeremy shakes his head.

Great.

“How do we know she’s not working with them?” That bitch never shows her true colors, and it wouldn’t surprise me if she’s screwing us over once again. She keeps trying to convince us she’s changed and part of me wanted to believe it for the last few days. But that is now shredded to pieces. My gut is telling me she’s up to more than just getting that diamond in her hands.

“We don’t. But I’ll find out.”

Goosebumps trail my arms with a force that has me shuddering like a wet dog when I feel my heart racing for a different reason than the minute before. Adrenaline is being replaced by a sense of utter fear, suddenly feeling lost and alone. I bury my face in my palms, never letting go of the gun, despair washing over me like a bucket of ice. My tears refuse to be held back and my shoulders shake as I sob.

These days on the yacht fucked with my head, the tension felt in my core the entire time, but he got me through it. He made me smile. He gave me confidence, and he made it easy to believe that we will win this. That it will be over before I know it and that we'll go back to our lives. *Together.*

But now I fear that vision blowing up in my face, scared as hell that Liam won't come back to me with a heartbeat. That Cristina will sell him out like she did before.

The weight of a warm hand falls on my back. "He's trained, Gen. We will get him back."

I let him pull me against his side, staining his black shirt as he softly removes the gun from my grasp. "I can't lose him, Jer."

"I know, sweetheart. You won't." He rests his chin on my hair and I suck in his comfort, needing his touch to let me know I'm not alone.

For the rest of the ride, we all sit in silence, with me sobbing against Jeremy's chest. A few minutes later, I feel the van drive onto a wobbly road, the vehicle rocking from left to right.

“We’re here,” Jeremy announces.

I sit up, wiping away my tears, waiting to see where “here” is, as I patiently stay still until we’ve come to a full stop.

The doors fly open and Jeremy orders his men to get out at the same time Callie comes running down the small porch steps.

“Genny!” There is the same fear on her face that I feel on mine, and I jump out of the back of the car and into her arms. “Are you okay? Are you hurt? Where is Liam?”

I feel her stiffen as she looks into the empty vehicle.

“He’s still out there, Callie.” My waterworks resurface, taking comfort in finally feeling her arms around me.

“Oh, Genny.” She refrains from saying any comforting words, simply being there for me by holding me tight against her chest. We stand there for I don’t know how long until I have no tears left. Finally, I lift my head, my eyes colliding with Kane’s arctic gaze. I expect him to be furious, but he just gives me a reassuring smile.

“Jeremy is right,” he says, clearly already briefed by him. “Liam is going to be fine.”

I nod, wanting to believe them all, but my chest still feels like I got the weight of the world sitting on top of it. Kane pulls me from Callie’s grasp, yanking me against his chest.

The move catches me by surprise, because this man is not the affectionate type with anyone but Callie, but he wraps his huge arms around me, resting his head on mine. I’m standing

there for a few seconds, awkward as fuck, until I feel him sigh against my cheek.

“We’ll get him back, Gen.” There is no room for argument in his voice, and unlike Jeremy and Callie, Kane manages to put pull a smile from my lips. It’s not like I don’t trust the others, but getting the confirmation that everything will be all right from the biggest grump I know calms me down at least a little bit.

I accept his hug by circling his back with my arms, his heart pounding against my ear. It’s booming with steady beats, never faltering, and I tell myself that wouldn’t be the case if he was worried about his brother.

The moment stops when his phone rings, and he answers it with a grunt.

“Liam?” I let go of him when I hear his name, looking up at Kane with hope swelling in my chest. “Where are you?” Pause. “Right.” Pause. “Send us your location. We’ll pick you up.” Without saying goodbye, he hangs up the phone. “He’s okay.”

Sighs of relief sound all around, and I feel Callie wrap her arm around my neck.

“See! He’ll be here before you know it.” I nod, the words not completely settling in just yet. That will probably not happen until I can see it for myself. She turns me around, and I glance up at the home. It’s Caribbean yellow, with white window frames, and a big wraparound porch. It looks like the perfect getaway, the leaves of the palm trees softly bobbing in

the island breeze. I'd love it if the entire thing wasn't engraved with the dreadful feeling inside of me. "Come on, let's go inside and get you a cup of tea."



It's the longest twenty minutes of my life, but finally, I hear a car driving up the road. Everyone around me grabs their guns, peering suspiciously out of the window until someone outside gives Kane a signal.

"It's Liam."

Without waiting any longer, I run out of the house. My feet are going as quick as I can, the heaviness in my chest finally lifting when I connect my gaze with Liam's fatigued expression.

He can't move more than two steps out of the car before I launch myself at him, wrapping my legs around his waist. Like a junky, I sniff up his scent, wallowing in the comfort and familiarity I was so scared to have to live without.

"I thought I lost you!"

"I know, baby. But I'm okay." His warm lips land on my neck with a soft touch, and I do the same with him, wanting to feel that he's really here with every sense I have. His hand slips into my hair and he guides me to his mouth. "I'm not that easy to get rid of, you know that." His smirk is contagious, only because my heart is put at ease, and I press my lips

against his. I moan when I feel his tongue collide with mine, his taste erasing every inch of dread I just felt.

“Don’t ever do that again!” I scowl when I break loose.

He chuckles while I glide down his body. “I won’t. I promise.”

From the corner of my eye, I notice the she-devil watching us with hawk eyes.

“Cristina.” I smile. “So sad to see you made it.”

“Genny.”

Liam rolls his eyes at Cristina’s glare, placing his hand on my back as he walks beside me to greet everyone else.

“Happy to see you, brother.” Kane hugs him, slapping him on the back while I point my attention to Cristina, who comes around the back of the car.

“Glad to see you’re safe, Gen.” Sweet Cristina seems to be making an appearance, but I’m not stupid. I don’t reply, instead, just feel a frown cutting deep above my eyebrows as I cross my arms across my chest. “I’m so happy Liam was there. I wouldn’t know what to do without him.” I don’t miss the instantiation before I squint my eyes at her.

“Die, probably,” I deadpan.

“Maybe, yeah. But luckily, Liam was there for me.” The sound of her syrupy tone almost makes me want to gag, but I decide to shut up.

She’s not worth it, Gen.

“What are you wearing?” My eyes slowly roam over the flashy fuchsia pink tank top she’s wearing, all the way down to her denim shorts and sneakers.

Not exactly her style.

“We had to blend it.” She waves her hand at Liam, and I follow the motion, now noticing that he’s wearing a floral print shirt and some khaki fishing shorts.

“Blend in with what? The Catfish crowd?” I wait for a snarky comment to come my way, but before I know it, Kane storms past me, the wind it comes with almost knocking me out.

“What the—” I mutter.

“You fucking bitch!” He goes straight for Cristina’s neck while a roar erupts from his chest. With one sweep, he lifts her by her throat, throwing her onto the hood of the car. “I’m done with you, Reyes bitch!” Cristina’s fingers try to peel Kane’s hands from her neck. “I’m going to kill you!” Her eyes grow wide at his announcement, knowing Kane is not fucking around.

“Kane, stop!” Callie pulls his arm while Cristina desperately tries to kick her way to freedom, her features growing more flush with every second she lacks oxygen.

“Stop!” Callie cries, the only one who’s still making an attempt to not let Cristina suffocate. “Think of Babushka!”

The last word snaps me out of my selfish desire to see Cristina suffer, and I take a step forward.

“She’s right, Kane! Stop! We need Babushka back!”

“Please, baby!” Callie pulls his arm again, but it’s Liam who drags him off of Cristina.

The moment he loses his grip on Cristina’s airway, she sucks in a deep breath with horror in her gaze. She starts to cough, her lungs in need of release.

“Don’t, Kane. We need her.” Liam pushes him away from the car.

“We don’t fucking need her! We’ll find Babushka ourselves!”

“Kane, STOP! We are not risking her life.” Kane’s eyes lock with Callie, the fire in her eyes affecting him enough to take a deep breath.

“Fine.” He shrugs Liam off. “Fine! Get off of me! Any more tricks and you’re dead, girl!” He points his glare at Cristina, who’s still gasping for air on the hood of the car.

He pulls Callie’s arm, leading her back inside the house, and we all just stand there, not sure what to do.

Liam stares back at Cristina, patiently waiting for her to get a grip. He looks ridiculous in his outfit, being everything he’s not, but there is still power in his gaze that draws her eyes toward his.

“You better get your act together. *Quickly*. We will get Babushka back, but if Kane ever has to choose between Callie’s safety or Babushka’s, he will always pick her.” He takes a few steps my way, linking my fingers with his. “Same

goes for Gen. Babushka comes before you on our priority list, but make no mistake, Cristina. The old woman will never come before these two girls.”

Cristina’s glare expands with every word Liam says, a wolfish glint in her dark brown eyes. Liam tucks me behind him as he walks toward the steps and into the house, but I hold my gaze on Cristina, showing her a satisfactory smile.

Eat that, bitch.

You’ll never win.

IMOGEN

PRESENT DAY

I'm swirling the wine around my glass, staring into the fire. My back presses against Liam's chest, his mouth comfortably close to my neck the entire time. I feel safe in his arms. Like I can conquer the world, knowing he will always have my back. That I'm never alone. The feeling of loss I felt deep in my bones earlier made me realize how lucky I am for the family that I have today.

Liam, Callie, Kane, even Jeremy, the five of us make a fucking dysfunctional family with not an appropriate story to tell on anyone's birthday. But we're a family and we'll go through hell for each other. That's all I need.

"So, now what?" I ask, keeping my voice low to make sure Cristina doesn't wake up.

We waited for her to fall asleep, one of our guys keeping watch in front of her door to ensure we can talk freely. She's been trying to stay close, wanting to play nice with everyone and save face, but eventually, she gave up and went to her room. Thank fuck, because after dinner, I was tempted to stab her with my fork.

“Well, there were two stories in the safe deposit box,” Callie explains. “One about a Russian girl finding a key, which I’m pretty sure refers to me and my inheritance. It was a young adult novel, and I’m sure I saw Junior reading it when he was younger. That’s not it.”

“Besides, you’re twenty-five now. Cristina will never be able to claim your inheritance now,” Jeremy adds. We’re all sitting around the firepit in the big yard, nursing a drink of our choice. Which means whiskey for them and wine for me. I still don’t feel like I can relax with Cristina around, and I don’t think it’s a good idea to dull my senses too much.

Callie nods. “The other one was about a ballerina. It was a picture book, and the drawings reminded me of one of the paintings at home.”

“New York home?” I ask.

“No, Granada,” she replies, referring to the home she lived in last before she and her mother moved to the States. “We had a painting of a ballerina hanging above the fireplace. I always loved it when I was a kid.”

“Do you think they are connected?” Liam’s voice slides into my ear, his breath warming my skin.

“I know they are connected,” Callie rebukes. “We went to the house.”

“You broke in?” I wouldn’t put it past her, but I doubt Kane will let Callie break and enter, knowing there is a chance she’ll have to run from the cops while being pregnant.

“No, smartass over here just rang the doorbell and told them she used to live there.” Kane chuckles with a proud look. We volley a few looks over and back, all a little surprised at Callie’s boldness.

“It worked, didn’t it?” she counters with a tiny glare. “They let me in, and luckily, they rented it completely furnished. The painting was still there. So, my billionaire husband over there...” She cocks her head with a smile.

“Paid two grand for an old stuffy painting.”

“Of course you did,” Liam mumbles with a smile, then coughs under his breath, “Pussy.”

“Don’t even start with me, brother.” Kane pins him down, giving me a side-eye, and Liam just laughs, planting a kiss on my cheek.

“But behind the painting was a letter,” Callie says with a knowing look.

“Let me guess. It was from Loranne Almos,” Jeremy cuts in.

“Yup.”

“So, Loranne is definitely still the one we need,” I add.

“Yeah, there is a good chance she knows more, but Cristina is right. She’s nothing more than a vegetable. I doubt her hired help will let us go around her house, so we need to do it when they are out. Preferably draw as little attention as possible, because these islanders are pretty protective of each other.”

“Do we even know what we’re looking for? I hardly believe she’ll have a diamond worth two million just sitting in her bookcase or something.” The woman might not be able to speak, but I’m pretty sure Frank wouldn’t have made it easy if this is a diamond that a lot of people would want to get their hands on.

“Gen is right,” Liam agrees.

“I know. That’s why we need to search the entire place.” Callie looks at Kane, silently pleading, but he instantly shakes his head with a firm expression.

“No chance in hell, baby girl.”

“Come on! This is my family. I don’t want to sit this out,” she pouts.

“And you are my family! The both of you!” He huffs, quiet enough to not be heard in the main house. “You are not breaking and entering while carrying my child. Or *ever* again, for that matter.”

“What do you mean *ever*? You don’t get to tell me what to do!”

“Yeah”—Kane just tilts his head, unimpressed—“I do, baby.”

“You’re being ridiculous!”

“He’s right, Callie.” My words grant me an angry look from her, but I’m not going to take it back. I know she never backs out from an adventure, or challenge, but we can’t risk anything happening to her and the baby. I offer her a coy smile as a

peace offering. “We need to be smart about this. Liam and I will go.”

Callie’s eyes grow wide, the teal popping against the black of the night, and I’m about to ask her what’s wrong when I feel footsteps getting closer.

“Y’all are having a party and didn’t invite me?” Cristina takes the empty chair with a pout, and we all stay quiet, the mood having completely shifted within seconds.

“I’m getting the silent treatment now?”

“Would you rather have one of my knives in your neck?” Kane offers with a straight face.

“Kane!” Callie scolds, even though we are all thinking the same thing. We can’t trust her, and she needs to go.

“Thank you, Kane, but no.” Cristina smiles at him, then drills her gaze into mine with narrowed eyes. “So where are we going tomorrow?”

I grind my teeth at the fact that she clearly heard what I said, already knowing where this is headed. I move my gaze back and forth between Callie and Kane in question, but it’s Liam’s voice that lets me release the air from my lungs and try to shrug off the hate I feel for Cristina.

“It’s better having her around us than around Callie,” he whispers in my ear.

I hate that he’s right, but he is. The more time Cristina will spend with Callie, the sooner she will find out she’s pregnant and that would put her at more risk.

“You were right,” I tell Cristina, getting off Liam’s lap. “The clues lead to Loranne.”

I turn around toward the house, because I can’t stand being around her any longer. I hate the smug grin on her face and the fact that she’s more perceptive than I want her to be. I know why she needs to stay alive and, God forbid, anything happens to Callie’s grandmother, but Kane is right. She’s a hazard to all of us.

“We already knew I was right,” Cristina bellows to my back. “So, what’s the plan?”

