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BASTARD
BROTHERS OF
CARNAGE

BLAKE BLESSING

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ADDICT

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Blake Blessing

Addict

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For anyone who loves the emotional struggle of moral dilemmas... this is for you.

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FOREWORD

Welcome and thank you for giving this story a chance! I'll keep this short and simple.

This is by far my darkest series yet, although maybe not that dark depending on your darkness meter?

For triggers, there is SA, kidnapping, violence, themes of rape and drug use. Please tread carefully! Your mental health is more important.

This story is also a reverse harem romance, meaning that the female main character will not have to choose between love interests.

If all this is your jam, carry on!

I'll see you on the other side.

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PROLOGUE

ADDICT

Maikel had one chance.

Otherwise, I'd have to let Vicente know he had fucked up. It was either him or me. And Maikel had never been kind to messengers. Or merciful. So, uncle or not, I had no loyalty to the weak-ass bastard.

“Lafe! Son! I wasn't expecting you!” Maikel walked toward me in the open gallery of his compound. I say gallery, but out of all the factions under the Institution, this one disgusted me the most.

Bright, pristine walls with twenty-foot ceilings enclosed the gallery. Opulence shone from every corner of the room. Then there were the windows. Behind each window was a woman who had been abducted from some highly sought-after part of the world with some requested physical features. Naked and dazed, they swayed to an unheard beat.

Anyone who was unfamiliar with the compound would think they were here of their own free will.

They weren't.

These fucking unlucky women had been broken by Maikel's handlers until they did exactly as they were told without a thought of complaint. Because the unruly ones paid a price much too high to keep their sanity. It was a brutal lesson and far too effective a reminder to all the other girls.

Maikel made a show of giving the unruly ones to the soldiers.

And the soldiers learned from Maikel.

Never kind. Never merciful.

Always sadistic.

It took a truly depraved man to run this part of the business. Maikel ran and reveled in it. Sampling the goods.

Not that there was anything I could do to change it. This was life, and it was either forget the morals of the mainstream world or execution. It didn't matter who you were or what position you held, you were replaceable.

Expendable.

My hands shook in my pockets as I narrowed my eyes on his quickly approaching form. He knew exactly why I was here. I might not have any real power to stop him, but I could make his life damn hard.

Because out of all the sins my brothers and I had committed over the years, rape and human trafficking remained hard lines in the sand, even for men like us. We may not be able to stop it, but we would never hurt and abuse innocent women like this.

"Maikel," I sneered as a ball of excitement formed in my stomach. Vicente might not want him dead, but he had no issue with him suffering. Not when his incompetencies fucked with the bottom line. At the end of the day, Vicente was a businessman.

"There's plenty of time to chat before business," he laughed and swiped a handkerchief over his sweating brow. He ended with a pained grimace lining his tan face that looked too much like Vicente's. They were both elegant men with slightly graying hair—a pleasant façade to cover their misdeeds.

Oh yes, Maikel knew precisely what was about to happen.

"And what would we chat about?" I mused, pulling my hands out of my pockets. His gaze darted to my hands, but I couldn't have stopped the trembling if I'd tried. It wasn't important anyway.

“We have a fine new selection of girls. You could take one or two up to your suite of rooms at no charge. Family discount.” He tried to smile, but the beads of perspiration dotting his upper lip ruined the jovial effect.

That, and family, meant shit in this world.

“There’s no such thing as family discounts. And Vicente would be livid to know that you’re offering them.”

Maikel gulped.

“Let’s find a nice quiet corner and talk about the finances. You can’t really afford to give away favors, anyway, can you?” I despised Vicente and everything he stood for, but I always volunteered for these jobs. He used my brothers and me as something like police, and as much as I hated the institution, I loved raining pain down on these fuckers.

“Sure, sure. My office.” He turned and marched us to the end of the gallery, through a back hallway until we entered another gallery-sized room, but this one lacked any of the elegant décors. Instead sporting concrete floors, metal crates, and industrial fans.

This was where the new chattel came.

I kept my gaze on the back of Maikel’s head, dreaming of the satisfaction it would give me to bash it against the red-stained floor. But there was another reason why I trained my attention to Maikel.

Too many girls were being broken at this very moment around the room. The slaps and cries of terror were already making my stomach roil. And a different kind of skin slapping with animalistic grunts from the guards. If I let my gaze linger on any of the handlers with the girls, I’d lose my lunch.

I’d done that once. Let my stupidity get the better of me. It was years ago now, the first time I’d seen how they break the girls in. There had been so many, and the cacophony of their pained cries shredded what goodness I had left in my soul, if I’d ever had any.

I had frozen on one particular girl bent over a cage with the guard’s hand smashing her face against the bars as he

pounded against her.

Blood dripped through the bars where she cut her mouth while screaming, even though by the time I'd seen her, she barely had a voice at all. Blood coated her fingers where she gripped the cage so tight, like she could block it all out.

I squeezed my eyes shut.

I can't save them. It would be suicide to try, I kept repeating to myself. Not after the last time I failed. At least now I'd learned which drugs numb the guilt.

Then a damn near war cry caught my attention, and as if she were a magnet, my unwilling gaze fell on her.

A small black-haired beauty with ivory skin, just as naked as the rest, fought against a handler who was dragging her by the hair toward a back room. A shiver crept down my spine. Most times, women didn't reemerge from the torture chamber. What came out wasn't human.

Her eyes snapped open, twin glowing orbs of ice sawing through me as our gazes locked.

That woman wasn't like the rest. She wasn't caving as multiple women were being assaulted within a few feet of her. Their tactic to cow the masses didn't faze her.

She was angry.

Savage in her kicks and bites and scratches.

Regret closed around my black heart. Women like her never lasted long.

Maikel let out a string of curses. "Tony fucked up when he grabbed her. She's a beauty, but not fit for shit. Too much brain, not enough fear."

"She's going to the chamber for lack of fear?" I scoffed. Anytime his handlers were made out to seem like the pathetic pigs they were, Maikel's pride took a hit. And when his pride was stung, he clumsily lashed out, which led to more punishment.

Punishment I would all too happily dole out this trip.

“Because she’s a martyr trying to save all the girls. Too stupid to live.” He shook his head as he left me in the center of the cages.

Any humor at his expense was wiped away.

A fury like I’d never felt raced through me, searing every inch of my skin. This woman, probably minutes away from her last breath—if she was lucky—was willing to throw her life away when she had to know there wasn’t a damn thing she could change?

Tearing my gaze away from the now-closed door, I almost fucking ran after Maikel, not willing to be in this hellhole for one more second.

What a stupid fucking woman. I didn’t even know her, yet I was livid with her. Hate hit me just as strongly as I tried to force thoughts of what was happening to her behind that door out of my head. I hated that she didn’t care enough about her own life to shut the hell up and follow directions.

Mostly, I hated her because, in just a few seconds, I could tell she was everything I wasn’t.

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AMORETTE



The chatter of the courtroom quieted as I rose from the table. I squeezed Irena's shoulder as I passed behind her, giving her all the comfort I could in that quick touch. It was almost over.

Approaching the podium with my notes, I ignored the tingles in my face and neck as I let out a slow exhale. This was it. I could do this. I *would* do this.

Irena and her daughter were counting on me, which was record-breaking for a junior associate to even have the chance to do the closing argument. I was shocked that Mark let me have the opportunity, but he said I was perfect for it. At five-foot-two with doll-like features and a sweetness about me that had always been the bane of my existence, I was the perfect weapon for women in the courtroom. And I intended to be the *deadliest* of weapons.

At the podium, I laid a hand over my notes and made eye contact with each and every juror. From the grungy twenty-five-year-old woman all the way to the gruff sixty-year-old man, they each held my stare. I didn't smile. This was not a smiling matter.

"No one ever wants to be the victim. No one ever asks to be hit, burned, or raped. Ever. Mr. Wurther will tell you that he was a devoted husband—a hard worker, who treated his wife and daughter with care, but as you've seen over the last month, nothing is as it seems.

“Just because they were married, does not give Mr. Wurther the consent to act with profound cruelty. But as much as Irena and Anya suffered, they are incredibly lucky to be sitting here today. There are three heroes in their story up to this point. Now they stand to have twelve more...



“THANK YOU. SO MUCH.” Irena’s thick accent stumbled over the words as she struggled to control her tears. Her fourteen-year-old daughter sobbed into her chest as she clung to her mother.

“Don’t thank me. You two are the brave ones. You came forward after everyone in your life told you that you were crazy. Ungrateful. Bitter. But you didn’t let that stop you. You got yourself and your daughter out of an abusive situation, and I couldn’t be more in awe of your strength. Testifying can be debilitating for some, but you both did so well.” I touched Anya’s shoulder, and she started sobbing harder, muffling her cries in her mother’s shirt even as she nodded. “It may not seem like it now, but this is the beginning of the next chapter. Good things are coming your way.”

“Thank you,” Irena whispered. “We couldn’t have done this without you. I know you’re young, but I can’t even fathom the women you’re going to help. If you ever need someone to help talk to a victim, please call me. If that’s allowed...”

“Absolutely.” I caught her hand and squeezed. Pride filled my chest. For them, for myself. The verdict wasn’t in yet, but I had a good feeling about it.

Regardless, this mother and daughter duo had faced their abuser and came out on the other side. They won already.



MARK TAPPED ON MY DOOR. “Hey, you did a great job today.” I held my breath, waiting to see what he’d say next. “I was skeptical about hiring you so young, but I think it was the best

decision I ever made.” He rapped his knuckles on the door again, and I exhaled as he walked down the hallway. Thank God.

Accepting praise for something that seemed like a human obligation seemed wrong. I helped these women because they deserved to have someone in their corner. Too many times, they didn’t have any support and were scared shitless. I was one of the fortunate few who found my calling early on, allowing me to focus through school.

My twin, Grace, rolled her eyes every time I left her to study. We were just two *very* different people.

I listened for any sound in the office as I packed up. Nothing. It was completely quiet. I wouldn’t be asking any co-workers to grab a late dinner. Though, that was for the best. We needed to be in court first thing in the morning. The last thing I needed was a distraction right now.

The parking garage was mostly empty, except for a few cars every other row. Fluorescent lights flickered above. The only sounds were my heels and the echoes of engines from upper levels bouncing off the walls. At this time of night, I was surprised there was this much activity. Usually, the place would be a ghost town.

My phone went off, and I pulled it out of the side of my oversized purse.

How did it go, woman? Tell me everything! I know you kicked all the ass today.

Grace. My beautiful, glamorous sister checking on my case. I loved her so much.

A smile coasted over my lips as I unlocked the screen to type a response and—



“PSSST.”

It was a struggle to open my eyes, and I only managed to succeed with one. I didn't want to, and I couldn't even remember why. From what I could see of the dark room, it was spinning. Too quick to make any sense out of which way was up. I groaned. What the hell? Thoughts were hard. I waited for the fog of sleep to drift away, but it clung to my mind with bitter, clawed hands.

Slowly, feeling started returning to my body, and I wished it hadn't. Something happened. Something...

Pain lanced through my skull as my fingers pressed against tender skin.

This wasn't a bad dream.

It was my nightmare.

I'd been abducted. I'd been mother-fucking abducted. I thought my heart rate tried to increase, but whatever drugs they pumped through my system blocked the response. Instead, chills erupted over my skin and tremors racked my body.

This couldn't be happening.

I was supposed to be the fighter—the one who saved women.

How the hell had this *fucking* happened?

My teeth started to chatter, but I wasn't cold at all. Shock. I was going into shock. I tried to catalog my surroundings, but everything was still so blurry.

I was naked. The metal floor was cool against my bare skin.

I was dirty. Even though I was still partly out of it, the grime coating my skin *itched*. At least, I thought it did. Maybe it was all in my head.

I was bruised. That's why I couldn't get both eyes open. One was swollen shut. How had I not felt the heat and ache a few minutes ago?

“Hey, are you okay?” A girl sharing my cage held a crusty bottle of water against my lips. “Drink this. Dehydration is the last thing you need right now.”

She came into focus and I wished they, whoever they were, had hit me so hard that both my eyes had swollen shut. She was pitiful. Young, but I was scared to ask her age. Quiet, but only because her screams had run out. And sad, if the red, irritated tear tracks going down her face were anything to go by.

There was no good answer for her, not when we had both been kidnapped. From the sounds of women crying, we were a few among many. My stomach bottomed out. There were only a few scenarios I could think of where so many women would be taken and placed together. None of them good.

The girl nodded in understanding. She didn't need an answer.

I tried to take the water bottle from her, but when I missed her hand three times, she shook her head and pressed it against my lips. Taking a sip of water, I hoped it was clean. She pulled the bottle away when I choked, and it burned going down my throat.

My head fell to the side, and I got my first look at our keepers. Men. Mostly young. How funny that I needed only a few seconds to see them to know they had villainous, dead eyes and shark smiles. I didn't need first-hand experience to recognize their touch was only one of pain. I was sure I'd get a chance to find out. They were making their way around the room. Around the other *cages*.

On the other side of the hall, because that was what this was, some kind of large hall, the metal of a door banged against the wall. A man barked out orders in what I was almost certain was Spanish.

The men walking between the cages snapped into action and raced around the room. Someone turned the lights on, and I squinted. Pain radiated from the left side of my face and I sucked in a breath.

“Welcome, ladies.” A polished man stepped into view with his hands clasped behind his back. He strolled between the aisles like he was taking a leisurely walk through the art exhibit, not like he was a monster ripping our lives apart, one word at a time. “You may be wondering why you’re here. How you got here, perhaps?” He hummed, then huffed a laugh under his breath like this was funny. “You’ve been given the glorious honor of joining the Gallery. We have high-end clientele who have certain...proclivities. You ladies will be the ones to satisfy these men. I’m sure you all will do wonderfully. *If you behave.*

“In my experience, you all will do much better if you understand the consequences, and believe me, there are consequences. What better way to understand than to have an example?” The man stopped right next to our cage.

He was tall and slender, with perfectly tanned skin and slightly graying hair at his temples. On any other day, I could have appreciated his distinguished beauty. Today, I only faced a monster.

“Juan,” he snapped his fingers at a nearby man who mostly resembled a boy. “Open the cage.”

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AMORETTE



Juan, a weasel-faced man, stepped forward and unlatched the lock on the outside of our cage. The metal scraping against metal was so deafening, I jumped then winced from the aches radiating through my body. The few girls in my cage scurried away from the door.

The lock wasn't anything sophisticated. It wasn't even unreachable. I could probably unlatch it myself if I wasn't so drugged up.

These men just had an abundance of confidence that their "demonstration" would be enough of a deterrent. For some, I was sure it was.

Juan ducked to reach in, grabbing the arm of a girl I hadn't properly looked at yet. She shrieked, clawing at his arm as he roughly pulled her out of the cage. He backhanded her across the face and muttered, "*maldita perra.*"

Her head jerked viciously to the side, and she whimpered, ceasing her resistance immediately.

I tried to lift my head, but a wash of dizziness settled over me, and I dropped back down. When I opened my eyes, he had her shoved over the side of the cage, the bars unforgiving as they bit into her soft flesh. Her face was turned away, but tears dripped through. One splashed on my arm.

No. The girl had to do something. They wouldn't stop if we complied. These monsters would just take advantage and find pleasure in our pain. I tried to roll, push myself up... Something.

All I got for my efforts was an ample opportunity to listen to more cries from the girl, pants from the man, and a dizzying headache, knowing damn well I couldn't save anyone right then.

Not even myself.



THE MUNDANE SOUNDS were what brought me back. I wasn't sure if it had been an hour, a day, or even fifteen minutes. But at some point, Juan and the man giving the speech had stopped their demonstration.

Sucking in a long breath through my nose, I waited for the whimpers. There was nothing but gentle breathing.

I opened my eyes, groaning as I rolled to the side. My back ached, and my head pounded—this time, probably from dehydration or lack of food over drugs. My low-level energy had nothing to do with a muddled mind. Right now, I was as clearheaded as I could expect to be.

More like I was in a surreal movie.

Everything felt like a dream, but the very real pain and exhaustion contradicted my brain's effort to explain it all away.

The fluorescent lights were dimmed, except for one in the corner that flickered constantly. The hum of electricity was so loud, maybe even more distracting than the stench of urine and feces and sweaty human bodies.

When I pushed up to a sitting position, my spine cracked.

How long was I laying like that?

Three other women were in the cage with me. They were huddled in the corner for comfort. It couldn't have been for warmth since it felt like a furnace in here.

I twisted to the right, then left. Stretching my arms above my head and across my chest. Anything to alleviate the soreness.

Everyone was asleep. Or at least trying to find any rest they could.

It seemed a considerable amount of time later.

“Time to wake up!” A guard yelled as he banged through the door at the end of the room. Shocked gasps and whimpers erupted from the various cages as women scattered to the far corners of them.

The older man was missing this time. So was Juan.

We were blessed with a new group of sadistic men. Disgust slithered over my skin as the men leered into cages at the naked women trying so hard to hide their bodies.

These fucking pricks. My hands itched to get a hold of them.

The new man leading the pack was short, maybe a few inches taller than me. A little pudgy and balding. His expression was jolly, and maybe in another life he would have been considered a kind man. On appearance.

However, appearances mean nothing.

And this jolly smile was directed at scared women.

He said something to his closest companion, and the boy nodded, heading for a cage. The women in that cage seemed so young. Their eyes were wide with fear, their mouths open in prayer. They clutched at each other, completely forgetting about their need for modesty.

“No,” I whispered, grabbing at the cage. The cool metal was rough against my palm.

The man, who at this angle could have either been fifteen or thirty, pinched his chin, playfully studying the girls. He enjoyed this too much.

I wanted to hurl.

“Don’t,” another word spilled from my lips.

The smallest girl caught his attention. Blonde hair, dark eyes, small frame. She shook her head uncontrollably.

He grabbed her ankle and started pulling her toward the door. All the men began to gather around. I lost sight of her, but she found her voice as she began to shout.

“Please, please, please. No! Please. Ouch! That’s hurting me! Ple—” Her words stopped as she started gagging. When she stopped gagging, she started sobbing as the men worked on a rotating basis. The men in the back moved to the front, and the men in the front shuffled to the side. All while the jolly man in charge stood off to the farther side. He wasn’t watching the show, he was scanning the cages even when the girl made one heartbreaking cry.

The girls in the cage with me closed their eyes and covered their faces.

I didn’t.

Her words—now her sounds—told me exactly what they were doing. And exactly how much it *hurt*.

“Stop!” I screamed, shaking the bars. The metal racket echoed around the room, and the men surrounding the girl stopped. They turned, making a big enough gap to see two men pinning the girl down as one straddled the back of her legs.

“You stupid motherfuckers! Assholes! Small-dicked menaces!” I shouted every obscenity I could think of. Let them come for me. I’d fight back. I could handle the attack in a way that girl couldn’t.

I wasn’t so naive to think I’d save her. Not forever. But I could take their attention for now.

The jolly man grinned as he snapped a finger, and one of the men with his pants still up started winding through the cages.

The girls behind me pushed the far corner, avoiding me as if I had leprosy.

When the man unlatched the cage, I took a breath and waited until he reached in. When his hand was close, I grabbed it and yanked it, crashing his head against the bars. He cursed as I screamed and kicked out.

He would take me out of the cage. My adrenaline would fail, eventually. It was inevitable. But I would fight like hell to inflict as much damage as possible.

The man yowled as I connected with his shin. Pain reverberated through my ankle and up my leg, but I kept going.

Another guard pushed him out of the way and grabbed my foot, much like they'd done to the other girl. I sucked in a sharp breath as the concrete scraped over my lower back.

When I was out of the cage, I pulled my leg away with enough force that he bent forward.

Perfect.

I swung my other leg, and my foot connected with his cheekbone. He dropped me.

Vibrant laughter came from the jolly man as he pushed through the men. "This one," he said.

The two men who'd tried to take me backed away, leaving all the room for the man to come forward. Instead of reaching for my foot, he stepped on it. Not hard enough to break bones, but enough to cause pain.

"Little girl, fighting isn't encouraged. There are only so many ways we can punish you, and none of them can leave any permanent damage to your skin. Let me ask you, does that make you feel lucky?" He leaned toward me as his smile widened.

I didn't fall for his manipulation. Nothing he could say would make me feel safer, fortunate, or happy to be here. Especially when he inferred their options for punishment were much, much worse.

"My name is Randall, I'm the lead handler here. And you just became interesting." He slowly bent forward, as if he was ready for an attack. I didn't give one. He would be expecting a kick to the face.

Instead, I waited until he grabbed my wrist, and I scored his cheek with my nails. He yelled as blood rose to the surface.

When he yanked back, still holding onto me, I went forward with him. At crotch level, I grabbed his balls and twisted.

“Fucking bitch!” he roared as he let go, grabbing his genitals.

I tried to scramble to my feet, but too many guards were on me. They took my arms and hoisted me up. There was so much rage inside me; this was just the tip of the revenge. I needed to cause the same pain to these monsters as they doled out to us. I needed it like I needed to breathe.

A man on each side held my arm tightly, enough to keep holding me up. Using that to my advantage, I continued to scream and kick any available surface I could reach, mainly going for the balls and knees. Those were the most vulnerable places on a man from this angle.

Randall muttered, no longer the jolly man who walked in, but one with death in his eyes instead. He gripped me from behind, banding my arms and walking me out of the room. Shouting to one of the other men, who pulled his phone out.

I twisted my neck because something felt off.

What I had hoped was a temporary solution wasn't. The men weren't following us to make me pay. They were spreading out and opening up all the cages.

Randall pushed us through a door, and I let out a cry of rage so strong I should have damaged my vocal cords. If I could get back to those women, I might be able to save a few of them. Maybe.

I scratched at his stomach and hips, and I kicked out at his legs. When he hoisted me higher, I bit his forearm as much as I could. He cursed and twisted me to his side so he could walk faster. All the while I raged.

A few men stood off to the side. They could have been standing there talking, or they could have stopped when they saw us. Either way, I wanted them to *see* me.

I screamed again, renewing my assault on Randall.

We didn't go far. We didn't even leave the hallway before he pushed open a door. Inside, he shoved me away from him, and when I tried to be the attacker, he backhanded me so hard I fell and cracked my skull on the floor.

Bells rang in my ear as he swung back and kicked my ribcage and then my stomach. I curled in a ball, trying to protect my middle and still hold whatever pathetic contents were in my stomach. It didn't matter. He rained down punches and kicks over my body until I was close to passing out. When I stopped making any kind of whimpers or cries, he stopped. Like it wasn't fun anymore when he couldn't hear the results of his beating.

Reaching down, Randall lifted me from the floor and dropped me on the table. My energy waned, and the lights blurred and spun in circles above me. Using all my residual strength, I pushed myself up, only to be slammed back down. My head bounced on the table, and I groaned.

Randall grinned that jolly fucking grin.

He tightened a strap over my body just under my breasts. For a moment, I stopped. I just *stopped*. I needed to breathe and I couldn't multitask. Not then.

When he caught one of my ankles, I weakly twisted it to break his hold, but he only chuckled. "Dumb bitch. I like the strong ones. They're the most fun for me to break."

He forced my foot to the edge of the table and cuffed it with a leather strap. Eventually he had both feet and wrists strapped.

"This is a posh pleasure house, and our men pay a premium for beautiful women. Now, remember what I said about not leaving marks? That rule doesn't apply to the ones who don't go into the Gallery. Those girls are for a different type of clientele. Before they're ready to be placed on consignment, I get the pleasure of breaking them. While you're here, just remember, kindness is only reserved for the Gallery girls."

His face blocked out the light, and a halo appeared around his head. I thought, at least. Or maybe that was just a concussion setting in. This devil of a man didn't deserve a halo.

“What's your biggest fear, pet? You must have one.” He drifted his fingers over my shoulders and down the v of my chest.

It hit me, then. Randall didn't have an accent. He sounded like someone I'd encountered on the streets of Raleigh when I'd spent time there. A slow, lyrical speech pattern.

An unimportant detail yet something my brain focused on. Better that than the way his fingers circled my areolas. Shame coated my burning cheeks as my nipples puckered.

“Ah,” he said in delight. “You may not want to be here, but your body does.” He left that nipple and licked his fingers before circling the other.

The damned thing reacted.

I knew it was out of my control. Bodily functions happened whether we wanted them to or not. But it still soured my gut that he got this reaction from me.

“No answer?” he queried.

I glared.

“I'm more than happy to fill you in on the fears of the women who have been where you are now.” He moved his damn fingers down my stomach, circling my belly button before moving farther south. “One was afraid to lose her parents. Not anything I could do about that one.” Randall shrugged like he wasn't that concerned; he was powerless in that particular fear. “One was afraid of pain. We had *lots* of fun.” His deranged grin told just that.

I stiffened when he reached the top of my hood, the touch invasive and too warm. I tried to close my legs, but they were strapped too far apart. Spread wide open, he traced one side of my lips, then the other.

“The very last girl was afraid of her body betraying her. She could stand the pain. She could stand the beatings and the torture. What she couldn’t stand were the orgasms.” His voice dropped to a whisper like he was letting me in on a secret.

Leaving my vagina, he laid his hand on the crease of my thigh and smoothed it down my leg as he walked toward the end of the table.

“If I had to peg you, I’d say you were the latter. From the way you handled the minor beating, I doubt you’re afraid of pain. Maybe you’re afraid to lose your loved ones. Maybe not.” Another shrug like it was of no consequence. “But...I think you’d hate yourself if you found pleasure from my touch.”

He expected me to talk; he must have craved it. But I stayed silent. Let him come to his own conclusions, he’d do what he wanted anyway. I just had to survive to fight again. That was my only goal.

Randall’s smile dropped at my lack of reaction. “We’ll start with that, then.”

As he came around the table, I relaxed my body. If I gave him no signs of a struggle, he might move on to a different tactic.

He stroked my lips, then brought them to his face, sticking them in his mouth. The hum made my stomach roll.

When his fingers were on their way back, I expected him to rub my clit. That was where orgasms originated from for most women. And he did start there, but then he dipped down.

I shrieked as his fingers entered me, thrashing back and forth.

That fucking grin returned once his fingers were all the way inside. The fullness was too noticeable to ignore. I wanted to pretend he wasn’t assaulting me, except my mind wouldn’t let me detach. Instead, I screamed and yanked away as best I could.

The monster kept moving his hand in a rhythmic motion, hitting my clit with his palm. It felt good. I hated it. I hated my

body. At least at that moment.

I closed my eyes, trying a different route.

This was masturbation. I was pleasuring myself. I could come, and then it would be over. If I couldn't block out the pleasure, maybe I could block out *him*.

“You like that, pet? You stopped struggling. Your hips even started rocking.” Randall's voice was like being dumped in ice water.

When I opened my eyes and renewed my resistance, he smirked down at me.

“I won't let you forget it's me making you feel this way.” He started moving faster, and I turned my head, ready to puke right there. Because it was coming. He was going to make me orgasm, and there was nothing I could do about it.

The first waves were like shards of glass washing over me. The pulsing, a restrictive choker sending signals I didn't want to share. And the moan that spilled out was the ultimate treachery.

At some point, I stopped trying to get away from the table. He kept up with the gentle motions until the pulsing stopped. Keeping my head turned, I didn't see what he did when he pulled his fingers free, too abhorred by the wet sounds my body created. Although, the slurping gave me an idea.

“I think you definitely feel the sting of that orgasm, don't you?” This was all games to him. I just had to figure out how to play the game better. After so many years of school, I was smarter than this.

Right then, he wanted to know I was upset. Traumatized.

Evening out my breathing, I kept my eyes closed. Nothing mattered. I couldn't fight back in this state, so it was pointless to waste the energy. I'd save it for when I could use it.

“You're not even making this any fun.” He sighed like he was put out with his new toy. “Back to your cage, then. I'll play with you more tomorrow.”

Wait. Why was he stopping here?

I'd seen what those men had done to the other girls. He was going to rape me. Wasn't he?

When I whipped my head around, his eyes lit back up. "Surprised this is where the fun ends tonight?"

I didn't answer, but I didn't need to. He could read my confusion all over my face. "I'm more into the long game. I like to know exactly what makes the girls tick. I don't need instant gratification. Although, don't worry, pet. It *will* happen."

The leather straps were loud as he pulled them through the buckles. He did my wrists first and then my right foot. Finally, my left. The only thing holding me down was the one at my ribs.

Then that was gone too.

With too gentle hands, he lifted me to a sitting position. A stand was placed beside the table with an array of tools. Various knives and mallets. Some devices I had never seen before. All of them are toys to cause the worst pain.

He helped me off the table and walked us around it. We weren't on the side near the knives, however, we'd have to pass it to leave the room. Sort of.

As we were passing it, I reached for the butcher knife then whirled to face him.

Swinging the knife toward his face, I grunted when he blocked the hit, catching my wrist in a bruising grip.

I didn't think, I just punched him with my other hand, making sure to tuck my thumb below my fingers. Randall cursed and staggered back.

When he lifted his head, he gave me a bloody smile. "I was wrong about you. I think you're a combination of two fears. You hate your body's betrayal, and you need to fight back. But what happens when you fight and still lose?"

He rushed me, and my back slammed into the wall. I barely got in any hits before he slapped me across the same side he'd gotten earlier.

The world faded fast, but I had one lingering thought.

I'd lose, but I'll never give up.