I keep walking, pouring all the contents of my glass down my throat.

“We pay Loranna a visit tomorrow. *Goodnight, Cristina,*” I sing with annoyance before I disappear into the house.

LIAM

PRESENT DAY

“Well, who put her in charge?” Cristina mocks as Gen walks away from the firepit, and her brown eyes cut to mine. I was so jealous of Kane this morning when he had his hand wrapped around that slender little neck of hers. That snarky mouth finally tensed with fear, her muscles spasming as she squirmed under his touch in agony. I was enjoying every second of it, and if Callie didn’t try to stop him, I would’ve grabbed a bucket of popcorn and took a seat.

I can’t wait for that day to come.

Not wanting to give Cristina any more of my energy, I just glare at her before I follow Imogen back into the house.

“Baby, wait up.”

She turns around, my heart missing a beat when I see the exhaustion in her expression. Putting her empty glass on the side table next to the stairs, she manages to shoot me a smile.

“I’m just going to bed.”

“Are you okay?” I hold her arms in my hands, rubbing her cold skin.

Gen's eyes close for a brief moment as she exhales, then they find mine. "I'm just fed up. Tired. I want this to be over. I want *her* to get herself killed or something." She points to the yard over my shoulder. "I'm sick of how she's trying to manipulate us. You. Me. She's competing with me, and I'm getting closer and closer to wanting to just beat her brains in with a baseball bat. "

I whistle. "Damn, Blondie. Who knew you could be so dark?"

"It's what happens when you get taunted by the girl who tries to steal your man away from you."

"Hey"—I take her face in my hands—"you know there is *no* competition, right? She doesn't stand a chance. In fact, she wouldn't even be on my radar if she didn't put herself there every five minutes."

"I know," she admits reluctantly. I want to make it better for her, but I can't give her anything else than the promise it will be over soon, like I've been doing every day.

"Come on, let me show you something." I wrap her hand in mine, then walk us out the door into the front yard.

"Where are we going?"

I ignore her question, leading her down the path between the palm trees. We walk over the soft sand, toward the greenhouse that's hidden between the trees. The team has been using it as a way to talk strategy in private since we got here, but now it's empty except for the two guards holding the place down.

“I didn’t know there was a greenhouse,” Gen muses.

“Take a hike, but stay close.” I give the two men a small nod, and they disappear into the bushes when I open the door. The air inside is humid, the heat dampening your skin as soon as you enter.

I leave the lights off, deciding the glow of the moon shining through the glass ceiling is more than enough when I notice it illuminating Gen’s soft blonde hair. Her blue eyes have replaced their fatigue with a glint that dances around like fireflies.

“What are we doing?”

Grabbing her hips, I turn her around so I can walk her backward until her ass hits the workbench and I lift her onto the edge. “What do you think we’re doing, baby?”

I dive my nose into her hair, sucking up her cherry flavor. Today I was more than content just knowing she was close after needing to let her go this morning. It killed me to see her drive away and register the pain in her eyes, but I knew I had to do it. I knew I needed to have one less person to worry about because it was the only way I would’ve been able to get out of there. But it tore me apart, not knowing if she made it out. My heart started beating automatically, instead of the vivid thump it has when she’s around, and it didn’t spark back to life until she was in my arms again. That was enough for the rest of the day. To just hold her. But not anymore.

“You’re showing me your talent for gardening?”

My mouth connects with her neck, and she arches it to give me better access. “I have more of a talent for planting seeds.”

“Oh, my God, Liam. That’s so fucking cheesy.”

“It’s true, and I can’t wait to dump my seed inside of you right now.”

With a laugh, her body melts into mine, whatever resolve she had gone as she rubs her entire body against me. I feel how her fingers move up and down my back, the sensation shutting my eyes. All my nerves go on high alert, a primal need of desire owning me more with every touch. Every soft stroke. She lifts the hem of my shirt, pulling it over my head, before I do the same with hers. Baby blue lace covers her puckered nipples, taunting me through the thin fabric.

She licks her lips when her gaze falls to my chest, yanking me toward her. The heat of her body vibrates a moan from my throat, and I slide my hand into her hair to direct her lips to mine. “I’m addicted to you, Imogen Payne. From that first moment in Havana, you made me a fucking junky.” I swipe my tongue over her lips as she starts to push down my sweats. “No one can ever compete with you.” Disconnecting our lips, I press my forehead against hers. She stares at me with a haunting look, then runs her tongue flat against her palm. “Gen,” I grunt with closed eyes.

She shushes me, wrapping her wet hand over my throbbing length with a tight grip. My mind is confiscated of all thoughts when she moves her hand up and down in a teasing motion. It’s so easy to get lost in this girl, to fall into a deep pool of

desire with her. But I need to get this off my chest. Need her to understand.

I fist her hair, forcefully tilting her head. She stares back at me with parted lips, her breaths shallow as she never stops stroking my cock, which makes focusing on what I want to say that much harder.

“You are all I want, do you hear me?”

She replies with a moan, and my hips jerk when her palm covers the tip of my leaking cock before she slowly slides it back to my balls.

“Goddamnit,” I mutter through a groan. “Do you hear me, baby?”

“Yes, I hear you.” She nods with an innocent look, but it’s quickly replaced by mischief. “Now, fuck me, Liam. *Own* me.”

She keeps flicking the tip of my cock against her wet center, her lips parting more with each circling stroke. “I feel so used,” I joke.

“You love it.”

“Fuck, how can I not, Blondie?”

I nibble her neck, enjoying her fingertips as they alternate between pleasuring me and strategically pleasing herself like I’m her personal vibrator. Her plea makes me feral, and I take a step back, my boxers hanging on my thighs, my sweats pooling around my ankles. “Get naked,” I order, having every intention of enjoying the show. “Let me see that sweetness

dripping from your cunt and down your pretty thighs. Show me how hard your nipples are.”

A wolfish grin expands her pretty face as she runs her tongue along her teeth, biting her lip. Her hands disappear behind her back before she tosses her bra at me with a fling of her wrist. I catch it, never letting her eyes fall from my sight as I throw it over my shoulder. She lets her feet fall to the floor, then strips down to her panties.

Her denim shorts sit around her ankles, and she kicks them toward my face with a grace that makes it hard to hold back a chuckle. She’s fully going for it when her hips move from left to right with a sensuality I’ve only seen from strippers, bringing a ton of ideas into my head.

Man, I’d love to see her sliding down a pole one day.

“Are you wet for me?” I lick my lips at the sight of her perfect pussy as she pushes the lace down her hips. She nods like a naughty schoolgirl, making my cock throb for the feel of her. I gawk at her standing before completely naked, my eyes moving up and down her body, ready for it to be my hands.

“Are you wet for me, Blondie?” I repeat.

“I’ve been wet for you since the first day we met.”

The lazy look in her eyes changes to wicked, cutting deep into my soul, because I know this is the true depth of her entire being. She can be insecure; she isn’t your typical combat girl and would probably suck as a soldier. But I see who she really is. The dark desires that she holds deep within her. She shows

me the real Gen and every time I get her without any more boundaries, I'm more in awe of this woman. She has the ability to shake me up in ways that are both disturbing as they are addictive.

But this right here is why I fell in love with her. Why there will never be another woman for me in this world. She's a goddess roaming over the fucking earth like the light in a dark night.

My breaths quicken when she flutters her lashes at me, stroking her breasts, then so damn slowly, dipping her finger down. Dragging it to her stomach, over her hips, and finally pushing them through her wetness. My lips part when I see them coated with the juices between her thighs, glistening at me like crystals.

"I'm soaked for you, Liam. I'm always soaked for you like a damn waterfall." It comes out in a whisper, her entire voice filled with a need that makes it impossible to hold back any longer. With one big stride, I crash my body against hers, finding her lips in ravenous hunger. That taste of cotton candy and cherry seeps onto my tongue, and I grunt in relieved pleasure. She climbs back onto the workstation hastily, while I come to stand between her legs, rubbing my cock against her warm entrance.

"Your pussy's so hot for me. Are you gonna burn me, baby?"

"I already did," she replies, looking up at me with smug grin.

“You’re damn right you did.”

My tongue delves in, traveling across every piece of her mouth with intent. The vibrations of her moans grow my lust to insatiable levels, and my hands move into her hair to deepen the kiss.

“Fuck me, Liam. I need to feel you inside of me. I want you to stretch me w—”

I push my cock inside before she’s even finished, starting with the tip and holding still as my stomach feels like it’s about to flutter away if I push any farther. My forehead falls against her shoulder, almost losing it at the first touch.

“Fucking hell, you feel too good.” Trailing open-mouthed kisses below her ear, I push deeper with a held breath. Her head falls back the moment I’m fully seated, and we both moan long and loud at the merging of our bodies. Digging her heels into my ass, her arms hold on to my shoulders while I start to pump inside of her. Each movement results in tiny mewls from her lips, spurring me on with each thrust. I drag it out, wanting to go slow and make her feel everything I feel for her. I want her to feel how my body beats for only her. How her smile is running through my head every single minute of the day she’s not with me.

The humid air of the greenhouse makes the air thick and our skin sticky, but it only adds to the sensations. I want to swallow her whole, and drag her body to mine, anything to keep me on this wave we’re riding. All that matters is moving together as one.

“You’re a dirty girl, aren’t you, Blondie?”

“Yes,” she huffs, nails clawing into me.

“You want my cum all over you, don’t you?” I jerk inside of her, thinking of marking her pretty, smooth skin with my release.

“Yes, please. Please!” Her cries are feral, a clear urgency in every syllable.

I keep slipping in and out of her tight slit, tilting my head to find her eyes when I notice her body growing rigid. Her blue gaze peers over my shoulder with a glare that’s meant to kill from a distance, but her panting never stops. The moment I want to take a glance, I refrain, suddenly realizing what she’s staring at. *Who* she’s staring at. Feeling it in my gut. Instead, I keep going, putting even more intent into my thrusts and driving a moan from deep within her.

“She’s here, isn’t she?” My mouth is flush with her ear, the sensitive brush of my breath along her shell causing her to whimper in blissful agony. Her eyes stay trained on whoever has captured her sight, but I don’t even have to hear her name to know who’s there. Who’s watching us fuck under the light of the moon.

“Let her,” I tell her. “Let her watch how I good I fuck you. Let her watch what it looks like when two people become one. When they share a soul.” I cup her cheek, forcing her to look at me. “You own my soul, baby. Let her witness what she can never have.”

The slight frown that had formed smooths out, instead her light blue eyes bouncing with wickedness that I haven't seen before. It's so goddamn sexy. And it's when I know she feels the confidence that she should feel every minute of every day.

My warrior princess.

“Show her how dirty you get for me, Blondie,” I whisper against her skin, trailing my tongue up her neck.

She runs her hand through my hair, tugging it hard enough to make my scalp burn, and I close my eyes, loving her rough grip. Pulling my head forward, she forces my mouth against hers, then presses my cock even deeper with a thrust of her own. Her nails dig into my back, dragging them down and making me growl. It's hard enough to leave marks that will be there in the morning, already burning under the humidity, but I love every moment of it. Let her brand me. Let her own *me*.

The thought of Cristina seeing me fuck Gen with a passion I've never felt for her turns me on even more. “Show her, baby.”

Gen's gaze falls over my shoulders again, her devilish smile pressed against my skin. A silent battle going on between the two women.

“There is nothing better than knowing you are mine, Gen,” I whisper in her ear to motivate her to let go. To let go, no matter who's watching. “There is nothing better than your pussy waiting for me every single day.” She grunts in response, her neck staying rigid and aimed in front of her. “Let go, baby. Who cares who's watching. Let go, knowing nothing

else matters but you and me.” I pull back to find her eyes, but she keeps staring into the darkness, her hips moving along with mine. I thrust inside of her, slamming deep, while I watch her carefully. Grabbing her chin, I hold it tightly in my palm, waiting for the moment she falls over the edge. My release builds inside of me, but I need to stretch it out. I *need* her to come with me. Finally, I almost grunt in agony when I notice her smile expanding in victory, knowing that she won the battle.

Without waiting any longer, I cover her mouth with mine. “You and me, baby.”

“You and me.” Gen smirks, the look on her face elevated to something new.

“Come with me, baby. Touch yourself.”

A hand dips to her clit, while she keeps the other firmly planted on my shoulder to hold on. I pick up the pace, both of us working our way to ecstasy. I carefully pay attention to her panting, noticing when her breaths grow more irregular, alternated by the moans that reverberate against the glass ceiling.

Her blonde hair swishes back and forth while I drive inside of her with more force. “Are you close?” I huff, trying to ignore the pounding in my ears.

“Keep going! Harder!”

Finding every last ounce of strength in the muscles in my ass, I pump harder and harder and harder until I feel how her

walls clench to milk my cock. A wail falls from her gorgeous lips, her neck arching backward as she comes apart in my hands. Her legs shake, her pussy constricting around me, and that's all I can take. The sight of her coming always has me in pieces.

I feel her body come down from her high, a lazy look in her eyes as I shoot my load, with a roar blasting from my chest. For a few seconds, I feel like I'm no longer standing on my feet, my head floating somewhere around the greenhouse. The rush that left my body takes every last bit of energy before I collapse against her.

My forehead rests against her chest as I try to catch my breath, her arms latching around my body like she's a koala bear.

"I love you, my little exhibitionist," I whisper against her skin.

"Little exhibitionist?" she snickers.

"You liked knowing that she was watching us. That I was fucking you and not her." I find her eyes with a smirk and the glint that flashes through them is evidence enough to tell me I'm right.

She shrugs, pressing my lips against hers. "Maybe a little."

I cock an eyebrow.

"Okay, it was fucking *hot*." She laughs.

I shake my head with a grin that will probably stay on my face until I fall asleep with this beauty wrapped in my arms. "I

love you, baby.’

“Even now that we know I like it when people have a peek?”

“Baby, we could be having sex on a stage with thousands of people watching, and I wouldn’t care. I’ll only have eyes for you anyway.”

“Hmm, good answer,” she muses.

“You’re sexy when you act like the dirty little thing that you are.” I smirk. “But the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen... is this.” I pull out, taking a step back as I lower my vision to her spread legs, then rub my fingers over her center until my cum drips from her slit. “Knowing the only seed that will ever drip from your sweet cunt... is mine.” I bring my fingers to my lips, sucking them clean of our combined releases with a groan.

“Oh my God, Liam.” The shock on her face is golden, morphing into renewed lust as I keep swirling my tongue around it, not wasting a drop.

“Yum.” I pop my lips with a smile as she bites hers.