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AMORETTE

How the hell had I gotten here?

I opened my eyes to a distant industrial ceiling through thin, black metal bars. There was no chatter, although I felt people around me. I heard their breathing, their feet as if they were sticking to the floor when they moved. Then a girl popped into my view with a dirty bottle of water.

“You have to stay hydrated,” she whispered, pressing it to my lips.

Oh shit. I was taken.

It was all so vague, like the last day—or maybe two—were stuck on the far edges of my mind. How had I gotten here?

I didn’t think they would drug me just to take me, though maybe the trauma messed with my perception. Not that it changed anything, but lying here, too weak to do more than accept questionable water from a too-sweet girl, I could do nothing but play it over and over in my head.

Where had I gone wrong?

I had finished up at the office. I’d been working on a case to get a woman and her daughter justice, and we stood a hell of a chance of showing the world what a monster her husband truly was. Right? Or was I remembering something else? No, that was definitely the last thing I did. I stayed late at the office, leaving there alone like I did most of the time. I wasn’t high enough or important enough to piss anyone off.

The memory was a dirty wisp of a thing, becoming more insubstantial the more I tried to cling to it.

The brightness of my phone screen seemed like it was on.

Then nothing. I literally couldn't fucking remember anything after that.

Until I woke up here.

Then Randall.

Now I was groggy, out of sorts, and scared. I'd never been so scared in my life. And the women...I wished I could save them.

All I'd gotten was a trip to hell.

I didn't even really remember what happened. Or I did, but it felt like a film was over it, clouding my perception. The beating was bad, but not bad enough to break bones. He touched me. I vaguely remembered that. It was probably better that I didn't.

Now it was the middle of the night, and low fluorescent lights cast a murky grey glow over everything in the room. Men stood guard on either end, and I had zero energy to care about anything. Maybe tomorrow.

I'd care tomorrow.



“EAT UP, CUNTS.” A guard slung bags of food through the bars of the cage. He didn't even glance at us. We were less than people to them, it seemed.

The anger that had been building since I'd been here ebbed and flowed. But now, naked and dirty, sitting with three other women in some kind of fucked up dog crate, I felt less than human. And fucking lucid.

And that pissed me off, even as traitorous tears burned in my eyes.

It was morning, and if the last day or two were anything to go by, this was really our only reprieve. As soon as the sun was up, the real monsters filtered in, doing what they called *breaking the girls*.

I sneered at the bag one of the girls handed me. She whimpered and scooted back against the bars on the far side of the cage. There could be all of three reasons for her reaction.

One: she thought I was angry with her, and these girls had dealt with enough of that to last a lifetime. Two: my appearance frightened her. Three: I was quickly labeled as the girl whose going to die soon, so she thought it might be catching.

Sighing, I ripped open the cheap bag, at least thankful it wasn't streaked with dirt like the water bottles. Inside was a stale cheese sandwich and some carrots. I laughed, and the girls shrunk further away from me. It was a deranged sound, even to my own ears, but seriously?

They were raping and beating women, selling their bodies to the highest bidder, and they served us an outdated school field trip lunch?

Yeah, okay, I was losing it. Too little sleep, too little food, and too much pain were screwing with my head. This didn't even seem real, and the brief flashes of true terror did funny things to my mind.

Instead of trying to flee, I was ready to fight.

How fucking *dare* they do this to us. What gave them the right? Why was no one stepping in?

I wanted to *live*, damn it.

The door at the other end of the hall slammed against the concrete wall with a loud crash. If that had been standard drywall, the knob would have put a hole in the plaster.

Shit. This wasn't going to be good. The torturer.

Randall.

Vivid flashes of last night took over my vision as I saw him hovering over me, touching me.

Hurting me.

But I should be thankful, right?

That I had escaped the room without being full-on raped was a miracle. A short-lived miracle. I had been passed out for the walk back to the cage, but his voice whispered through my mind. "It's going to be so sweet when I break you."

He still wore that happy grin, but his eyes were cruel. Cruel and empty. His skin was scabbed and inflamed where I'd scratched him. More than a bit of satisfaction filled me.

As soon as the girls in the cage saw him, they curled into the fetal position, praying to whatever god they believed in. Fury boiled beneath my skin.

I wanted to yell, shake them and force them to get up.

Fuck!

They were falling into a cycle by laying here and taking whatever the men dished out. They were telling these fucktards that the abuse was welcomed. All they did was make it easy on these men, feed their egos, and let their monsters take something precious from them.

Randall stared right at me as he strolled toward our cage. Our gazes locked, him smirking as I glowered. The women he passed wilted in relief when they realized he wasn't coming for them.

Stopping at the cage next to us, he yanked a girl out by her hair and over to one of several makeshift benches that were waist height. For convenience, I was sure. He shoved her over it and undid his pants.

The woman cried but did nothing. Not a damn thing.

Didn't they know we were all going to die anyway?

She opened her wet, brown eyes, her tangled hair obstructing some of the scenes. Then she looked at me. Standing five feet away, I knew she could see me watching.

Fight, I tried to tell her with my gaze. Don't let him do this. Don't make it easy for him. I put every ounce of

determination in my gaze as I could.

Nothing. She held my stare because it probably gave her some small measure of comfort that she wasn't alone, yet it was like we were speaking different languages. The victim and the fighter.

The same door Randall had come through banged against the wall again, and a few more of the men strolled in. High on life with an extra pep in their step, like they were about to have the fucking time of their lives.

One of them called out to Randall, and he responded in Spanish. Whatever he said, their eyes snapped to our cage. That man headed directly to us, and he opened the latch, swinging the door wide—which, why wouldn't he? None of these girls would try to escape. It had been just a few days and they'd effectively broken them.

I braced against the bars, ready to jab him in the mother fucking eyes. I seethed as my heart tried to break out of my chest. All my senses sharpened until I could see the pock marks on his cheeks and smell the faint onion aroma of whatever he'd eaten last.

He didn't reach for me.

Instead, he grabbed the arm of the girl who'd offered me water as she sobbed and started to move with him.

I lost it.

Screaming, I launched myself at him, tearing at his eyes and clothes and biting his ears—anything to get him out of our cage. My blood was a dull roar in my ears, blocking out even my own voice. Then he slapped me.

They loved their open-handed hits.

My head twisted to the side as I hit the bars and everything went black.



“HEY...HEY.” A deep voice swirled through the blackness of my mind.

Whoever it was, he was trying to call me back. I liked it here, in this dark oblivion. I wasn't sure why, but I didn't want to leave it.

“Why are you even bothering with that whore? Maikel said she was worthless. The only reason she's still here is because Randall likes playing with her.” This voice wasn't so nice to listen to. It was scratchy and high, maybe even a little shaky.

Some of the feeling in my body started to return, and I groaned. Pain pulsed through me as if I had one giant bruise. A tender hand brushed against my cheek, and even that burned.

Reality slammed into my nose like a rubber band bouncing back into place.

I had been kidnapped, and this was my hell.

Whoever was holding me up arranged me on some type of soft surface. I would have said it was a bed, but I didn't think women were allowed those here.

I tried to open my eyes, only they were glued shut. So, I listened.

“And that means you're going to kill her?” asked the same deep voice from earlier. There was just enough of a rasp to go with the honeyed tones. It reminded me of a hot toddy my mother used to force my siblings and me to drink when we were young and sick.

“We aren't going to kill her,” the other man explained as if he were at the end of his patience. But something about it made me think the other man didn't like my savior. Maybe it was the vein of fear in his words. “Once we bring them here, we continually work on breaking them for their new role. But this bitch? I won't outright kill her, but I wouldn't spit on her to save her either.”

The man above me made an ugly noise in the back of his throat. Not quite a scoff, more like he was holding back a laugh. I wouldn't have thought it was weird, but kidnapping

girls, raping them, or in their words, *breaking them*, was nothing to laugh about.

But monsters surrounded me.



THE NEXT TIME I opened my eyes, I was back in the cage. The young girl watched something in the distance with a fearful gaze.

I glanced around without moving my head, and all the other girls were turned in the same direction. I wanted to sit up, but I ached everywhere. It was the kind of ache I knew would be pulsing in my ears if I tried to sit up.

Muted sounds trickled through slowly, and then my hearing fully snapped back into place. Someone was speaking. And it was English.

Thank God. I'd primarily heard Spanish from the men who came through.

"Bernadette will get half the girls who are acclimating well. Maria will get the other half." The man speaking had a slight accent. Even though he was talking in English, the inflections in his words sounded like it wasn't his first language.

Whispers erupted from the cages and I managed to twist my neck just enough to see the rest of the room. The young women—I refused to imagine them as girls younger than eighteen—were huddled in corners and hugging their knees to their chests.

"What about that one?" A reed-thin guard tossed a sneer right at me. I wanted to care or at least show a little fear to remind myself I was still human. Numbness was all I currently had.

Was this shock?

"Randall is going to keep her."

Those words were all it took to disintegrate the severe haze that covered me.

A sharp spike of fear so keen split down my chest and stomach. That man...That was the man who had taken me to that back room. I shivered, then groaned from the sudden movement. Unwanted flashes assaulted me of him beating me, strapping me down, beating me, his hot putrid breath and sinister smile as he forced his fingers inside me.

The burning scent of bleach ghosted through my nose. This warehouse was filthy. No bathroom for the women stuck in cages. No toothbrushes. No hygiene allowed. But the room that fucking bastard Randall took such care with, that room sickened me.

“Where are they taking everyone?” I croaked. It was barely above a whisper and no one seemed to hear me. They were riveted by what was happening around them.

Men ranging from their late teens to early twenties, dressed all in black, started opening cage doors. They weren't kind, and they weren't even blasé in their job. With each girl pulled out, they handled her with pure cruelty.

It took about fifteen minutes for them to sort through everyone, leaving our cage for last. The way some of the guards kept sending hungry looks my way, I was sure it was because I was in this one. Our cage wasn't the farthest from the center, meaning the guards were purposefully avoiding ours.

Then a kid, barely legal, if legal at all, opened our door. He locked gazes with me when he ducked his head down. At first, he seemed afraid, almost nervous. Whatever vulnerability he had, he quickly masked it up with an ugly curl of his lip and grabbed the closest girl by her hair and hauled her out.

She fell, only held up by his grip on her now lackluster strands, and started to sob and babble incoherently. It sounded like a prayer.

He laughed, and even I could tell it was forced. Then he showed us how cruel of a monster he was learning to be. He

shoved her face against his crotch and rocked his hips against her a few times before another guard pointed to the group of women they'd moved to the left side of the room.

Slinging her away, he cackled again, this time with more confidence. I also couldn't miss the tent that had risen in his pants.

Bile filled my mouth, and that death rage returned with a vengeance as he grabbed the next girl. For her, he forced her hand to his crotch and made two stroking motions. She didn't cry or fight. Instead, she limply allowed him to use her, and the vacant look in her eyes said she might not even know what was happening right then. That was enough for him to decide she went to the other side of the room.

I was saved for last.

When his hand reached in, I wanted to bite it or kick out at his face; something to protect myself. The fury was intense in my mind, but my body was weak. Too tired to do much other than endure the move to wherever the bastard wanted me.

Randall wasn't even in the room. I wanted to think that was a good thing, that I could escape if they took me somewhere isolated. The number of guards they had running through here quickly squashed that hope, though.

Just when he reached in his arm to grab me, an older guard knocked him out of the way.

"Uh-uh, kid. You don't get to touch the mean ones on the first day. We don't want you to die on us." The older guard's words were as mean as they were teasing. His smirk when he turned to me was cutting. Another American.

"What the hell ever. I can handle that cunt." The kid was all bluster and hot air.

"Sure, go help Travis," he said. Then his hand clasped over my bruised arm, and all my energy came rushing back. Courage whipped down my spine as I started screaming and pushing my sore body to hurt him in any way I could.

Blow after blow fell short of their intended target.

It didn't help. If anything, I made it worse. After he spewed a few vulgar expletives, he knocked his elbow into my temple and everything fell black.

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AMORETTE



“**M**on bébé, don't cry.”

Maman... I hadn't heard her voice in years. I wanted to tell her I wasn't crying, that I hadn't cried since she died, but my mouth wouldn't obey me. Straining to hear her voice, I tried to press closer, yet pain coursed through my torso and down my back.

Her voice didn't come again.

But the pain did bring the memories.

Memories I wished I'd never experienced. Being abducted. Thrown in cages. Touched and beaten. I thought that was last night, but my brain was filled to the brim with fuzz, obscuring every recollection.

I hurt so fucking bad.

There was so much dull pain that spiked when I moved that I couldn't pinpoint all the places that were injured. Maybe the dull ache meant that some time had passed. One thing was certain, I wasn't in the cages anymore.

The hunger pains cramping my stomach made me think more than a few hours had passed, at least. The scent of teakwood filtered through the fog of my brain as I cataloged everything I could to figure out just where the fuck I was.

Only the low hum of an air conditioner or something mechanical surrounded me. I at least laid across something soft, but that raised my suspicions. These were not kind men,

and nothing was free. Any small mercy had a price too high to accept. The funny thing about that?

Even then, we didn't get a choice.

I peeled one eye open, my good eye, and squinted into the harsh light overhead. My vision left something to be desired, but I couldn't rub the sleep out. Even as groggy as I was, I knew from the hot throb around my eyes that it would hurt.

It was weird, this moment of peace in an unfamiliar room. Given my circumstances, I should be terrified. And I'd suffered through bouts of that particular emotion since I'd been abducted. I couldn't even comfort myself with delusions of eventual freedom. Chances were, half of those girls would be dead within a couple of weeks.

I'd sat through the training. I'd previously organized several self-defense classes for underprivileged girls and women in the past. The statistics were heartbreaking, and no one would soon forget after going through the course. No matter what the abductors promised, they wouldn't save you. Or take you home.

Your only option was to fight.

Of course, that was information given about the initial taking. It was arguably a different game once you were locked in an unknown warehouse.

But those men...

Monsters...

Every time they touched one of the women, I saw red. I would rather die in defense of myself or others than let them defile me again.

Maybe I even hoped for death.

It had to have been better than the alternative.

For now, the room was quiet, I was alone, and it was a slight reprieve before I had to start thinking. Remembering.

In fact, this was probably done on purpose. Randall The Torturer seemed like he was into head games. Like he would

get off on it. My heart rate picked up as I strained to hear any signs of someone approaching.

Nothing. I relaxed.

I hated this new paranoia plaguing me, even as I recognized it served a purpose. Survival instinct.

Just like before, there were no sounds outside the low hum. My left eye was still swollen shut, so as I blinked, only one eye cooperated. I lifted my head just enough to see where I was and froze.

The only thing that registered was that I was not alone in the room.

My pulse, steadily rising, suddenly jumped into my throat as I met a pair of sapphire eyes. He was new. Over the last few days, I had committed every evil face to memory.

On the off chance I escaped, I wanted to be able to describe as many of these bastards as possible.

I'd have remembered his. Even in quiet anger it was a thing of beauty. Good thing I wasn't taken by beautiful faces.

Light blond hair was stylishly cut short on the sides with a longer top. The front was long enough that it barely brushed into his eyes. His hands were steeped in front of his face as he regarded me with something akin to irritation.

No, this man didn't want me here.

Scrambling to a sitting position, I shoved my back against the headboard. Then immediately regretted all my life choices as my breath stuttered out of me and evaded my metaphorical grasp when I tried to inhale—bad idea. Moving quickly, hell, moving at all, was a bad idea.

Wait.

I glanced around at the blatant luxury. I was in a bed with an expensive cloth headboard and silky sheets. The walls were made of exposed brick and nothing else was in the room except for the beat-up leather chair my current jailer was sprawled across.

We were locked in this room together. Could I attack him? Did I have the strength? My trembling hands and difficulty breathing said no.

He was also too calm, and there were too few distractions to attempt anything. That would be incredibly stupid.

The man continued to stare at me as I returned the favor. My traitorous heart started to slow when he didn't make any moves to touch me. He wasn't dressed in all-black pants and shirts like the guards had been. Instead, he was clad in a pair of old, ripped jeans, the kind which was actually worn, not trendy. A thin gray hoodie covered his torso.

What did it mean that he was dressed differently?

“You've been checked over by our doctor. He believes you have a mild concussion and a cracked rib. Bruising as well.” He didn't elaborate outside of that.

Now that he mentioned it, my head pounded and my stomach roiled from the sudden movements. The edges of my vision darkened as if any minute I'd faceplant in the bed, but I fought it.

Passing out wasn't an option here, if I could help it.

“What's your name?” His voice was smooth and deep. The soothing quality of it was a lie. An absolute fucking lie.

I almost didn't answer him.

Another vicious burst of agony shot through me as I adjusted my ass on the bed. This had to all be a sadistic nightmare. Because the reality that I was going to die, was too much to handle. And I still couldn't stop trying to save the ones I could, even knowing it was pointless.

But, right now? With barely an inch of my body that wasn't screaming in pain and so much of my pride beaten to a pulp, I was almost done. My body was pushed to the limit, and I couldn't take another beating like I had the night before. Or this morning? I wasn't sure how long it had been.

Deciding to choose my battles wisely, I answered him. “Amorette,” I croaked.

I would have lied if I wasn't concerned that they'd taken my wallet along with me. But if he knew my real name and I didn't give it to him, he could punish me.

"Amorette," he tested out my name. It rolled off his tongue with too much ease, as if we were old friends instead of captor and prisoner. I didn't ask his name. There was no reason to. The only one who I needed to know at this point was Randall.

As if it was an afterthought, he reached down next to him and picked up a bottle of water. It wasn't the nasty plastic bottles they'd given us before. This one was a high-end metal bottle with a twist cap.

When he held it out, I didn't immediately take it.

Something was off here.

Either I was still unconscious, having a really fucked up dream, or this was Randall's idea as some sort of sick game. The adrenaline I'd counted on before was suspiciously missing while my brain felt I wasn't in any immediate danger.

"Don't worry, Killer. It's not drugged, poisoned, or otherwise."

A snide remark was on the tip of my tongue about the killer comment, but I knew better than to engage in any type of banter with him. It would only confuse my image of him and I couldn't afford that.

The likelihood I'd get out of here alive was slim. I knew that. Yet I could hope for a quick death. While I was setting all my hope in one bucket, I'd still do everything I could to get out of here.

He shook the water bottle, and I hesitantly took it from him. My hand trembled as my fingers brushed against his. They were dry, warm. Funny that there wasn't any visible blood on his hands.

"Thanks," I conceded. Giving any kind of gratitude to these men tasted like sour milk on my tongue.

Silence settled back around us as we studied each other. None of the other girls made eye contact. Like if they didn't

see their attacker, the actual assault wasn't real.

These men could hurt my pride, break my body, and take what I would never willingly give them, but they would stare into my eyes while they did it. I wanted them to see how much I hated them. How much I loathed the very devils they were.

I wasn't foolish enough to believe they cared about me in any sense other than being a hole with a heartbeat. All the same, it made me feel like I was fighting back with every weapon I had at my disposal.

The man moved back to his relaxed position with his gaze locked to mine as he steepled his hands under his chin. The edge of his jaw grew sharper as he ground his teeth together. That, and only that, was the only visible sign he wasn't unfazed by whatever his end game was.

"Who are you?" The honeyed tone of his question melted over me, and I startled.

This... this was the voice I'd heard one of the times I'd been knocked out. Maybe.

Disgust whipped through me, and I squashed the thread of hope that had started to twist around my heart. Without even realizing it, his docile manner had made me hope he was different from the others, that perhaps he was here to take me away from it all.

But his voice...

If he was here with them, then he was just as evil as the rest. Why would I ever let myself think any differently? Any man here, and maybe some of the women too, were bad people if they were in this compound willingly.

It didn't take a genius to figure out we weren't in the US anymore. Added to the fact they were too open about what they were doing, we weren't anywhere close to authorities.

I tried to remain calm, if only to save myself some pain. Shit. I couldn't do it. "Who the hell are you?"

My mother always said I was a tenacious little Chihuahua, always fighting for what I wanted and never backing down. It

just wasn't in my nature.

He shrugged as he stretched his arms along the chair, bending one hand to touch his fingers to his temple and letting the fingers of the other hand graze his thigh.

"I'm just a bastard. No one important." His lips twisted into a bitter semblance of a smile. "What is fascinating, is how someone like you came to be here."

The hand touching his face had the slightest tremble I would have missed if I wasn't trying to memorize every detail of this man.

"I blacked out, and you apparently brought me here. Shouldn't you be answering this question?" I retorted.

Fuck, Amorette. Shut the fuck up.

I curled my fists as I silently berated myself for my idiocy.

"Drink the water, Amorette," he said, only slightly stumbling over my name. Whether it was because it was unique in the US or he wasn't used to addressing their captives by name, I'd never know. "If I wanted to drug you, I could have done it already. I also could force you to take a drug if I chose to and no one would be able to do anything about it. So drink it."

"That's all true and not particularly reassuring," I murmured, but drank the water anyway. The water was cold as it hit my lips, and I greedily sucked down several gulps. If he wanted to hurt me, he could in any number of ways and I wouldn't have been able to stop him, nor would anyone else.

Hell, they'd probably be pissed that they missed the show.

"Why are you fighting them so hard?"

The question caught me off guard. Was he one of these men? Why would he use *them* instead of *us*?

Images of the women crying, complying, doing everything the men forced on them, played like a movie reel in my mind. I gasped from the horrors I'd witnessed, apparently allowing myself to process it in a way I couldn't when in the middle of the atrocities.

“These monsters will hurt me regardless. Why would I give them what they want?”

“To save yourself whatever pain you can. To live as long as possible.”

The blue of his eyes turned steely as he glared at me. As if he were angry with me for fighting back.

Well, *fuck you*. The missing adrenaline sprung out of nowhere. The urge to sling myself out of the bed and get as many hits on him as possible was almost too strong. I forced it down. It would do me no good here.

I remained silent, because anything that came out of my mouth was sure to set him off.

“What’s your history? How old are you?”

“Fuck. You.” I had multiple personality disorder. That was the only explanation for why I couldn’t keep my fucking mouth shut.

He gave one sharp shake of his head. “Sorry, I like my women willing. And not battered to hell.”

I canted my head. For a second...

No, there was no way he wasn’t like the rest. Not if he was here in this place. He was a beautiful man, to be sure, so the tiny slip of naivety in my brain wanted to believe he wasn’t an evil asshole, but the logical part of my brain said that was ridiculous.

A knock came at the door, then one of the boys—men—stuck his head in.

“Sir, Randall’s livid. Said you took his girl.”

The hand touching his temple curled into a white-knuckled fist. “Is she his or the Institution’s? I didn’t think Randall was so important to have girls for himself.”

The kid gulped and shot a nervous glance at his feet. He shuffled from one foot to the other, not even trying to hide the fear wafting off of him. Like this guy knew what real fear was.

“He said I’m to take her to him right now.”

I caught the sinister smirk that crawled over the man's face before he turned his head toward the door. "And what was the punishment if you failed to deliver?"

The kid's face paled, and he pressed his lips together. Then the heart I'd tried to harden against all men while being in this hellhole cracked at the tears forming in the corners of his eyes. "That he'd put a bullet in my sister's brain after taking her to *the room*."

I knew *exactly* what room he was talking about.

Shit. Shit, shit, shit.

Why was he doing this? This kid who could barely be more than eighteen was evil. He was a man. I saw the way they were training the newbies. Without even realizing it, he was destroying my carefully crafted hatred against everyone here with that unbidden show of emotion.

He added a splash of gray to the black-and-white rules I'd applied to this place. It was literally the worst thing he could have done. I was a sucker for people forced into the system. I couldn't help it.

Whoever this guy was, whatever he'd done or would do, fuck, whoever he grew to be, one thing was very, very clear. He loved his sister, and he was trying to protect her.

The man in the chair had just opened his mouth to no doubt respond in an acerbic tone, but I chose that time to push myself up out of bed.

It was hard, and I fell over the mattress as soon as my feet hit the ground. The sudden movement caused a loud pounding in my head that had my stomach heaving. Except I was determined. I couldn't have that girl, woman, or whoever she was on my conscience.

I was a hero. Or a fool. That had been my one dream my entire life. To make a fucking difference.

This was actually something I could do. I could go with this kid and his sister wouldn't be taken because of me. Randall would find another way to abduct her, I was sure. But it wouldn't be because of me.

Brutal hands gripped my hips, and I gasped from the sharp pain clanging around my torso from where he touched the day-old bruises. Fabric slid along my sides and I glanced down to see I was wearing a T-shirt.

Nothing else, though it was more than I'd been allowed to have since they threw us in cages.

"Sorry," the man murmured.

"Let me go," I snapped as I wrenched myself from his hands and tripped toward the guy at the door. He really was young. Horror was painted over his expression as he caught my body.

I wanted to mourn the man he could have been. He seemed too innocent to be here, but there was nothing I could do about that.

"You're going with him? Really? All because of a sister he might or might not have?" the man behind me yelled, disbelief and confusion strong in his words.

He was right, this kid could have made it all up, although I didn't believe he had. There was too much raw emotion on his face when he'd answered to have faked it. So I took the only option I knew how to take. I went with him to save his sister.

"Fuck off," I tossed over my shoulder as the door shut behind us.

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LAFE

Now that I was alone in the room, full-on shakes were hitting me. I usually could control my reactions better than that. It had only been an hour since my last line. But that fucking girl...

She really was too stupid to live. Getting sucked in by some jackass who was more of an ass-kisser than any I'd ever seen? Seriously fucking stupid. And so fucking tiny. What did she really think she could do against Randall and those fucktards?

Going against everything I'd been ruthlessly and sadistically taught over my life, I'd snagged her as soon as I had seen her go down. The guards knew better than to try and take her from my arms as I carried her out and back to my temporary rooms. One glare, and they shut the fuck up. To them, I was their worst nightmare because I policed Maikel when he stepped out of line.

She should be thanking her fucking lucky stars I happened to be walking through the hall when they were sorting the girls. The man towering over her was already swinging his leg back in preparation for a fatal blow. There was no way she would have survived that kind of hit on top of her battered body.

How her spirit remained intact, I had no fucking clue. I hated her for it as much as I was drawn to her because of the fire in her soul.

I'd brought her to my room, had the Doc on hand look over her, and waited. Hours passed before she woke up, and I started worrying they'd done too much damage. Maybe even permanent damage.

Then, in a bout of reckless courage and naïve altruism, she walked right out with that rat bastard.

And told me to fuck off!

I was the only one who had tried to do anything kind for her. At my own expense, not that she knew that.

My phone vibrated in my pocket, and I nearly threw it against the wall as I ripped it out.

“What the hell do you want?” I growled, glaring at the closed door.

“That’s not any way to greet your favorite brother,” Andre drew out on the other end of the line.

He had been my favorite brother. Until two years ago. Now he could go suck a disease-infested dick.

“If you weren’t aware, I’m on a job for Vicente. Something or someone better be burning down to the ground for you to be calling me.” I perched on the edge of the bed, half-distracted by thoughts of foolish little Amorette.

She was a mess. Her bruised and battered body was a collection of mottled and darkening marks. The side of her face had definitely taken the brunt of Randall’s fury, and her hair was a tangled nest. Still, I could see why they’d chosen her. Underneath all the swelling and grime, she was still stunning.

Maikel had been right. There was too much fire in her to last long here. Her days were numbered as surely as she breathed. And every spark of life she showed would chop away at what little time she might have left.

Why did I care?

I didn’t. I couldn’t.

It was ridiculous for me to even try to help her when I did. Especially after my parting words to her.

Andre cut the bullshit small talk. His direct approach was something I'd always liked about him. Before...

“Grey’s off on a bender. If we don’t get him under control, Vicente is going to have his head. This was his last warning.”

Ice filled my veins. “Who was the dealer that supplied him?”

Grey wasn’t a user. Not in the way people assumed. He didn’t use at all unless he wanted to burn the world down, which had been too often lately. Just because we had an uneasy fondness for him didn’t mean Vicente would spare him any mercy.

“None of yours that I’m aware,” Andre said in a droll tone. “Although he’s currently fighting his way through Vicente’s prized soldiers.” He paused. “The ones who guard the mansion.”

Fucking hell.

Which meant Grey wasn’t even at our compound.

Shit, man. Why did Andre even bother with him anymore? He was the crazy one, and he endangered anyone around just because he could. It was useless.

I was at a point in my life where I’d given up. I was never leaving, and the best I could do was lose any attachments Vicente could use against me. Grey was a very bold attachment that wouldn’t stay in the closet if I locked him in.

The fucker would fight his way through the door.

“And what do you want me to do about it?” My voice wavered and I knew Andre heard it. Shit, man. I hated this life. Spinning around, I landed a swift kick to the chair I’d been sitting in, feeling moderately vindicated as it flew across the room.

“Did that make you feel better?” Andre asked in a tired voice. The bastard.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Of course he’d heard, but I wasn’t ready to acknowledge it.

“The piece of furniture you just destroyed. It was too big of a crash to be anything smaller than an end table. Don’t worry, I’ll reimburse Maikel if he tries to bring it to Vicente.” Exasperation was all over Andre’s voice. It almost made me smile, except I was full of fear, and my body trembled for a very different reason.

Then there was Amorette, who walked out on my protection to let Randall torture her. *Bitch*. I couldn’t save those who didn’t want it. I learned *that* lesson fucking years ago.