“You’re going to lick me until everyone can hear me scream, aren’t you?”

I wink, dropping to my knees. “Hell yeah.”

IMOGEN

PRESENT DAY

When we crawled into bed last night, still disgusting and sweaty from our time in the greenhouse, I was cackling. I had a shit-eating grin on my face that I couldn't get rid of. Liam kept looking at me like I was high or something, but the truth was, I was.

I am.

Waking up now, with his warm skin against my back and his lips resting against my neck, I still feel it.

The first few moments I was angry when I found Cristina's eyes lasering into Liam's back as he kept thrusting inside of me. My organs twisted, my muscles rigid, while I was contemplating how to get rid of her without losing Liam's touch. But as soon I heard him whisper in my hair, ordering me to let go, that feeling was replaced by power. The realization that he was making love to me while she was watching with jealousy in her dark eyes made me feel strong. On top of the world, of her. That final inkling of doubt caused me to feel insecure around her finally vanished into the humid air of the greenhouse, because in that moment, she showed her

cards. She showed every ugly piece of her soul as she kept glaring at me. I'm sure she wanted to convince me she didn't care as she watched the show, but she couldn't hide the sense of failure that was cutting through her gaze, knowing she will never get Liam back. I saw the hint of defeat, the slight panic when she finally turned around and left.

Cristina has nothing on me, and I'm about to show her.

"What are you all chipper about?" Liam hums against my neck, his morning wood resting between my cheeks.

"Had a good night's sleep."

"A good night's sleep, or a good night's fuck?"

"Hmm, definitely both."

Liam places an open-mouthed kiss in the crook of my neck that makes my toes curl. "I'm glad you feel good, baby."

"You know what makes me feel even better?"

"Tell me."

"Breakfast on the beach."

Liam exhales heavily. "I like this whole new attitude, but we don't have time for a date today, baby."

I spin in his arms, showing him a fierce expression with a hint of mocking. "I know that, smartass—"

"Who are you calling smartass?" He starts to tickle me, and I scramble myself out of the bed with a playful screech to escape his grasp.

“Stop!” I hold a finger up while he tries to launch for me. “Stop, Liam!” I chuckle. He holds still, though there is a haunt in his gaze that wakes my pussy up from her nightly slumber. “What I was gonna say... I want you to take me out for breakfast *tomorrow*. This ends today. Do you hear me?”

He cocks an eyebrow at my commanding tone.

“We’re going to see Loranne, get that diamond, get Babushka, and then you and I are having a holiday on this tropical island.” I plant my hands on my hips.

“Scratch that, I *love* this whole new attitude.” He jumps out of bed, and I take a step back just to watch the lust in his eyes a little while longer before he reaches me and snakes his arms around my waist.

“I mean it, though. This ends *today*. And then we will start our lives together.”

“Sounds like a plan, baby.”



We’re sitting on the terrace in the center of South Reef Bay. The wind gushes through every section of the colorful restaurant that’s nothing more than an open floor plan at the end of the dock, only supported by beams when the floor-to-ceiling shutters are up and they’re open for business. I’m nursing an early cocktail with my sunglasses firmly on my nose, my eyes shut behind them. It’s only eleven in the morning, but I need something to make me tolerate Cristina

for a little while longer. The sun warms my cheeks, and I suck in a deep breath, taking in the scents that are making their way to me all the way from the kitchen. I smell some bacon, a little bit of beef, and the delicious aroma of garlic. Everything has my stomach roaring like a dino baby, thinking about the fact that I had to settle with some leftover Pop-tarts I found in the empty cabinets.

“I’m hungry.” I pout, popping my eyes open to look at Liam.

He’s looking sexy as hell in his navy t-shirt, his hair still messy and shining underneath the flickering of the sun. I can feel his eyes finding mine from underneath his sunglasses while a boyish grin lifts the corner of his mouth.

“You’re always hungry.”

This is true.

Liam leans over the table, lowering his head to get closer to me.

“I’ll feed you when we get home, baby.” He smirks with a sultry voice, then leans back against his plastic chair. “And myself.”

The suggestion in his tone makes my organs flutter, and I snap my mouth shut to prevent myself from drooling. I keep my lips firmly planted together, but really, I feel content staring at the perfect setting in front of me. South Reef Bay Liam, the sun gracing my skin. It’s almost paradise.

“I’m surprised Callie didn’t want to come. She’s not the kind of girl that would skip an adventure.”

Almost.

I roll my eyes at Cristina. “She probably didn’t want to look at your deceitful face.”

Just count on this chick to kill the mood, though I do feel different. I’d still like to see her swim with sharks while her foot is cut off, but she will not be able to wipe this grin off my cheeks today. Or ever again.

“Seems like a plausible reason,” Liam chimes in.

Cristina moves her glaring eyes back and forth between the two of us, the corner of her lip raised in a snarl. “Aren’t you two chipper this morning, tag-teaming and all? You know I don’t have to be the enemy, right?”

“Yeah, you do.” I chuckle. “I mean, you got the looks for it. Dark hair. Dark eyes. Shit style.” I let my eyes roam over her black jeans and a trashy halter top that seems to barely hold her boobs together. “A mouth that only produces bullshit. You really fit the entire description.”

“Liam seemed to be really digging it before he met you.” She tries to stab.

“That’s right! *Before* he met me. You see, you don’t know you’re slumming it until you get the best in your hands.”

“You got nothing on me, bitch.”

“Bitch?” I repeat, gripping my heart with a smile. “Oh, really, Cris? You can’t do any better than that? I take it back, maybe you’re right, maybe you’re not the villain in this story. I’m pretty sure the villain is supposed to be more inventive with their banter.”

“I can be really inventive when I kill you,” she seethes, her dark eyes growing luminous.

“And no sense of humor. Sorry, I forgot that one,” I add, undisturbed, while Liam just smirks at me. “What do you think, baby? Does she make the cut for the villain?”

Liam shrugs. “Fine by me. The villain never wins anyway.”

Cristina opens her mouth to counter, but Liam cuts her off when he snaps his fingers, pointing at something at the dock. “Look, she’s here.”

Our necks turn, watching a woman being pushed in a wheelchair toward the restaurant. Her brown hair is perfectly styled, and a flowery dress covers her legs while she’s being pushed by a girl in jeans shorts and a t-shirt. Her soft brown curls are sitting in a messy bun on top of her head while one of them has sprung free and is now bouncing through the air with every step she takes. Her fake Louis Vuitton bag is hanging loosely on her shoulder, and her sweet, radiant smile shows her age in every way. She’s probably not older than twenty, and she gives all the vibes of someone who genuinely enjoys taking care of someone.

It’s clear they come here daily as we watch in silence how they slowly stroll toward the bar, while the caretaker girl

greet every one of the staff. I scan the length of her entire body, trying to find a set of keys in any of her pockets, assuming they are in her bag when I can't spot any awkward bulges in the denim.

"You're up, baby," Liam tells me, and I nod before I get up.

"What's the plan?" Cristina asks.

"*You* just sit tight like a good little doggie." I swirl my finger in her face before pointing it at Liam as I begin to walk backward with a smirk on my face. "*You* flirt with me."

His eyebrows knit together above his sunglasses. "What do you mean?"

"Come on, baby, you got better than that." I keep my steps steady, my gaze never leaving his. In my head, I've counted it to be ten to fifteen big strides backward.

"Where are you going?" Liam asks, a little louder this time.

"Why?" I beam. "You wanna come?"

He laughs when he realizes what I'm doing. "You know I'll catch you anyway."

"You're going to catch me?"

"You want me to?" He gets up, his ominous steps following mine.

I nod, showing him my teeth with a mischievous grin.

Eleven.

Twelve.

“Run fast, baby!” The moment the words release from his throat, I turn around with a shriek, running into the caretaker girl and knocking her on her ass. I follow right behind her, landing almost on top of her with wide eyes. My knees connect with the wood, and I hold myself up on my palms.

“Oh, my God! I’m so sorry!” My palm covers my mouth, while my eyes quickly scan the contents of her bag that are now spread out on the deck. “Are you okay?” A notebook, her phone, some receipts, beauty products. Finally, I lock my gaze with the set of keys, a cute little slipper keychain attached to the metal.

“Baby, you know we can’t play these games in public anymore.” Liam gives me a slight reprimand as soon as he’s within reach. “Someone is bound to get hurt at some point.” Then he points his expression at the girl. “Are you okay?”

A little stunned, she pushes the air from her lungs. “Yeah, I’m okay.”

“I’m so sorry!” I cry out again with red cheeks while I start putting her stuff back in her bag. “I like to tease him, but I really should be more careful.” I slip her set of keys into my back pocket in the blink of an eye before I continue with the rest of the stuff that slipped out.

“It’s okay, really.” She chuckles while Liam helps her get back on her feet. Lorraine is still sitting in her wheelchair, her eyes never even moving anywhere else than right in front of her. Man, she really is nothing more than a vegetable.

“Can I buy you a drink?” I hand her bag back with an apologetic smile.

“That’s okay, Mrs. Almos doesn’t always respond well to new company.”

I glance at the woman who Frank Reyes mentioned as the love of his life, seeing the sadness in the love story when I peer into her hollow eyes.

“Thank you for the offer.” The girl smiles.

“You’re welcome. I hope you have a great day.” I softly rub her arm, then signal to Cristina to get her ass up. She does so with a glare, and a roll of her eyes, though they’re covered by sunglasses.

“You too!” The girl strolls off with Loranne, and I look up at Liam. “If I ever turn into a vegetable, you better kill me. That’s just awful.”

“You got what we need?” Cristina approaches us with swaying hips and an attitude that has everyone she passes rearing their heads to follow her every move.

I snort. “What do you think? Let’s go.”



“You stay out here and keep watch. Gen and I will go in,” Liam says as we’re standing in front of the house. It’s small and cute, and I imagine it to be a pretty home while in its glory. But now, the front yard is covered in tropical bushes that

barely make it possible to look through the windows and the paint seems in need of a new lick years ago.

“¿*Que te pasa?*” Cristina sneers. “I’m not staying out here! Who says you two won’t get out through the backyard when you find the diamond?”

I turn my head to look past Liam to see the displeasure on her face, but he blocks my view when he turns his body, crowding her space. A few days ago, I’d probably be jealous, hating their proximity. But now, I just smile, feeling a bit sorry for her when his energy radiates nothing more than contempt.

That’s a lie; I couldn’t feel sorry for the bitch if I wanted to.

Not anymore.

“You wanted me to trust you, right?” Liam thunders, though he doesn’t raise his voice at her. “That goes both ways, sweetheart. Consider this a way to show your loyalty. You stay out and let us know if Lorraine and her caretaker come home early, got it?”

When Cristina doesn’t reply, a stare-off takes place for longer than a few heartbeats until I roll my eyes. “No offense, but we don’t have time for this.”

“Fine.” Cristina folds her arms in front of her chest.

“Great,” I clip, beaming. “Let’s go.” Pulling Liam’s arm, we walk toward the front door and easily access the house with the keyset I’ve stolen. I wait for a few seconds, listening for any reply with my ears prick up.

“What are you doing?” Liam whispers.

“Checking if she has a dog or something, duh! Breaking and entering 101, baby, they didn’t teach you that in felon high school?”

“Nah, I majored in distributing weapons and drugs; everyone knows that’s where the money is.”

“Right, I forgot about that.” When I’m convinced there will be no Bingo to snap our ankles, I push the door fully open, and we enter the house. A soft smell of summer patchouli attacks my nose as I scan the living room. The house is small, and a little messy, but it still feels homey, like someone’s safe haven. Reign told us she’s been living here since she was eighteen, which means that Frank Reyes has been in this house as well. It’s hard to picture him in a cozy setting like this when I only know the man as cunning and focused on luxury.

“Where do we start?” I ask, Liam walking past me.

“Let’s start with the bedroom.” We let our feet carry us to the bedroom and then get to work. We don’t want to alarm Lorraine’s caretaker in any way, so we try to put everything back the way we found it, going through every inch of the room with precision. Closet, under the bed, drawers. Liam ticks every piece of furniture to look for any hidden compartments, but when we can’t find anything, we move to the guest room in the house. We proceed in the same way, but come up empty-handed.

“Come on,” I balk. “We have to find something!” I walk toward the kitchen, looking for anything out of the ordinary.

Liam pulls my back against his chest, pressing a kiss to my cheek.

“We will. You check the bookcases, and I’ll check in here.”

I round the bar that’s connected to the living room before I start looking through every book on the shelf. Most of them are just old books, with the occasional history book about the island, but when I get to the third shelf, I open one of the bigger books. The corner of my lips curl when I see the photos inside, then glance at the shelf when I realize five of them are all the same.

“Photo albums,” I murmur to myself.

One by one, I go through them, looking for any that have pictures of Frank and Loranne together. My gut tells me there is something in here, but I can’t pinpoint it. Maybe we’re looking in the wrong place. I want to grab the next book, when the sound of a car door has me peeking out the window.

Cristina’s black hair is shown in front of the yard, and I fixate my gaze on the direction she’s looking at. A man with a thick beard is standing across the street, about thirty yards away, leaning against the door of his SUV. He’s bulky, with tattoos covering both his arms, popping out when he crosses his arms in front of his chest.

That man.

I know him.

He’s the one who chased us yesterday.

Dax.

Liam told us how Cristina mentioned he was a treasure hunter who was after the diamond.

I can feel my heart rate speed up when he smirks at Cristina and she doesn't do anything. She doesn't move. She doesn't say a word. I fixate my eyes on both of them until she gives him a curt nod, and I gasp.

“What's wrong?” I hear Liam from the kitchen.

“Cristina!” I hiss. “She knows that guy who tried to run us off the road yesterday!”

I watch him get back into his vehicle, starting the car while Liam's weight stomps my way.

“Are you sure?”

“Positive!”

“Where?” Liam comes to stand beside me, peering out of the window at the same time the car drives off, his face no longer showing. “Are you sure it was him?”

“I saw him, Liam! I swear!” I snarl, a little impatient. “We need to go. Call Jeremy!”

He puts his phone to his ear while I take the last two photo albums from the shelf.

“What are you doing? We can't take those, they'll know.”

“Have you looked at the woman? She can barely register her own reflection in the mirror. She won't miss them. Besides, I'll bring them back.”

Someday.

I clutch the leather-bound books against my chest as we walk out, while Liam talks to Jeremy on the phone, but I hold Liam back before we reach the sidewalk.

“What are we going to do with her?” I whisper.

“Don’t say a word until we’re back at the house. I don’t want to risk her running off right now.”