Why was she even a blip on my radar? She was going to be used, abused, and killed just like all the other girls here. That tiny woman was no different.

“Maikel won’t make any complaints. He’s been skimming the profits for months. Last night at dinner, he all but admitted it when I reviewed my findings with him.”

The funny thing about working for Vicente, we were thugs. Gangsters. Whatever society deemed low-life criminals who ran the most successful organizations in the world. But, we were intelligent thugs. Parker, Andre, Grey, and I, especially. Vicente had all the best tutors come in when we were growing up, ensuring we were all well-versed in business, languages, and economics. Because what were drug sales without supply and demand?

I sneered at the idea. It was true, but it was still despicable.

“Fine. But if I hear any whispers of trouble, uncle or not, he won’t see the light of day again. I have to go. Hopefully Parker’s around to help me get Grey under control.” Andre sighed.

The beep echoed in my ear and I threw the phone onto the bed. It bounced harmlessly against the pillows where Amorette had just been ten minutes earlier.

That bitch had a death wish.

And I was a masochistic idiot who wanted to go save her.

I paced around the room, almost tripping over the edge of the bed because I was that much of a fucking *fâne*.

A knock came at the door, and a part of me hoped it was the kid bringing Killer back, that she had changed her mind. I snatched the phone up and slid it in my hoodie pocket. Phones were data, and in this business, data was leverage. Like hell, would I willingly leave any leverage for anyone in this prison to find.

When I swung the door open, I was sorely mistaken. Maikel stood there brushing the lint off of his long-sleeved buttoned-down shirt. He smiled and straightened his collar as I pushed past him.

“Not now,” I growled and marched down the hallway. I shouldn’t have answered Andre’s call. As much as I wanted to help him with Grey, I couldn’t, and it tortured me.

Sighing, I focused on the one thing I could do and hoped like hell it didn’t backfire in my face.

“Lafe, son. Wait up. Where are you running off to?” Maikel called after me as his hurried footsteps rushed to catch up. I did not need him following me. He would stop me. Or... he’d try to.

Because I was the bastard of the bunch, I flipped him off over my shoulder. The way he constantly tried to kiss my ass grated on my nerves, and I wished Vicente would give the order.

There might have been the smallest shred of loyalty between the brothers, but not much. It would only take one colossal fuck up to make Vicente wash his hands of him. There were a dozen men in the institution who were ready and willing to take his place. They’d run the business harder, make more profit, and dominate the space.

If I shared my report with Vicente, this could be the end of it for Maikel.

If.

But there was something I’d rather have.

I jogged down the hallway toward the torture room. Randall wouldn't wait. With her dumbass attitude, he was about to break her. I knew his signs. He was a predictable motherfucker.

The hall was mostly empty now that the girls had been sorted. The fans to keep the temperature down blared through the space covering up any conversation from the handlers.

Shit, that wasn't good. The room wasn't soundproof. Randall wanted everyone to know exactly what happened to those who displeased him. And for the girls, he wanted them to know what awaited them once it was their turn. With the fans on... That meant he had something special planned.

I skidded across the concrete floor as I approached a circle of handlers close to the room. I was wrong, they hadn't even made it to the room. Whatever was happening was taking place in the hall. Most of the men wore hunger and rage with pride as they flexed their hands and cracked their necks. A few on the far side were rubbing their erect dicks through their slacks.

Shoving men out of the way, I forced my way to the center.

Shouts went up around me.

"This isn't for you, Laugh," one punk ass kid sneered and spit on the floor. The handlers laughed like he'd actually done something.

If my anger wasn't already reaching a boiling point, that would have done it. No one mocked my name like that. "Would you like to die today? Or would you rather wait for death to creep up on you when you least expect it?" I slowly turned toward him. The shaking in my arms shifted to my legs as I watched for his next move. He was too cocky to figure out that attacking me was a mistake.

"I doubt you could manage it, Laugh. You're too strung out on your own product to do any damage."

Smirking, I motioned for him to come closer. Yes, I might sample my product but only on trips, never allowing myself to get lost in addiction. I just needed enough to deal with these

fuckwads. Regardless, it worked in my favor. I was wired, and he was just wet behind the ears. “Then it would be easy for you to take me, right? Go ahead and give it your best shot. I won’t even tattle on you.” Most of the veteran soldiers and handlers knew who I was. You fucked with me, one of Vicente’s prized enforcers, you lost your life. Or at least your dick. Vicente was a fan of castration for the more serious offenses.

Furious to be called out, the kid swung, but I caught his fist. I squeezed, bending his hand back until he fell to his knees, gasping in pain. The adrenaline pumped through me as I glared at the rest of the handlers, not letting myself see what was in the center just yet.

I wasn’t ready, and I needed to be able to handle this mess first.

To prove my point, I deepened the angle until I heard a satisfying crack. There went the wrist. The kid howled to the ceiling.

“Fucker, that’s my brother!” Another slightly older guard rushed me. He had muscle, and less stupidity cloaked him than the kid still at my feet. I released his fist and kicked him away with a boot to the face before facing his brother. It wasn’t enough to kill him, but if I hit the right spot, he would feel it for days. If I weren’t trying to save Amorette, I’d dole out a better punishment for disrespecting me. The tips of my ears burned as I ached to turn around and finish him. Maybe next time I was here.

This handler in front of me looked as if he wanted to fuck me up seven ways from Sunday, and he didn’t give two shits who I was. I knew a thing or two about brothers. I might be the soft one, but Grey made sure each of us was able to take care of ourselves. We had to be. Too many men would rather see us dead.

The man raised his arm to swing, but I ducked, then followed it up with an uppercut. His head jerked backward and spit flew from his lips while his teeth clicked together. It wasn’t enough to knock him out.

Stepping after him to finish him off, I pulled my own arm back to punch him in the tender spot beside the eye. The temples were my favorite place to strike. It knocked them out the quickest.

I didn't have Grey's strength or Parker's speed, but I had this one trick up my sleeve.

Before I could touch him, guards closed around him and swung him out of my reach. Fucking cowards. The circle widened, the handlers giving me a decent berth.

No one else tried to approach me. They glared with unconcealed fury and hatred. That was fine. I didn't mind the hate. I hated myself better than any of these punk asses ever could.

A sharp inhale brought my attention back to my whole reason for being here. There was no sign of a voice attached to that breath, but I knew without a doubt it was her.

I turned my head slowly, as if it pained me to do it—and it did, because I was afraid of the nightmares I'd have from whatever image I'd see. For all I knew, my little Killer could already be a bloody and twisted set of bones on the floor.

Randall faced me, with Amorette on her knees staring right at me. The left side of her face was a mess of dark blue and purple, but nothing that wasn't there ten minutes ago. A cool burst of relief fell over me. Even the need for the next fix couldn't take away from how good it was to look into her eyes while she still lived. It didn't matter they'd ripped the shirt off of her body. In the time they'd taken her from my room, they hadn't done any more damage. None visible, anyway.

Then I noticed his hand cupping the underside of her throat. To anyone else, it could have been a lover's hold. Those who knew Randall, knew this was his favorite way to break a neck.

That wasn't going to happen.

Not today. Not with her.

Maikel closed in on my right side, his pants harsh in my ear. Without removing my glare from Randall, I dared him to

act. I reveled in the fear that entered his gaze. I despised almost everything about the Institution, but not my power over men like Randall and Maikel.

Randall knew if he went against me, Vicente's enforcer, it would be the last mother fucking thing he'd ever do. It was a toss-up if I'd approve of throwing him in prison or deep in the ocean. Either worked for me.

"Maikel. I have my final report prepared for Vicente." My voice rang loud and clear. "You will absolutely want to meet with me before I leave tonight, but I'm taking her with me." I nodded to Amorette. *Why was I using her name?*

Names had power, familiarity. For someone I could just as easily bring back, I should call her Killer. It would make her death easier in the end.

"Of—of course! We can dine while we discuss it. Did you want to use the suite upstairs before it's served?" His stutter sent a rush of power through me.

What was I doing? What was this girl doing to me?

Knowing it would backfire didn't do a damned thing to change my course. Fuck, it was like I had no control over what was going on. This was a repeat of my biggest mistake, the one that cost the largest piece of my soul.

"I can have her bathed and ready to go by tonight. Randall can ensure she's prepared."

"No," I said softly. "He releases her now. She'll be locked in my room until I leave."

"Done." Maikel wasted no time shooping Randall away from her like he was an errant child.

"I'll take her to my rooms. Send Juliana with her kit. After I've seen to her, I'll meet you in your private suite." I moved forward to cup Amorette's arm. I wasn't rough, but I also wasn't gentle.

These men could speculate all they wanted on why I was stealing her, but I wouldn't fuel their interest. I wouldn't paint a bigger target on her back because of me.

Randall growled as I helped her to her feet. As long as he stayed in the corner like a good pet, he could bark till nightfall. I didn't give a fuck. As of now, he was no longer my problem.

Maikel walked alongside me, his hands clasped behind his back as he studied me. A few times he opened his mouth, but I shot him a look that said he needed to keep his fucking mouth shut.

While we walked the halls of his estate, there were ears. I was about to screw over everyone I cared about, and I didn't need Maikel making it easy for Vicente to execute us all.

My uncle wasn't the brightest, because his head would be first on the chopping block. Maikel might have inherited a lot of physical similarities as Vicente, but when it came to business, he was a selfish, greedy bonehead. No eye for strategy and definitely no pride.

"I'll meet you in your private suite soon," I repeated.

There was a moment of hesitation in his steps, then he bowed his head. "Of course, Lafe." At the next hallway, he left us.

I breathed a little easier knowing soon he'd be begging for his life.

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AMORETTE



Lafe.

His name was Lafe. At least that part of the conversation had been in English. And he abhorred Laugh, although I thought that was the proper pronunciation... Wasn't it Scandinavian or something?

Instead of thinking of him, I tried to process what had just happened in that warehouse, but my head was too fucked up. I was confused, aching, and ready for this nightmare to be over. But I knew it wasn't a nightmare, just like I knew I had been about to be gang-raped.

As soon as the guard had delivered me to Randall's grasping hands, he gave me sad eyes and scurried out of the room.

Thanks a lot, kid.

I was positive he had, if not a sister, then someone he was trying to keep alive in this hellhole, but something other than watching the back of his head leaving me to die would have been nice.

No, that was dramatic. I wasn't going to die, only brutally assaulted and potentially beaten.

"My small thorn, I'm so glad you've come back to have some fun," Randall cooed, his southern drawl shining through. He flicked two fingers behind me, and suddenly my arms were restrained. Fingers bit into my arms as I tested the strength of their hold. I whimpered when they ground my muscles against

the bone. A dozen or more men left whatever job they were doing around the ample open space to crowd around us, excited grins on their faces like they knew exactly what was going to happen and couldn't wait.

Randall must do this with all his special girls.

My gut instinct was to fight. I wanted to fight so badly, but I wasn't completely stupid. With two men holding me, and more surrounding us, I didn't have a chance of escape.

Randall closed in, pulling a long serrated knife from a holder on his belt. He dragged the tip down my cheek and I held still, avoiding the cut. If I were impulsive, I'd lean into it, let him tear my face up and make it bleed until it scarred. They wouldn't use me then.

All the girls I'd seen were gorgeous, even in the filth that covered them from being kept in cages like dogs. If I wasn't attractive to their disgusting patrons, I'd be killed.

A quick death over a few years of sex slavery was my preference. I said a few years because the life expectancy couldn't be long here. In all the studies I'd read, it never was.

But I didn't lean into the knife. Randall hated me enough that he wouldn't allow anyone to tend to it, and in the cages it would get infected. I had no illusions they'd taken the girls to comfy, clean rooms. Wherever they were now, they were still slaves. I'd prefer to go out my own way than weaken until I couldn't fight back.

In this light, a scar that curved around his left ear and down his neck stood out against the tan of his skin. His jolly appearance wasn't so jolly now. The illusion of an ordinary man fell away as his sinister soul poured through.

Then I looked in his eyes.

Those soulless black pits sparkled as he pulled the collar of my shirt away from my body. He gave me two seconds to realize what he was doing before he slashed the knife down.

I jumped. Fucking hell, I gave that to him.

I paid for it too, as I swayed, darkness clouding in and my mouth watering. The clarity I'd woken up with started to wane under the constant torture of my body.

The macabre grin on Randall's face said that was what he lived for, little moments of terror from those weaker than him. Instead of pushing away, I straightened my shoulders and worked to calm my now racing heart. There was no cut, no blood. The knife hadn't even touched my skin. Tears of relief threatened to surface, but I breathed deep, in and out. In and out until they were gone, and only my resolve remained.

His amusement fled the longer I held his stare.

Not the reaction you were expecting, hm?

He didn't get the entire shirt in one swipe, poor man. Using angry, choppy slashes, he finished cutting it open and forced it from my body while the men adjusted their holds on me. I jerked back, damn it, but I couldn't help it.

Another wash of agony.

Cool air hit my body and my fucking nipples pebbled. Sometimes bodies reacted and I loathed that they saw mine. These monsters probably enjoyed it, believing it was from fear or arousal.

I glanced around at the naked lust on their faces. It was most likely fear that turned them on, considering why they had me here in the first place.

Randall pushed me to my knees and I sucked in a sharp breath. Once I was down, he strode around to my back, cupping my nape, and reached around to grope my breast in a punishing squeeze. I gasped but otherwise kept my mouth clamped shut.

I would not scream. I would not cry. I would not give these motherfuckers the satisfaction.

Once I was alone, then I could cry and feel sorry for myself. But not now.

When I didn't yell out from the pain, he twisted. Fuck, that hurt. I gritted my teeth and fisted my hands on my thighs. I

would never, not ever, give this man a reaction. Not if I could help it. I almost laughed as I thought of that gorgeous man questioning me on why I made things harder on myself. Like I didn't feel fear.

I felt plenty. For the last few days, my life had been one mashed-up ball of fear. My constantly vibrating chest proved it. Fear colored every action, every thought, and even coated the back of my tongue.

But the rage was stronger.

And my pride.

There was only one thing in this world that would give Randall the power he wanted over me, and she wasn't here. So fuck him and them.

Men started to crowd closer, some openly palming their crotches like the anticipation was too much for them to wait for the party to officially start. One man to the side of Randall began to lower his zipper while baring his teeth in his excitement.

Then *he* had appeared.

Ah, the way I detested him on sight because he was here. I had been furious, believing he was there to take part in Randall's games, but he quickly shattered that thought as he took down a few of the guards. Some words in English, some in Spanish. The one clear message was he was particular about his name.

He'd spoken in rapid Spanish to *him*. The one who gave the pretty speech on our first day. The man was older by about twenty years, and despite having an inch over Lafe, he cowered before him. The older man was dressed in a full suit, clearly trying to appear as the master here. But he was afraid of the daunting man in the hoodie. That was interesting.

Which brought me to now, shoved back in the bedroom I'd recently left, by that man who seemed pissed he'd pulled me from the warehouse.

"What are you planning on doing with me?" I asked as I backed up to the wall, trying to keep the adrenaline from

shaking my voice. My gut said he wasn't into the same kind of torture as Randall, even though he was violent. He had no problems with that.

Had I just traded one torture master for another?

"Saving your ass, you ungrateful brat," he spewed and ran his fingers through his blond hair before turning around and punching a hole in the plaster. "Shit, Andre is going to have my ass over this."

Another question was on the tip of my tongue when a soft knock came at the door. He threw it open then stood back for a tall, statuesque woman to walk through. She was in her late thirties at least and carried it well. There was enough sadness surrounding her that I knew she wasn't here by choice, but she lacked too much of the self-hate to be used like the other girls.

"Lafe," she murmured, sending him a puzzled look. Did she know him? More than just as an acquaintance?

It didn't matter. He was the enemy.

"Julie," he returned, walking closer to the bed. I didn't like how he eyed me, but I didn't react fast enough to escape his sudden hold on my arms. "Sedate her."

"What?" I yelled. "You mother fucker! You said you wouldn't drug me." I thrashed, dizziness and delayed pain distantly rolling over me. But it was no use. Between his death grip on my arms and his legs holding my knees together, he was too strong.

"Hurry," he urged. His voice was steady, but his hands trembled.

I had one thought as darkness drifted over my conscience.

Why was he afraid?



LAUGHTER FILLED the locker room as I finished changing. Practice was brutal, like always, but I loved the thrill of the

workout and the competition. It got me hotter than my on-again-off-again boyfriend Ethan.

He was a nice guy, but he didn't make my panties wet like scoring a goal on our rival team.

"Amorette?" My twin sister sang out as she pushed past the girls in various states of dress. She was in a great mood, considering she didn't comment on the smell or the steamy heat from the showers.

My dear sister. I loved her more than life itself, but she was a bit of a priss. In the best way possible.

"Yes, twin?" I grinned and stuffed my sweat-soaked jersey into my bag.

"I'm going to the mall with some friends. Want to ride with?" My smile reflected back at me. We were mirror-image twins. Identical. The same size, haircut, and makeup sense—mainly because she forced me into a chair to apply it every morning.

She tucked her arm in mine as I slung my bag over my shoulder. "See you guys tomorrow!" I called out to the team before ducking out of the locker room. The cool air in the hallway brought chill bumps to my arms after roasting for the last thirty minutes. "Who are you going with?"

Grace rolled her eyes. "Andrew. His friends Cohen and Matt are going too. You should absolutely come. It'd be a hell of a lot more fun than spending time with Ethan." Her mouth twisted over his name. She wasn't a fan of his, at all.

"He's my boyfriend," I told her like I'd told her a million times. "Keep your phone on and check in with me if you go anywhere outside the mall."

"Am...Even Maman isn't as strict as you are," she said with equal love and exasperation. "You could come and make sure I stay out of trouble."

"I have homework. And Ethan's taking me to volunteer at the shelter downtown." I patted her hand.

“Fine,” she groused. Grace openly wore her moods for anyone to see, and the way her brows pinched and her nose crinkled gave all her irritation away. “I’ll try again tomorrow.”

I laughed. Her life goal was to make me live more ‘in the moment’. Mine was to inject a bit of ambition into her body...

The memory spun away on a slow-moving vortex, leaving me with the darkness of deep sleep. It didn’t last long. As soon as I started to wake up, my sister Grace popped back into my head. That had been our sophomore year. God, was that what, eight or nine years ago?

It seemed like decades.

I wished I could have spoken to her one more time, before I was taken. She’d go apeshit once she realized I was abducted. The scene she’d cause with the police and media would be epic and cringeworthy.

She was alone, even after I promised her we’d always be there for each other...

A heavy ache filled my chest. I expected tears, but the darkness around me was too strong to allow them.

Racing away from thoughts of Grace, I continued to play the rest of the memory in my head. Ethan and I hadn’t lasted. Of course, we hadn’t. He was too nice and docile for what I wanted out of life. But he was there for the moment I decided I wanted to go to law school.

He was the catalyst, really. His mom worked at the women’s shelter and being there, witnessing the hopelessness and fear in those women’s eyes, especially the ones with children, changed my life.

No longer asleep, I dreaded opening my eyes. What fresh hell would I be in now? The last thing I remembered was...

I struggled to sort through what happened, but my head throbbed when I focused too hard. The one brief minute of lucidity was melting into the desire to go back to sleep. I was so tired.

Groggy.

Then little clips filtered through the cracks of my mind.

Randall, the fuckface who wanted to hurt any woman he could get his hands on.

The crowd of men pressing closer and the fear pumping through my veins.

That beautiful man dressed in old jeans and a hoodie when all the other men were in various versions of black pants and shirts. They had been intimidated by him. I hadn't imagined that. He'd held power over them but acted as if he disliked what they did.

I gasped, my eyes popping open.

That mother fucker drugged me!

Working on getting to a sitting position, I allowed myself the weakness of whimpering from the aches in my ribs. I wheezed from the mild exertion as if I'd ran ten miles. Damn it, this hurt! I almost flopped back down, but I managed to stack a few pillows up so I could lean against them.

While I peered around the room, I tested my body by moving my arms and legs, twisting back and forth. I was fairly confident I hadn't been beaten anymore, but the soreness had set in. My chest was tight, and when I touched my ribs, they ached.

Glancing down, I stared at my gray t-shirt-covered chest. Okay, good. If this guy had stolen me from Randall, I could at least be happy he didn't force me to be naked all the damn time. Hope that he wouldn't expect the same as that hellhole sparked in the pit of my stomach.

The little things would keep me going.

It was clearly a man's shirt because it engulfed my petite frame. My brothers had been giants but always picked on Grace and me for being so tiny, even tinier than our mother. We were the family's *petite fees*, or little fairies.

The room I was in was also different from where he'd had me before. That room had been sterile and lacking any

personality.

This room wasn't the complete opposite, but there were some photos of random places hanging on the walls. The bedding was lightly patterned like expensive parchment.

Swinging my legs over the side, I slid off the bed. I had to steady myself once I was on my feet so I didn't tumble over. Who knew if it was from my pain or hunger? I felt both with a vengeance.

Should I stay inside the room or attempt an escape? I searched for the mental fire I'd been operating on, though after a long, sedated sleep, my tank of emotions was strangely empty.

What was it about the faux safety of an empty room to calm me right down? Granted, I could blame my lack of energy on the lingering effects of the sedative. My thoughts turned to Grace for a brief moment, but I pushed them from my head even as I held them tight in my heart.

I could be weak when I was asleep. I could dream about the good times and miss her then. But not now. Any second, my captor could storm in and I'd need to be prepared.

Memories were a distraction that could get me killed.

It would happen. But that didn't mean I was rushing to meet fate head-on. I would fight any way I could to get free.

Noises banged lightly on the other side of what I assumed to be the door out of the room. There were three altogether. One was open to an empty closet. One was closed right next to it, most likely a bathroom. Then there was the door on the other wall. That's where the sounds were coming from.

Instead of heading to potential freedom or death, I wobbled to the bathroom to relieve myself as quietly as possible. I didn't want to alert the person who was probably guarding me that I was awake.

After I peed, I didn't flush. It rankled not to, but that was a first-world problem. I'd rather be the one controlling when they found out I was awake. As quickly as possible, I eased

the faucet to a trickle and cupped my hand under it to catch the water.

I paused. I had no idea where I was, although I had strong suspicions I wasn't in the US anymore. Depending on where I was, the water could make me sick.

Shit. I turned it off. They had been providing water from water bottles. There had to be a reason for that, right? Of course, they were nasty dirt-caked water bottles. That could have been their version of captive humor.

The more I was upright, the more awake I became. I was ready to find out where I was. The slight reprieve was nice, but I wasn't a person who could flourish in naivety, especially when it wouldn't last. I was too practical for that.

I needed to know who was here, and I needed to know what to expect. It was the only way I'd be able to devise a plan.

Sucking in a deep breath, I steeled myself for confrontation.

The knob was room temperature. The fact it wasn't freezing cold like it would be back home only solidified my assumption that I was far, far away. I twisted, releasing a breath when it turned easily. So, Lafe wasn't trying to lock me in.

Whatever I expected outside of the room, this wasn't it. The space opened to an apartment. A nice one, with smooth walls, arched doorways, and an open kitchen and living room space. Green plants were spaced throughout the place and inviting furniture surrounded a large-screen TV.

What the fuck? I almost scrubbed at my tender eyes.

This wasn't anything like what I'd seen at that warehouse, not even when he'd had me in that room.

Lafe stood at the island flipping bacon onto a napkin-covered plate. He must have been busy the last few minutes because a cutting board was next to the stove with slices of tomato, lettuce, and fresh sliced bread.

How had I not smelled the bacon?

He glanced at me as he turned the stove off. His dark sapphire blue eyes moved from the top of my unbrushed head down my naked legs to my feet. “The bruising looks better. Good. I was just about to come check on you. Are you hungry?”

He was being almost...kind. So either this was a dream, or he was more dangerous than I had initially thought, and I knew he had been the most dangerous man in the warehouse. What did he want?

“Come eat,” he said in that honeyed voice as he nodded toward the counter. A few stools were tucked underneath the island across from him. He must have assumed I’d listen to him without hesitation.

Dropping his gaze to the food, he assembled a thick BLT with a healthy dose of mayonnaise before sliding it across the island. Then he began making another one. For him?

“Why am I here?” My throat was sore, but my voice was mostly normal.

He rubbed his forehead like I was a pain in his ass. What right did he have to act like that? “You’re safe here with me. Come eat, and I’ll explain your options.”

I perked up, even if it was most likely a trap.

Options? Was he really so against what was happening that he was helping me escape? Elation that I might be able to see my sister again brought actual tears to my eyes.

It was foolish to believe him, but I wanted to, all the same. A pang of regret flashed through me at the thought of leaving all those women behind to suffer. No, I couldn’t allow that to stop me from saving myself. I could help them if I could get back home. That was what I did, my life’s work.

I ducked my head and shuffled forward. He didn’t get to see the way his words gave me hope. If this was indeed a sick twisted game to him, he’d prey on my reactions. For now, I’d play along. I needed to figure out what his endgame was before I did anything rash.

The savory smell of bacon made my stomach gurgle loudly. He passed over a glass of water poured from a filtered pitcher as I picked up half of the sandwich and crammed the corner in my mouth.

The salty bacon, fresh tomato, and lettuce were heavenly; possibly the best BLT I'd ever had. I'd also never been hungrier. Instantly, my stomach protested, but I ignored it. I needed food and this tasted too good.

I watched him as he pushed his own glass of water and plate to the spot next to me. His walk around the island was agitated, as if he had too much energy pent up inside his body.

It wouldn't surprise me if he was into drugs. The way his hands had trembled. He had all the low-key signs of an addict, even if it hadn't diminished his masculine beauty yet.

It would. Drugs always sucked the best out of people.

The stool scraped against the stylish concrete floor, and he sat so he faced me. Instead of eating his own food, he watched me. That was fine, let him watch.

“You have a choice to make, Killer.”

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LAFE

For the time, we were alone in the compound. Both Andre and Parker had gone to the mansion to try and save Grey's ass. Depending on Vicente's mood, they could be gone for a few hours or a few days.

Either way, I was already regretting my decision to take this girl.

I'd give her a choice and let her decide what she wanted to do. The chopper was on standby, just in case. As much as I rebelled against it, part of me hoped she'd decide to go back.

That would make my life a hell of a lot easier. What was adding a little more hate onto the already massive pile of self-loathing?

Amorette took another bite of her sandwich, chewing slowly as she regarded me. There was so much working behind those light grayish-blue eyes. Stark intelligence, tinged with shrewdness, contradicted her sweet appearance. Well, when she wasn't beaten to hell with bruising along the side of her face.

And so tiny. That was probably why she was selected. Barely five-foot-two with elfin features and thick, lustrous dark hair. For all outward appearances, she looked like a teenager, but you only had to look into her eyes to realize she was much older. Early twenties, at least.

I allowed myself to truly study her now that I wasn't constantly under watch at Maikel's place. Taking her had its

own set of problems I'd have to address soon, but I could at least breathe.

The girl barely blinked the entire time she held my stare. A bitter smile threatened to tug up the corner of my mouth, but I resisted. If I had two guesses, I could figure out what she was thinking. She might have a decent poker face, but I could still read her.

To her, I was evil incarnate. So why the fuck was I trying to be her hero?

Her posture loosened as she pushed her half-filled plate away. A decent meal probably went a long way to setting her at ease. She patted her stomach a couple of times, then froze. That was a very human gesture and one she didn't appear to want me to see.

Funny. Shouldn't she be trying to get me to see her as a person? A human being and not an object? I'd watched those crime shows too.

"What options?" Her lips pressed into a firm line and her eyes brightened.

Fuck, she was waiting for an answer. I grabbed my glass and took a healthy drink of lemon water to stall. What the hell had I been thinking? Andre was going to have my ass. Grey would probably order her death, and Parker would view her as a temporary plaything.

I loved those bastards, but this wasn't a good idea. None of us were good men. We weren't heroes. The best thing we had going for us was that we weren't rapists.

Setting my glass down, I pressed the heel of my palm hard against my forehead trying to force some sense back into my unused brain. I'd gone this far, so I might as well see it through. Andre would never know if she decided to leave. She had been passed out when I carried her in, so she wasn't a threat.

"Do you know what fate had in store for you, my little killer?" I dropped my hands to cup my knees. I didn't have to worry about her trying to run away from me right now. The

door was locked with a key. The windows didn't open. Such was the beauty of our guest apartments.

No guest was ever really innocent, and this was our insurance that they wouldn't cause trouble. The same went for Killer. She couldn't escape the place without my permission. The best she could do was steal a knife to try and slice me up.

I wasn't an arrogant fighter, but she couldn't whip me on her best day. Not when she was barely one hundred and twenty pounds.

"Sex trafficking," she said blandly as if the truth didn't faze her. Except there was a tick under her left eye. She was bothered all right. She just had on a brave face.

I could respect that.

"Correct." I leaned toward her. "Patrons who pay very well frequent the girls all day long to use their bodies as they see fit. The only silver lining is that they'd keep you drugged out of your head so you wouldn't remember much. If you're lucky, you'd be kept in decent living quarters to serve the wealthiest of the men."

Amorette's gaze grew darker with each word that left my mouth. "And if I were unlucky?"