I nod, agreeing, then put on my best fake smile.

LIAM

PRESENT DAY

“**Y**ou got anything?” Cristina questions.

I have a hard time not narrowing my eyes at her in suspicion after what Gen just told me, but I manage, and instead, I let my eyes roam over the street, looking for any threats.

“What are those?” Cristina’s gaze drops to the albums in Gen’s hands.

“We didn’t find anything. I thought maybe there would be some clues in these photo albums.”

“Let’s walk to the corner of the street. Jeremy is picking us up. We don’t want the neighbors to wonder why we’re lurking around the house.”

I take the lead, walking past Cristina while the two girls follow behind me, and I try to keep my distrust in check, thinking about the car that just took off.

It wasn’t any of the cars that chased us yesterday, but Gen’s information doesn’t rule out that it isn’t them. But there is also the possibility of it being another enemy or even one of

Cristina's men. I hate that we still don't know what her main motivation is, making it that much harder to anticipate her next move.

The sound of screeching tires makes me turn around, and I try to register what I'm seeing.

That same SUV stops next to Imogen and Cristina, Cristina walking toward me with a questioning look before she finally turns around.

Imogen's expression radiates panic when a bearded guy jumps out of the car, a gun aimed directly at her face. Her feet freeze, and she raises her hands, dropping the albums to the ground.

I pull out my gun, having every intention of shooting the motherfucker through the head, but keep my finger still when two more men get out of the car with automatic weapons.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you, Carrillo." His smirk is slipping through his beard, though his eyes don't waver from Imogen's. "Let's go, babe. We're going for a ride."

"NO!" I boom, taking a step forward. In reply, he cocks his head my way, the movement of his finger on the trigger registered in the corner of my eyes.

"I don't hesitate," he warns.

Imogen's eyes find mine, her light blues pleading at me with fear while her chin is up in the air.

I shake my head. "Don't you dare!"

“I’ll be fine.” She tries to give me a comforting look, but it only cuts me deeper.

“Let’s go,” the guy barks, yanking Imogen toward him before pushing her into the SUV.

My jaw ticks, my muscles frozen by the sight of the gun at Gen’s head until all doors are closed, and I let out a roar. My skin feels too tight for my body, and in anger, I start shooting the car as it speeds past and away. Bullets make small dents in the armored vehicle until my gun is empty.

“FUCK!” My voice booms through the empty street.
“FUCK!”

I let my head fall back, staring at the sky while it feels like my heart just drove off in a bulletproof car. My chest feels completely hollow while at the same time the fragile bones have to carry the weight of an elephant.

For a while, I just stand there, in shock about what just happened. Then I feel a hand landing on my back.

“It’s okay, Liam. We’ll get her back.” At first, the words are soothing, then a small black Jeep stops in front of me and Jeremy steps out. His face is somewhat comforting, and I smile, but then my brain catches up, and I realize who just spoke to me.

I spin around, eyes wide, as I viciously grab Cristina by the neck and push her against a fence. “YOU!” I roar, loud enough to be heard three streets away, I’m sure. “What did you do?”

“I didn’t do anything!”

“Where are they taking her? Who is he? TELL ME!”

Cristina shrinks under my palm, and I have every intention of killing her right here, right now. Fuck Cristina. Fuck this diamond. Fuck Babushka. I just want my girl back.

Someone pulls me off of her, and she scatters away from me before Jeremy comes to stand between us.

“STOP!” he shouts, acting like a human shield for the both of us. Isn’t gonna help this time. This girl is dead. “What happened?”

“She saw you!” I blast, ignoring Jeremy. “You know him! Who is he?”

“I already told you I know him! His name is Dax!” Cristina yells back at me with a knowing look.

She did tell me that, but right now, I don’t see reason.

“What does he want?!”

“What do you think, Liam!? He wants the diamond!”

I just blink at her, my chest heaving.

“He wants the diamond, and he will probably use Gen to trade her for the diamond.”

What she says makes sense, but all I feel in my chest is hate for her and despair for Imogen. I need to get my girl back as fast as possible.

“Look,” Jeremy says with worry etched in his expression, “we will get her back, Liam. But right now, we need to get off the streets before we attract any more attention.”

I take another ominous step toward Cristina, but Jeremy holds me back. “If she gets hurt in any kind of way, you’re next.”



Callie doesn’t take the news any better, because as soon as we get back to the house without Imogen, she’s launching herself on top of Cristina. She punches the girl in the face, hard enough to see the bruises paint her skin within a minute, and I feel a sense of pride knowing Callie’s my family now. She hits her in all the right places I stopped myself from attacking, the sole reason because she’s a woman.

Kane yanks his wife from the bane of my existence with a scowl.

“Callie, stop!”

Blood drips from Cristina’s mouth, her chest moving slowly up and down as she glares at Callie from the ground.

Given the temperament that she has, Callie just spits past Kane’s hard chest.

“If anything happens to Imogen, I will make you vanish as we did with Junior! Don’t think I’m playing with you.”

“Okay, everybody needs to calm down!” Jeremy holds his hands up. “We need to get Gen back, we need to get Babushka back, and in order for us to do that, we need that goddamn diamond!”

“Jer is right,” Kane agrees. “Did you get any leads from the house?”

I shake my head while Cristina gets back on her feet, wiping the blood from her chin with the back of her hand. “Nothing that could lead us to the location of the diamond.”

Callie lifts her hands before she lets them drop against her thighs with a thud. “Great, so Gen is taken, and we didn’t even get a clue that makes it worth it.”

“We got this.” Cristina’s voice is a little hoarse from the beating she just got. She pulls the photo albums from the car and holds them up in the air.

“What are those?” Callie raises her eyebrows.

“Don’t know, but your precious cousin thought it was worth it to bring along.”

“Keep your snarky tongue to yourself.” Callie snatches the albums from her grasp. “I’ll take these.”

She doesn’t wait for her reply before she disappears into the house with the albums tucked under her arm. Kane and Jeremy follow behind her, and I’m standing with a fixed expression on Cristina.

She asked me to trust her yesterday. She asked again this morning when we were at Lorraine’s house. But I’ve tried to trust this girl a few times now, and the outcome is always the same. I don’t mind playing a game, as long as we’re all playing the same one. But Cristina makes it clear every single time that she’s playing a different game. I feel like it’s a

missing link that I need to figure out before anything else goes awry.

“Why are you here, Cristina?”

“What do you mean, Liam?” she snarls. “I thought that was clear by now.”

“Because you want me back.” I scoff.

“Well, I at least hoped you and I could get some closure, yes,” she says, her glare softening a bit. “But I’m here for the diamond, Liam. When Frank and Junior died, I was left with nothing. They used me my entire life and as soon as they took their last breath, I thought I would be free. That I finally could do whatever the fuck I wanted. But being poor isn’t free. You know that. I need money to survive.”

“So get a job.”

“As what? A professional thief.”

“Real estate.” I pause. “Unless that was a lie too.” The guilty look in her eyes is answer enough. “Of course it was.”

“I was born into this, Liam.” Her tone has turned pleading. “I don’t know anything else.”

I relax my features, shooting her a coy smile. “I know it’s hard,” I concede. “Life is never easy for a criminal and getting out of it is even harder.” She smiles, but as quickly as the corners of her bloody lips rise, the faster they fall down again when I narrow my eyes. “But we both know you don’t want to get out. You want more. You always want more. But you know

what they say, don't you?" Her lips pinch as she lifts an eyebrow.

"The more you ask, the less you get, sweetheart." I don't wait for her reply, and get in the house, feeling her eyes burn into my back like lasers. I'm tempted to flip her off, but I decide against it, fueled by the knowledge that she doesn't drive any more of my attention.

"Did you find anything?" I ask Callie when I find them all in the kitchen. Callie's going through the albums on the kitchen table, while Jeremy and Kane are both protectively planted in a corner like the soldiers that they are.

"Maybe." She keeps going through the book, carefully searching for anything that could help.

"Is that Frank?" I point at a picture of him standing with his arms wrapped around Loranne. His face was still youthful, his wrinkles limited even though they are clearly there, half of them covered by his black hair.

"It is. This seems to be an album dedicated to them. Trips to Florida, one where Loranne is standing at Plaza de España. I don't remember seeing her face before, so I'm assuming he kept her hidden from my mother when he brought her to Spain. I'm looking for anything that can lead to the diamond, but nothing yet."

I take the seat next to her and we glance through the book together, scanning every picture without any luck.

“There has to be something,” I mumble when Callie flips to the last page.

“What is this?” Callie frowns, and I crane my neck to look at the last photo.

Loranne is standing next to a grave, a blank expression on her face. She looks young, almost a child herself, though her soul seems missing.

“Holy shit!” Callie blurts. “Look at that name!”

My eyes trace the words on the headstone. “Ruby Reyes.” I pause. “They had a daughter.”

“Yeah, but look. She died at birth. The date is the same.”

That’s it!

The realization feels like a triumph, and I give Callie a knowing look.

“What?”

“I bet you that diamond is buried in that grave.”

“Oh shit,” she huffs. “I think you’re right.”

IMOGEN

PRESENT DAY

My head feels like a knife sliced through it, the sharp pain traveling all the way down my spine. With squinting eyes, I wake up, trying to adjust to the dim light in the room. A thick rope is wrapped tightly around my wrists in front of me, digging into my flesh, while I'm sitting on the cold ground. The air feels stuffy and smells moldy, and in the distance, I can hear rushing water. My vision is a bit blurry as I blink a few times, and I crack the muscles in my neck to hopefully loosen me up and fix that.

“Good morning, sunshine,” a voice sings to me.

I twist my neck in the direction of the sound, my eyes still squinting. Beardman, who I assume is Dax, smiles at me, almost as if he doesn't have any ill intention toward me.

“You didn't have to knock me over the head, you know?” I moan, thinking back to how he hit me with his gun as soon as I was fully inside of the car.

“Yeah, I did. I bet you're real crafty like Callie when you want to be.”

“You know Callie?” I taste copper in my mouth, and I spit it out before I look up. The ceiling is black stone, and when I look around again, I realize we’re inside a cave. The entrance is about twenty yards away, providing the only source of light in here, and I now register the clear sound of a waterfall somewhere in the distance.

“What is it with these people and caves?” I mumble to myself as I wait for him to answer me. The entire Reyes family has lived in caves most of their lives, but after I visited Callie and her mom in Granada once, I was healed from any desire to ever go inside a cave ever again. It creeps me the fuck out.

“Personally? No. But I’ve heard the stories. She’s quite the woman. Rumor on the streets is she’s the one who’s on top of the Carrillo empire nowadays,” he says from the big boulder he’s sitting on.

He’s eating an apple, cutting it up with a pocketknife piece by piece, and I roll my eyes at the cliché sight of it. *Of course, he is.* Warrior man. Real-life Bear Grylls. Manly cutting up an apple caveman style—fitting for our scenery.

“It’s more of a joint effort.”

“Doesn’t she control the money?”

“You tell me, Dax.” I’m not going to give this guy any more information than what he already knows, so I have to be careful of how much I share. “Can I get aspirin or something? Maybe a bottle of vodka to get rid of this headache?”

He laughs. It's whole-hearted and full, making his green eyes sparkle. It almost makes him handsome. You know, if he didn't knock me out and have me tied up in some fucking cave.

“Cristina never mentioned that you were as sassy as Callie. She warned me your cousin was a force to be reckoned with, but she never mentioned you.”

“So you do know her.” It's an accusation that only makes his grin expand.

“And you're also smarter than she painted you to be.”

“What? She didn't tell you that either? That bitch,” I mock as I try to wiggle my wrist to freedom while hiding them behind my knees. “But then again, she never even mentioned you, so at least I'm a little higher on the list than you are.”

“Funny.” He throws the core of the apple against the wall, then gets up, showing his full height. Now that I fully can take him in, I realize he's not just bulky. No, he's tall as well. He looks like a fucking sequoia when he stops in front of me, then squats down.

“I'm too special to make the regular list, sunshine. I have my own list.”

“The shitlist? That's where most of her men go. I'm sure you heard what she did to Liam.”

“I'm not on the fucking same list as Liam Carrillo,” he snarls, his green eyes flashing with fire. My heart tells me to fear him, to beg him for mercy, since I have no clue how far

he's willing to go. But my mind seems completely in control, my confidence sky high.

I release a chuckle on a breath when it clicks in my head.

“Oh, my God, Dax,” I taunt. “Do you have a crush on Cristina Reyes?” He doesn't reply. “I have to tell you, she's a risk because she doesn't have a good track record with men. She tends to fuck them over when she gets what she wants and, well, you seem like a decent guy. Let me warn you because whatever you're doing, it might seem like a good idea now, but really, it's the worst idea *ever*.”

“You talk a lot.”

“I've heard that before, yeah.”

He searches my face. His eyes are intimidating, like a shark, but he keeps a straight face. He has the kind of look that assures you he could snap your head off in the blink of an eye.

“You don't know shit about Cristina.”

“I know she's a two-faced whore?” The smile it comes with is quickly slapped off my cheek when he connects the back of his hand with it and my head snaps to the left. The burn has me gasping for air, but I refuse to give him the satisfaction of hearing me in pain, so I keep my lips pressed firmly together.

With my nostrils flaring and my eyes turned into a lethal glare, I slowly turn my head back to face him.

“If you push, I'll pull, sunshine.”

“You mean when I push, you slap my face? Real men don’t have to hit women,” I spit.

He lifts his finger in a reprimanding way, his mouth tilted in a smile. “Nah, the saying is: real men don’t hit *real* women. But you’re nothing more than a little girl trying to play in the big league.”

He gets up, laughing down at me.

“You’ll see just how big I am when I get myself out of these things.”

“Which will be *never*.” Dax turns around, unimpressed.

“What did she promise you!?” I call out to his back. “Because whatever it is, you’re not going to get it! She’ll never give you what you want!”

He gives me a wink over his shoulder before he says, “I know.” His entire body turns to face me again as he holds up a pendant. On it hangs a small trillion cut diamond, glistening in the small daylight inside the cave. I recognize it vaguely, like I’ve seen it before, but I can’t really remember where. “You didn’t really think she was coming for you, did you?”

Not particularly, no.

“She’s coming for this.”

“What is it?” I frown, but it flattens out quickly when I recall one of the few times I went to visit Callie in Granada when we were little.

“The last thing her father gave her.”

Oh, damn.

LIAM

PRESENT DAY

I feel Cristina's eyes burning a hole through my side, sitting next to me in the passenger seat. Her presence makes me grip the steering wheel tighter while my nostrils flare with every exhale.

"I'm not bullshitting you guys, Liam," she says. Her voice is whiny and needy, reminding me of all the moments she acted like a brat when we were together. At the time, I thought I felt important, being the one to fix shit for her. Man, I was stupid.

"Your track record is so checkered, it's almost black, Reyes," Jeremy bellows from the back of the car. Normally, he's the epitome of reason, always keeping his emotions in check. But right now, I can hear the annoyance seeping from his throat. He's getting just as fed up with her bullshit as the rest of us.

"I'm trying to make amends."

"You're trying to get a fucking diamond in exchange for the life of an old lady," I argue.

“You weren’t going to listen unless I had something to make you.” I know that when I turn my head, she will be looking at me with Bambi eyes, because she’s done it more than once. She’s skilled when she wants to persuade someone.

“You’re right. I wasn’t.” I pull into the parking lot of the small cemetery with two of our cars parking on either side of us.

“Sit tight, we’ll be right back,” I tell Cristina.

“I’m coming, Liam.”

I roll my eyes, getting out of the car. A man can try, right?

“You two.” I point at two of our men. “Follow us. The rest, keep your eyes open for any threats.” They all nod in agreement, and I walk into the cemetery with Cristina next to me. She’s looking completely unlike herself, with her black hair in a messy bun and her denim shorts. A world of difference compared to the tight skirts and blouses she used to wear back in New York. I know she does it to make us believe she’s not all shine and power, that she’s one of us, but her efforts are futile. Jeremy trails behind us with the two men. I instructed him to get in the back of the car, just like I instructed him to literally have my back while we were here. I can’t prove shit what Cristina is up to, but I know she’s up to something. I wouldn’t be surprised if she slams a knife into my body when I’m not looking, and I’m not risking that shit ever again.

My eyes run the length of the entire lot, trying to find the angle the picture was taken while I hold it up in the air.

“There.” The same tree is shown on the picture as the one in the back of the lot, and I tuck the photo back in my pocket. Floral aromas enter my nose when we make our way to the grave, clenching my heart when they remind me of Imogen, but I push them away.

We will get her out of here.

“Here it is.” I glance over my shoulder as Jeremy points at a headstone to the right and I follow it.

Ruby Reyes.

“Well, start digging up your cousin, Reyes.” I twist my head to Cristina while passing her one of the shovels that’s handed by my men.

She cocks an eyebrow with a glare that speaks volumes. “You’re kidding, right?”

“What? You’re too good to dig up a little dirt? Can’t get your hands dirty? Yeah, that sounds like you. Don’t worry, sweetheart. I got it.” My smile doesn’t reach my eyes, but inside, I’m laughing.

She’s so predictable.

I lock eyes with Jeremy long enough to silently tell him to keep his gaze on Cristina at all times, while I get down on my knees and start digging. I can tell my men to do it instead, but Gen’s life is at stake. I want to find that diamond and hold it in my hands to make sure I can trade it for her. I’m not leaving that job to anyone else.

Sweat is dripping from my forehead, my shirt getting damper by the minute, as I keep digging under the heat of the sun until I'm about a yard in. Victory squares my shoulders when I hit something hard below me.

“You found it?” Cristina cheers.

Throwing the shovel to the side, I start digging the dirt with my hands, slowly exposing a wooden cigar box. Eagerly, I pull it out as fast as I can, while all eyes are set on me.

I carefully open the box. Inside rests a white satin cloth, pushed in there like a soft bed, and on top, a yellow diamond shines bright. The reflection is intense, even though there are also bits that are a bit dusty from being in the ground for so long.

“¡*Joder!* We found it! Give it to me!” Cristina's grabby hands fly my way, but before she can pull it from my palms, I snap the box closed and remove it from her reach.

“Keep your manicured paws off. I'll be keeping this with me.”

“I just want to see it!”

“And run away with it, I have no doubt.”

She crosses her arms in front of her chest, popping her hip. “Are you ever going to get over it, Liam?”

I crawl out of the hole, the box in hand. “Oh, I'm over it. I'm more than over it. In fact, I'm so over it, your life is worthless to me.” She frowns when she sees the devil grin that

crosses my face, but then I change it to a loving smile and hold out the box. “You want to have a look?”

She squints her eyes. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah, go on. Have a look. What do you wanna do? You’re outnumbered anyway.”

Her gaze volleys between Jeremy and I with suspicion, but as expected, she can’t resist.

Her hand moves toward the box, but before she feels the wood with the tips of her fingers, I yank her wrist toward me with my free hand, then toss her past me and into the shallow grave.

A shriek sounds over the empty graveyard, loud enough for the birds to fly from the trees before she lands on her ass in the dirt. Her eyes are wide, a glare marring her features, as she lifts her upper body on her elbows.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?”

I bark out a laugh while Jeremy takes a step closer, pointing his gun at her. We both peer down into the hole, my eyes taking the time to etch this picture in my memory so I can savor it forever.

She does a good job of keeping an expression that hides her fear, but when she glances at the box still sitting firmly in my hand, she realizes her game is played.

“What are you doing?” She swallows.

“You fucked up, Cris,” I start. “I was fine tolerating you until we found a way to get Babushka back. But now that you’ve gotten my girl taken, things have changed. Babushka is no longer my priority. Which means, neither are you.”

“Callie will hate you!” She spits from below. Her hands are covered in dirt and strands of her hair have sprung loose from the fall, but it’s the panic in her eyes that keeps my shit-eating grin in place.

“Maybe. Maybe not. *Shoot her.*” I hold her gaze, calling out the command, and Jeremy takes another step closer.

“NO! Wait!” The tone of her voice is frantic, and I decide then and there that this is how I like Cristina best. Begging and filled with terror. “I can fix this! Tell me what I have to do! You can trust me!!”

So goddamn predictable.

“You want another shot? Prove it. Prove you’re one of us.”

“Anything!” She nods. “I’ll do anything!”

I pull my phone from my pocket, then squat down. Putting it on speaker, I keep my eyes fixed on Cristina.

“You got it?” Kane’s voice quickly comes over the line.

“Yeah, I got it.” I pause. “I was going to blow a bullet through her brain, but she wants one more shot. What do you think?” I cock my head, knowing the words taunt her as she stares back at me with a heaving chest.

“I don’t know. What do you think, baby girl?”

We all wait for Callie's voice to come through the phone, and it's almost as if I can hear Cristina's heart pounding against her chest. She's probably holding on to the hope that Callie will want to save her grandmother at all costs, but she also knows by now that Callie can be ruthless and cunning when she wants to be. If she has to make a difficult decision, she will make it. And even Cristina must know that a choice between Imogen and Babushka isn't one that's set in stone.

"You got the diamond?" she asks again.

"Holding it in my hand as we speak."

"Then we don't need her anymore," Callie says flatly.

"No, Callie, please! No! Have mercy! I will do anything!" Cristina pleads again, only expanding my smile.

"Babushka for your life, *Crissy*. You tell us where she is, *right now*, and you'll walk out of there alive."

Cristina grinds her teeth at the knowledge that she has to give up her leverage, a glare shaping her tensed features. "Liam will kill me if I give her up."

"Liam will kill you if you don't," Callie discloses. "But sharing her location might earn you enough trust for us to let you walk."

"You'd really let her rot?!" Cristina dares.

"My grandmother is Russian. She's tougher than you and I will ever be, and you know what she would tell me to do?" Callie pauses. "To let her rot, because there is no way a Kulikov will be manipulated."

Cristina's breathing grows shallow.

“If you make me choose between Imogen and my grandmother, I will choose Imogen, *Crissy*.” The way she emphasizes her little nickname is callous and without any hesitation. The air becomes filled with silence, Cristina still glaring while she tries to break her head over a way out. But that's the beauty. There isn't.

“Give us Babushka, Cristina. It's your only shot,” Callie orders again.

With some huffing and puffing, she lets out a grunt. “6459 Park Avenue.”

“What the—” I mumble, then frown. “New York? You've been holding her in my penthouse in New York?”

A smug grin comes my way. “You never expect to look in the places you own.”

Clever bitch.

I shake my head, a little stunned, then snap my fingers at Jeremy. “Get someone to check the penthouse.”

He steps away with his phone to his ear, and I glance down again while I mute my own device.

“How did you get her in there anyway?”

“You live in a building that's filled with Forbes 500 people. No doorman bats an eye when large packages are shipped in.

A gut-wrenching feeling attacks me, thinking about Babushka moving through my front door in different boxes,

and I pull my gun from the back of my jeans. “She better be alive, Cristina.”

“Relax! She is! I hid her body behind a pallet of champagne when your next-door neighbor was throwing a party.”

I close my eyes, imagining Babushka passed out like a rag doll behind some crates of bottles, resisting the urge to shoot Cristina now for treating the old woman the way she did.

“What? She’s fine, Liam. I swear.”

“Shut up. Just fucking shut up,” I seethe, pinching the bridge of my nose. Getting up, I point at the fucking wench in the hole. “Never leave her out of your sight.”

I trail toward Jeremy, who’s standing about twenty yards away, calling to our men in New York while I continue my conversation with Kane and Callie.

“You two still there?”

“We are,” Kane announces.

“Is she there?” Callie asks, her voice a little clipped. She did a good job, showing no emotion when talking to Cristina, but I know she must be anxious to know if Babushka is safe and healthy.

“Jeremy is finding out as we speak. I want to shoot her so bad.”

“Wait until Jer confirms Babushka is okay. Then do with her whatever you want,” Callie scoffs.

“Hold on. I’m getting a call,” Kane says before I hear his footsteps leave the room.

“You okay, Liam?” Callie’s tone is sweet and caring, and I smile at the long road that led us here. I’m tired, and I’m worried about Imogen. I can’t wait until we can fucking get on with our lives.

“I’m worried about Gen, Callie.”

“I know. So am I. But Dax will not hurt her. He wants that diamond.”

“What about Cristina?” Gen’s suspicion keeps running through my mind, wondering if she has anything more up her sleeve that we don’t know about.

“I asked Reign to find out if she has a connection to Dax, but so far, it doesn’t seem like it, other than the fact that he wants the diamond just as much as she does. She’ll never let us trade that thing for Imogen. She’s gonna try to steal it before we get it to Dax.”

“I know. It’s why she needs to go. *Now.*” There is no scenario other than Cristina dying. It’s the only way we know she’ll never screw us over again.

“That has to wait, brother.” Kane walks back into the room on the other end of the line.

“What do you mean?” Callie questions.

“That was Dax. He doesn’t just want the diamond. He wants Cristina as well.”

I grunt, rolling my eyes. “Let me guess, she fucked him over as well?”

“He didn’t say. But he’s sending a location. Wants to meet us there in two hours. Cristina has to stay alive for now.”

I’m not happy about this. I’m sick of looking over her shoulder every time she’s near, and I want to get my girl without her breathing down my neck for that damn diamond. But there is no other option.

“Fine. We’ll meet you back at the house.” I glance at Jeremy, who hangs up the phone as well.

“We found Babushka. She’s safe. A little dehydrated, but still sassy as always.”

I sigh in relief. At least that’s one thing that’s going in our favor.

“They are bringing her to a safe location until we get there.”

“Let her get checked by a doctor and send Callie a text.” I don’t want to get back to New York and find out the woman is not okay. “Dax called.”

“What did he want?” Jeremy and I saunter back to the more dead than alive girl in the shallow grave, because the outcome will still be the same. She’s a goner. If not right now, then definitely by tonight.

“The diamond. And her.” I nudge my chin at Cristina, who rears her head toward me at the same time. “Good news, sweetheart. You get to live a few more hours.”



When we get back to the house, I round the car while Jeremy yanks Cristina from the passenger seat.

“Can someone please untie me?” she bellows.

“Nope.” Jeremy shoves her toward the house.

Now that we have Babushka back, and we know Dax has some unfinished business with her, I’m not leaving anything to chance. Cristina’s days of freedom are done.

We plant her deceiving ass in an empty room with some guards before Jeremy and I find Callie and Kane in the back of the house.

Callie’s talking on the phone, and by the look on her face, I’m assuming it’s her grandmother.

“Everything okay with her?” I ask Kane.

“She is now. But this has got to end. We need to get Gen back; this amount of stress is not good for Callie.” The worry that crosses his face is hilarious, considering she’s not even showing yet, and I’m pretty certain she can still kick ass if she needs to. I try to keep my amusement under wraps, but I can’t help some of it slipping through. “What are you looking at, asshole?”

“Nothing.” I shake my head with a grin.

“Where is Cristina?”

Jeremy points over his shoulder. “Guarded and tied up.”

“Good. We found the location he wants us to be at. It’s an abandoned chapel on top of the hill on the east side of the Island. Reign has tried to scan the place with satellites, but he didn’t see anything out of the ordinary.”

“Reign Wolfe is hacking satellites now?” Jeremy doesn’t hide his awe, and I’m right there with him. That’s impressive.

“Reign Wolfe will hack about everything for the right amount of cash and the people he loves. Lucky for us, my wife seems to be on the list. Besides, we met his girlfriend, Sienna, and Callie won her over. So it’s not just Callie who he’s trying to please.”

“What happened to the times where we worked with them because they respected us?” I joke, though there is some truth in it.

“Gone when the two of you lost your petty little hearts.” Jeremy claps me on the shoulder and we all stifle out a small laugh.

Callie finishes her call and comes to join us. “Okay, boys. What’s the plan?”

“Do we know what Cristina’s relationship to Dax is?” Jeremy wonders.

Kane shakes his head. “No, but it’s Cristina. She probably fucked him over. So, either way, we win. We give him the diamond, we get Gen back, and he can ride into the distance with Cristina. Or ride her off a cliff, whatever suits him.”

“Do we know how many men Dax has on his team?” Callie looks at Kane.

“At least a dozen. Our men are scouting the area on the east side right now. As soon as they report back, we can get out of here.”

“All right.” I volley a look between the three of them. “Let’s prep so we can get our girl back.”

LIAM

PRESENT DAY

An hour later, I open the door to the room where they are holding Cristina.

“Time to go, sweetheart.”

She scowls but gets on her feet with her hands tied behind her back before she storms past me and out the door. The rest are already waiting for us outside where three SUVs are lined up.

“Be careful.” Callie cranes her neck to find Kane’s lips.

“You’re not joining the excitement, Callie girl?” Cristina taunts. “It’s nothing for you to say no to a little fun. Are you sick? Feeling a little under the weather? Or Kane won’t allow you to come?” A gasp echoes through the air. “Oh my God! Are you pregnant?”

Cristina freezes on the spot, but not for long because I shove her forward, noticing the furious look that now flashes over Kane’s expression.