I chuckled. We both knew she'd be among the unlucky ones. She'd already gotten on Randall's bad side. Maikel let the handler have too much power over his branch of operations to step in on her behalf. The only thing there for her now was pain, then hopefully death. "You'd be Randall's pet for his amusement, and then when he loses interest, for the soldiers." I kept my words as pretty as possible, but there was no way to cover up the brutality waiting for her there.

Her face paled. *Finally*, she exhibited at least a drop of self-preservation.

She swallowed hard and glanced toward the windows. I expected her to be upset, to beg for release. But she didn't.

"I've yet to hear you give me any alternatives." Her words were firm and her tone made of steel.

Digging my fingers in my knees, I straightened. “You have two choices. You can go back. There’s a pilot waiting and ready to take you straight to Randall. Or,” I drew in a deep breath, “you can work for us.”

Her head snapped back, and a sneer covered her face. “What do you mean *work* for you?”

Did she think I meant sex? Killer was gorgeous, and my dick twitched to imagine her full of lust and need, but I’d never cross that line. I hadn’t lied when I told her I preferred my women willing. And she was anything but. In fact, I suspected she’d try to bite my dick off if she ever got her mouth close to it. “We’d find you something appropriate for your skill-level, if you decide to stay here.” Something that would require constant surveillance.

Andre was going to tear my ass up.

She barely let me finish my sentence before she hit me with another question. “What do you mean by *pilot*?”

“We’re a two-hour ride from Randall.” I was careful not to say Maikel’s name in front of her. The less information she had, the safer my brothers and I were.

“Those are my choices. A criminal or a victim?” She couldn’t hide the disgust in her tone. “I want to go home. I have a family. A life.” She pressed her hand to her chest, curling her fingers against the thin fabric of the t-shirt.

“You’re dead to them now.” My words cracked through the room. It was callous, confirming what was probably her worst fear, but no matter what possessed me to give her a better life, I wouldn’t risk those of the ones I loved. “A survivor or a sex slave.”

Amorette shook her head. “You might as well state it plainly.” Her lip curled in a fierce grimace and her eyes sparkled with defiance. “The only choice you’re giving me is to be a victim—or an accomplice.” She spun around on the stool to face away from me as sobs wracked her body.

I allowed her that play. Who was I to take any more of her pride than the Institution had already stripped from her?

Without warning, she doubled over her knees and screamed at the floor.

The sound would haunt my sleep for the rest of my life.

It wasn't the sound of a woman afraid. The deep, anguished notes were those of an animal trapped in a corner with no reasonable way out. And I'd done that to her.

Clenching my teeth, I kept my gaze trained on her. The first time I saw her, I hated her. She was a fighter. She was determined not to be broken. It didn't matter what they did to her or what she witnessed, she fought.

Maybe I wanted to know her, to understand what made her tick. Although hearing her now, I realized I should have left her there. Amorette would never see us for the people we were. Whether she joined us or not, we were the bad guys. She'd hate me for who she'd have to become to survive.

Join the club.

Her hand reached toward the glass plate with the half-eaten sandwich before she fisted it and brought it back to her lap. Her sobs continued to shake her shoulders. Minutes passed, and she still hadn't turned around, even though her cries had softened to sniffles.

They sounded so alien coming from her. Every time I'd seen her, she was tough, untouchable. Now she seemed fragile, perhaps even breakable.

I almost touched her shoulder, but I didn't. She wouldn't welcome my touch. And I didn't have the right to comfort her.

I was no white knight, I reminded myself cruelly.

My phone vibrated in my pocket. I pulled it out and cursed.

Andre: V was feeling sentimental. He allowed Grey to leave with a mild lashing. He's currently passed out but he's fine. We'll be back tonight. V had us do an errand for him before we were able to leave.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

A mild lashing to Vicente meant half his back was stripped off. The errand was a way for Vicente to delay them from coming back here. He loved to prolong suffering, no matter who it was on the receiving end. That cunt didn't care who he hurt, it was all a sadistic game to him.

Killer might always hate me, and I might hate myself, but neither could come close to the abhorrence I had for Vicente and the Institution. I'd just learned from an early age there was no escaping it. When you were born into *this* life, it claimed you. The only way out would be prison or death, and neither worked for me.

I needed to go make sure our supplies were stocked up. If Vicente let Marcos do the whipping, Grey would need something extra to dull the pain.

"Do you have a decision?" I stood from the stool, kicking it back under the counter.

Slowly, she swiveled back around. Her creamy skin was flushed pink, shiny with the tracks of her tears. So many tears, they even clung to her eyelashes.

"Fuck you."

Shrugging, I headed toward the door. If she was trying to push me to decide for her, she'd be disappointed with the one I'd choose. Let her stew on it for a while.

"Where are you going?" The stool scraped the floor and I twisted, just in case she tried to attack me. She was a fighter, after all. Luckily, that wasn't what she had planned. Her glowing gaze speared me.

"I have things to do. I've wasted enough time here with you." Confident she wasn't going to come after me, I made up the distance to the door.

"You're leaving a butcher knife on the counter?" Was that shock I heard?

I used the key to unlock the door and held it open as I turned my head toward her. "The door will be locked, and the windows are shatterproof for anything less than an atomic explosion. Yes, you have access to water, a toaster, a knife,

and anything a common apartment would have. But, you will not be able to leave unless I let you out.”

“Are you saying...” She took a step forward.

“Yes,” I dropped my chin as I met her stare. “My only concern is that you can’t cause trouble. Kill yourself, I don’t care. I gave you a way out, and if you don’t want to take it and don’t want to go back to Randall, you have another option.” I laughed, but it shook too much to be as cutting as I’d hoped. “Hell, that would make my life a hell of a lot easier.”

“Accomplice, victim, or death,” she murmured, her eyes trailing to the knife.

Disappointment I wasn’t expecting flared up at her sudden interest in suicide. I thought she was stronger than that. But the truth was, I didn’t know her enough to know anything other than she had a death wish.

We’d see what she chose when I came back later.

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ANDRE

I slung the glass across the room, feeling moderately better as it shattered into a thousand shards. Vicente's people would be cleaning that up for days. With any luck, he'd walk around his study barefoot and slice himself.

"Andre," Grey slurred, raising his glass of rum cheerfully. "How was I supposed to know they'd be pussies about it?"

Spearing Grey with a heated glare, I silently urged him to shut the fuck up. The tallest of us all, he was an imposing figure. The man was pure cut muscle, if a little on the lean side, and never skipped days in the ring. He loved and excelled at it, which was why Vicente had him over that particular faction. Now he only fought when he wanted to, which was more often than Vicente probably wanted.

Most of the time, Grey was a cold bastard. I didn't even care about the irony of using that word. The entire situation had me so fucked up in my anger I was seeing red.

Any other time, he would glare and sneer at anyone who approached him, but he was a happy drunk. A fucking happy drunk I could happily kill right now for putting us in this position. All for a wager...

How was I supposed to save his ass this time? Better question, how had I gotten any of these idiots to adulthood?

"Leave him alone, Andre. Vicente isn't going to actually follow through with it, and you know it. If for nothing else, Grey's too valuable to him," Parker said lightly as he scrolled through his phone.

Ah, my baby brother. He was just as bad as Grey. Only, his brand of crazy was more dangerous than Grey's. Where Grey wore his psycho on his chest, Parker held his close, not letting onto any of his crazy schemes until he'd fucked people over sideways and made them beg for it.

"I don't think you fucking realize what's happening here," I stopped my pacing to yell at him. Gripping my hair, I welcomed the brief shock of pain. We were fucked, and the best I could hope for was to believe that Grey knew what he was doing.

"I don't?" Parker asked drily while Grey snickered. "Bruno is the most recognized fighter in the underground world. Only takes fights to the death. I realize what Vicente is trying to do and it's a scare tactic."

"You want to take that chance?" I could barter something with Vicente. He always enjoyed it when I needed to save their asses. He liked it even better when I had to grovel and crawl on my knees.

"You don't have any faith in me, *hermano*?" Grey's sloppy grin did nothing to cool my ire.

"In a regular fight, yes. You're the best fighter I've ever seen. But Bruno only fights to the death, and V only sets him up with people he wants gone from the Institution. You might have pushed him one too many times on this." I shook my head and resumed pacing. "I watched him send out the announcement. One of his enforcers against Bruno? The bets have already started rolling in, and the fight is still two months away. The money alone means he won't be able to cancel it. He won't want to."

Grey tilted his head, still wearing that silly ass grin. "Then I guess I better win. Don't worry, I'll train hard. Harder than I already do. Mia will bring in the best fighters for me once she hears about it."

"Mia's always had a soft spot for you." Parker scowled at Grey, his voice deepening in irritation. Of course, he would be angry with Grey for that. They were best friends, and Grey swooped in and made her his fuck buddy. That particular

relationship was long in the past, but Grey somehow managed to retain a friendship with her.

It had chafed Parker's ass ever since, the territorial fuck.

"I know." Grey grinned.

"The plane will be ready soon. Grey, stay here and don't start any more fights. I don't care who walks through that door. Parker, you're responsible for keeping him in line. I need to go check on a few things, and then we'll be able to leave."

I walked over to Grey and looked over his back to make sure it had quit bleeding. He was lucky Marco had been on an errand for Vicente. Otherwise, he would have flayed his back open, not leaving a strip of skin.

"It stopped bleeding with only a few lashes where the skin broke," I murmured.

"Yes, Vicente's backup torture master has some things to learn, doesn't he? His striking arm is a bit weak." Parker snickered.

"Laugh it up. Who knows what I'll have to do to keep Grey off of the whipping post again," I muttered more to myself than to them. Leaving them in the study wasn't ideal. Anyone could walk in, and Grey had no friends here. Parker was a wildcard if he'd help him or not, so I better make this quick.

The mansion where Vicente ran his operations was precisely what most people would think of when given the words luxury and status. There were many different floors, wings, and paths through the five-hundred-acre property.

Twenty-foot ceilings were standard in the public spaces, with windows nearly as tall. Vicente was more of a modern man than a classical one, so almost every aspect of his mansion was clean and sharp. Even the artwork he loved to put on display was basic yet cost a small fortune.

Like that painting right there by the Gallery entrance. Two blurry black circles overlapped each other on a gray canvas so light it was nearly white. The only reason I knew it had any

color was because it was framed on a stark white wall. Two Lovers in Paradise.

Fuck. The title was a complete farce in this mansion. There were no great love stories. More like horror endings.

I reached the Gallery as the tall, wide double doors slowly opened. It was too theatrical to take seriously, but Vicente had rigged most of the mansion with this type of technology. Not that motion sensors were high-tech, but for here it was ridiculous.

Garbled conversation riddled with occasional groans and grunts fell out of the room. Vicente liked to think of himself as a modern-day Caligula, conducting business through orgies and creating the Gallery as the boardroom. To him, his Gallery was as significant as Caligula's infamous orgy boats. The setting made for some damn awkward discussions, but at least he wasn't offended when I never participated.

The one redeeming quality here was that these women were volunteers, not the slaves Maikel kept in his miniature Gallery. It sickened me to go there. I didn't know how Lafe could stomach it, either.

This city that Vicente called his home worshiped him and the riches he rained down on the economy. Who cared how the wealth was acquired and how many had to die for it to enter their hands? They were grateful. All the attractive young women threw themselves at his mercy for a chance to entertain his guests, sometimes at their parents' urging. Like he would make any of them his queen.

I nearly laughed out loud. That wasn't the way Vicente operated. He just hid the truth well from the city.

Straightening my shoulders, I tipped my head back and prepared to play Vicente's little lapdog. There wasn't anything I despised more, but for my *pendejo* brothers, I'd eat shit at his feet. Damn them for making me play his games.

With strong, determined strides, I entered the Gallery heading straight for the far platform. Beds, chaise lounges, and sex chairs lined the outside walls in front of the windows of

dancing women. The slow sensual music beat through the room, adding the erotic sight of women bent at all different angles for their partner's pleasure.

Some of them I knew from when I was forced to live here. That was one thing about Vicente, he was sentimental about his possessions. When women pleased him, he kept them in the Gallery long after they lost their youthful bodies. All except his concubines. Those he treated very differently.

Vicente grinned as he watched me approach. Yes, he knew exactly why I was coming to find him. His grin widened into a predatory smile that formed deep grooves in his cheeks, giving his classical looks a bit of a sardonic edge. How it rankled me that I looked like this man.

Dark hair, dark eyes, dark skin. We were also the same height and build. I used to convince myself I looked more like my Colombian mother, but when I stood in front of Vicente, I couldn't deny I was his carbon copy.

He used to detest the similarities between us. Then he discovered how much it bothered me, and now he rubbed it in any chance he got. He'd already played that card today, so here was hoping I wasn't subjected to any more cutting comments before taking my family home.

"Vicente," I murmured and dipped my head in respect. It was always about the deference with him.

"Andre," he said politely as if he were happy to see me, when not four hours ago, we both watched Grey whipped in this very room. You see, the Gallery held all manner of business for the Institution.

"We're preparing to leave." I smoothed a hand down my suit shirt. "I came to pay my respects and confirm you are satisfied with the completion of our errand?"

Vicente leaned forward, propping his chin in his hand. The immaculate suit he wore rustled with his movements. "Yes, yes. Victor has been a thorn in my side for quite some time. He holds a high position, has earned it, but he's gotten too

comfortable.” A sadistic gleam brightened his dark brown eyes.

You mean he was too well-liked by your men.

“Arlo is secured. How long will you be keeping him? We’re happy to return him to the Armory once his time is done.” I gently pressed for his intentions. Arlo was a good man, intelligent. In a few years, he could be just as liked as his father and potentially twice as capable.

Vicente waved my offer away. “He won’t be here long enough for you to retrieve him on your next visit. This is just a little reminder to Victor not to get any drastic ideas.”

I raised my brows. “Do you not think abducting his son would have the opposite effect? The rumors of him using his followers to take the weaponry faction are just that, rumors. This could motivate him to actually act on that.” It grated on my nerves to offer him any type of counsel.

“Eh, not a concern. He has two other sons and three daughters. They’re all interchangeable. I didn’t even have you collect the oldest. This is a message Victor needed to learn sooner rather than later. It’s a small message. If he tries to go against me, I’ll go after his children. Each and every one. It’s better he learns his place now.” He leaned back against the chair with a smirk plastered across his face.

Of course, Vicente viewed children as replaceable and disposable...

Victor wasn’t an enemy, though. As far as I knew, he never had been. Part of me wondered if Vicente had started those recent rumors on his own to have an excuse to hurt him. I’d never know, and as long as I kept my brothers away from the mansion, I wouldn’t look too closely into it. Let him do what he wants as long as he stayed the fuck away from us.

Asking about the fight was on the tip of my tongue, but I held it. I’d already asked about it when he sent the invite out, and if I asked again, he’d take it as an offense. Instead, I settled on a safe question. One that Vicente loved to hear.

“My apologies about Grey. I’m taking him back to the compound, and he will get his shit together.” Yeah, fucking right. “In the meantime, is there someone else on the block?”

This was our game. My role in the Institution.

Years and years of carefully cultivated relationships across several countries. Lafe hated what he did, but I was sure my role was worse. When I flipped the lowest of men, I could give two fucks.

When it was to bolster Vicente’s revenge for some unknown slight, I died a little inside. I tried to placate my guilt by telling myself they were away from Vicente and that a gruesome death was less of an option.

But it got easier and easier every time, as long as I got what I wanted out of the deal.

“I’m glad you asked.” He flicked two fingers to a soldier standing in the corner, watching our every breath. It didn’t matter that I held a high position within the Institution or that I could kill him before he lifted his weapon.

It didn’t even matter that I was the blood to Vicente.

I was the enemy if I threatened our leader.

The soldier brought over a file and passed it to me. Vicente was prepared. He knew I would come and ask, and he knew I wouldn’t hesitate because it meant buying Grey more time. Once I completed this job, Grey could slaughter fifty of Vicente’s best men buck naked while screaming for our father’s head and Vicente would keep him off the post.

For a week. Maybe two.

I now had one more errand to run before we could lock ourselves away in the compound.

Ignoring the crescendo of moans and slapping skin, I fled the Gallery. Men passed me as they patrolled the hallway, and I nodded before I ducked into an alcove. It wasn’t private, but it was better than standing in the open. I needed to review the folder before I made it back to Parker and Grey, just in case.

The folder was thin, holding only a single picture. This time it was a woman. One I knew.

It was going to be a late fucking night.

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AMORETTE



After everything that had happened since I was abducted, it was strange to sit here in this empty apartment, safe from the cruelty of that place. The walls must have been insulated very well because there were absolutely zero sounds filtering in from the outside.

I walked to the window to peer outside. Several stories up, my view was of tall, lush palm trees scattered around a courtyard guarded by a tall stone wall. Beyond the wall, a small village spread out before what appeared to be another wall in the distance. How strange. I was almost reminded of a medieval video game with the different layers of people and protection around the castle. I couldn't see much over the walls, but this apartment reminded me of a modern high-rise.

Fronde on palm trees wavered from the wind as birds flew past. Men were running the perimeter of the courtyard, laughing and talking to each other. Still, everything was dead silent in here.

The silence should be calming after days of listening to screams of terror and disgusting slaps of skin. But it wasn't. It was too loud. Like the end of a concert after hours and hours of blasting speakers. When the vibrations of the music suddenly cut off, your body feels off-kilter, as if something's missing.

I left the window to go back over to the counter where the chef's knife lay. I touched it just to make sure it was real.

Who was that man? And why would he take me only to offer me all the tools to kill myself? The way he'd laughed before he left, muttering under his breath, I almost believed he wanted me to take that option.

But why?

Fucking hell, what was the point? Was he into sick head games? Was this part of Randall's elaborate schemes to break me?

Even as the thought entered my mind, I immediately discounted it. Lafe was no friend of theirs. They wouldn't have staged those fights before he stole me just to trick me like this. Randall struck me as someone who wanted to lazily fuck with your head. He didn't have the intelligence or patience for the long game.

Lafe, however...

My instincts said he didn't want to hurt me. I should trust myself, but I wasn't sure if I could. This entire situation was fucked up, and I could just as easily get sucked into what I wanted to see, only to play right into his hands.

Shit. My head pounded as I attempted to rationalize everything that had happened. I was already exhausted, wanting to crawl into that bed and sleep. Not for forever. I wanted to live too much for that.

If I laid down, I'd dream.

Images of Randall hovering over me played behind my eyes. Phantom fingers violated me.

No. He only won if I allowed him to.

Shaking myself out of the strange trance I'd been in since he'd locked me in here, I searched the apartment. Slowly. My lungs burned with each breath as I bent to search cabinets or stretched on my toes to check the contents at the top of closets. I needed to know exactly what was here and where.

When my shirt and face were sticky with sweat, I walked to the couch and gingerly sat down to extend out my prone

body. The pain was a dull ache I'd grown used to by now, but at least I was able to breathe.

The large, soft bed called to me, but I wouldn't know when he came back if I secreted myself back into that room. It was too far away from the front door if he was quiet. Here in the living room, I would know if someone even scratched at the lock from the other side.

That was what I hadn't checked. I should have looked at the lock to see if I could pick it. I had minimal skills with that, only what they discussed in the training classes I'd organized and attended. Picking locks wasn't something I would have thought would be a part of survival and defense training, nor was it something the instructor wanted to teach.

In fact, the entire time he'd given us brief instructions, they'd been vague, as if he might be giving criminal secrets out. I had laughed where I sat back far enough in the room that I didn't draw any attention to myself. The only reason he brought it up was because he said we might need it if we failed to get away. That it could save our lives.

Hoisting myself up, I went straight to the door and studied the lock system. It was simpler and more complex than I'd ever seen on any door. Simple in the way they were only key locks. Complex in the way that latch after latch climbed up the door. They were spaced just far enough apart that I knew there were a different set of locks on the other side.

"Damn it," I grumbled. The keyholes were all different, most likely needing a different kind of key. I'd try to pick them soon. For now, I needed to rest, or I'd throw up and pass out right here. That wouldn't save me.

Back on the couch, I closed my eyes and tried to catch up on some much-needed rest. Ha. Like I hadn't slept more hours than I'd been awake recently. It didn't negate the fact that I was tired, both mentally and physically.

Then, because this quasi-sense of safety held me hostage, I did something that positively mortified me.

I broke down. Again.

Earlier with Lafe, I'd already been at the end of my mental capacity. Then he offered me a ridiculous ultimatum? The continued lack of choice had been the last thread of my composure, and he knew exactly what to say to snap it.

I hated that he saw me lose it.

My weakness now was different. It was everything I probably should have been feeling this entire time. A molten tangle of despair and hopelessness slammed into me, submerging me until I was drowning.

I gasped.

Tears filled and spilled from my eyes. Ah damn, it hurt to cry. Clutching my ribs, I tried to calm my breathing, but I couldn't. There was too much helplessness, and I had never felt this way.

I *wasn't* a victim; I was the hero. Saving women from abusive husbands and helping them get their comeuppance was what I lived for. It energized me, knowing I was making a difference.

I did not get abducted from dark parking garages. I did not get assaulted in the backroom of a trafficking ring, and I never—never—watched other women get abused without lifting a god-damned finger.

A terrible squeal ripped from my throat and I banged my fists against my thigh until the tightness in my ribs almost made me blackout.

Lafe wanted me to work for them? Fuck that, and fuck him.

I wouldn't do it. There wasn't a thing on this planet that would make me be the bad guy.

Killing myself? Also not an option. There was still too much left I needed to do in life. I needed to escape, to get out of here.

I needed to hug Grace. My other half.

It didn't matter how. I'd use this time alone to make plans, then devise contingency plans. Then more plans on top of that.

I wanted to be prepared for any type of scenario that came at me.

My stomach grumbled. Over the last several days I'd eaten and drank so little. I needed to get my strength up. But finishing that greasy BLT, no matter how delicious, wasn't a good idea. It was too much on my mostly starved system.

I'd try to get a few more bites down in a little while. Just like Lafe...No. He was an addict. Addict was what I would call him in my head. A name made him seem like a decent person and I knew he wasn't.

Just like Addict had said, there were plenty of things in this apartment. It was fully stocked. Even the fridge and cabinets had essential food items. Enough to last almost a week. Maybe.

Could I hope he wouldn't come back yet? I needed as much time to prepare myself to escape this nightmare yesterday.



FIVE DAYS.

It had been five long days since I'd been dropped here. There hadn't been a word from Addict or a sign of any other life forms except the men I would see down below in the courtyard. In the village, sometimes, I'd catch glimpses of men or women on the street. One time I caught sight of a child. The entire thing was so bizarre. They seemed happy, healthy. Acted as if they weren't within feet of sex traffickers.

No, the Addict had shared that business wasn't to his tastes. Regardless, he was a criminal all the same. Gorgeous man or not, he was dangerous and had his hands in unsavory business. The straightforward answer would be drugs.

The one piece of good to come out of this was that I no longer wheezed when I moved. My ribs still hurt like hell, but outside of checking the entire apartment over multiple times a day, I had taken it easy. My head had also stopped killing me. I

was thinking more clearly, happy the action didn't threaten to scramble my brain.

Nevertheless...

Five days without human contact when everything was uncertain was driving me insane.

The air kicked on, and I jumped thinking someone was coming in. The pipes made a funny noise when I allowed myself a quick shower and thought the ceiling was about to collapse. Even when I washed dishes, I got startled. I dropped a fork in the sink and ducked, sure someone was firing at me.

I was about at my wit's end. Was this what he was trying to do? Get me so worked up as a form of psychological torture? I hadn't thought him that cruel. But I was stupid for assigning any decency to him at all.

Completing my seventh pass around the small space after my daily apartment check, I froze.

Metal scraped against metal.

My skin flushed as my heart pounded in my ears. This was my shot. I ran to the bedroom where I'd already stashed the chef's knife and a cast iron frying pan. Addict had wanted me to believe he was the only one who would come back, but I couldn't be sure, especially as so many days passed and he *hadn't* come back. So, the knife was for him, but I would use the pan if it was someone else, someone innocent.

The chance that someone here was innocent was very slim, but I had to consider it.

A soft, feminine voice called in as I gripped the pan in one hand and the knife in the other, trapped between the bedroom door and wall. It was a gamble to be in this room. Whoever this was, they might not come in here, although the rest of the apartment was left open. I had nowhere to hide with any leverage for a good swing once I was discovered.

"*Hola, Señora!* Lafe said he had a guest here that might need some extra groceries," she continued to call out through the apartment. Her English was good. Only slightly accented.

Bags rustled from the other room, probably filled with said groceries. If she found it weird that she had to unlock the door to get in, she didn't let it show in her voice. Why would she find it weird? If she worked here, or was forced to be here, and had a key then she knew what they were doing. Or at least suspected.

I just had to remind myself she might be here against her will.

“Are you okay, miss? I also brought you some nice soaps and lotions. Mr. Lafe didn't ask for these, but I'm a girl. I know we girls like these things.” She kept talking as if she thought her sweet words would draw me out.

That wouldn't happen, but guilt started to press into me. She seemed genuine. Much nicer than any of the women I came into contact with at the warehouse. Those women were beaten down. This woman sounded like her life was all bliss and cupcakes. Even so, she still had to unlock the door to let herself in.

I gently set the knife down, my heart beating wildly in my chest. When I'd fought before, I had acted on a keen fury that zapped through me so quickly I had no other thoughts at that moment.

Today, this was completely different. It was premeditated. I was psyching myself up for what I had to do, and the anticipation was making me nauseous, especially because this was a woman who was most likely a victim.

Clutching the handle with both hands, I held my breath as footsteps plodded closer to the bedroom. The fear that I would seriously hurt or kill her stalled my hands when she stepped through, heading for the bathroom. She didn't even think to search behind the door. Whoever she was, checking on prisoners wasn't her regular job duty.

Without hesitation, I yelled inside my head. Indecision is what got you killed. Now she was four feet into the room.

I cranked the pan back over my shoulder like a baseball bat and then swung, hitting her square in the back of the head.

There was no way to avoid knocking her out, even though I used as little strength as I could manage. The loud crack still seemed to reverberate around the room as she crumpled to the floor.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,” I whispered as I checked her pockets. She was in a pair of black slacks and a matching black t-shirt, just like all the other men I’d seen. There were two sets of keys, one with about ten keys and the other with only one. I took both.

Good, she was still breathing. I checked her pulse, and it strummed a steady beat in her throat. For a second, I considered taking her clothes since I had only had this gray t-shirt but decided against it.

Removing her clothes would take precious time I didn’t have. She could wake up in that time, and I didn’t know if I could knock her out again. It could cause her actual damage, and hitting a woman who hadn’t shown any sign of criminal intentions took too much out of me.

Those assholes I could beat on all day and not lose an ounce of sleep. Not women, though, not when it had been my life’s mission to help them.

Within seconds, I had the knife in my dominant hand and the keys in the other and I was out of the apartment. Thankfully, she hadn’t locked the door when she came in.

Three steps into the hallway, I stuttered to a stop. Doors lined the hall as if this were an actual apartment building. Only, it was vacant because there wasn’t a soul in sight. Making a quick decision, I headed right and booked it. My chest squeezed and my ribs ached, but there was nothing I could do about it. I needed to get out of here.

At the end of the hall, I reached a landing that opened to an ample open space. The landing was a balcony over the ground floor with another entrance on the far side that seemed to go on forever. On either end of the balcony, steps descended down to the first level.

Shit, I needed to not be on a balcony for anyone to see.

I hid inside the hall, listening for any sounds. Music and conversation echoed from far away, either on another floor or another part of the building, but it seemed like nothing was going on below.

As quickly as I could, I tiptoed down the stairs, hugging the wall.

This place wasn't anything like the warehouse. I'd been kept in the shitty part, but when Lafe had taken me to his room, we'd walked through what was essentially a luxury hotel. Wherever I was now, this was indeed an industrial building with random standard apartment-style hallways.

At the bottom of the stairs, the place gave the impression it was even larger than it was from up top. And empty.

The front was all glass with no furniture, paintings, or anything. It was, for all purposes, unused. Four separate halls in each corner broke away from the main space, and all looked identical. At least I could tell the conversation and random noises were coming from the back right hallway. I constantly scanned every nook and cranny as I walked to the front glass doors. Bright, blinding sunlight streamed through the glass, causing my eyes to squint and my palm holding the knife to sweat.

Damn it, I didn't like the glare. It made me feel at a disadvantage, like I could miss something coming at me.

Reaching out, I pushed on the glass and...nothing.

There was no handle. No fucking handle. Was this even a door? It was shaped like a door. I banged on it harder and it was fucking loud even as it vibrated the glass. Oh hell. Okay, this was not the way.

I took a step back trying to figure out my next move, when a black Humvee pulled up, stopping maybe fifteen feet from the glass on the dirt driveway. Shit, they were going to see me.

Spinning on my heel, I ran down the closest hallway, cursing a blue streak in my head and holding the knife out. I'd be pissed if I fell and stabbed myself. That shouldn't have been a worry...

Soon, I was out of breath, coming to a stop just to the side of a metal door.

That opened.

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AMORETTE



A man stepped out. Younger than Addict.

He was about the same height, but his face was more angular. The planes of his face were so sharp, I knew if I touched him, he'd cut me. His dark brown hair was buzzed, giving him a sinister vibe.

But, it was his eyes that scared me. When he looked at me with those black eyes, they were bottomless and cold. So cold, I shivered.

Just as I was coming out of my daze, twisting to run, he jerked out of his own shock. The man slammed me into the wall and I cried out in pain as he caught my wrist before I could stab him with the knife. Somehow, I'd dropped the keys and they clattered across the floor.

I whimpered from the pain as he squeezed my bones. It wasn't enough pressure to break, and as soon as I let go of the knife, he loosened his grip.

Sighing, I relaxed into the wall. I was still out of breath, and as long as he held me here, I couldn't get away. What I could do was take advantage of the moment and catch my breath. Watch him for any sign that I could get past him.

The smell of him dominated the small space between us. Sweat misted his brow as if he'd come from a workout, adding a salty flavor to the cedarwood and patchouli tinging the air. Then he dipped his head, running his nose along my cheek as he pressed his body against mine.

No. I knew where this was going. Using all my strength, I pushed at his chest with my free hand, but he didn't budge. Instead, he growled a string of Spanish in my ear, though I understood none of it.

"Please," I whispered, turning my head away from his face, dislodging his touch at least there. Heat radiated from his body and his chest rose and fell against mine. I could even feel his strong and steady heartbeat in his chest.

Sweat slicked my hands as I kept uselessly trying to put space between us.

He chuckled, slamming both of my wrists against the wall in warning. I stopped struggling against his hold. He had to give me an opening somewhere. Maybe it wouldn't be this second, but he'd let his guard down soon. He had to.

Hopefully it would be before he took me to any other men.

"Hmm, where did you come from? And who here made those marks on your face?" Just like his eyes, his voice was cold, even with the playful note.

I hadn't seen him before, and I had no idea if he would help me or hurt me. Knowing where I was, he would most likely hurt me.

When I didn't answer immediately, he moved both wrists to one hand, yanking them above my head and forcing them against the rough wall. I gasped, squeezing my eyes shut as sparks of light danced over my vision. That hurt so fucking bad I couldn't breathe.

He caught my jaw and turned my face to his with his other hand. I blinked, trying to make out his face past the dots.

His hold was gentle, so at odds with how I was reading him. He dropped his head one more time and inhaled at my temple. I trembled as his warm breath washed over my face. "That's our standard shampoo, so you've clearly been staying here."

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

I couldn't get away and he didn't seem like he would step away from me without my answers. Even then, he might not, but I had to try.

"I just want to go home. Please." It burned my pride to plead, but I had no other alternatives. Not right then.

Apart from his body molded to mine, he wasn't trying to rip my clothes off; he wasn't even hurting me. It made it damn hard to want to fight back when there might be another way. Except my brain was screaming there wasn't.

"And where is home?"

I kept my mouth shut. There had to be something else I could say to get him to let me go. Everything running through my head had to do with Addict, and that could just as soon backfire in my face as help me.

His thumb stroked over my cheek as he watched me, patiently waiting for me to speak. Sucking in a deep breath, I took a chance. Against my better judgment, I took a chance.

"Lafe brought me here. I just want to go home."

Whatever he thought I was about to say, or possibly could say, that shocked him. He didn't let go of my face or wrists, but he did step back, rising to his full height. Goosebumps raced down my legs and arms from that sudden loss of warmth.

"Repeat that?" A furrow appeared between his eyebrows as his gaze bounced between my eyes.

"Lafe drugged me and brought me here. I've been locked in an apartment for days. I want to go home. I have a job, a family, a life." It was a waste of hope to tell him those things. Outside of mentioning Addict, he had no other reaction. No sympathy or emotion entered his face as he listened to my words.

"That's quite surprising. I didn't think my big brother had that in him. Definitely not his style," he mused, his lips twitching in amusement.

I stiffened. They were brothers? They didn't look anything alike other than their height and perhaps their build, although Lafe was leaner. If they were brothers, he wouldn't help me. I should have listened to my gut and stayed silent.

"I recognize this shirt now. Tell me, little girl, has he fucked you?" The hand that was holding my jaw moved down to my thigh. His fingertips traced a hot trail up the outside of my leg.

"No!" I screamed, twisting sideways. I didn't have any panties, absolutely no barrier to prevent him from touching me. The anger I needed came rushing back as I kicked out at his kneecaps.

"Now, now. I was just curious." He avoided my kicks and pushed me back against the wall, trapping my legs and gripping my waist. Then, more to himself, he said, "Big brother's been keeping secrets."

The asshole grinned, flashing white teeth as if he thought this was a great time.

"How did you meet Lafe?"

I glared, pursing my lips together. He could go to hell.

His grin widened into a disarming smile. He wasn't as classically beautiful as his brother, but he was just as attractive. Except he had a dark edge that Addict didn't have.

"How about this? You tell me how you met my brother, and I'll let you go."

Was he serious?

I narrowed my gaze on his face, looking for any sign he was lying while I ran the words through my head. He could also be giving me a half-truth.

"You'll let me go? Find a way to take me back home?" Not that I would tell him my real home if he agreed. I could go to any state and get a ticket back to Virginia.

He laughed, and if he wasn't such a mean bastard, it would be a great sound. I was really starting to despise how evil could be so easily disguised under masculine beauty.

“No, I won’t help you escape if Lafe brought you here. But I will pretend I never saw you in this hallway. Sans the knife and keys, of course.” He raised his brows as if this was a good deal.

The sad thing was, it was a good deal. He could just as easily take me back to the apartment or, worse, to a filthy cage.

“I was abducted. Lafe said the place he brought me from is a two-hour flight from here. He...” I swallowed, the words sour on my tongue, “saved me from a man named Randall.”

He smiled so wide his face nearly split in two. “That’s absolutely fascinating. And just what did he plan to do with you? Apparently not kill you if he brought you home.” The man vibrated in his excitement and that scared me more than any of the time I’d spent with Addict.

Ignoring how I was in their home, I tugged my arms. Surprisingly, he let them go but now held my waist with both hands. I had no idea what to do with them, so I dropped them to my sides. When I glanced down, the knife was right by his shoe.

“Uh-uh.” He kicked it down the hallway. “We can’t have you getting yourself killed now, can we? And make no mistake, that’s what would happen.” His exuberance melted into a stern expression. “You might draw a little blood, but all our men are highly trained. You’d be dead before you could do any real damage.”

Like he really cared about my life. The only value I had to this guy was his brother’s interest in me. Because he loved his brother? Or wanted to torment him? Given the vibes rolling off of him, it could go either way.

“The deal was, you’d let me go if I told you how we met. I did.” I tilted my chin up, taunting him despite my better judgment. What was wrong with me?

“So I did...” A ghost of a smile curled his lips. “One more thing then, before you go. What’s your name?”

Again with the names. It wouldn't be worth it to lie, not when he could ask his brother. My name wasn't important anyway. If he kept his word and released me, I'd be back to searching for a way out. "Amorette."

"Fitting. It's nice to meet you, Little Love. I'm Parker. Don't forget it, because I assure you, we'll meet again." He stepped back and crossed his arms. "Well?" he said through a smirk when I didn't move.

I hadn't actually expected him to let me go. I still didn't trust him. Glancing down both ends of the hallway, I made a snap decision on which way to go—the opposite direction of where the knife lay. Otherwise, I could end up tackled to the floor and my injuries couldn't take that.

"I wouldn't go that way if I were you. Take this door. It leads to the gym, and there's an exit to the outside." He nodded to the metal door he came out of.

"And who's down there?" I edged around him, staying as loose as I could in case he changed his mind and I needed to sprint.

"No one. The off-duty men are in the commons."

"Why would you help me?"

"You'll be caught soon enough. Maybe I like giving the underdog a shot." He turned and strolled toward the main entrance where I'd come from. Once he reached the knife, he bent and picked it up, then tossed it in the air. It flipped end over end until he caught the handle. "You better run, Little Love. Men are coming," he warned without looking back.

Sure enough, someone started to turn down the hallway. Without waiting, I slipped through the door and ran.

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GREY



Fuck Parker.

I landed a blow across Carlos' cheek, spit and blood spewing from his mouth as his head whipped around. He staggered back a step, yet I didn't let him get further away than that.

Fuck him and his overarching opinion.

Twisting back for more leverage, I hit him with an uppercut, getting tingly from the sound of his teeth clicking together. His head snapped back and he started to topple to the floor. Hell yeah. I chased him down, landing blow after blow over his face, chest, and shoulders.

Parker had to be such a fucking punk-ass bitch.

His pained groan had disrupted by my next hit, even though it sounded like music to my ears and had my groin tightening. This...This is what I lived for. The feeling of life underneath my hands, the warm flesh giving with my hits. The spray of blood across the floor; it was never in the same pattern. Sometimes depending on the color red it took on, it was downright artistic.

“*Señor, señor! Por favor!*” Hands grabbed at my shoulders, but when I refused to back away, they caught my forearm, slowing down my punch until it landed with a pathetic amount of softness on his chest. Well, damn. Carlos did look like he'd passed out a while ago.

Jumping up to my feet, I snatched a cloth off the rope and wiped the sweat from my face and the blood off my hands. Then I tossed another at Daniel to clean up Carlos.

Ever since I could walk, I'd been starting fights. If analyzed, I was sure some half-cracked therapist would say my need for fighting was a way to assert my dominance in a situation, my refusal to back down. Our lives were too dangerous not to want to stay on top, so they'd probably be right. In a world where Vicente preferred to land fists over praise, I worked my ass off to be stronger, faster, more lethal.

Once he gave his soldiers full reign to break us in, all bets were off. I was eleven the first time I killed one of his men. Hell, the fear in that moment was burned into my memory. It was probably the only time in my life I'd quivered before Vicente. But he'd laughed his head off. The fucker thrived off chaotic savagery.

It was at that moment that I learned how to play Vicente. As long as I played into his bloodthirsty cravings, putting on one hell of a show, I'd stay alive. I was lucky I thrived in the heat of a fight.

Then there was Parker. He couldn't stand the sight of me half the time. And now he wanted to give me grief about the probability of my death? I was the one ordered to fight Bruno. Not him. Just because he was being a pussy about it, didn't mean he could crawl up my ass.

Already I was climbing the high of an upcoming fight, and he just wanted to whine about it like a little bitch. He was convinced Vicente wanted to put me down, but I was too good at running the fights. Even if Bruno whooped my ass, which would never happen, Vicente wouldn't let him kill me, no matter his usual MO. As long as I was valuable to him and gave him part-time entertainment in the form of corporal punishment, I was safe to fight another day.

What did Parker care, anyway? It wasn't like he was part of our brotherly unit because of an unbreakable bond. None of us were.

Don't mistake me, I loved my brothers. But this game we constantly played against Vicente was deadly. The only way we were going to come out the other side in one piece was if we banded together.

Fucking hell, I'd love nothing more than to slit his throat and smear his blood over every inch of his precious Gallery. Unfortunately, that would never happen, but it was a thought that kept me warm at night.

"Again?" Daniel asked, holding up his fists on the other side of the ring. He'd pulled Carlos off to the side. After just an hour, they'd already soaked the mat with their blood and sweat.

Daniel was a good kid. Fast, smart, and loyal. Not a great sparring partner. It seemed like Parker was trying to increase that probability of his by sending me punching bags. If I was going to win this fight, and I would, I needed an actual challenge. As much as I loathed to admit it, Bruno was the best in the ring. Outside of me. But that was only because I was a fucking psycho when it came to fighting. I thrived on the rush of smashing my fist through someone's face. Or kicking their balls into their throat.

That was probably my favorite move for punk asses going up against me. My ring had no rules, and fighting dirty was my favorite pastime.

God damn, I loved what I did. Overseeing the fights was nearly as fun as fighting. Almost.

Unfortunately, I still needed to train. The level of my opponents this week was just offensive. I was the best fighter in my club. Anything less than a tier two was a waste of my time. Where was Mia? Now she knew how to find me a worthy opponent.

"Nah. We're done here for the day." I grabbed my squeeze bottle and squirted cool water in my mouth before spraying it over my hair.

Drops of water flew as I shook my head. They soaked the floor outside the ring but fuck it. This was my domain, and no

one came here without my permission. The outside sand pit was the soldiers' to fuck around in.

Outside of my brothers or a sparring partner, this gym was off-limits. Only one wall of mirrors, otherwise those bastards would never get any workouts in. They'd just gawk at themselves.

The equipment, like this room, was beat to hell. There had been so much sweat lost in this room it had soaked into the floor long ago, giving the place that dirty, musty smell. A true sign of a well-used gym.

Daniel set his gloves on the bench by the wall and saluted me before he hefted Carlos over his shoulder and left through the glass door. Like all the other soldiers we'd handpicked, he lived in the town surrounding our compound. They thought their proximity to the compound served as protection. They were actually decoys.

Disposable bodies in case the need arose.

The door to the hall banged against the wall. Fucking Parker.

"Hey!" I barked. "Watch the door." I didn't give one rat's ass about the door. It was old metal that served a purpose and nothing else. But he needed to grow up. We were *in* the life and we'd never get out.

I didn't want out.

I just wanted Vicente's head on a platter.

By the time the small slap of footsteps breached my mind, I'd already marched over to the mouth of the hallway.

What the fuck?

A girl slid over the slick floor and slammed right into my chest with a low moan.

Gripping her arms, I held her to me as she tried to pull away. When that didn't work, she went for my kneecaps.

"Son of a bitch," I gritted out. Who was she?

I spun her around and then lifted her so her body was diagonal over my torso. With her legs dangling out to the side, she wouldn't be able to make purchase with any of her kicks. If I wasn't trapping her hands against her chest, I'd be ripped to shreds right now from her nails.

Outside of a few grunts from her efforts, she didn't scream. But she also never stopped fighting as I walked her over to the ring and tossed her in the center. This time she cried out when her back slammed against the mats.

The ropes surrounding the mats wouldn't keep her inside. In any case it was enough of a barrier for now. I was still fucking confused as to who she was and why she was here. We never brought anyone—any fucking one—to the compound without alerting each other and completing a full background check.

It hampered our fucking, but we left the compound enough that it usually wasn't an issue. So where had this little thing come from?

At first, I thought she was barely more than a child.

Nonetheless, there she was, her fingers digging into the mat as she glared through strands of her hair with a sneer on her lips. Not a child. More like a small woman. Her pale blue eyes were barely visible through her black hair, but from what I could see, they burned bright against the mottled bruising on her cheek.

Oh, she was livid. I just didn't know if her anger was directed at me for tossing her around like last week's trash or one of my brothers for making her do the walk of shame in a faded t-shirt.

She could use a shower. Shame on my...whichever brother worked her over and kicked her out. Probably Andre. Parker was just here and not nearly smug enough to have claimed this girl.

I grinned and her fingers flexed. If it only took sheer will alone, she would have pierced the thick rubber mats, but

unfortunately she didn't even make a dent. Her nails might be sore later, though.

“Who are you running from, *mami*?” I crossed my arms. If I couldn't have a good fight, I could at least have some fun.

Her brow crinkled and her gaze swept the room. Probably looking for a way around me. I got it. I was the tallest of us, more muscled, and wore a scowl the way most people wore underwear.

Often, if you didn't know.

The gym was empty and even though she could run under the ropes, I'd be on her before she reached the closest piece of equipment. Not that I wanted her to stay put like a good girl.

Maybe I'd get a fight of a different kind. I tucked my chin, ready for whatever move she would make. After all, she was more my type than Andre's.

And she thought about it. Her gaze flicked between me then the glass, back to me, then to the hallway. Her attention finally settled on me, taking in my entire body. I'd be lying if I said her gaze wasn't a physical touch that seared my skin. Like they had a mind of their own, my pecs flexed.

“Nothing to say?” I taunted.

“Fucking asshole,” she muttered in English under her breath. Ah, maybe she wasn't answering me because she didn't know Spanish. Not that uncommon if she were a tourist picked up from the nearest city. Or wherever Andre took her from.

“Who are you running from, *mami*?” I asked in English this time.

“Where am I?” She squinted those gorgeous blue eyes at me like I wasn't fit to lick her ass.

“Where do you think you are?” Alarm bells started ringing in my head. I didn't have any theories on how this girl could have gotten into the compound, but something was off. If Andre, or hell, any of my brothers, brought her here, she wouldn't be questioning her location.

She swallowed and looked toward the glass, tears filling her eyes. I recognized that expression. Those weren't tears of sadness or longing but frustration. Her day was shit, apparently.

I wanted to know why.

Sighing, I motioned for her to get up. "Come on."

Shaking her head, she scooted back toward the wall. Stupid girl. I could step in and get her just as easily as if she came to me. I quirked an eyebrow. Really? She wanted to play this game with me?

"You have until the count of three." I ducked between the ropes to stand inside the ring. "One." She shot to her feet but didn't immediately come to me. "Two." Her head whipped back and forth like she couldn't decide which way was her best bet. "Three." I dove toward her.

And then she looped her hands behind my head and crashed her knee against my chin, knocking my teeth together.

This fucking cunt.

I growled, cupped the backs of her thighs, picked her up, then slammed her to the mat. Her pained grunt met my ears as I hooked her knees in my elbows and caught her wrists before she could hit me.

She was folded up like a pretzel, her face turning an alarming shade of red as she pushed against me, panting. Hell, she wasn't wearing anything under the shirt. Her sweet pussy was spread wide open, just begging for attention.

Laughing, I settled over her chest and nuzzled the side of her neck. "I wouldn't fight if I were you. I like it," I whispered in her ear.

The shaky release of breath coasted over the crook of my neck. She was scared but not paralyzed. Where had she come from, and who brought her here?

Her natural scent caused my already hard dick to twitch.

I banged her wrists against the damp mat. "Are you going to be good?"

Mami screamed out her anger as she bucked against me. Then she stilled as I chuckled. She had planned to throw me off, not grind against my dick. I nudged my hips against hers, savoring her heat seeping through my shorts.

Still, this wasn't why I was here, and she could very well be some kind of plant by Vicente. Or any number of enemies, if I were being honest with myself. She was stunning in her fury, but I didn't fuck my kills. Even I wasn't that demented.

Wedging my knees under her hips, I kept her thighs open with my elbows while still gripping her wrists. I'd be irritated if she kicked me in the head because I was careless in restraining her. She'd clearly had some training or raw motivation to get out from under me. Both options were closer than most people realized.

Surprisingly, the bitch yanked my hand up to her mouth and bit me.

"Stop!" I barked. "You want to get fucked?"

That did the trick. She shut right up. Not that she had anything to fear from me, but she didn't know that. Her gaze bounced between my eyes, probably trying to gauge my seriousness.

"If you hadn't noticed, I like the pain. Turns me on. Keep it up, and you'll be helping me take care of the problem."

All I'd tried to do was be nice to her. Then she fought like a hellcat. I liked her already. It would suck if I had to kill her.

The silent treatment must be her new strategy. Either that or I'd scared her shitless. She needed to be afraid. Fear controlled, and as much fun as I was having with her, I needed to know what she was doing in the compound when no one was able to get in without one of us.

The soldiers guarded the wall like their lives depended on it. I laughed because, I mean, their lives did. But we were fair with them. Add in the constant surveillance, they all knew not to break the rules.

No problem, though. We'd know sooner or later who brought her in.

It was better I found her over my brothers. They said I was the wild card, but Parker had more of Vicente in him than he'd ever admit. Andre? If none of us brought her here, he'd be the first in line to bury her out back.

Then my sorry brother Lafe, well, he'd been burned already. He wouldn't be in her corner.

If she had any chance of surviving, she was better off with me.

"Now that you've come to your senses," she'd stopped fighting me at least, "I'm going to stand you up. You try to run...or fight, you'll end up in the same position." My grin scared her. She knew exactly what option I wanted her to pick.

Her gaze dropped to my erection straining against my gym shorts. When she looked back into my eyes as if she was asking for the truth, I nodded. I was beyond horny. Pain and sex went hand in hand for me. That was why fight nights were my favorite.

The corner of her mouth turned down in an exaggerated frown and her body relaxed. She knew she was in a spot with zero options, and it pissed her off.

Ah, yeah. I'd have fun with her.

And all I had wanted was to show a little kindness to her before she kneed me in the face.

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AMORETTE

I knew that man in the hallway wasn't as altruistic as he wanted me to believe.

Not that he'd actually wanted me to think better of him. He had told me flat out I wouldn't make it far, that he'd see me again. The way his eyes had flashed with delight and his mouth continuously tried to curl into something close to sinister amusement should have given away that he was a fucktard.

Then right before I ran, he warned me which way to go. I knew he was most likely toying with me, enjoying the sick way he held power over me. I had hoped, even if this was a trap, that I'd be able to get away. That I was smart enough to outwit whoever I'd come up against.

Only, I'd barely made it ten feet before colliding with an even bigger man.

Even in his apparent shock, he gripped me to his chest. That had been my one advantage and these men were too well-trained to screw it up.

Now he pinned me to the floor after showing how easily he could deflect my attacks. Sweat dripped from his shirtless torso, down onto the top band of his red workout shorts. Every breath I took burned my lungs as he stared down at me, his erection standing tall between us. The one consolation was that he didn't seem to want to hurt me, no matter what vile words he said.

I'd seen evil. At the other warehouse, I'd become intimately acquainted with it. This man, who towered over me as he restrained me, didn't have the same stink about him.

He'd only hurt me when I hurt him first.

Even in my worked-up state, I could admit that. That truth alone eddied through my mind, forcing me to view him in a different light. Now that I'd stopped fighting against his hold, he wasn't moving. The flimsy t-shirt I wore was bunched up at my waist, leaving me on full disgusting display and he wasn't gawking.

Oh, he'd looked. His eyes had darkened as he'd allowed his gaze to roam over my bare skin, but after the initial examination, he'd locked his gaze with mine.

Although he was still turned on. He was still a man from *here*. Here being the keyword. He was still my enemy, whether a devil or a saint. Everyone in this place was suspect, and I'd be a fool to believe otherwise.

For quite a few minutes, we studied each other. I cataloged everything about his appearance, committing him to memory like all the other men I'd come into contact with.

His partially wet, dirty blond hair fell in his face, obscuring part of his eyes. The tattoos spread across his chest and down one arm. His long, brutal face matched his long, lean body. He couldn't have been more than a few years older than me, yet danger clung to him in a way that said he'd been telling the truth.

He liked pain, and he craved violence.

Only, he wasn't trying to hurt me.

As my heart stopped racing, the sweat I'd shed while trying to escape him cooled on my skin. Low tones of electronic music carried through the place—gym—making the room seem bigger than it probably was.

I'd heard music like this before. It wasn't popular. But similar to techno, maybe, only with a deeper base and a more primitive sound. No words, only providing an atmosphere for a hard workout.

The entire time I studied him, he scrutinized me from the neck up. I wanted him to see a survivor, a fighter. I wanted him to know that I'd escape this place. Maybe not now, or soon even, but eventually. And I'd do it with my spirit intact.

He nodded to the silent conversation between us, then lithely jumped to his feet. Another wave of shock trembled through my body as he extended his hand.

Hesitantly, and against my better judgment, I accepted his offer, allowing him to pull me to my feet. Even though I'd already determined he wasn't like those other men or even the one in the hallway.

His hand didn't let go as we continued this ridiculous staring contest. Maybe my strategy should be different with him. Running wasn't working. I could admit when I was at a disadvantage, and in this place, that was all I had going for me.

Like that man in the hallway said, *escape from this place was impossible*.

Unless I had someone on my side.

The thought was ridiculous. The chances of convincing him to help me were slim. But the devastating frustration that welled inside of me was so foreign. I felt more helpless here than I had in that warehouse. Pitifully ironic considering the nightmare with Randall. I almost laughed but held it in.

There in the warehouse, I knew I was caught. I'd never believed fighting against them would save me. Instead, it was cathartic, practically soul-freeing to not willingly give them what they would so cruelly take.

Here, however? I had several chances to get away. Small, almost non-existent opportunities. Yet every time I was stopped, it hammered powerlessness into my psyche.

I was in more danger here than in the warehouse—just a different kind of danger.

“Who are you?” I whispered. This man could be the key to helping me escape, but I needed to know more about him to confirm he wasn't in the same league as the others.

Realistically, I knew I could be seeing what I wanted to, but I had to try. Because this ugly knot of anger strangling my heart felt more like defeat than I wanted to admit.

I never gave up. It wasn't an option. I just needed a new plan. A better thought-out strategy. Damned if I knew what that was yet, but I couldn't keep acting out of desperation. That would be what got me killed.

And I damn sure wasn't going back to that warehouse.

I'd thought about it.

The guilt that I'd left those women there was a bitter pill to swallow. Then I contemplated death. Only for a minute. Except that was the coward's way out.

My destiny was to help women. Do my best to save humanity. I had to remember that.

Taking a deep breath, I closed my eyes, forcing the wild, whipping emotions clinging to the surface of my mind back into a box. Those feelings would only cloud my judgment. Instead, I focused on the now.

This man wasn't trying to hurt me. He wasn't trying to toy with me. Out of the men I'd met, he seemed the steadiest. The most normal.

In order to survive, to find a way out, I needed to understand who I was dealing with and where I was. That had been my mistake. I had allowed myself to operate on fear and adrenaline and not enough on logic and research.

I wanted to slap my forehead. My entire career was built on research. You had to look at a problem from all angles and make your case knowing every argument that would try to tear away your credibility.

Only, I hadn't done that. I was so, so stupid.

"I think the better question is, *who are you?*" The glare this man leveled on me sang with suspicion. That was laughable in itself. Like I was the threat.

Apparently, the people around this new place didn't communicate. That was clear. Maybe I could use that to my

advantage.

“I’ll give you my story if you give me yours.” I held my breath. He could just as easily beat the truth out of me and be done with it, or lock me up until he spoke to Lafe.

Was he one of the brothers, too? If he was, how many were there?

He smirked, tugging on my hand until I shuffled a few steps closer. A couple of feet still separated us, but the heat of his body was so intense, I shivered. I glanced down and froze at the visible truth that he was still very much turned-on.

When I thought he would close the small gap between us, he only squeezed his fingers around my hand as if in warning. “What makes you think you have any power here?”

“I’m not the bad guy.” The words slipped out of my mouth before I realized what I’d said.

He laughed, tossing his head back. His white, straight teeth were on display with his humor. Something popped into my head. These men, between him, Addict, and the asshole who had let me run, all had an aura of wealth. Different than what I would have expected of men wrapped up in sex trafficking. Or maybe that was exactly what I should have expected? I never looked into this horrible industry past the statistics and training I’d attended through the years. My career had been built on locking away wife beaters and child abusers, draining their hard-earned savings.

Filing that bit of knowledge away for later, I waited for the end of his laughter. Which lasted longer than it should have. He eventually sobered and stroked his thumb over the back of my hand.

“Ah, but, *mami*, we’re all bad here.”

My heart stuttered to a stop. I knew that. He wasn’t revealing any crucial piece of information I hadn’t already figured out on my own, but to hear him openly admit it...

Shit, maybe he wouldn’t be the one to help me escape.

“How about,” he began, acting as if he was about to offer me some unexpected mercy. “I’ll take you to my rooms. I’ll give you some clothes, so you’re not flashing your pussy every time you fail to run away, and you can tell me how you got here. And, most importantly, who brought you.” Then more quietly, as if to himself, “Yes, *who* is most important.”

Why was every question, every decision taxing so hard on my brain? I’d never had to think so much and that meant something, given most of my life revolved around school and books and building strategic knowledge.

I barely took a minute to decide, even though it seemed like eons as I ran through any options I might have had. The truth was, I had no options. Not really. The long game was necessary here.

“I accept.”

“Good,” he said, his voice deepening as a sly look slithered through his gaze. He was smug, probably enjoying the fact he had me cornered.

He kept a hold of my hand as we left the gym. Now that I wasn’t racing through the halls, avoiding every tiny sound or suspicious movement, I took the time to learn the layout. We headed back through the central part of the building.

This was some type of warehouse with less glamor than the other place. The block walls and concrete floors reminded me of an old school or an armory. More an armory.

His footsteps echoed through the hall until we reached that open part where the stairs climbed from the first to the second floor. Instead of heading upstairs toward the apartments, he led me to the back left hallway.

Where the others were open, this one was barred by a set of heavy double doors. He scanned his hand on a hanging tablet and the doors popped open.

This was the only indicator I needed that he was someone important.

Determination flared up inside me. He was my key. I’d watch him, get to know him, and appeal to whatever piece of

him that would let me go.

I could give him a sob story. I could easily be the fighter if he loved the violence. Then I gulped. Or I could try and barter with him, since he had been aroused.

The cold metal under my back stung as the orgasm rippled through my limbs. Uninvited and unwanted, the pleasure soured my stomach.

I turned my head away, blinking rapidly to dislodge the thought. Deciding when I had sex wasn't the same as what happened at the warehouse. It would be my choice. Nevertheless, trading sex, if he would even accept it, though I didn't believe he would, didn't appeal to me at all.

Maman always said my moral high ground would be my downfall. And Grace...my sister couldn't be bothered with such problems. For the first time in my life, I wished I was a little more like her.

The nice sister.

This hallway was more elegant than the others, but nothing like the warehouse where the girls were kept. Abstract art hung on painted walls instead of the bare stacks of blocks we'd just come through. Someone tried to make this into a home, even if it was cold and impersonal.

Short, dark gray carpet spread through the hall, masking our noises as we headed toward the end of the hall. The very end.