“Shut up, Cristina,” Callie huffs out, then locks her gaze with me. “Be careful. And don’t bring this bitch back.”

“I won’t.”

“Ah, is this goodbye?” Cristina coos while I guide her toward the open car door. “Goodbye, Callie girl! I’ll miss you! Please consider calling it Cristina if it’s a girl!”

“Shut the fuck up and get your ass in,” I bark before I slam the door, almost too quick for her to retrieve her legs.

“I’m going to kill her,” Kane grits out, rounding the car to take the wheel.

“Patience, Kane. She will get what she deserves.”

“She fucking better!”

I instruct Jeremy to take the seat next to Cristina, before I climb into the passenger seat and we are on our way. The silence is thick inside the vehicle, the blowing AC the only sound. I have hope Cristina is smart enough to keep her mouth shut to ensure Kane doesn’t drive us off a cliff.

“So,” Cristina jolts, cheering, “a Carrillo baby! That’s so exciting, Kane! Congratulations. You must be so thrilled to have another weakness out in the world.”

I *had* hope.

I notice Kane’s jaw tick from the corner of my eye.

“With your sassy little wife and a baby that carries your name, the leaders of the underworld will be having a field day with this news.”

“Too bad you won’t be there to witness it anymore,” I reply.

“Don’t be so sure of that, Liam.” The contempt in her voice makes it clear how she really feels about me instead of the bullshit she’s been trying to feed me. Cristina hates us just as much as we hate her.

Shocker.

“If you don’t get yourself killed, I will,” Kane says.

“You and what army, hothead? You tried it once. You failed.”

“We didn’t fail,” Jeremy pitches in, his voice steady and calm. “We never fail. The only reason you’re still alive is because we still hoped you were under the influence of Junior.”

“Ah, that’s right. You three also still believe in leprechauns and fairies.” She chuckles, then mocks. “You will have the world in your palms in no time, riding your unicorns. I have good faith in you.”

I glance over my shoulder just in time to see Jeremy twisting his body to look at her, an unfamiliar expression taking over his face. His eyes are shooting fire, rage clear in the shape of his parted lips. She’s pushed too far.

“We already *own* the world, honey. Now shut the fuck up because I’m sick of hearing you talk.”

He moves to look forward again, while Cristina opens her mouth.

“Jeremy, when did—”

Before she can finish her sentence, he knocks the back of his gun into her face, causing a wail to echo around us. My eyebrows shoot to my hairline and Kane sits up, not wanting to miss any of the sight behind him as he looks into the rearview mirror with a smile ghosting his face.

“I said shut up,” Jeremy says with the same composed energy as we’re used to from him. “I meant it.”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Cristina yelps. Blood gushes from her nose, tears glazing in her eyes, but it doesn’t stop Jeremy from repeating the move, this time hitting her cheekbone at the highest point.

“Hard learners, are we? I said *shut up!*” he roars.

Cristina shrinks in her seat, not producing any sound this time, her eyes a mix between a glare and straight-up horror while Kane barks out a laugh. I look at Jeremy with wide eyes, and he shrugs.

“I never hit a woman. But she’s not a woman. *She is Lilith.*”
The Devil’s wife.

I can’t even argue with him and instead just throw him a wicked grin as I turn back around while Kane’s chuckles reverberate through the car.

“Hell, if you can get Jeremy to snap, you really are some impish piece of shit.” His foul mood is completely erased and for the rest of the ride, we drive in silence, but Kane and I can’t wipe the smiles off our faces.



Thirty minutes later, we drive up the last stretch of the bumpy road that leads up to the chapel. Three red Jeeps are waiting for us in front of the abandoned building with their men standing in front of the vehicles. They are all wearing camo attire and holding M16s in front of their chests. If Dax really is a treasure hunter, he's not exactly Indiana Jones. Seems like he's a mercenary with more ambition.

We all exit the cars, me keeping a firm hold on Cristina before she starts to feel brave and tries to take off, while Kane takes the lead.

“Leave your men outside,” one of Dax's men booms.

“Not a chance.”

The door to the chapel opens, and Imogen steps out with a gun pressed to her head, my stomach clenching at the sight. Her hands are tied behind her back and her cheek is bruised. I seethe, feeling the strong desire to strangle the man who's holding her hostage, but the glare on Imogen's face tells me she's in full fighter mode. That's all I need for my heart to jump with pride. It's the only thing keeping me from taking a shot at his head.

“Let her go!” I shout.

Dax shakes his head, showing his teeth through his beard. “Don't be rude, Liam. Just come on in. Check inside if you don't trust me.”

Kane narrows his eyes for a few beats and then signals for Jeremy to check it out. Jeremy trots inside past Imogen and Dax, who make sure his back is pressed against the doorpost with Gen acting like a human shield. He's followed by half our team as they check the premises. Less than thirty seconds later, Jeremy gives us a nod, confirming the small chapel is empty and we move forward as a unity.

“He stays outside.” Dax lifts his chin to Jeremy, who sends me a questioning gaze.

I nod in agreement, moving my eyes from left to right to signal him to instruct our backup team as he walks out. It's the perk of working together for several years. We don't need words with Jeremy. All we need is a glance.

We make it up the small steps, and I keep Cristina's body close while we pass Dax and Imogen. I let my dark blues connect with her light ones and give Gen a reassuring wink as we walk in. The space is stuffy, dust flickering in the air that's lit up by the sun shining through holes in the roof.

The door of the chapel closes with a loud thud and Dax moves them both toward the left side while we are standing on the right.

“You got the diamond?”

I pull the cigar box from the back of my jeans, holding it up in the air. Opening the small box to show him the diamond is sitting on the cushions, he nods in satisfaction before I snap it shut again and put it back in my pocket. That diamond is not going anywhere before I have my girl back.

Imogen's back is pressed against his chest, and his smirk is still in place when a glint of something flashes in his green eyes. "You okay, baby?"

I frown, following his gaze until my chin dips to the black-haired serpent next to me. Her bruised cheek is up to her ear, an arrogant smile cutting her lips. "I'm a little beaten up, but I see you settled the score."

I huff, suddenly understanding what's going on, and Kane rolls his eyes next to me.

"What, this?" Dax pets the bruise on Gen's cheek, and she jerks her head away. "This is nothing compared to what happened to your pretty face. I think maybe we need to even it out."

"Hurt her again, and whatever you want, the deal is off. I will burn this entire island down if I have to," I bark.

"Calm down, Liam," he taunts. "Everything is fine. We will all be fine." Then he puts his attention on Cristina again. "You were right, he really loves this one."

"Fucking hell, you're fucking him, aren't you?" Kane chuckles, but it's diabolical as fuck. "Of course you are." He rapidly pulls his gun from his waistband, then yanks Cristina out of my grasp and puts his gun to the back of her head. "I'm done playing games. You can have the bitch and the diamond. I just want my sister-in-law back and breathing before my wife will have my ass. And she's way scarier than you are." He pushes the barrel of the gun deeper into her head to support his threat.

Dax's teasing expression grows stern. "Fine. Untie her, and we'll let them walk toward the middle at the same time."

"Untie Imogen," I counter.

He pulls out a knife from his back pocket and Kane moves his finger deeper on the trigger while taking a step forward. Dax ignores him, putting the knife between Gen's wrists and cutting her loose with one swift move. "Untie her!" Dax commands, nudging his head to Cris.

I untie her, then shove her forward. "Go. Your owner is calling."

She gives me a final glare over her shoulder before she moves forward with a swing in every pop of her hip, and I follow closely behind her. Gen does the same, followed by Dax, rubbing her wrists from the tightness of the rope. Both Cristina and Gen don't take their eyes off each other the whole way.

"He's *it*, isn't he?" Imogen taunts Cristina when we get closer. "The one who makes you feel?"

I notice a stiff jerk in Cristina's shoulders before she relaxes them. "Shut up, *Genny*."

"*Really?* Damn, I must be right, then." Gen chuckles. "Are you two seeing this?" She gives Kane and me an amused expression. "*Crissy* fell in love with the big, bearded man, isn't that cute?"

"Shut up." Dax shoves her forward until Cristina and Imogen are standing only three feet apart. The move makes

Gen stumble, but as soon as she straightens her back, she gives Cristina a wide smile.

“I guess he loves you too. Too bad it’s only a matter of time before either one of you screws the other over. After all”—Gen lowers her voice with an ominous tone—“no one can truly love a bastard child, right?”

“You bitch!” Cristina howls before hell erupts inside the chapel.

IMOGEN

PRESENT DAY

I want to hurt her. I want to poke her and make her lose control. My little chat with Dax only confirmed to me what I already knew: Cristina Reyes is nothing more than a burned child. A little girl longing for the recognition of her father. Her attention and affection are conditional, completely corrupted to the core. She made her lifelong mission to grow the power she lacked as a child, seeing love as nothing more than a weakness. But life played her just like she played everyone else.

“You bitch!” Cristina’s screech puts me on high alert, but not fast enough. She lowers herself and sweeps my feet from under my body with one solid kick, and before I know it, the air is knocked from my lungs when I land my back on the cold concrete. I gasp for air as she jumps on top of me, the sting of her right hook going through my scalp before I can catch it. From the corner of my eye, I see Liam attacking Dax, punches going back and forth in one big daze, and a lot of screaming. For a heartbeat that feels like a minute, I recall everything Liam taught me while I try to ward off any more attacks she throws my way.

When she raises her fist again, I register the raging look on her face, her eyes more crazed than ever. The realization that she won't hesitate to kill hits me harder than her right hook ever could, and all my training comes rushing back like a freight train. Quickly, I snap up, wrapping my arms around her waist and pulling her upper body toward mine. With my leg, I lock hers, making it so she's unable to move it, then hook my arm around her shoulder. She's trying to squirm out of my grasp, but I hold her tight against my chest.

I focus all my energy on my other side, like Liam taught me, then grumble in her ear, "Meet the new Genny, Cris."

With all the strength I can gather, I swing my body up and over hers, rolling on top of her. My instinct is to strangle her until her eyes pop out, but an arm circles my body and lifts me into the air before I can wrap my palms around her neck. A salvo of gunshots bangs through the roof, clouds of dust drifting over us, catching everyone's attention. Automatically, I try to wiggle myself to freedom, until I notice Kane's tattooed arm pointing a gun at Cristina before he lets me go. She freezes in terror, suddenly looking fragile and insecure when she peers up at Kane's scowl. He gives off the energy he's known for. The one that has no mercy. The one that will never hesitate to kill. The one that would scare me to death if it was aimed at me, but now it only feeds my confidence, knowing that these men are part of *my* team. My family.

"Stop or she fucking dies now." His voice echoes through the empty and hollow chapel, loud enough to make Dax and Liam look up. Dax lowers himself in the little distraction Liam

got, then pulls another gun from a side pocket of his camo pants before he takes a step back, straightens his body, and points the firearm on Liam with his chin held high. But in the blink of an eye, Liam anticipates his move and does the same. Nostrils flare. Complexions flush. Breaths heave. They both glare and look into the barrel of the other's gun while giving Kane a side glance every few seconds.

Nobody says a word, stuck at a standstill, until Jeremy opens the door with a loud thud. Both teams trot inside with a precision that almost looks rehearsed, incited by the commotion inside the chapel, I assume. Dax's team comes to stand behind him and Jeremy and our men line up, covering our backs. I'm surprised the men didn't start shooting each other outside.

The tension is as sharp as a machete while we wait for anyone to make a move.

Dax glances at Cristina with a crooked smile, almost as if there's a silent conversation going on between the two of them before she parts her lips. I keep moving my gaze back and forth to figure out what's going on, seeing shock take over her face. The little hope that was left inside of the wench that made it her mission to terrorize us is vanishing before our eyes when the time ticks further and Dax keeps his mouth shut. Whatever she expected him to be, he's quietly making it clear there is a change of plans.

The look in Cristina's eyes becomes frantic, as if suddenly she knows she's out of hand. There is no more wild card, no

more secret play. This is it.

“Look, man.” Dax smiles. “I just want the diamond.”

Cristina barks his way with an incredulous look. “Don’t do this, Dax!”

But he ignores her. “Just give me the diamond, and I’ll be on my way.”

Liam eyes him with suspicion. “You can have that stupid diamond. But she stays here.” He points at Cristina.

“Fine.”

“Dax, NO!” Cristina cries.

“Fuck no!” Kane rumbles.

“Let him go.” Kane’s gaze travels my way.

“That’s a two-million-dollar diamond.”

“We don’t need it, Kane. We need peace and quiet,” I reason with him, giving him a pleading look. “We don’t need another enemy. If he wants the diamond, let him have it. All we need is her.” I point my finger at the girl still enjoying the show from the floor, hoping Kane will listen to me. They already decided to give up the business. To start over for the sake of the baby. To keep our family safe. Callie and the baby will never be safe if we piss off Dax. He can have the diamond. We just want Cristina out of our fucking life. For good.

Kane keeps his eyes fixed on me, thinking over my argument. I get half an eye roll and a clenched jaw, but finally he twists his neck toward Dax.

“You get the diamond. Then take your men out of here, and I never wanna see your face ever again. You got me?”

Dax chuckles, unimpressed. His shoulders are squared, and with his tattooed arms, he could be related to Liam and Kane. He radiates the same unaffected stance and arrogant attitude both brothers possess without effort. After what he told me, I expected him to show more emotion toward Cristina, but instead, he’s standing here, cool as a frog. Clearly feeling no remorse whatsoever to back out of the deal they seem to have. “Don’t worry, Carrillo. I have no interest in you. You don’t cross my path, and I won’t look for yours. We can go our merry little way. Just give me the diamond.”

“If you trick us, it won’t end well.” Liam slowly takes the small box from his pocket, holding it up in the air.

“I know.” Dax snorts, amused. “You’ll burn this island down.” He holds up his hand and Liam waits a few more seconds before he takes a step forward. My chest tightens and without anyone noticing, I pull Kane’s second gun from his waistband to make sure I have something to defend myself if mayhem breaks out again.

The box lands in Dax’s rugged palm, and he smiles through his thick beard, holding it up in the air. “Pleasure doing business with you, gentlemen.”

“Dax, NO! We had a deal!” Cristina yelps, but he just keeps grinning.

“Sorry, love. We could’ve been great together. But you and I both know you’re not much of a team player.”

Guilt washes over her face, the despair etched in her eyes. “No! That’s not true, Dax! It’s different with you!”

Dax doesn’t acknowledge her any longer as he signals his men to retreat and without showing us his back, they leave the chapel with firm steps reverberating through the area while Cristina keeps crying from the floor.