He came to a door and punched in a code, swinging it wide open before turning to me and quirking a brow.

A dare.

Straightening my shoulders, I walked ahead of him, trying to ignore the sudden patter of my heart as he twisted the lock behind me. A mechanical beep followed from whatever alarm he'd set.

He wasn't a rapist. Nor did he want to hurt me, as long as I didn't fight him. I had to hold onto those thoughts now that I was locked in.

I stopped walking and stood just inside the living room. He stepped up behind me and cupped my shoulders, the warmth of his hands burning through my shirt, and I hated the effect he had on me.

For some god-forsaken reason, my mind was trying to forget he was my enemy and remember how long it'd been since I'd been truly intimate with anyone.

Then Randall's face popped up in my head splashing hot water on any desire I felt.

Gritting my teeth, I stepped away from his touch.

Pointing over my shoulder to a door closest to me, he gave me a nudge at the small of my back. "Through that room, there are some clothes in the dresser. They won't fit you, but they're better than what you're wearing."

Then he left me standing there as he moved toward the kitchen.

His rooms were different from the apartment I'd been in. That place had been on the smaller side and completely open outside of the bedroom and bathroom. His home was bigger, what I would call sprawling, as the rooms glided into each other. Though I could see through the glass windows taking up the entire outside wall, I could also see through to the kitchen, dining room, and study. All rooms were just off the living room.

Shaking my head, I went into the bedroom and straight to the dresser. I didn't care about the layout, except from a clinical perspective. What would help me escape? Not what his home said about him.

At least he had more personality here. Dark, warm tones made up the entire space, and the artwork consisted of moody landscape photography. There were still no photos of him or people he might love, but it was better than what we'd passed in the hallway.

Did these people think they were robots? Like they didn't need friends and family?

Perhaps they didn't. How could you traffic people—women, when you knew they had thoughts and feelings, dreams and fears? It could be that they needed that separation to avoid the crushing guilt that came with their sins.

I barked out a laugh. That was giving them too much credit. Of course, they didn't have the capacity to feel the softer emotions like empathy and compassion, or even the more painful ones like guilt or regret.

The clothes I found in the dresser were all women's, folded neatly and organized by article type. I grabbed a pair of sleep shorts and a shirt. The underwear and bras were too big, otherwise, I would have grabbed those too. Whoever normally stayed here was built much differently than my short, slim stature. My bust was the only thing I really had going for me, but even if the cup fit, the band wouldn't. At least the sleep shorts had a drawstring.

When I joined him back in the living room, he was carrying a container of rice and chicken with huge bottles of water tucked under his arm.

He motioned for me to sit on the couch and for once, since I'd been taken, I didn't fight. The leather cushions depressed under my weight and he pulled the coffee table close and set my food down in front of me.

"Eat," he ordered as he sat beside me and dug into his own meal. The normalcy of it all struck me as weird. Here I was, digging into a healthy dinner, most likely meal-prepped, sitting in a comfortable setting in this man's home.

The feeling that I was living someone else's life had never been stronger.

After devouring almost the entire thing, I pushed my plate back on the table and grabbed my water. My ribs twinged from the extended motion, and I winced. After several days of recovery, I hardly noticed the ache, but getting slammed on the mat didn't do me any favors.

Once he was finished, he wiped his mouth with a napkin and turned to face me, bringing one leg up against the back of

the couch.

“I think I’ve been more than generous. Your turn to hold up your end of the bargain.” He draped his arm over his knee as he leaned back, with no sign that he was worried I’d do anything other than answer his earlier questions.

His arrogance grated against me, but he was right. I was going to hold to my promise and pray he was different.

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AMORETTE

I angled to face him while crossing my legs underneath me. His silence while we ate gave me absolutely no idea of how he would react to my story. What I should have done was start up random conversation questions.

“Before I tell you about me, what’s your name?” I sounded tired even to my own ears. After almost a week of being alone in the apartment, I was exhausted from the small number of social interactions I’d had today. This man didn’t seem to notice or care. If anything, he was amused by the fluff question.

“Grey...” He trailed off, like he was waiting for me to give him mine. At this point, it didn’t matter. They would all know my name soon enough because of Addict and the man in the hallway.

“Amorette.”

“Pretty name,” he said with a grin.

Shaking my head, I swiped my fingers over my forehead. What was I thinking? This wasn’t some blind date. If I started asking him random questions, he would be even more suspicious of me. Instead of jumping into my story, I decided to ask the question that meant the most.

“How much are you involved in the sex trafficking?”

The slightly mocking smile fell from his face and he bent forward.

“What do you know about it?” he growled. His top lip curled and his brows were deep slashes over his dark green eyes. Energy crackled around him as he seemed to swell in size.

“I know about it because I was abducted maybe two weeks ago.” My voice was rough, showing exactly how furious at the situation I was. “I was taken to a place with lots of other girls and...” I stopped, sucking in a shuddering breath. He didn’t need to know all of my details. I was sure he knew precisely what went on there. But was he a participant like Randall, or a silent victim of the bystander effect like Addict?

If I was looking for disgust, fear, or anything that shed any kind of human light on him, I was disappointed. His nostrils flared as he regarded me.

“That still doesn’t answer how you got here.”

Believing I could make an ally of him was a mistake. But I carried on. “I met a man named Lafe.” I paused, waiting to see his reaction. His rapid blink was the only tell he showed that this name meant anything to him. Once. Twice. “We had a few encounters, and then he drugged me to bring me here. I didn’t come here on my own.”

“You’ve been here by yourself for days?” He finally leaned back, a look of disgust on his face. “Where did he stash you?”

Rubbing my sweaty palms down my bare thighs, I couldn’t think of anything to tell him except the truth but dreaded it all the same. “He had me in an apartment on the second floor. You should send someone to check on the woman who came to bring me food. I...” I swallowed. I’d never actually harmed anyone before who didn’t deserve it, and it sat hard on my soul. “I knocked her out. Now that it was all for nothing, I’d like to make sure she’s okay.”

He blinked again as if that was his knee-jerk reaction, then he roared with laughter. Deep lines formed in his cheeks where dimples would be. As he neared the end of his mirth, his voice raised in pitch and he dropped his head onto the back of the couch. “I like you, Amorette,” he wheezed, his body still quaking. “I’m glad my skittish little brother found the *cajones*

to steal you away.” Another burst of laughter rocked through him.

I furrowed my brow. His reactions confounded me, and words escaped me as I searched for something to say.

Then he scooted closer and dropped heavy hands on my knees, digging his thumbs into my inner thighs. The smile stretched across his face as he dipped his head close to mine. “How’d you do it?”

“Knock her out?”

“Hell yeah. You’re barely bigger than a child. I can’t think of any women who work for us even close to your size. How’d you take her down?”

I could barely see his eyes from the way his cheeks pushed up.

“Please make the call to check on her,” I urged quietly. I’d tell him, but now that my secret was out in the open, I needed to know what I’d done.

He never took his gaze from mine, nor did he stop smiling as he pulled his phone out of his pocket and asked Siri to call Anton. “Anton, check the birdcages. There’s a woman that’s been hurt up there. Call me back and let me know how she is.”

The entire call, he’d spoken in English. If the man on the other side of the line thought that was odd... I would never know, but the small kindness was unexpected. So, when he eagerly watched me, I didn’t make him wait.

“I used one of the skillets from the kitchen.” My voice came out strangled. “Then I waited in the bedroom, hiding until she came in, and I hit her once she’d come far enough into the room.” I dropped my gaze, ashamed.

But he didn’t let me avoid him for long. He moved one of his hands from my leg and used his fingers to tip my face up. Slowly, I lifted my gaze. Light brown stubble covered his chin, and his mouth was no longer smiling, although the shape remained soft. His eyes still gleamed with amusement, but something steely appeared as well.

“Don’t worry about it. You’re a survivor. I admire that. Respect it even,” he praised me in a low voice. “You were trying to escape?”

Nodding, I tried to pull my face away from his touch, but his hand shifted to the side of my neck to halt my progress. “What did my brother say when he brought you here? Clearly, it wasn’t to kill you, or else you’d already be dead. And Lafe, well, he never had the stomach for death. It tears him up inside. So what did he offer you? Not to take you home, either, yes?”

Holding my breath, I bit my bottom lip. This conversation was starting to enter dangerous territory. The more I talked, the higher chance I told something Addict didn’t want me to share. From the lack of information both he and the man in the hallway had, they weren’t close. Who did I want to bet on?

“Amorette...” He warned, the glee melting from his expression as his fingers tightened on my neck. Grey was the one who had been the nicest to me. There really was no question about who I should trust.

“No, he said I couldn’t go home. I’m sure he believes I’ve seen too much. My choices are simple. I could go back to that warehouse,” I was at least somewhat relieved when his gaze darkened. “I could kill myself, because he’d left me quite a few useful tools in the apartment. Or...he said he would find work for me, and I’d stay here.”

“Done.” He sat up, the smile once again on his face. “You’ll stay here. Every evening you can spar with me in the gym. I can teach you how to drop a man two, shit, probably three times your size. You’re just so small.” His mouth twisted to the side as his gaze moved over my body.

I flushed with heat. “I need to go home. I have a career, a family. I can’t stay here.” I kept all of my opinions on who they were and what they did to myself. They didn’t have any place here, not when it would decimate any agreeability he felt right now.

Seriousness fell over him. “Lafe had one thing right, Amorette. You can’t go home. Not now that you were with

Maikel, and most definitely not now that you've been here. As much as I like you, I don't like you enough to risk my own ass. And make no mistake, you're a liability."

No, no, no. I couldn't accept that. There had to be a way out of here.

Bracing my elbows on my knees, I covered my face in my hands. Breathing became difficult as I struggled to believe that, just like that, another chance was taken from me. It didn't matter if I was nice or if I played by his rules. It didn't matter how many times I tried to escape. They weren't willing to let me go.

Were these truly the only options I had?

Grey got up, and from the sounds of it, he cleared our dishes away. He was giving me a moment to myself, as if he understood how hard this was for me. I'd barely said more than a handful of words to him, and he was showing me more compassion than I expected while stomping on my free will at the same time.

It seemed to take an act of Congress to raise my head. I fisted my hands on my knees and sniffed. My revelation hadn't brought about any tears, or at least not any that fell, but lingering wetness clung to my eyelashes.

Grey was back on his end of the couch, facing me with his arms crossed. He was still shirtless, and his muscles flexed while his chest steadily rose and fell. There was no fear in him. No anxiety or sign that he was anything other than calm. Patient. Allowing me the time to process how my life was no longer my own.

One thing was obvious, he was comfortable with who he was.

He just didn't know *me* very well.

"You think I can just accept everything that's turned my fucking life on its head?" I tried to remain calm, though a thread of obstinance still bled through.

Shrugging, his head dipped close to one shoulder. "You don't have a choice."

“Then give me information, because I have none. I don’t know where I am, who you are, why I’m suddenly this liability...” I didn’t know anything, and it was crippling.

Holding my breath, I waited to see what he would do. I wanted him to prove he was the monster by refusing to answer any of my questions. I also wanted him to prove there was something good in him.

“Amorette, you only need to ask. I can’t say I’ll lay all my secrets at your feet, but there’s certainly no reason for you to run around blind. That’s only going to get you killed. We already determined I’d like to keep you very much alive.” He smirked, but there was an element of darkness to it.

He answered my questions, because they would never let me go. He wanted to keep me here because it suited his needs, whatever they were.

“How are you and Lafe connected to the sex trafficking?” I asked, my voice low.

Completely nonplussed, he answered, “You’re familiar with organized crime?”

I nodded when he didn’t go on.

“Let’s just say we’re part of the largest organized crime syndicate in South America. There isn’t just one branch. There are many. We don’t have anything to do with that part of the business. You can say it’s a sister company under the same organization. Does that help?” He raised his eyebrows.

That wasn’t surprising, not with how...shit. What was I trying to say? I understood because they employed the dregs of society in sprawling estates.

“How are you and Lafe connected?”

He grinned. “That bastard is my brother.” When he didn’t offer up any more information, I scowled. Grey was giving me crumbs for answers and enjoying the way it prickled.

“And what do you all do for this organization?”

His grin spread into a smile. “I’ll let him tell you what he does. But,” he leaned forward, tipping his chin down as he

held my gaze, “I run the fights.”

The fights. That wasn't so bad. With MMA and other fighting leagues, that was practically mainstream. I nodded.

“Not what you expected?”

“No.” I opened my mouth to ask another question when his phone rang.

“Anton,” he greeted. “Yeah, I'm trying to get to the bottom of it. I think I have a pretty good idea of what happened...Oh shit.” The corner of his mouth twitched. “That's not good.” Except he was at least amused.

I needed that woman to be okay. From his expressions and the one-sided conversation, it was a toss-up. Glaring at him, I willed him to end the call so I could get the update.

“Not necessary. I'll deal with him.” Then he hung up and slid the phone back into his pocket. “You want the good news or the bad news?”

“The good news.” Please, please let that woman be alive.

“Blanca's fine. She's got a nice bump on her head and you've made an enemy out of her, but otherwise, no damage. She's also shouting the compound down as we speak.” He was enjoying this too much. It practically oozed from his pores, making my hand itch to slap the smug expression off his face.

Releasing a breath I hadn't realized I was holding, I briefly closed my eyes. Relief swept through me. “Now, the bad. Rip it off like a Band-Aid.” I steeled myself for the worst, digging my nails into the skin of my knees.

“My brother, Andre, is on his way here right now.” Swinging his leg off the couch, he grabbed his water from the coffee table and took a swig.

Lafe. Parker. Grey. Andre.

At least four brothers in this organization. It felt strange to refer to it as a business when it capitalized on crime. Just how many brothers were there? How did they all get sucked into the same corruption?

“You might want to prepare yourself. He’s an asshole,”
Grey warned as a dark, gleeful vibe surrounded him.

*Great. Just great. Let’s hope my multiple personalities
won’t come out to play.* Something told me I’d regret it.

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PARKER

I set the knife down on the edge of the counter as I grabbed a beer from the fridge. Once I'd downed a decent amount, I returned to the knife, using my finger to twirl the handle around in a circle.

What a pleasant surprise, that Little Love.

She was about to spice things up, and I couldn't wait. Just thinking about her running in on Grey had me barking out a laugh. Would he kill her on sight? Play with her first? Given his unpredictability, it was a toss-up.

Served him right for trying to mess with my plans.

He thought it was about the fight. It wasn't.

And it wasn't like I was going to fill him in anytime soon. Or ever. I pulled my phone out and texted Jorge.

Me: How much is this going to mess with my plans?

There were no immediate bouncing dots. He was stateside today, and there was a real chance he was either out of cell range or in the middle of a meeting. Unlike some of my brothers, I held my own businesses close to the vest, but Jorge was a solid second choice when I wanted to step away for a little break.

Since Grey decided to fuck everything up by causing trouble at the mansion, I needed to retreat and lick my wounds, so to speak. Usually, I could manage my affairs remotely and often did, but I found I needed the short separation.

Rapid-fire Spanish echoed from the commons. Blanca. That woman was full of piss and vinegar when she wasn't exuding sugary spice. I dropped the knife in the sink and followed the rising sound of her voice.

"Who let that demon woman in here? Do you see the size of the goose on the back of my head? Anton, do you see it?" she screeched. Blanca was Jorge's younger sister and the one who kept the kitchen stocked for us. Standing at five-foot-eight with more than generous curves, her body matched her personality. Nothing like that little wisp of a thing I ran into in the hallway.

Speaking of, the demon woman could only be one person.

I grinned as I leaned against the doorjamb to the media room. Blanca waved her arms around, nearly hitting Anton's second in command.

Old Anton. He had been with Grey the longest. While the soldiers worked for all of us, some were closer to a specific brother, and Anton was his.

"I said we should take you to the doctor if you're so worried about the bump. Clearly, you're fine. Otherwise, you would shut your fucking mouth," Anton growled and stalked past her.

"What's going on here?" Andre was on his way toward the community kitchens when he skidded to a halt and pushed past me.

I'd barely seen him since coming back from the mansion, but the days had not been kind to him. His usually neat hair was a bedraggled mess, and his eyes were bloodshot. What had my dear brother been up to?

Not that I had any room to judge when I'd been working on my own shit since we touched down.

"Andre!" Blanca exclaimed. Our housekeeper had always had a thing for Andre, and no matter how many times he rejected her, she was never able to hide her infatuation.

She rushed to Andre, gripping his wrinkled button-down shirt in both hands as she tipped her head back. No one else

would get away with that kind of familiarity, but Blanca had been with us the longest and was essentially harmless. Her family would never betray ours, so we'd put up with a little disrespect every now and again.

"What the hell is going on?" Andre gently gripped her hands and set her away from him.

"Lafe asked me to check in on some woman he had up in the apartments, and she tried to kill me! *Dios mio!* She slammed something in the back of my head, and now she's running around the compound!" Her words ended in a wail.

I knew why. What started out as genuine anger morphed into fear as she realized the implications of what that meant. We were very strict about who came and went through our personal haven. This was the one place even Vicente didn't travel to. Surprisingly, he had accepted that, although I wouldn't put it past him to have spies here. And we did have to host associates on occasion.

Andre stilled.

Snickering, I pulled another drink from my beer as I watched the cogs turn in his head. I was sure I would have been just as shocked if I hadn't run into Little Love in the hallway.

He canted his head, nearly squinting at Blanca. Then he rubbed a finger in his ear as if he hadn't heard her right. "I'm sorry. Did you say Lafe had a girl in the apartments? And now she's loose in the compound. Because, see...I'm sure I heard you wrong."

As if realizing the mood her crush was in, Blanca gulped and stepped back.

"Lafe's been gone for almost a week. When did he bring a girl here?" The deadly calm in Andre's voice scared poor Blanca. Even Anton moved further away. Andre wasn't the violent one of us. They wouldn't have to fear he would suddenly pound sense into someone for the fun of it.

His method of dealing with people was far, far worse.

I loved it.

“Why are you grinning?” Andre barked as he twisted toward me.

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe because, for once, Lafe is stepping outside of his comfort zone. He’s been living in fear of his shadow for years. I, for one, am happy to see him break outside the box.”

“Chuck it up, *pendejo*. She could be a plant. She could be an oblivious whore he brought here for a good time. Regardless, there’s no scenario where we want her running around by herself.”

Anton cleared his throat. “Actually, sir. I don’t think she’s alone.” He hesitated, earning a venomous glare from Andre. “Grey called me. Told me to check on a woman in the birdcages. I figure he’d only know Blanca had been hurt if he had captured the woman.”

I wasn’t smiling anymore. Little Love shared more information with that savage than she had me?

Swiping his hand through his hair, Andre made a sound of disgust as he stormed by me. Blanca wrung her hands as she watched his retreat, and Anton cleared his throat. He might have been trying to get my attention, but there was a show to see. I wasn’t about to waste my time with these two.

I finished off my beer and chucked it into the trash by the door. Then I stuffed my hands in my pockets and strolled after Andre. There was no use running, I’d already gotten my workout in and then some. It might be better anyway to allow Andre to blow off his steam in the first few minutes before I showed up.

He got testy with an audience.

Ah, it didn’t matter. Grey must have taken Little Love elsewhere because, by the time I made it to the open commons, Andre was stomping out of the wing with the gym and heading toward our private apartments.

That was a good call. I could see Grey taking her home like a lost puppy. Well, actually, I couldn’t. He should have

beaten her on sight. Picking up my pace, I trailed after Andre, my own curiosity beating at me.

At Grey's door, Andre pounded using both fists. "Open up, Grey!"

I stopped a few feet from Andre. Had Grey taken our little friend somewhere else? The compound was massive in its own right, but Grey could usually be found at the gym or at his place. On occasion, he'd venture out elsewhere, but rarely.

Out of the four of us, he was gone the most, overseeing the fights. He probably didn't see the need to socialize.

Andre started another round of pounding, reaching in his waistband for the gun he carried when Grey opened the door.

I snickered. Was he about to shoot the lock? Even though we were brothers, working together toward a common-ish goal, we didn't have keys or codes to each other's domains. We preferred to keep our privacy.

My big brother was probably regretting that oversight right about now.

"What the hell are you doing?" Grey glared Andre down.

"Move back." Andre shoved past Grey. He must have seen something he didn't like because a few steps in, he rushed into the living room.

"Fuck," Grey muttered, following after him.

As the brains of our operation, I shut the door and locked it. This was our place, our territory we ruled as kings. Still, we could never be too careful.

In the living room, Andre had Little Love's head pulled back by her hair with his gun shoved under her chin. Grey stood off to the side with his arms crossed, still shooting Andre a stern glare.

"That isn't necessary," Grey growled.

"The fuck it's not. Who is this, and why the hell is she here?"

I had to give it to Little Love. She didn't cry, didn't appear afraid, although I knew her heart had to be pounding out of her chest from the flush creeping up her neck and face. She held his gaze with fierce blue eyes, her top lip barely curled in contempt.

Ah, that was why Grey hadn't killed her. She reminded him of himself.

"Lafe brought her. Found her at Maikel's. You want more than that, you'll have to ask him." Grey dropped onto the end of the couch, his unblinking gaze on Andre and Little Love.

If I didn't know any better, I'd say he was about to rip her away from Andre.

Grey rubbed one brow. "If you're going to kill her, kill her. Otherwise, take a seat. You know guns make me twitchy."

Or maybe not.

Andre's grip tightened, her head yanking back further in his hold, then he pushed her away and grunted his frustration.

"What have you found out about her?" Andre took a seat on the coffee table facing her as if he needed to be close at hand if she tried to escape.

Not one to be left out, I dropped into the chair on her left. When she turned her attention to me, her eyes momentarily widened before she blanked her expression. I winked.

I told you your short stint at freedom wouldn't last long...

"First, she doesn't speak Spanish," Grey shared. Andre settled slightly as if he was relieved she couldn't understand us. Then again, with his experience, he wouldn't completely trust that she couldn't speak the language. "She was abducted to serve in the Gallery at Maikel's. For some reason, and if she knows why she hasn't said, Lafe decided to take her. He's offered for her to work with us, or he can return her to the Gallery. She's not happy. She wants to go home, but I told her that wasn't an option." Grey shrugged.

Andre didn't respond. He continued to stare at Little Love, as if he could decipher all her secrets given enough time. I, for

one, didn't care, except her being here could help me in the end.

“Let's get Lafe on the phone. Even if our little bird sang, you wouldn't trust a word out of her mouth.” I pulled out my phone and found Lafe's name in my contacts, the helpful brother that I was.

Neither objected as I hit call. It only rang a few times when he picked up.

“What?” he barked, breathing heavily. My lips curled. This was just too good.

“Why the irritation? Is something wrong?” I taunted, having a good idea what caused his labored greeting.

Doors slammed and steps pounded. “Fuck you. Did you need something or not?”

“Are you at the compound or still dealing with that pesky little issue?” Out of all of us, Lafe dealt with the most bullshit in his ranks. I didn't envy him. Of course, I'd just kill the problem children and let the public lesson speak for me, but Lafe was a different animal.

He believed that made us too much like Vicente. I disagreed. We were nothing like him, though we were a product of our environment, and sometimes a show of cruel force was required for the greater good.

Whatever he was doing stopped. After a full minute, he grudgingly answered. “I'm at the compound. I made it back about ten minutes ago.”

I grinned at Andre. “Lovely. We're having a meeting of the minds in Grey's apartment. Come join us. Something alarming has popped up.”

Lafe didn't give me the satisfaction of an answer. He knew the birdcage where he'd kept her was empty. The poor man probably needed the time it would take to get here to steel himself. He'd fucked up by not telling anyone she was on the property.

Lucky for him, Andre seemed to be the only one who cared.

Not that I didn't want to eliminate threats against us. I'd done more than my fair share, some without even the brothers' knowledge. But I liked to believe I was a rather good judge of character. I had to be with my branch of the business.

And Amorette... Little Love wasn't a threat. At least not while we held her captive. If the time came and she escaped, maybe she could cause issues for us then, but not here. Not as long as we clipped her wings, so to speak.

"He's on his way." I dropped the phone in my lap.

Andre stood, gripped Little Love's arm to yank her up, then walked her to the guest room. He tossed her in and commanded in English, "Stay."

"Is something wrong?" I asked drily as he continued to stare at the doorknob.

Tossing up his hands, he walked back toward the couch. "Is it too much to ask to have outside locks on your guest rooms?"

"I don't make a habit of keeping prisoners in my home, so yes, that is too much to ask. That's what we use the birdcages for." Grey stretched his legs out as he leaned back against the cushions. "I want her to stay. I'll take responsibility for her." He glanced up at Andre, his expression cold.

"You don't know her! What, so that you can fuck her? I hate to break it to you, but she barely looks legal. I know you like them young, but that's hitting a little too close to the mark, isn't it?"

In a flash, Grey was off the couch landing his fist into Andre's face. The resounding crack echoed around the room as Andre staggered back. Instead of following him as I'd expected, Grey sat back down. If his expression was cold before, now the look he leveled Andre was glacial.

"One, I don't like them young. You know that's a lie. Two, she's in her twenties. I'd bet closer to mid-twenties. Three, go fuck yourself."

I wagged a finger at Andre. “That was low. I’ve never seen him even fuck a fight girl who smelled under eighteen.”

“Shit, I didn’t mean that. It’s been a bad day. And you fuckers acting like she isn’t a potential threat is driving me crazy.” He wiped the blood from his nose on his shirt sleeve. “It’s like I’m the only one who cares about keeping you all alive. I swear, fuck, it gets harder and harder every day.”

I laughed, but Grey still wasn’t amused. Andre just didn’t see the big picture as I did.

A knock came at the door, and I hopped up from the chair. Seeing Lafe’s face when he realized his little prisoner was here was too much fun to pass up. “I’ll get it.”

Sure enough, Lafe was a shaking mess as soon as I opened the door.

“Is she here?”

No beating around the bush. I liked it. Amorette might be good for him. Now, whether she lived or not? That was to be determined, but she was forcing Lafe to find his backbone.

“Who?” I smirked.

“You know fucking who. Don’t mess with me right now.” His face twisted up into a pained grimace.

I stepped back so he could enter. Lafe walked to the living room like he was walking to his death. I tried not to laugh, but seriously, sometimes it was good to shake things up. I, for one, could and would capitalize on the chaos.

“Where is she?” Lafe fisted his hands.

Edging around him, I took my seat again, spreading my fingers over my knees as I settled in to watch the show.

“The better question is, *who* is she?” Andre gritted out as he bared bloody teeth.

Yes, the answer we’d all been waiting for.

Who was our little friend?

LAFE



Shit. I should have never brought her here.

Over the last week, in between dealing with Sanders' fucking problems, I thought about Killer way too often. Mainly why I'd risked Maikel's wrath and my happy way of life.

I sneered.

Like I was happy. Or living.

More like moving through the motions making the best of the gold-plated handcuffs Vicente had locked on my wrists.

And somehow, Killer escaped the apartment. I shouldn't have sent Blanca to take her food. If I'd known I would have been able to wrap up today and come back, I wouldn't have. Fucking Sanders. He was the worst kind of *fãne*, but he'd been in the business before I'd taken over. Even if I wanted to get rid of him, I'd have to replace him with someone else, and there were no viable options. Just thinking about it was like stabbing hot needles through my eyes. My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I would bet Killer's life he wanted to grovel for all the money he'd cost me, along with the three best men. I couldn't stomach talking to him right now.

Then again, as I withstood the daunting weight of attention from my brothers, that seemed like the better alternative. At least there were no surprises there.

Parker smirked as he retook his seat. He was settling in for the show. Typical, considering he only cared about his own

amusement. That was probably why he excelled so well here, and I floundered. I cared too much even when I tried to check myself.

Grey was sprawled over the end of the couch like he couldn't give two shits about anything. Also typical for him. If it wasn't a fight, and no one had lit his short fuse, he could give fuck all about anything else.

Then there was Andre. The self-proclaimed ringleader of us all. Not that we viewed him like that, but he decided he was our babysitter somewhere during the many years we'd lived together. If anyone asked him, I was sure he'd happily share he'd been stuck with brainless twits for brothers and business partners.

"Who is she?" Andre repeated, shuffling around the table, his hands raised as if he were going to strangle me. I was sure he'd love nothing better, but after our childhood with Vicente, I knew he'd never lay a hand on me... or any of us.

Well, except for fight training with Grey. That was our one time to really let loose on our pent-up frustrations.

I rubbed my hand along the side of my jaw. This was either going to be a painfully long, or extremely short conversation. Killer had done what nothing else had managed in a while. She, or the situation I found myself in because of her, made me so fucking tired. "Is she still alive?"

Andre's top lip curled as he went back to the couch and sat down. "You think I murder women for giggles?"

Parker raised an index finger. "Well, brother mine, you did greet her by shoving a gun under her chin."

That was the exact kind of scenario I'd tried to avoid by locking her away. Groaning, I turned my attention to Grey. "You have any vodka? I need a drink." Andre wouldn't be so offended if he shot her. And I needed to level-down as I tried to explain to them why I'd lost my ever-loving mind.

"When's the last time you sampled?" Andre's tone changed to one of concern.

I waved him away as I took the chair across from Parker. Grey went to get the vodka, and when he returned, he had four shot glasses and a half-full bottle.