“Dax! You promised! Get back here! We had a deal! GIVE ME WHAT IS MINE!”

“You mean this?” I hold up the pendant, letting it hang on my finger while peering down at her. She shuts up when her eyes fly to the necklace, her lip lifting into a snarl.

“Where did you get that?”

“Your boyfriend forgot he shouldn’t show anything shiny to a pickpocket. I’m guessing you want it?”

“It’s mine! Give it to me!”

“Is it really, though?” I tilt my head. “Because I’ve seen this thing on Callie’s neck when she was little. Frank gave it to her. Said his mother wanted him to give it to his daughter. I bet that hurt, didn’t it?” The blood drains from her face. “Not only did your mother saddle you with an abusive dad that wasn’t even your dad, but your real dad has been raising the little girl you and Junior despised.”

“Callie is not his daughter! It should’ve been mine! It is mine!”

“What the fuck?” Kane mutters behind me. “Frank Reyes was *your* father?”

Her silence speaks for her.

“Apparently, her mother had a thing for both Reyes brothers. Unfortunately for *Crissy*, her mother never told him she was pregnant with his child because she was married to his brother. He wasn’t as successful as Frank unless you count his talent to beat up his wife and empty a bottle.” When Dax told me Cristina’s full background, it all clicked. For a minute, I even felt sorry for her. But she made her own choices. She got terrorized by her father when she was young. Callie got terrorized by Junior. Both come from the same family, yet Callie was strong enough to make a different choice. Cristina made hers.

“So why us? Where do we fit into your story?” Kane wonders.

“God, you are so thick sometimes.” Cristina dares to roll his eyes at him, and he stomps on her foot in retaliation. “Ouch! ¡*Joder!* Because Dax was going to help me kill you in exchange for the diamond! I wanted you dead so I could take over.”

“Do you hear that, Liam?” Kane snickers. “I always thought she was smart, but turns out she’s just as stupid as Junior.” He turns his head back. “I guess you’re lucky your daddy died, because now you don’t have to tell him you failed. *Again.*”

“Fuck you!”

“Did he know?” I ask her. Frank Reyes was a bad man who deserved what he got, but the few times we met, I’d seen the

annoyance he felt for Junior. Yet Cristina, he spoke highly off. She was his favorite girl in the family.

“Of course, he didn’t!” she spews. “I was meant to tell him after we killed Liam. After we took the Carrillo empire.”

“You wanted to prove yourself.”

“I wanted him to see me for who I am! The true Reyes heir. The one who should take over the business when he retired, instead of the one who was doomed to destroy everything my father built with his sociopathic behavior.

“You never planned to let Junior take over, didn’t you?”

“Junior was a fool!” she spits through her burst lips. “He was a psychopath who had no clue what he was doing. He was a dog in a henhouse.”

“And you weren’t?” I hear the mocking tone in Liam’s question, though I keep my gaze fixed on Cristina.

“Unlike Junior, I know how to think ahead. I don’t run around like a headless chicken.” Her tone grows smug. “Not to mention the fact that any man with a working dick is easily tempted by a woman.”

“Girl, you’re delusional.” Kane scoffs.

“Am I? It worked on your brother. It worked on *you*. My dearest cousin has you wrapped around her little finger, and you know it.”

“Wrong,” I bark. “That’s what happens when you love someone. You compensate. You make sacrifices.”

“You grow weak!”

“Well, by the look on your face when soldier boy just walked out, I guess that’s happened to you, ain’t it?”

Her face sours.

“Funny enough, I’m pretty sure he was willing to go the distance for you. He seemed smitten. But even for him, your track record was just too tainted for him to take the risk. I warned you about that,” I clip with a smile. I saw the look in Dax’s eyes when he spoke of her. He cared for her, but he also knew she was always a lost cause. Cristina doesn’t love anyone but herself. He was right. Cristina will always be a one-woman team, no matter how much she wants to convince herself she’s capable of more. Her childhood completely destroyed her ability to fully trust.

“Dax is a pussy like all other men! Now give me my fucking necklace!”

I put it back in my pocket. “Nah, I’m going to keep this for a while. You won’t need it anyway where you’re going.”

The metal of the gun sits firmly in my hand, and I raise my arm.

“What are you doing?”

“Ending this, Cristina.”

The look in her eyes is nothing less than the way I imagine the devil’s to be, her flushed cheeks filled with contempt like she has no fear.

She huffs, entertained. “And *you* are the one who’s going to end it? *Por favor, niña*. We all know you’re way too sweet to kill anyone. You’re not capable of killing. Unlike the people you surround yourself with, you actually have a heart.” She spits out the last words as if having a heart is an illness, reveling in more of how her fucked up mind works. “You can’t do it. I know you can’t.”

“You don’t know what I’m capable of, Cristina.”

She smiles. “*Si*, but I do. You’re not enough, and you never will be because you’re not *me*.” There is triumph in her voice, followed by a psychotic chuckle, and I laugh with her. A few months ago, this would be the point where I would freak out. Letting my insecurities take the best of me, but right now I just realize I agree with her.

“You’re right, I’m not you.” I pause, long enough for her brain to register the cold look in my eyes and for hers to widen. “*I’m better than you.*”

Then I pull the trigger.

LIAM

PRESENT DAY

The gunshot is loud as fuck, echoing through the hollow area, but not as loud as Cristina's excruciating scream that follows right after.

"You bitch!" she wails, gripping her thigh in agony.

"What? I just spared your life," Gen blurts, incredulous. "That was just to make sure you don't run. *This* is me being a bitch." Without a second thought, she pulls the trigger once more, this time shooting her in the foot, and Cristina starts to yelp like a banshee.

I watch the entire scene, wishing I had a drink in my hand, a little shocked at this sudden plot twist.

Gen pushes the gun to Kane's chest, then closes the distance between us before she launches herself around my body. I clutch onto her like she's the tree and I'm the koala, instead of the other way around, burying my nose in her cherry scent.

"Are you okay?" I whisper.

"I am now."

I take her face in my palm, holding her tightly against my chest with the other. “You scared the shit out of me.”

“I know.” She presses her lips against mine.

“Don’t ever do that again.”

She giggles innocently, her words almost drowned out by Cristina’s continuous screeches.

“I won’t. I promise.”

“For fuck’s sake, shut up before I blow a bullet through your head to do it for you!” Kane squints his eyes, as if the sound of Cristina’s voice is physically paining him, but it does work. She finally shuts up, her chest heaving.

“You are psychopaths!”

“Maybe.” Kane chuckles. “But since you’re the one squirming on the floor, I guess that’s another thing we’re better at than you, aren’t we?” He twists his neck to face us. “This was fun and all, but who’s getting the honors to end her? Should we do rock, paper, scissors?”

“Let her rot in jail, Kane,” I suggest.

“What? No. She’s going to die.” He aims his gun.

“We’re too late, brother.” I point at the SUVs stopping outside the chapel with screeching tires. “Hobbs isn’t going to let us off the hook if he knows he could’ve gotten her dead.

“Fucking hell,” he mutters, knowing I’m right. A few months ago, he wouldn’t care who he pissed off, law enforcement or not. But we discussed this; we want to make a

clean slate as much as we can now that our family is growing and we're selling the business. "Don't get too comfortable, *Crissy*." Kane dips his chin to Cristina, who's looking a little confused at this outcome. "Just because you're locked up doesn't mean you're safe." Her face falls and Kane's smile returns. "Jeremy, can you drag this piece of shit out, please?"

With a smile that's just as wicked as Kane's, our team puts Cristina's hands in cuffs before they escort her out of the faded building.

"What's going to happen to her?" Gen lowers herself from my body, keeping her arms wrapped around my waist.

"That's for him to decide." I point at the man who steps inside the chapel wearing an FBI bulletproof vest, his gun pointed in front of him, and a big smile spanning his face when he sees Cristina being guided outside.

"NO! You can't lock me up! Let me go! I can't go to prison!" Cristina throws a fit. "They will kill me! He will kill me!"

He puts his gun back in his holster as soon as he realizes the party is already over, then walks deeper into the building with spread out arms. Cristina's futile attempts grow fainter outside until she's shoved into a car.

"She's still alive? It must be Christmas morning!"

"Hey, Howard." I extend my hand to his, shaking it before he does the same with Kane. "You have to thank this one for the fact that Cristina Reyes is still breathing."

His gaze swings to Imogen, an appreciative smile coming her way as I tuck her closer against my side. “You’re the one who shot her in the leg?”

Gen nods.

“I told these bastards that they would be exonerated from everything the U.S. government has got on them if they would hand me Cristina Reyes. Dead or alive. Considering their track record, I was expecting her to arrive in three boxes by airmail. You can imagine the surprise I felt when they told me to come to South Reef Bay and pick up a package, but I never dreamed of getting her alive.”

“Neither did I,” Kane sputters, clearly not fully on board with the outcome of this situation, though he can’t hide the smile that wants to creep through.

“You’re clearly more forgiving, Miss...?” Howard offers his hand and Gen takes it.

“Imogen, sir. Imogen P—”

“Carrillo,” I cut him off. “Imogen Carrillo.”

I see her look up at me from the corner of my eye and when I dip my chin, her wide smile has my stomach fluttering with the relief fully settling in my bones.

She’s here.

She’s safe.

She’s whole.

And she’s fucking mine.

“Carrillo,” Gen repeats with a clear pride in her tone that I feel as I broaden my shoulders. She takes his hand while Howard gives me a side glance and then looks over his shoulder at Kane, who just shrugs.

“Nice to meet you, Imogen Carrillo. So it’s you I have to thank for bringing in the most wanted criminal in human trafficking?”

“I guess so,” she says.

“Do you have a record, Mrs. Carrillo?”

Damn, I love how that sounds.

She shakes her head.

“I already thought so. So, you don’t need any exonerating to be done?”

Her palm flattens over my stomach as she volleys a look between Kane and I. “They are assholes, but as long as they are free to go from now on, I’m happy.”

“I understand.” He then puts his attention from me to Kane. “It was a pleasure doing business with you. Considering you both have a different future ahead of you, I hope to never see you again, boys.”

I chuckle. “Can’t promise you that, Howard. But we’ll try.”

He wags his head with a laugh, then turns around to walk out, but not before he slams Kane on the shoulder. “Congratulations.”

The blood drains a little from his face, and he gives me an incredulous look.

“Mrs. Carrillo, if there is anything I can do for you, you’ll let me know, okay?” Howard fixes his gaze on Imogen.

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. Have a good day.” With big steps, she strides back to the entrance.

“How the fuck does he know that?” Kane hisses.

I pull up my shoulders. “He’s FBI, Kane. He probably already knows if it’s a boy or a girl.”

Kane’s face drops. “That’s not even fucking funny.”

“It’s a little funny.”

“It is,” Imogen chimes in, chuckling, then breaks loose from my grasp as her feet take her away from me.

“Where are you going?”

She smiles over her shoulder. “I’ll be right back. Howard!”

The old man turns around right before walking through the door.

“I have something you can do for me,” she says.

IMOGEN

PRESENT DAY

“**Y**ou were a total badass, you know?” My cheek is pressed against Liam’s bare chest. The sun is warming my skin while we’re lying on a sunbed on one of the main beaches in South Reef Bay. Meaning, Liam is lying down and I’m on top of him. He kept his promise, and we had the most amazing breakfast on the beach. Eggs, fresh fruit, toast, bacon; it was all there and delicious, and I’m sighing at how content I feel.

After we came home last night, I have to admit, I’ve been a bit clingy. I won’t lie; at some point when Dax had me tied up in his cave, which sounds disgusting, by the way, my mind wandered off to the realization that there was a chance I would never see Liam ever again. The thought alone gutted me, and I decided I’m going to be like a little monkey for the next few days. I want to feel him against me every chance I get, just so I know I’m not dreaming.

I’m sure Liam will get annoyed with me soon, but so far, he hasn’t protested in any way. Instead, he just wraps my arms around me, kisses the top of my hair like it’s perfectly normal

that I'm holding on to him like a baby sloth. It's not, I know that, but I've just been kidnapped. I think I deserve a little extra affection.

"Yeah?" I muse, lifting my head to rest my chin on his chest.

"It was goddamn sexy. Told you, you are a warrior."

"Hmm, maybe I am."

"You are. Although, I'd appreciate it if you kept out of trouble from now on."

"Ah, what's up, old man? Your heart can't handle a little excitement anymore?"

"First off"—he tickles my side, and I yelp—"I'm not *that* old."

"You're eight years older than I am, so I say you are," I tease.

"Secondly, you gave me enough heart attacks for a lifetime. The only heart attacks I want to get from now on are the ones where you wrap your pretty lips around my cock."

"What? This cock?" I sneakily rub my hand over his swimsuit-covered groin, and his eyes shut.

"Gen," he hisses, though he doesn't do anything to stop me as I slowly move my hand up and down. "We're in public."

"I know. I bet it turns you on even more."

"Stop before I drag you to the ocean and make you scream in front of all these kids around."

I look over my shoulder at a few kids playing on the shoreline, though my hand never stills.

“That’s hardly a threat, Carrillo. I can be quiet if I have to.”

His eyes snap open with an incredulous look, before his lashes lower again and his lips part. “You couldn’t shut up if your life depended on it.” He licks his lips. “Baby.”

“For fuck’s sake, Gen. Can you stop touching my brother’s dick in front of everyone?”

Kane’s voice has me falling from the stretcher, landing on my ass in the sand.

“Kane! You almost gave me a heart attack.” He seems like he’s actually going to relax for once when he drops his body to the sunbed next to Liam, wearing an army green swimsuit. His tattoos are on full display, looking like the badass that he is, and I notice at least half a dozen women ogling him from their towels in the sand.

Liam chuckles, adjusting his dick while I put myself back on the edge of the bed. “That’s karma for wanting to give me one.”

I stick out my tongue, then look at Kane. “Where is Callie?”

“Over there.” I follow Kane’s eyes over my shoulder, quickly locking with Callie sitting in the sand. She’s wearing a beige bathing suit that brings out her bronzed skin, her freckles brighter under the sun. Her reddish hair looks fiery as ever, but it’s her beaming smile that expands my own. She’s building a

sandcastle with a little girl in pigtails, and for the first time, I can truly see it.

“Callie is going to be such a great mom.”

“She is,” Kane confirms. When I rear my head back to him, he’s staring at his wife with a dreamy look that almost makes me melt on the spot. Who ever thought the raging crime lord could soften up by the sight of his wife with a little girl.

“You’re in trouble if it’s a girl.” Liam adds.