Parker bent forward to read the label on the bottle. I knew what it was. It was Grey's favorite, orange blossom. He quirked a brow, but Grey shrugged, not giving one shit. Once the glasses were filled, we each downed ours. I personally enjoyed the burn. The best liquors were so strong you could feel it all the way down in your sternum.

"Where is she?" I asked. Andre would eventually get the hint. I wasn't about to divulge my reasons for bringing her here if they didn't answer my questions.

Rolling the shot glass in his hand, Parker motioned to the guest room on the other side of the apartment. "Andre tossed her in there and shut the door."

"You don't think she'll be able to get out?" I turned to Grey. The windows in the birdcages had no locks with a special kind of glass. We hadn't taken those same precautions with our own homes. If we needed to escape, we wanted to ensure all avenues were available to us and only us.

He shrugged. "The alarm will beep if she tries to unlock or shatter it. And if she gets out, she'll be shot. I think her self-preservation is too great for that."

I didn't argue with him, although if she'd already tried to escape, she must have thought the risk of dying was worth potential freedom. How strange that that was a better death than suicide. I'd prefer to control my own end, but I was selfish enough that killing myself would never be an option.

Grey poured another shot for me and nudged it my way. I happily took it. Where Andre tried to rein me in, Grey would enable me when he saw I needed it most. Now was one of those times.

"I saw her when I was sent to check over Maikel's books," I started, rolling my own glass between my palms. "Randall was dragging her to the chamber, and she refused to..." Refused to what? Go willingly? Submit meekly? "She fought

like hell. I watched her throw down some damage on a few of the younger soldiers. Every day, when I saw her, she was fighting.” I gulped. What a bitch response.

“You’ve gone there the most out of all of us. You’ve seen thousands of women carted through there. I don’t understand.” Andre scooted to the edge of her seat. “Was that it? She was a fighter, so you wanted to save her?” He seemed to be trying to figure out what I had been thinking. Good luck.

“Just because I’ve seen the women there, doesn’t mean I like it, Andre. I hate it there. I hate Maikel. I wished I could tear the place apart with my bare hands and dance over all their corpses.” We all hated that piece of the business. Right? Didn’t they feel the same?

Andre nodded, apparently agreeing with my unspoken question. “I still don’t understand why you would risk yourself, or us, for one woman when you’ve never put our necks out there before,” Andre huffed and threw himself back against the cushions.

“That’s not true,” Parker cheerily chimed in. “There was that one time. It just didn’t end well.”

I growled at him. He was my brother, and I loved him as much as I could in our circumstances, but sometimes I hated him.

“Since then,” Andre amended. “Vicente lets us get away with a shit ton. Partly because we do a hefty amount of his dirty work, partly because he doesn’t know what we’re up to.” Parker snorted like Andre told a hilarious joke. “But if he thinks we’re getting too ballsy, it won’t matter who we are or what we do for him. And I don’t trust Maikel not to whisper in Vicente’s ear.”

“Maikel won’t say a word,” I murmured with faux conviction. I had him by the balls now, but that could just as easily be turned into ammunition against me. My knee started to bounce. “He’d rather keep his head than tattle that I took a girl away from his Gallery. I’ve never even *sampled* one of his girls.” I hated that word. In the Institution, it was tossed

around so much, no matter what the poison. To use *sampled* when it came to people disgusted me.

“Mmhm...” Andre hummed, humoring me. “He didn’t mention anything when I spoke to him, but I’ll just need to have my people dig up something on him. Get in front of this by letting him know his days are numbered if he talks.”

“You could get in front of this by telling Vicente you took one of the girls for yourself,” Parker mused. “That would ensure Maikel couldn’t spin the story to fit his narrative later.”

“Absolutely not.” I glared at him. “If he knows I took her, he’ll think she means something to me. I won’t have whatever he’d decide to do to her, purely for his own entertainment, on my conscience.” If that was the case, I would have left her to her fate. That hurt a hell of a lot less than being directly responsible.

That shut them up. While it would take Maikel’s power away, we all knew Vicente was sadistic enough to do exactly as I said. Maybe not when I told him, or the next day or month, but all it would take is one minor infraction and he’d punish me through her. We already walked on eggshells; we didn’t need to layer them up.

We’d already isolated ourselves as much as possible. To Vicente, we were unfeeling machines who worked and fucked. It was safer for us and everyone around us to maintain that image.

Andre was the first to break the silence. Shocker. “So, she drew you in with her fighting spirit?” The question was light but mocking.

Contempt pulsed within me, and I curled my lip instead of responding.

A humorless laugh escaped him. “Okay, so we established you were doing the one good deed of your life. What are we supposed to do with her?” His face evened out into a bland expression. He apparently had plenty of ideas but wanted to hear what I had planned in my half-cocked attempt at being a hero.

I cleared my throat. I didn't want to answer. Like any hushed midnight confession, the words were hard to stomach in the light of day. My momentary stupidity was glaring at me now. Not for the first time, I wanted to bang my head against the wall. How could I have been so careless?

"I gave her three options..."

"Go back to Maikel's, off herself, or work with us," Grey answered. A hint of a smile played at his lips. The show of emotion got my back up straight. He was so uninvolved it scared me if he was showing an interest.

"And what did you think she was going to do? What's her name? Where did she come from? What did she do in her past life? Can she be trusted? You see where I'm going with this?" Andre raised both of his eyebrows, his tone condescending.

"Fucking bastard," I gritted out. I fucked up. He didn't have to rub it in.

"I'll have one of my contacts run a background check." Parker set his shot glass on the coffee table. He wasn't much of a drinker. Never did drugs. He hated to feel impaired in any way, always said he needed to keep a sharp mind.

I couldn't comprehend that because all I wanted to do was numb everything. That was the only way I was able to keep going every day.

"Actually, I think my U.S. contacts would be a better fit for this particular job. Name?" Andre turned back to me.

"Amorette."

"Amorette..." He trailed off, and I wanted to pelt my glass at his forehead. The bastard wouldn't let me forget that I couldn't stand the sight of him most days.

"I. Don't. Know."

"I'll get the name from her." Grey grinned, and I almost fell out of the chair. Maybe he'd started drinking before I got here, although the sloppy signs of inebriation were absent.

"What you missed, Lafe, is that Grey has quite the crush on Little Love."

“What the hell is *little love*?” Andre asked Parker as he pulled out his phone.

“It’s the literal translation of her name. It’s French.” He rolled his eyes like we should all be able to decipher names from other languages. I only knew Spanish and English, and he knew that.

Then it hit me. Unable to hold it in, I bent over, rolling with laughter. The endorphins giving me a better high than any I’d had in years. Before long, my breath tapered off into a wheeze. Eventually, I sat up and scrubbed my eyes.

All of my brothers were waiting, mostly impatiently, for me to stop.

“Care to share?” Parker grinned.

“That woman is not *little love*. More like a little killer. Little psycho. Little righteous with a savior complex.” They hadn’t shared how they caught her, but she wouldn’t have changed that much in a few days.

Parker continued to grin, and even Grey seemed to share my sentiments by the dark delight in his eyes. Andre just didn’t have time for any of our shit. Ever.

I glanced toward the guest room. That side of the house was quiet. If I knew her at all, she probably had her ear pressed against the crack at the bottom of the door. Grey was a modern minimalist with few furniture pieces to muffle the sound. I was sure she heard us just fine. It was a blessing that she didn’t speak Spanish.

“Grey, get her last name. After we run her background, we’ll see what we can do with her.” Andre was firm, like his word was the law. He must not believe she’d take either of the two other options. Although, I should probably be thankful he wasn’t forcing me to kill her to keep our secrets.

“I brought her here. I should be the one to watch her.” She was my responsibility. And if she stayed, I wanted to peel back the layers and understand why she valued her life so little. Her lack of fear both intrigued and angered me. But Andre, or my

other brothers for that matter, would never hear that from my lips.

“You also fucked it up,” Andre pointed out.

Shame burned through me at the unemotional way he called me out. “I had to leave. Otherwise, this wouldn’t have happened. She’s my problem, I need to make this right.” I shook my head, determined to make a stand against him. No, I shouldn’t have brought her here, I shouldn’t have interfered at all, but I had. And now I needed to make sure this didn’t backfire on any of us.

Parker sighed. “We already determined Grey has a thing for her. He’ll watch her closer than any of us would. We also have jobs to do. Grey’s a freeloader unless there’s a fight he has to oversee.”

Grudgingly, I nodded. He was right, Grey did have the most time on his hands where he could keep her close. There was also less chance she’d find his work distasteful.

I could only imagine the uptight judgment she’d have tagging along with either Parker or me. Andre was a wild card, even though he seemed like he’d rather wash his hands of her than babysit.

“I think by bringing her here, Lafe, you’ve made her *our* problem.” The bitterness wafted from Andre as he used the heel of his palm to swipe over his brow. Then he stood. “I have something I need to take care of.” He pointed at Grey. “You get one chance. She runs or causes any problems, I’ll deal with her my way.”

As much distance as there was between us, which was his fault, I turned to him. “Andre, you can’t kill an innocent woman. That’s not who you are. It’s definitely not who I am.”

He gave one sharp shake of his head, his lips pursed tight. “No one is innocent. And you’re wrong. To protect my family, that’s exactly who I am.” No goodbyes or anything. Andre only stayed in my presence as long as he needed to. I wanted to know if he was the same way with Grey or Parker, but I was too proud to ask. It wasn’t like our fight was a secret anyway.

When it was the three of us left, I turned to Grey and asked the question Andre would have mocked me for. “What happened? How did you find her, and how did she get out?”

With complete seriousness, a typical expression for him, Grey said, “She ran straight into my arms.”

Parker lost it, but I continued to stare. I didn’t want jokes; I wanted the truth. He sighed, then gave me the account of what happened, and I kicked my ass even harder. If I’d been back hours earlier, I could have prevented all of this.

Blanca was supposed to go last night. She waited until today, when I was already en-route, to return.

Parker’s eyes glittered, and he told us how he ran into Andre and that particular greeting. Each word had my head dropping in defeat. There could have been a chance for her to change her mind and want to stay here before. I’d left her in luxury compared to the kennels Randy used to train the girls. She’d had food, a bed, hot water. And time to contemplate the desperation of her choices. No matter how bad her life was, she had too much fire to end it. I believed that.

But now? With Andre attacking her with a gun and tossing her into a room to lock her away? She’d probably spit in our faces and take her chance with escaping.

“Now that your curiosity has been satisfied, I’m kicking you out. I promised Andre I’d watch her, and I promised her I’d teach her to fight properly. Time for you all to find somewhere else to be.” Grey rose from the couch and nodded toward the door.

“Aw, Grey. I’d like to visit with our little love.” Parker snickered but headed toward the door. He stopped at the guest room and knocked. “I’ll be seeing you soon. Don’t cause any trouble for Grey. He’s the psycho of the bunch,” he called, then left.

I hesitated as I passed the door. I wanted to see her, but I shouldn’t. Killer probably didn’t want to see me, either.

My steps became heavier as I shuffled past. Even with Parker’s warning, she had no idea how Grey really was. I just

hoped she didn't try to stab him in his sleep.

With the right triggers, Grey really was psycho.

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AMORETTE



I heard *his* voice through the door.

Addict, the one who brought me here.

As soon as voices started lobbying back and forth, I'd slid to the floor, tilting my ear to the crack. They probably knew I would try to listen to their conversation, but it wouldn't have mattered. Every word I could make out was Spanish.

Damn it. Too many of them knew I didn't speak it.

Instead of getting a crick in my neck, I stood back up and examined the room. This was obviously someone's room. There were personal items everywhere. In the bathroom, there were hygiene products, different from what was in the other apartment. Clothes were in the dresser and the closet. Shoes at the bottom of said closet, all designer and about three full sizes bigger than my size five and a half.

All of my girlfriends back home always made fun of my small stature and feet. Said my personality was too big for my body, but if my body matched, I'd intimidate people from my sheer size.

I grinned as I ran my finger over the dresser on my way to the window. Grace was my identical twin and had just as big of a personality. Though where I was a bulldog, she was a bit of a princess. Then again, her armor left that impression on everyone. They didn't see the warrior beneath the beauty.

Missing her was a punch in the chest.

Blinds and sheer curtains covered the window. I pulled the string to open them, seeing the sun was starting to set and the leaves of the palm trees swayed in the light breeze. We were on the first floor and the wall surrounding the yard blocked my view of the town beyond.

Men of all ages, though I'd say most of them were in their twenties, either walked the perimeter or sparred in a makeshift ring in the middle of the grass. There was also a luxury outdoor kitchen with an awning to block the counters and appliances from the wind, along with a stone fireplace on one end.

They were laughing, cutting up, and relaxing. Like this was some kind of military resort.

My brain fritzed. How was I supposed to make sense of this type of place and this type of experience when I knew they were bad people? Bad men who did bad things. I just couldn't see their evil on the surface.

From my brief encounters, the brothers didn't seem like the men in that other place. Although that didn't mean they weren't just as evil. Clearly, they were complicit. A trickle of guilt and confusion cut through me as I tried to reconcile my thoughts and feelings, because without the high-tension violence that was a constant in that warehouse, here I mostly experienced relief at being safe.

Or quasi-safe?

Images of that man flashed through my eyes while he pushed the gun under my chin. I couldn't even recall what he looked like, except his eyes had been such a dark brown they were nearly black. I'd fallen into his gaze, and I hadn't been able to look anywhere else. I had been trapped.

The dark slashes of his eyebrows had cut low giving him a menacing look, even while he fisted my hair to yank my head back. Pain burst, but I hadn't allowed myself to flinch. No way would I give him the pleasure of knowing he had hurt me.

That must have been Andre, their other brother.

I didn't doubt the gun was real. I didn't doubt he was a man who could kill if provoked, maybe even without the provocation. But even as I had glared at him, daring him to kill me, to add one more stain to his dark soul, he hadn't. Instead, his black eyes held an immeasurable amount of pain and fear.

But these were the bad guys. I had to remember that. I couldn't go assigning human emotions to their actions as if that justified what he did. I mean, he fucking tossed me in here like I was last week's trash.

Behind me, the door opened. I thought about not turning at all, giving in to my immature need to be angry and belligerent. But, at the end of the day, I valued my life. To not look was to give whoever it was an opportunity to get close.

Grey stood in the doorway, one hand on the doorknob and one on the frame. He grinned wildly. "They're gone, *mami*. You can come back out now that the big bad wolf has left." He pushed away and left the door open.

I followed, needing to know more about who held me as much as I needed to be around someone else. Anyone else. After being alone for so long, my sanity was starting to fray at the edges. It definitely explained why solitude was a form of torture.

He'd already taken up a spot on the couch again, but when he saw me, he lifted the top of the coffee table, pulled a blanket out, and tossed it next to him.

I paused.

This was so weird. I half-expected to wake up from a dream and still find myself locked up in that pretty prison of an apartment or still with the other girls in the cage. Part of me felt like that was the better option, because I could trust that.

"Come on." He patted the seat next to him. "I don't bite. Much," he said through a devious smirk. "I'll find something to put on TV for us."

Pushing past my own mental issues, I walked around the far side of the coffee table and plopped down on the sofa,

pulling the blanket on top of me. I made sure to stay on the end, leaving a whole cushion between us.

Grey was a giant of a man who was too large for the couch. Although you'd never know it from the comfortable way he stretched out over it. He turned to the corner and propped one leg over the table as he surfed the TV. Netflix. So surreal.

He was still shirtless, the shorts hanging low over his hips and that delicious V most men coveted but could never obtain was on full display. Grey was sexy and he didn't care. It was attractive.

I wanted to smack myself. How could I have such normal thoughts?

"You like *Spartacus*?" He flicks his green gaze my way, a smile tugging at his lips.

Actually, I loved that show. It showed male nudity instead of pretending like dicks were more important than vaginas and boobs. The love stories and tragedies in season one were also as epic as they were heartbreaking. "Only season one."

"I feel you. Andy Whitfield made the show. The guy they replaced him with did terrible things for the character," he agreed.

Unable to take it, I cracked. I laughed like someone in a psych ward who had lost touch with reality and hadn't realized it. When my mirth started to wane, I peeked at Grey through slitted, tear-filled eyes. He looked a mix between amused and concerned.

"What's funny?" he rumbled, adjusting to reach out and lay a hand on my knee.

I'd brought my legs up crisscross style, apparently making it easy for him to touch me. His hand was huge on my bare thigh. His palm warm.

I held my breath, the hair on the back of my neck standing up as I waited to see what he would do. Was this the moment he showed that he truly was a monster who preyed on women?

“I didn’t kill your cat.”

Confused, I shot my gaze to him. He tightened his grip on my leg, his ring finger and pinky too far on my inner thigh. Only, he didn’t do anything else. That small squeeze was to get my attention.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked, not moving. He still seemed like my safest bet to leave this place, even if he said it was impossible.

“I touched you, and your face dropped like you were afraid I was going to hurt you,” he answered, his voice steady and calm. He still didn’t remove his hand. His touch burned through me in more ways than I’d like to admit.

Was I this hard up for human interaction that I’d accept, and even want, the touch from someone who was holding me captive? Even if he wasn’t the aggressor but merely a bystander who chose to side with his brother?

Could I even blame him for that? If I had to choose between Grace and anyone else, I’d always choose her and keep her safe. But she wasn’t a criminal, and she would never hurt anyone in any way. Not on purpose.

As much as I was afraid of him taking advantage of me, my dark curiosity lurked beneath the surface. I sneered at him.

Grey barked out a laugh. “You’re tough. I’m not saying you’re not, but you still looked scared.” He shrugged like the truth was what it was, and he wouldn’t lie to me.

His honesty was refreshing, giving me something I could count on, even if he was wrong in what he’d seen. I wouldn’t accept anything else.

Instead of acknowledging my fear or something else, I answered his other question. “I laughed because this is so bizarre, don’t you think? Your brother kidnapped me, you also won’t help me leave, and now we’re discussing a series with similar opinions. It’s hurting my head to have that conversation with you.”

The lingering smile had lost some of its amusement and what was left taunted me. “Why?”

I studied him. He knew why, but he wanted to make me say it.

“Because we have similar opinions, but we’re very different people,” I finally said.

He nodded like he agreed but was mocking me. “You’re right. Because you’re some abused, *scared*,” he snickered on that word, “woman who shouldn’t have anything in common with the thug involved in a crime organization. Right?”

Yes, but I couldn’t say that. It would sound silly and narrow-minded if I voiced my agreement. So, I stared at him, willing him to fill in the void between us. If he wanted me to pretend we were besties just vegging out in front of the TV, he could add the commentary.

“I get it,” he said as he swiped his free hand through his hair. The dirty blond locks stayed back from his face, making his expression sharper, darker. “You want to make me the bad guy. But, Amorette...” Chills erupted on my arms and legs when he said my name. The sweetness in his voice made it seem like we were friends.

Lies. I couldn’t forget this was all lies.

Could I?

“I’m not the bad guy. You’re not the hero—”

I was the hero. He just didn’t know me.

“We’re people. Every single person on this planet does good just as they do evil. We’re all dealt a specific hand in life, and we have to play the cards we’re dealt. We make the best decisions based on how long we want to live. You just happened to be thrown into a world where people are required to do bad things to survive.” His words were so blasé. Did he honestly believe that? People always had a choice. Always.

“There are bad people out there. Wife beaters, rapists, pedophiles,” I ticked off my fingers, getting heated that he could think something so... off the mark.

“You’re right. Anyone who forces themselves on women or children are the scum of the Earth. My brothers and I

decided a long time ago, in a world where we have a broken moral compass, that was a line we would never cross. I don't rape, and I don't raise my hands against women and children. What are your other requirements to have a conversation with you?"

"Fuck you."

"Gladly," he grinned, leaning in as if he was going to kiss me.

I knocked his hand away and pushed him back as hard as I could. He went easily like he'd never meant to go through with it in the first place. As if he had been *pretending*.

He chuckled. "It was a joke. Relax. I just told you I would never force you."

"But you'd sleep with me if I let you?"

Grey didn't answer immediately. He trailed his hot gaze over my body, stopping at my chest, then coming back to stare into my eyes as if he wanted to make sure there was absolutely no doubt in my mind. "I will fuck you. Maybe not tonight or tomorrow. But soon. When you're ready. You can't tell me you don't feel the lust between us."

I inhaled a shaky breath as tingles raced over my body. It was purely a human reaction. It didn't mean anything. "I'm not sleeping with you. You and your brothers kidnapped me." I enunciated each word with a sneer so he'd have no doubt about where I stood. It didn't matter that only Addict had taken me. They were all banded together in my mind.

Shit. I was supposed to be making friends with him. *Not* antagonizing him. *Damn it*.

He gave me an out. One, I tried not to think too hard on, because I could almost believe it to make my life easier. "Your life, whatever is left of it, is here with us. We're never going to let you go. But you don't have to be a prisoner, either. What privileges you have are entirely up to you."

He didn't understand what they were asking of me. The only thing I knew was that I'd play along for now. Before I could answer, he continued.

“Which reminds me. You’re with me for now. You can sleep in the spare room you got the clothes from. There’s an alarm on the door that requires a code to exit. You break the glass to escape through the windows, you will die.”

The way he said that with no emotion, like he couldn’t care if I lived or died, right after he said he wanted to fuck me, threw ice water on whatever kind feelings I had for him.

“Now, you want to start from the beginning?” He grinned and nudged my knee with his.

“Sure.” See? I could be friendly.

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AMORETTE



The first night I slept with the door locked. I tossed and turned, cracking an eye open anytime I heard the faintest noise. I didn't trust Grey. I didn't trust any of these men, and my paranoia in the dark had been shooting through the roof.

But Grey never came crashing through the door to hurt me or have his way with me. He didn't do anything other than watch several episodes of *Spartacus* from the other end of the couch, keeping his hands to himself. Then when I said I was tired and ready for bed, he only nodded.



I STOOD up to fold the blanket I had eventually spread over my lap. *Maman* would have verbally berated me if I'd left it in a messy pile on the couch. I missed her since she'd been gone, and even though I wished she were still here, I was glad she didn't have to live through my abduction. It would have broken her heart.

To keep my love for *Maman* alive, I often did things the way she would have done them, even when they were things I hated. Like making sure the dishwasher was started before bed, no matter how many dishes were in it. That or handwashing. She had been a neat freak, and I felt closer to her when I followed her routines.

That was how I found myself tucking the blanket back inside the table, carrying my plate and glass from earlier into the kitchen, and figuring out where everything was in the cabinets.

For a few glorious minutes, I'd forgotten I was being held against my will, no matter how pretty the prison. This was normal. Domesticated. What I did when I hung out at my girlfriends' houses.

Then Grey had shattered it all.

He'd brought his own dishes into the dark, sleek kitchen, skimming his fingers across my hip as he stepped up behind me.

"Mm, *mami*. I didn't realize when I said I'd keep you that I'd get a maid too. Although, you shouldn't worry about the dishes." His voice lowered as his fingers pressed against my lower back. Fire burned through me, locking me in place because what the hell was this? I couldn't be this screwed up in the head.

"Blanca comes in once a week to straighten the place up. I'll have to make sure I'm here to protect her from you." The grin was unmistakable in his voice even without looking up at him.

That was the wake up I needed. A reminder that I'd hurt someone. A woman.

Without thinking, I threw my elbow as hard as I could into his stomach and lifted my foot to stomp on his toes. I didn't get that far. Between one breath and the next, he had me pressed up against the wall, face first, with his body glued to mine.

Pain screamed through my body as I tried to control my breathing.

His dark chuckle stirred the hair on top of my head as he spread his legs wide enough that I couldn't kick him. The most I could do was hit the inside of his ankles, but I didn't have enough force to incapacitate him, much less do any lasting damage.

After a minute of persistent struggling, I blew out a hard breath and sagged against the wall, frustrated with myself for getting in this situation.

Shit. I had provoked him into this, and what did he do when I hit him? Restrained me. He hadn't done anything else, only molded his body to mine to hold me against the wall.

"Are you done?" His voice was like warm bourbon dripping over me and, damn it, I didn't want to like his voice. Especially when it was laced with amusement at my expense.

"Yes. My mistake. I don't like being teased, and I forgot myself," I said through quick pants. Not true, but I needed to give him a reason, and I hadn't wanted to tell him the truth. I was lashing out against my circumstances. "You can release me now."

Grey pressed me harder against the wall, and this time, his erection rubbed against the small of my back. How had I missed that?

I stiffened.

"I'll let you go, but the sooner you realize I'm not your enemy, the sooner you can settle into life here. You won't like the alternative." He pushed away, and the cold air that rushed in at his absence sent a chill down my spine.

Clearing my throat, I went back to the sink to rinse off the dishes. "What if I want you to be my enemy?"

He snorted and moved around me to grab a bottle from the cabinet as he went about making a protein shake. "You might want me to be, but I'm not. Despite what you might believe, my brother took you away from that place for a good reason. He was trying to help you. We're trying to help you. We don't want you to die, but we can't sacrifice ourselves either." He said all of that so matter of factly while focused on his task.

It was me who stopped what I was doing to watch him.

I got what he was saying. I even understood it. They were trying to be good people, but how was I supposed to find it in myself to want to stay here? To do whatever sort of fucked up

job they found for me? This went against everything I believed in, and that was a hard pill to swallow.

One that I choked on repeatedly today.

“What about those other women, Grey?” At my use of his name, his gaze flashed to mine. Dark green pools stared into my soul. “Why help me at all? There were other women in far worse shape than me. Other girls. Some were you—” I choked up on my words. I couldn’t even say it. My next inhale through my nose burned as I tried to hold the tears at bay. Never did he take his gaze away from mine, and I appreciated that. He was accepting the ugliness I was trying to unload. It took someone strong to hold the eyes of someone in pain, no matter the cause. And I was in pain, all right. The kind of pain that ripped at my chest because I was warm, fed, and safe, not knowing what kind of fresh hell those women were going through every day. But I could imagine...

“Randall liked playing with me. I had a few bruises, but nothing serious. Other women cried constantly, and when they weren’t crying, they were in a state of catatonia. Why didn’t he take one of those girls?”

Goddamn it. Hot tears started to fill my eyes and my nostrils flared. It took every ounce of strength I had to not let them fall.

Grey sighed, put the scoop back in the protein container, and walked toward me, slowly. “The only answer I can give you is, they weren’t *you*.”

“That doesn’t make any fucking sense!” I screamed.

He raised his hands, and when I didn’t move away, he gently pulled me into his arms. I didn’t return the embrace. I couldn’t. Because even though I was weak enough to accept the comfort, I couldn’t give in all the way. I still needed that line in the sand. And tomorrow, in the light of a new day, I’d pretend this never happened.

One arm went diagonal from my shoulder to the opposite hip, holding me tightly. The other petted my hair. As soon as he hugged me, the tears became even harder to fight back. It

was like my body thought it was okay to let go because someone was there to catch me.

I struggled to breathe past the lump in my throat and squeezed my eyes tight. One fucking tear from each eye escaped, but no more than that. Grey's smooth skin was warm under my cheek, and I knew he felt the wetness. But he didn't comment.

As good as it felt to be held by another human, I didn't want him to hold me, not when he didn't stop what was happening to those women. I pushed back, and for a second, I thought he would fight to keep me there, but he opened his arms, bracing one hand against the counter.

"I'm going to finish cleaning up these dishes, and then I'm going to bed."

He nodded, his expression unreadable. Then it was as if he came to some kind of decision because he randomly nodded again. "You can take the guest room. Remember what I said about the windows. I have to do some work tomorrow, but I'll train you in the afternoon." After finishing his drink and cleaning up his mess, he stopped beside me and smirked. "And, *mamá*, fight me all you want. It turns me on."

Then he left me standing in the center of his kitchen. A door, probably to his bedroom, shut. Not thinking too hard about what happened, I finished loading the dishes in the dishwasher, started it, and headed to the bedroom.

I didn't sleep much.

There were too many thoughts swirling around my head. Trying to make sense of what was happening. Analyzing Grey's actions to find holes in his kindness. If he had acted like Andre, this would be a no-brainer. I could hate him because he threatened me.

If he had taken me away from that other place like Lafe, I could hate him by association. But he was making it really fucking difficult for me to keep treating him like the villain.



THE NEXT MORNING it felt like I had a pound of sand under each eyelid.

Sounds were coming from the other side of the door, so that had to mean Grey was awake. Groaning, I stretched and twisted back and forth to crack my back. Now that it was morning, I felt foolish for thinking he would try to break in on me. There had been too much opportunity for him, or any of the brothers for that matter, to hurt me if they'd wanted.

So, where did that leave me?

Was it fair for me to keep lashing out against them when they were trying to help me? Or at least Grey. He was the only one I thought wasn't a complete fucktard.

Those stupid questions were on repeat inside my head so much they were giving me a headache. I put a pin in it for now and got ready for the day in the bathroom. I picked out a pair of sweats and a t-shirt from the dresser to wear. The pants were too long, requiring a few rolls at the bottom, but they had drawstrings. The t-shirt was only a little too big.

I found Grey in the kitchen, making eggs and toast. What was with these men and cooking?

He glanced up, none of the heat or playfulness from last night in his gaze. "Morning. Are you convinced I'm not the bad guy now that I didn't try and break into your room?"

How had he known I'd expected him to? I slid up to the counter, pressing my palms against the cool granite, ignoring his question.