“Oh, it’s going to be a girl,” I pitch in.

“How the fuck do you know?” Kane narrows his eyes at me.

“A gut feeling. It’s gonna be a girl.”

“Oh, fuck,” he huffs.

“Don’t worry, Kane. Callie is the most badass person I know. Your daughter will be in great hands. Callie won’t allow you to screw her up.”

His lips curl down, his eyes dull. “Shut up, Gen.”

“I’m kidding.” I cackle. “You’re going to be fine.” I’m sure they will be. Besides, they don’t have to do this alone. Liam and I will be there to help them with anything they need. It will be a whole different kind of adventure, but I’m excited for it.

“Who’s going to be fine?” Callie mimics my stance, taking a seat on the edge of Kane’s sunbed. Instantly, his palm strokes her leg, the love dripping from his normally icy eyes. Cristina

was right about one thing; Kane is completely wrapped around Callie's pinky, even though he will never admit it.

"I just told Kane that he doesn't have to worry. We won't let him screw our little girl up."

"You don't know if it's a girl!" he huffs.

"Yeah, we do," Callie argues.

"See!" I cry out, triumphantly.

"How?!"

Callie and I both shrug our shoulders, then say at the same time, "A gut feeling."

"You two are crazy."

"We are," Callie agrees. "But you decided to marry me, so I guess you're just as crazy."

Kane pulls her side to his chest, planting a kiss on her neck. "Touche."

"How is Babushka doing?" I ask both of them.

"Good!" Callie's eyes sparkle, almost matching the color of the ocean. "The jet is picking her up. She is coming to South Reef Bay to strengthen back to normal. She was excited to be flying out and doing 'nothing,' she said."

"I bet she does!" Lord knows the woman deserves a holiday after a week of being held captive.

"Agent Hobbs called, by the way." Callie swings her gaze to me. "Your permits will be waiting for you when we get back

to New York.” There is pride in her eyes, and it makes me feel three inches taller.

“EEK! Really?!” When agent Hobbs said he’d call him if I ever needed anything, I didn’t hesitate and decided to grab the bull by its horns. Sorta. In reality, I was still high on adrenaline and figured that if I wasn’t going to do it then, I’d probably chicken out. So, I ripped a page from Callie’s book of boldness and told him exactly what I want: the New York permits to start my own escort service.

I thought it was a big ask, but the old man replied with a smile and a genuine curiosity marring in his face, asking, “*That’s all?*” I replied with a shrug and a nod, and he just said, “*Consider it done.*”

“Really!” Callie cheers. “You finally get to realize your dream!”

I jump up, clapping my hands like a freaking seal, my blonde hair bouncing up and down my shoulders. “We need to celebrate! Drinks! We need drinks!”

“I can’t drink,” Callie deadpans.

“Oh, shit.”

“Don’t worry.” Liam gets up from the sunbed, pulling me to my feet and pushing me toward the water. “I have a better way to celebrate.”

“What are you doing?” I try to keep a stern expression, but my smile slips through.

“What do you think I’m doing?”

“You say celebrating, but I’m pretty sure you just laid out a threat that makes it seem like you’re punishing me.”

“To-may-tho, to-mah-to.”

“Liam, you can’t fuck me in the ocean in broad daylight.” His hands drop to my hips, a wolfish grin splitting his face.

“I can. And I will.”

Before I can say anything else, he lowers his knees, throwing me over his shoulder.

“Callie, help!” I shriek, my chuckle bubbling out of my throat.

“You’re on your own, Gen.” I see her settle her back against Kane’s torso with a wicked grin.

“Fuck you!”

“I’m pretty sure the one being fucked is you, Gen,” Kane pitches in.

“I hate both of you!” Cold water spattering has me yelping, trying to squeeze out of Liam’s grasp, as if that is going to change anything. “Liam, put me down! Liam!”

Finally, I fly from his shoulder, my entire body submerging underneath the lukewarm water. The salt enters my nose, and I snort when I get back up.

“Asshole!” I scold.

He’s on me within a second, grabbing me so he can put my legs around his waist, his bulge pressing against my center

hard enough to shut me up. The look in his blue eyes has me mesmerized while I try to keep my scowl in place.

“Give it up.” He curls his lip. “I know you secretly like it when we sneak around.”

This man sees right through me. I never thought I was an exhibitionist, but feeling his hard shaft press through the fabric of his swimsuit makes it impossible to move in any other way than the one that will leave me satisfied.

“You corrupt me, Liam Carrillo.”

With my hand on the back of his head, I guide his lips to mine. I can taste the saltiness of the water, creating something divine when he pushes his tongue into my mouth. My thighs clench and my pussy purrs in anticipation.

“And you make me more honest than I should be.” He smirks. “I guess we’re even.”

“Yeah.” I chuckle. “I guess we are.”

LIAM

EPILOGUE

THREE MONTHS LATER

“Hey, babe.” I walk into my penthouse, hanging my peacoat before I rub my hands together to create some warmth between my palms. The house smells like hot chocolate, and my nose tracks it all the way back to the kitchen.

“Hey,” Imogen beams, holding up two mugs of hot chocolate with whipped cream on top. Rainbow sprinkles are decorating the hot beverage, looking tempting as fuck, but not as tempting as my girl all comfy and cuddly in my grey hoodie. The hem comes almost to her knees, something like yoga pants covering her long legs.

I take the mugs from her hands, putting them back on the counter before slipping my hands under the fabric and pulling her toward me. Her lips quickly find mine while her arms circle around my neck, and I moan at the warmth of her body.

We’ve been living together since the moment we arrived in New York and instantly the house felt like home. She took

over my bathroom with stuff that I have no clue what it's for, and my simple but large gray couch suddenly has all these pastel pillows, my closet now half hers, but the best thing? My bed smells like her twenty-four-seven.

“How was your day?” I stare into the lazy look in her eyes.

“It was good! The renovation is almost done,” she shares, referring to the Upper East Side mansion we bought as a location for our business. She decided she didn't just want an escort service. She also wanted a location where her girls can go to relax, hang out, and work on everything else they have going on. A safe haven where they are not judged. Imogen's office will be on the top floor, and I can't wait to stroll in and fuck her on the desk when I'm in the neighborhood.

She asked me to be more than a silent partner, but I told her no, knowing it's important for her to have something of her own. Instead, Kane and I are focusing on real estate while Callie is pushing us to open our own gym. Kane is hesitant, but I like the idea she has of starting a nonprofit to help kids learn how to defend themselves. She wants to offer free classes to schools, motivated by the fact that she's producing a tiny person herself.

“I wouldn't have been a victim of Junior when I was younger if I knew how to defend myself from an early age. I want our daughter to be able to hold her own,” she said.

Kane flipped when he found out they were having a daughter. He was excited until he realized all the shit that had happened to his wife. Callie had to stop him from hiring a

small army to protect their kid as soon as she's born, but it did make him warm up to the idea of creating a place where kids can learn how to fight and stand up for themselves. He just hasn't given Callie the green light yet because I have the feeling he's just a bit scared in general for kids.

"That's great, baby. Do you need me to do anything before the opening next week?" I brush my nose against hers.

"Nope, just put on a tux and look handsome."

"I look handsome every day."

"Cocky much?"

"Just stating facts."

"Right." She rolls her eyes with a smile. "Look what we got?"

She grabs an envelope from the counter, holding it in front of my face.

"What's that?" I take it from her fingers, inspecting the gray envelope before I flip it over and find a wolf embedded in a wax seal. I open it, tearing a bit of the corner, then pull out the card.

"You are cordially invited to the wedding of Franklin Wolfe and Kendall Ryan."

"Oh, yay!" Gen claps her hands. "A wedding! A Wolfe wedding! I can't wait to meet Reign's brothers."

I give her a dull look. "Why?"

“Why? Are you kidding me? They are rumored to be just as handsome as Reign. I think Killian is even more handsome!”

A burning feeling runs up my chest. “You think Reign is handsome?”

“Don’t you?”

I keep staring at her for a few seconds, until I finally see the taunt slipping through her smile. She likes it when I get riled up, always finding a way to keep me on my toes.

“You testing me, Blondie?”

A laugh bubbles from her chest as she circles my waist with her arms again. “You’re such a jealous man, Liam Carrillo.”

“I am,” I admit. Completely caught under her spell and jealous as fuck. Imogen Payne does weird things to me, but I’ve come to accept it. It is what it is, and I wouldn’t have it any other way. “But I’m also a very vengeful man.”

“Oh, shit.” She chuckles, pushing herself out of my grip. “You can’t torture me. I made hot cocoa.” She brings the mug to my nose, and I softly pull it from her grip. With my tongue darting out to lick my lips, I run my fingers through the whipped cream, then wipe it on her collarbone.

Her eyes widen, her lips parting at the slightest touch before I swipe the residue off her skin with my tongue. The cream hits my taste buds with that hint of cherry that is the epitome of Imogen, before I moan in satisfaction.

“I know,” I start, holding her in place with my palm cupping the front of her neck, “and I know this hot cocoa will taste

even better when I'm licking it from your body."

I feel her swallow, before I put my lips close to her ear. "Take off your clothes and get on the counter."

"Liam?" she breathes, her chest heaving. "Is this a bad time to tell you we are having dinner with Callie and Kane in an hour?"

"No. But they are going to have to wait." Kane will probably curse me for letting him wait any longer than five minutes, but if he finds out what kept me occupied, I'm sure I can conjure a smile to his face. And if not? Fuck him. Kane would've done the same if he found his wife on the kitchen counter, holding a hot cocoa, butt naked. Imogen might not be naked yet, but she will be soon.

"We're going to be late."

"I'm counting on it." I plant a string of kisses in the crook of her neck, and she arches it a little more at every touch.

"Kane will be mad."

"Kane knows I won't pass up some hot cocoa."

"I didn't know you were such a fan."

"I'm not." I smirk, licking the seam of her parted lips. "But I am when it's dripping down your pussy."

Her eyes widen, lust sparkling inside of them. "You're so filthy."

"You love me."

Her grin expands to her ears. "You're right. I *do* love you."

THE END



Thank you so much for reading the final book in The Fire Series. I love these characters as much as they frustrated me at times, but they got me where I am today and they got me to you. Each one of you picking up my book is a piece of my dream staying alive and I'm forever grateful. Please leave a review on Amazon and/or Bookbub and feel free to slide into my DM's if you want to talk about one of the characters in my books.

Love,
Billie

'LOVE THRIVES IN EVEN THE DARKEST PLACES'

Can't get enough? Read **this** bonus scene where Imogen finds out Callie is missing!

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

S

This is not just the end of a series. I think this is the end of a phase. The end of an era, even though it only started two years ago. I've always had the dream to become an author. If you'd ask me: 'What would you do if you will win the lottery, Bills?'. I'd say: 'I'll get myself a dog, a jeep, some new boots and I'd write.' Well, I didn't win the lottery, but I still won. Because I'm writing every day. I'm living my dream every day. And I'm not giving away credit because I fucking did that and I'm damn proud of myself. But there are a few people who's support made this journey snowball quicker than it would if they weren't by my side.

Kevin, my baby daddy, my husband, my biggest inspiration, but most of all my best friend. Two years ago I gathered my nerves and told him I wanted to be an author and I expected to have to plead my case. But the first thing that came out of his mouth was: "You're right. You should. It's what you've always wanted to do and it's what you're good at." I knew then that was the last inch I needed to fully embrace my new future. And I can't thank him enough. My handsome king, you supported me in every single way and even though we don't

always agree, you let me figure it out. Your support is the most important and I'm truly grateful you've been giving it to me since the beginning. I love you.

My brother, Pasquinel, and my sister Joy. In an environment that's changing all the time, due to our own growth or growth around us, you two are the people I can always be honest with. The two people who celebrate my wins with as much excitement and pride as I am. The two who always saw my worth even when you couldn't find it for yourself. Our childhood wasn't easy, but because of you two, I can say it was a fucking blast. Thank you, and I love you.

Katie Salt, how we ended up on the same path on the same day? I got no clue. But I'm so glad we did! It has been so much fun to learn, laugh and cry about these crazy lives we created for ourselves with someone instead of doing it alone. Being able to talk about all the worry, frustration, and hardship that is author life made this bearable and I can't wait to see what's more to come for both of us. We're aiming for the stars and there is no doubt in my mind that we will get there. We got this and if we don't? We will get it!

Rion Hamilton, you and I quickly hit it off really quickly and I feel like I've gained a friend for life. You're the old soul that I go to when I'm in need of some guidance and vice versa. I think you helped me grow as an author and I'm very grateful. Thank you for sliding into my DM's when you did back in the day.

My fourway a.k.a Katie Lowrie, JC Hawke & Jessica Grace. Dudes. You've been there from the beginning when we all just started out and look at us now. Our safe haven fueled me, comforted me, and kept me going. I'm very grateful that I have the three of you to be able to talk about all things life without wearing a boss babe hat and being careful with my words. Fourway over fucktards.

Els, Ellie, my friend, my screamer, my superfan. Your excitement for my books fuels me to keep writing every single time. But over the last year you've become so much more than the girl voice noting me in the middle of the night to scream in my ear. You've become an author (I'm so fucking proud of you), you know you're worth (wearing that boss babe hat), and you've become my friend (yaay me). You're a joy to have in my life!

Madelon Cornelisz, skitrip. It will forever be an iconic moment for both of us. I love you.

Then to avoid this becoming an essay: Lea Joan, Jordan Middleton, Sheryn Trott, D. Lilac, Jacie Lennon, Kim Bookjunkie, Mackenzie Letson,

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Billie Lustig is a dutch girl who has always had a thing with words: either she couldn't shut up or she was writing an adventure stuck in her head. She's pretty straight forward, can be a pain in the ass & is allergic to bullshit, but most of all, she's a sucker for love.



She is happily married to her own alpha male that taught her the truest thing about love:

when it's real, you can't walk away.

Check out www.billielustig.com for more info & sign up to my newsletter to be kept up to date or follow me on: Facebook, Instagram, Goodreads, Bookbub, Amazon and/or TikTok.

ALSO BY BILLIE LUSTIG

The Fire Duet:

Callous

Combust

Tormented

Torched

The Boston Wolfes:

Franklin

Connor

Reign

Killian

The Sisters of Sin:

Lush Rebel

Lush Angel TBA

Lush Devil TBA

ALSO BY B. LUSTIG

I created B. Lustig to publish books that give you a heavy dose of angst, big-mouthed, heroes and women that like to challenge them. These are the stories without the guns, criminals, and dark worlds they come from. However, they bring you the same amount of sass and spice as any other Billie book.

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