"*Mami*, you have a very expressive face. And you look like shit. So, was I right? Were you waiting for me to come take advantage of you? Were you sorry that I didn't?" His voice was tired, like he'd been up for hours already.

I glanced at the clock, and it was only eight. "I don't think *you* specifically are the bad guy. But you're not a shining knight, either. Can you blame me for being cautious after what

I've gone through?" That almost had my mind taking a path I didn't want to go down. If it did, I'd end up driving myself crazy.

He shrugged as he separated the eggs on two plates and started buttering the toast that popped up. "I can't say I blame you, but you're going to have to come to terms with it sooner rather than later. You're only trying our patience by acting up."

My ire tried to build, but my tank was running on empty.

"Here, eat." He slid a plate over with a glass of water that was already poured on the counter. "Something important popped up today, and I'll be leaving in a couple of hours. No one will be coming in for you to try and make a grand escape." A flicker of a smile coasted over his lips, but it was gone before I really had a chance to see it. "We'll train when I'm back. Don't try anything."

He picked up his own plate and glass and walked off. Leaving me once again with his kindness and my thoughts. Fucking hell.

I needed a distraction, so I carried my food to the couch and turned on the TV. Luckily, it wasn't too complicated of a setup. I found the Golden Girls streaming and settled on that. The light hilarity of the show was mind-numbing.

After two episodes, Grey returned, carrying his dishes to the sink. He was dressed in a black t-shirt and a pair of jeans, so whatever he was doing wasn't related to fighting.

Grabbing his shoes out of the hall closet, he walked over and sat in the chair to put them on. If he felt the weight of my stare, he never let on. He never even looked at me at all.

And to my very reluctant dismay, that bothered me.

"If you need something, there's a panel by the front door. Push the red button, and it rings to my cell. The black button rings to Andre." Then Grey left.

He fucking left. No look over his shoulder, no goodbye, nothing.

So, what did I do? I cleaned up the dishes and tried to snoop in his room but found the door locked. Then I sat on the couch and watched TV like a good fucking girl.

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ANDRE

I pressed the heel of my hands into my eye sockets, massaging against the bone in an attempt to assuage this fucking headache that wouldn't quit.

My head had been throbbing for an entire day. Ever since I'd discovered what my dumbass brother had done, it had only worsened as my other crazy-ass brother decided to insert himself into the situation.

What they should have done was let me take care of her. Our lives were hard enough as it was. We didn't need to complicate it more by adding a woman who clearly didn't want to be here. That spelled trouble in the form of narcing.

Except, Lafe was over-plagued by his conscience. Grey was fucking smitten. And Parker was being his typical shit-stirrer self. Trying to keep these bastards alive was going to send me to an early grave.

I huffed a laugh to myself. I'd consider it a win if I died of natural causes over being on the receiving end of an assassin's gun.

My phone rang, and I glanced at the screen.

Speak of the fucking devil.

Twisting in my desk chair, I seriously considered not answering it. What were the chances that he knew something was up? I was confident we didn't have any leaks in our house, but I could never be too sure. And that uncertainty had kept me from getting a full night's sleep the entire last decade.

Right before it stopped, I hit the green button. “Vicente,” I greeted coolly.

“Andre,” he returned mockingly. If I were there in person, I was sure I’d see that sadistic grin he wore so often. “You didn’t call me back after the last job. I assume you took care of it to my exact specifications?”

“You know I did. When have I ever failed?” I spun around to face the windows. As usual, it was a gorgeous day outside, with the sun shining behind light, wispy clouds. Some of our men trained in the courtyard, while others walked the perimeter. When they were inside the wall, they were more relaxed. The guards on the other side were vigilant and somber. We’d never been attacked, but these men knew as well as I did that it was a matter of when, not if.

The million-dollar question was, who would that enemy be? Because we had many.

I was glad he’d called me while I was in my office. It was the place I did my best thinking and felt the calmest. Of the four of us, I was the only one who had an office and used it. Parker had a dedicated suite, but it was more of a gaming system setup than an actual office for work. I wasn’t even sure if he did work out of here. He had leagues of men from the top schools in South America monitoring business for him. How he found them and kept them loyal, I had no idea.

If only he’d put as much energy into keeping our family together, I wouldn’t need to ride his ass so hard.

Not that he gave a fuck.

“Oh, I don’t know. If you ask Lafe, I’m sure he could find one time you failed. Or failed *him*, anyway...” The amusement trickled down the line, souring my stomach.

Gritting my teeth, I didn’t answer. Lafe didn’t want to admit it, but I’d saved his life in the only way I knew how. He could hate and despise me all he wanted; I didn’t regret it.

Vicente chuckled. “Still a little testy over that, I see.”

“Why are you calling?” We didn’t have the typical father-son dynamic. How could we when people didn’t matter to

Vicente except for how they benefited him. We were all tools to be used and discarded as far as he was concerned.

“Andre,” he cautioned, but there was a note of dark humor in my name. “You always have so much more bite whenever you’re not here in person. Why is that?” he asked as if the question intrigued him.

I swallowed. He was right. I did have more of a backbone to stand up to him when I was in my own home. It could have been a false confidence from having scores of men surrounding the compound willing to die for us. It might also be that I could momentarily forget his cruelty when he wasn’t sitting in front of me.

The reason didn’t matter. I also didn’t care, outside of the fact that I couldn’t act like this. My disrespect would only bring more trouble down on our heads.

“I apologize,” I said through clenched teeth. “What brings you to call me? A new job?”

“Why yes, as a matter of fact, I do have a job for you and your brothers. My doctor, who is on my generous payroll, I might add, is attempting to strike. He’s refusing to treat my men or allow them in his clinic because of the role they play in the Institution.” He sniffed. “I need someone to remind him of why that’s not a smart idea. I don’t care how messy you get, just as long as he changes his tune by morning.” There was a long pause. “And he’s left alive to pursue his passion another day.”

Sighing, I dug my fingers into my temple. My headache was nearing migraine territory. If I didn’t get it under control, I’d have to sequester myself into a dark room for a day or so.

“No preference on discipline?” I hated to ask. But it was better to know what he expected going in before finishing a job and realizing he was displeased. He usually showed that displeasure in very private but painful ways.

Hence, why Lafe hated me.

“Have fun. Get creative. Just make sure when the men show back up tomorrow morning, they’ll be let in and given

the red-carpet treatment. Donnie is lucky none of my men were on death's door.”

The phone clicked off, and I dropped my head gently against the back of the chair.

Donnie was a soft man at heart. Not a fighter either. He'd been our doctor growing up, giving us suckers when we visited or making house calls.

Rage built in my chest, all directed at the doctor. He would know who would be sent in to persuade him to treat the men. We should make it hurt for putting us in this position.

The bright side was, this job only required one of us to see him. Lafe was out. He was too sensitive and sentimental, even if he refused to acknowledge it. Parker was a crap shoot right now. He'd been so erratic in behavior lately; I couldn't trust he wouldn't push Vicente's buttons just for laughs.

Grey it was.

The door to my office banged against the wall as the man himself sauntered in. At least he was making this easy for me. I wouldn't have to track him down.

He popped his gum and tossed himself down in the chair on the other side of the desk. Grey didn't offer a greeting. He watched me, his cold green eyes not giving anything away.

To draw this out, I rummaged in the top drawer of my desk and grabbed the bottle of Excedrin. I popped two in my mouth and swigged it down with cool water.

Sharp pressure was building behind my right eye, but I still looked him dead in the eyes. I wasn't about to break the silence. He barged in here like he had something to say, so he needed to say it. Then I could send him on his merry way. To Donnie.

Eventually, he rolled his eyes. “You need to get Lafe off my back. He's called me ten times today about Amorette. He can't have her back.”

Now the pressure was building behind my left eye until my entire head was a throbbing cock with no orgasm in sight.

I completely ignored his comments about Lafe. He could sort his own shit out with our brother. “Did you get her last name? I noticed you didn’t text any information to me last night.”

He leaned forward and braced his elbows on the desk. Great, now there would be greasy skin prints on the glass top. I wasn’t typically concerned with such things, but I liked my office space to be uncluttered and clean. It was the one place in my life where I felt like I had control.

And Grey just fucked with it.

“Amorette Black. From Virginia, just outside of DC. I tried to get more than that, but she was having a moment. That should be enough to get your background check started.”

“Age?” I raised a brow. I had connections, but it helped the process go faster if I had more than a few sparse details. If they were determined to truly keep her, I wanted everything on her, including her last shit, by the time he got back from this job.

He lifted one shoulder like he didn’t give one fuck about making my life easier. Typical. “She’s at least in her twenties. If I had to guess, I’d say between twenty and twenty-five.”

“She looks eighteen, if a day.”

A slight grin tugged at the corner of his mouth. “You only think that because she’s barely over five feet tall, with a young face. She’s older, though. I’d bet on it. Talk to her for ten minutes and you’d know that.”

Shit, I hadn’t talked to her at all. I’d shoved the gun under her chin then tossed her in the spare bedroom.

Nevertheless, she’d surprised me. I didn’t take surprises very well. Especially surprises which could get one or more of us killed because at least one brother was thinking with his dick. Parker, I’d expect that from, but not Grey.

Or even Lafe, not anymore.

As soon as I’d set eyes on her, my heart had started pounding in my throat, and I saw our lives flash before my

eyes. Bottomline, she was a threat that needed to go. I'd just have to find a time to make her disappear.

Speaking of opportunities...

"I'm glad you stopped by. I need you for a job." The words had barely left my mouth before Grey shook his head.

"No, I have to prepare for this fight. I also promised her I'd train her."

"What? Fucking train her?" Did he really want to give this girl more tools to take us down? Grey was an excellent teacher, and I didn't want her to be any more dangerous to us than she already was.

"Yes." That was it. One word accompanying that unblinking stare. He'd decided, and nothing could change his mind.

"No. Fuck that. You didn't even ask me what the job was." And he wouldn't. He had zero interest in doing anything that would take him away from his own agenda right now. "It's Donnie." Something flickered in the back of his eyes. "He's refusing to treat the men Vicente sent to his clinic. If I had to guess, they're part of the trafficking ring. One of us is to give him a message he can't hide from. If he doesn't open his doors tomorrow morning, I doubt he'll see nightfall."

"Why can't you go?" His top lip curled.

"I have a migraine coming on. I'm about ten minutes from finding a dark room until it passes." Anticipating his next question, I continued. "You know it would destroy Lafe. He cares for the old *pendejo*. And no. Parker can't go either. He's more liable to get us all killed with his games."

Grey flopped back in the chair. "If I do this, I don't take any more jobs for at least two weeks. I already had my own shit to take care of today and this is going to put me behind. Despite my confidence in fighting Bruno, I do still need to train."

I nodded. He did. Bruno was a beast, and Grey would need all the extra strength and skill he could hone to win. "Done.

I'd go, but this migraine is going to take me out sooner than I'd like. Donnie has to be disciplined tonight."

"Type of discipline?" He glanced down at his hands, where his fingers were rubbing the scarred knuckles of the other.

"Up to you. Vicente doesn't care as long as he bows to his will."

"Fine," he said, pushing up from the chair.

"Wait." I tossed out a hand to stop him. He slowly lowered himself back down and raised an eyebrow.

"Bring Amorette to me until you get back." That would solve at least one of my problems. Grey would be pissed, but there was nothing he could do about it after the fact. And he'd still be alive, so he could hate me just like Lafe if he needed to. Although, with Grey, it would be more of a pride thing that I got one over on him rather than actual hurt.

He gave me one sharp jerk of his head. "No fucking way. I know you. I'd come back to her mysteriously missing after escaping, right?"

Shit. With my head threatening to toss the contents of my stomach, I was showing too much of my hand. Otherwise, he never would have suspected a thing.

"She doesn't belong here. Just because she's got a cute face and a decent body doesn't make her worth keeping." With each word, my voice rose. I felt like I was talking to a wall while fucking a cactus-filled hole whenever I tried to reason with my brothers. It was pointless and painful.

They only saw what they wanted and always did as they pleased.

He chuckled, tucking his chin to his chest as he studied his hands. "Keep telling yourself whatever you need to hear. I'm not looking for a fuck buddy. I can find those anywhere. Lafe was right, though, she's a fighter. I like that about her."

I gave him a dry look. "So, you're telling me you're not going to fuck her?"

The grin he returned was as smug as it was cutting. “Oh, I am. She’s mine now, and you can’t have her.”

Groaning, I dropped my face into my hands. I didn’t have the bandwidth to think about any of this. After the migraine was gone, I’d revisit our *problem* and figure out a way to knock some sense into Grey.

“If you’re using that logic, you might as well give her back to Lafe. He saved her, after all.” And I could easily steal her from our sensitive little brother.

Grey waited for me to bring my attention back to him before he spoke again, his voice chilling. “He fucked up. She escaped on his watch, so as far as I’m concerned, he lost rights to her.”

“Do you hear yourself? Is that who we are now? We kidnap and hold women against their will?” We were dirty as fuck; we had to be to stay alive with the family we were born into. But from a very early age, we knew the type of men we didn’t want to be. Holding that woman here went against our moral compass, as broken as it was.

“She’s seen too much, so she can’t go back home. Not when she could pick us out of a crowded room and share details such as our names. She stays. I feel a fuck of a lot better about keeping her alive than tossing her in the ocean with cement blocks tied around her waist.”

“I wasn’t going to kill her,” I argued, my voice starting to thin with the pain.

“Weren’t you?”

Okay, fuck, I was. Because at the end of the day, my brothers were all I had, and I wasn’t going to lose them.

“Why does Lafe want her back?” I changed the subject.

“Don’t know. Don’t care.”

All my patience and interest in this conversation were gone. I couldn’t even pretend anymore when my vision darkened around the edges. “Go see Donnie. Make it hurt enough that he never puts us in this position again.” I waved

him away. The quicker he left, the sooner I could fall into bed for a couple of hours.

Grey stood, heading toward the door on silent feet. For as large as he was, he was the stealthiest of us all. With all his training, it came with the territory.

At the door, he gripped the doorjamb and glanced over his shoulder. “I set the alarm. No one can get in or out of my apartment without my say-so. I also revoked your access.” With how crazy he was acting over this bitch, that didn’t surprise me at all. “The other reason I came to see you was to let you know there’s a fight I have to oversee tomorrow night. It’s big and last minute. Vargas is in town and needs to make a quick buck. As a courtesy, I wanted to let you know I’ll be taking Amorette with me. Parker has agreed to come as well.”

Fucking hell. I should just let her have enough rope to hang herself rather than constantly trying to get rid of her. Then they wouldn’t protest her death. I couldn’t give her to my connections, they’d value her too much.

“You trust her not to betray you?” I asked, my voice grave. He was putting a lot of faith in someone he didn’t know at all.

He shrugged. “She’ll stay, or she’ll try to escape and die. It’s her call. But I won’t keep her caged. We’ve had too much of that in our lives, and I’d rather give her a chance than clip her wings.”

“She’s going to disappoint you. You know that, right? The only people we’ve ever been able to lean on is each other.”

“I guess we’ll see.” Then he was gone.

Shutting my computer off, I barely remembered to lock my office before I went to my apartment. I made sure all the blinds were shut tight to keep out any light. Once I’d undressed, I slipped between the cool sheets on my bed.

I couldn’t think about our little problem right now. But later, I’d decide if I would follow Grey to keep an eye on her.

Later, I’d think about her later.

AMORETTE

Grey never came back. At least not while I was awake.

I spent the rest of the day on the couch. Then, I made dinner using what ingredients he had in the fridge. Grilled chicken and rice with a homemade garlic dill sauce. To round it off, I cut up a few apples as well.

It wasn't the typical vegetable in a meal, but it was something outside of starch and protein. Once I was done, I glanced over the large amounts of food. There was too much for just me. There was probably enough food to feed Grey twice over. But I refused to look at why I would make dinner for him.

By the time darkness fell, I had locked myself away in the guestroom. After taking a long, hot shower, I fell into bed with all of my irritating thoughts. During the day, I'd managed to keep them at bay with mindless, funny television classics. I had watched several episodes of *The Golden Girls*, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, and *Family Matters*.

The only thing I'd allowed myself to watch were decades-old wholesome sitcoms. It seemed to help numb the mind. With who I was and what I did for a living, I wasn't typically someone who tried to escape reality, but I needed a break.

A break from myself. A break from the situation. A break from the brothers in all the forms I'd met them in.

Except when I laid down, stray thoughts bombarded me.

Why did they save me?

Could I really stay here?

Would I ever see Grace again?

My breath caught on the last thought. Damn, I missed my sister so much. But as much as I missed her, it was better that she was back home. Unless I could escape and get back to her, I hoped she never found out what happened to me.

Sometimes not knowing was worse, but if she knew I was originally taken into a sex trafficking ring and that I was still alive? I'd rather she believe I'd died a quick death at the hands of a psycho.

These men—these brothers—saved me, but I didn't doubt for a second that they would kill anyone else.

Which begged the most important question, why didn't they kill me? Or, in Lafe's perspective, why did he save me at all?

He could have left me to my fate and gone on with his life. Wasn't that what they normally did anyway? They seemed to bury their heads in the sand when it came to anything outside of their direct actions.

After talking to Grey, I recognized Lafe, in his own way, was trying to do something good. The longer I was here, the more guilt I started to feel for bitching at him and hating him for things out of his control.

But how could I start over, in a life so different from my own, when I *knew* those other women were getting abused daily? That wasn't who I was.

A small voice whispered through my head, *but maybe that's who you have to be to survive.*

The old Amorette way of thinking rationalized every concession I made. I could stay. I could figure out a way to help the women from the inside. When the time and opportunity came, I could escape and take down the entire organization.

It was a long shot, but the one thought let me know I was still the same person I always was. And with that small

comfort, I drifted off into a dreamless sleep.



GOLDEN YELLOW LIGHT streamed through the gauzy curtains, washing over my face. Blinking rapidly, I rolled over and scrubbed my eyes with my fingers.

Shit. I slept in.

The entire time I'd been here, I barely slept. When I did, the lightest noises woke me up. Sleeping like this? It meant I was starting to get comfortable with a warm bed, hot water, and good food.

Lies could trick my body. Although if I asked Grey, he'd tell me I was safe here as long as I didn't do anything stupid, like trying to break through the glass and run away.

I hated that I believed him. While in this apartment with him—or without him, apparently—I did feel safe. Safer than I had been in the other apartment. It might be a different story when I was outside of these four walls. Especially with his other brother, the one who liked to lead with his gun, it would *definitely* be a different story.

Just as I finished up in the bathroom, a soft knock came at the door.

I froze mid-step, then continued over to unlock it. No one who wanted to do me any harm would be knocking. It was still just so surreal to be in this calm, steady environment.

The door quietly swung open to reveal a grinning Grey on the other side. He gripped the top of the doorway with his other hand on the knob, displaying his bare, muscled torso.

Unable to stop the human reaction, I glanced down, taking in the defined muscular planes of his chest and the tattoos decorating his smooth tan skin.

The traitorous organ in my chest flipped and skipped a beat, and I scowled.

Grey smirked as if he knew exactly what brought that look to my face. If he did, he was gentlemanly enough not to comment on it.

“Morning, *mami*. Did you miss me?” The grin turned into a crooked smirk as his dark green eyes glittered in the morning light.

He was in a fantastic mood. I was immediately wary.

“Do you mean, did I miss human interaction after having so little of it lately? Yes, I did.” I surprised myself with my honesty.

Apparently, it also surprised him by how his eyes widened and his smirk fell. It came back quickly as he stepped back.

“I made breakfast, and I might have noticed a few containers of leftovers in the fridge. Did you cook for me last night?” He glanced over his shoulder as he led the way to the kitchen.

Heat suffused my neck and chest, slowly creeping up my jaw. Why did I save the food? I should have put any uneaten items in the garbage disposal.

“I like to cook.” That was a bit of an exaggeration, although I didn’t mind it. I just didn’t like what it meant that I’d made extra food.

“Mm,” he hummed as he picked up two plates of fluffy eggs and bacon with pico on the side. Instead of heading to the living room, he went to the small nook.

The table for two was set under a window overlooking a small yard. Every window in this place overlooked a small yard. They were trapped here like I was, except they had the power to leave when they wanted or needed to.

“So, what happened yesterday?” Shit. That sounded like an accusation. An accusation from a disgruntled girlfriend. I pinched the bridge of my nose and took a deep breath, reminding myself I didn’t care. This was just polite conversation to get him on my side.

He finished chewing his first bite before he answered. “I got called away on a job and didn’t get back until, I don’t know, one or two this morning.”

I glanced at the clock. It was ten now. A full eight hours of sleep was probably why he looked so bright-eyed and bushy-tailed.

When I didn’t have a response for him, we both dug into the food. It was delicious in a healthy sort of way. Except for the bacon, which was practically its own food group. I would never complain about salty, savory bacon.

The last bite tasted just as delicious as the first, and I pushed my plate away then patted my stuffed stomach. He’d given me a considerable portion. I was shocked I was able to finish it all after the way I’d been eating over the last week or so.

“I have a surprise.” He pushed his blond strands away from his face as that happiness entered his gaze again.

How could he be happy living the life of a criminal?

“What’s the surprise?”

Rolling his eyes, he stacked my plate over his. “Don’t hurt yourself with excitement.”

If I were back home, I’d be a smartass and feign giddiness while I repeated the question. But I wasn’t home. And no matter how he saw our situation, we weren’t friends.

He sighed. “I have a fight I need to oversee tonight. My main guy is unavailable. If you promise to behave, I’ll take you with me.”

I perked up and raised my eyebrows. Was he serious? I had an opportunity to leave my current prison? Or at least, if the fight was here, I’d be able to be around other people. “I want that. I’m going stir-crazy sitting here by myself.”

“You give me your word that you won’t do anything stupid?” He leaned closer, closing the distance between us until only a handful of inches remained. His warm breath fanned over my mouth as his dark gaze captured mine.

Goosebumps erupted down my arms and the bottom of my spine tingled from the sudden move. The sexual tension thrummed between us but we both ignored it.

“I can’t make any promises,” I breathed.

His low laughter hit me in the pit of my stomach. “That’s what I like about you, *mami*. You don’t lie and you’re feisty. I’ll just have to keep an extra close watch on you.”

The shiver snaking down my back didn’t escape his notice. He winked, then carried our plates over to the sink.

“We haven’t ordered clothes for you yet. But there are some things in the closet of the guest room. See if anything will fit. Normally, the fights are jeans and tank attire for women, but I doubt anything like that would fit you. Mia is about five inches taller with an additional forty pounds.”

Mia. That was the first time I heard that name.

Who was she to this man?

Couldn’t be a girlfriend, or her stuff would be in his room.

Sister? Childhood friend?

The question was on the tip of my tongue, but I held it in. If I started asking questions about her, it would make me seem more jealous and unhinged than I’d come across earlier.

I’d find other things to ask him so he’d see I was making an effort.

“When do we leave?” I stood and pushed my chair in, bracing against the back as I waited for his answer.

“You have about two hours. There’s some business I have to attend to before the fight, and we need to get there early.”

I left him in the kitchen to go get ready. Anticipation thrummed through me. I’d have to play this smart. If an opportunity presented itself, I just might take it. But only if it seemed like it would actually work.

What I didn’t need was another failed attempt these men could rub in my face. Grey had been good-natured about it all

so far, and he seemed to be keeping the brothers away. Still, I didn't want to push him too far.

Scanning the contents in the closet, there were zero options I would choose for myself and probably none that would fit. I was a Plain Jane kind of girl. I liked dark colors, mostly black and navy, and no frill dress suits. Although, I did lean more toward skirts to avoid the hassle of having the pants hemmed.

I looked young. Very young, which I was sure was what got me abducted in the first place. Since graduating, I'd taken to dressing older than I was so bastards would take me more seriously in the courtroom.

Whoever this Mia was, she was flashy and sultry and about four or five sizes too large. I rubbed my eyebrow as I tried to get creative. I couldn't go to the fight in pajamas. I also couldn't go looking like a little kid playing dress up.

If I was able to make a run for it, I'd be that much easier to spot.

Wait. There were a few items stuffed in the very back of the closet I hadn't checked yet. Using herculean effort, I shifted the clothes to the left to reach them. On the edges of the rack, I found a few dresses that weren't necessarily my size but only about two sizes too large instead of several.

A deep red dress with a plunging neckline. Nope. A large chest was the one thing I did have, so that was out unless I wanted to flash everyone. The other was a slinky black wrap dress. It said cocktail party instead of fight club, but it was better than gray stretchy pants.

With a strange mixture of excitement and sobriety, I got ready until I was satisfied with my appearance. From Mia's stash, I was able to blow dry my hair and apply some mascara and red gloss. I didn't bother with anything else. Using other people's cosmetics was never advisable. Grace would have a fit at me.

The wrap dress was perfect because I could tighten it around my waist until no one would know it wasn't mine. Now, the only issue was shoes.

Grey was waiting for me in the living room in a pair of worn faded blue jeans and a fairly tight black t-shirt. The way his shoulders and biceps bulged under the thin fabric, he exuded a lethality I didn't often come across in Virginia.

When he looked up, he did a double-take, then let out a slow wolf whistle.

“Damn, *mami*. I was keeping you before, but now, I don't think I'll ever let you go.” He walked over and brushed his fingertips across my waist.

“Where are we going for the fight? Is it here or...” I glanced toward the door then down at my bare feet. “Actually, I need shoes first.”

He held up a finger and went to the front door, picking up a small duffel bag. When he came back, he set it on the coffee table and unzipped it. “One of the soldier's kid sisters is about your size. See if these fit. If not, we might have to make a stop.”

I stepped closer and took in the various pairs of shoes piled together. Sneakers, heels, flip flops. On the bottom, there was a pair of small red heels that would look nice with this dress. They weren't so ridiculous that I couldn't run in them if needed as well as being classy enough for the outfit.

They were half a size bigger than what I wore. Perfect. I'd take that over too small anyway. The couch cushion depressed under me as I sat to put them on. “So, where are we going?”

“We're heading to a small town on the central coast of Venezuela. It's close enough to Caracas to draw the crowds but out of the way enough that we don't have to be quite so cautious.” He crossed his arms, waiting patiently for me to finish and stand up. Then he offered his arm when I joined him in the middle of the living room.

I hesitated for a brief moment, then slid my hand through the crook of his elbow. Glancing at him out of the corner of my eye, I tried to get a read on what he was thinking. He was more distracted than the other times we spoke, though he still gave me most of his attention.

Grey seemed to be in a decent mood. Not overly pumped to go to work, but not dreading it either. The most puzzling aspect of his personality was how he treated me.

“These are fights only, right?” I hedged. He’d said they detested the trafficking part of the business, but I had to be sure of what I was walking into. I needed to be prepared for what I’d see.

“Fights only. I have some low-key meetings with security and my manager about the upcoming lineup. Then the fights,” he said as we entered the hallway. We didn’t pass anyone, but that wasn’t surprising since this was the residential part of the place.

“What am I expected to do?”

He smirked as he glanced down at me. “You’re to be my shadow.”

Shaking my head, I left the conversation alone. For whatever reason, he wasn’t as forthcoming as I had hoped, and I had a feeling needling him for specifics would only entertain him rather than giving me the answers I sought.

Pushing open the door to the common area, voices assaulted me. Lots of male voices. Men were coming and going, laughing and cutting up. It appeared to be some kind of break or shift change.

At least half of the men didn’t care at all that I was there. The other half cast me curious glances and stopped whatever they were doing. A few sent me lascivious grins while trailing their gazes down my body.

Grey strolled through and pretended we were the only two people in the place.

At the large glass doors, he swung it wide open with no thought at all.

But my steps faltered as I gulped down fresh, tropical air. My eyes watered as the sunlight warmed my skin. A watery laugh bubbled up my throat to hear birds singing in the trees.

I didn't realize how much I missed the outdoors until this moment. How dull life had become inside the apartment, but out here, everything was vivid and sharp, assaulting my senses in the best way.

Absently, I realized the door clanked shut behind us, separating us from everyone else.

"You okay there?" Amusement laced Grey's words, and I didn't even care that he was laughing at me right then. I'd missed being outside so much, it actually hurt my heart to experience nature. But it was a good hurt.

"Yeah..." I breathed, sucking in another lungful of the salty air. "Yeah, for the first time this week, I think I am okay." I'd already started to get comfortable with Grey, but out here? I almost saw myself ignoring the voice inside my head that screamed for me to return to the warehouse.

For the moment, I was selfish, pushing my guilt into the dark recesses of my mind to enjoy this one moment. Surprisingly, it worked.

Shaking his head with a half-smile curling his lips, he led me down the stairs and we walked down a path leading away from the building. I glanced back to see where I had been for the last few weeks. Somehow, as I took in the industrial building that was both modern and imposing, I didn't lose my footing.

"We're taking a helicopter. It's a couple hours' flight from here and the helicopter is easier than the jet. We only use that for long-distance trips or to shove status down someone's throat," Grey spoke as he guided me through a lush field with tall, wiry grasses.

He didn't seem like a man who liked to talk. He had no trouble with it, but only to get a point across. So, was he telling me these details now to put me at ease? Was he even the kind of man who would do that?

My time with Grey confused me. His normalcy and kindness were starting to blur the lines of what I thought were once so black and white.

Through the grove of palm trees, the helicopter came into view. Someone milled about the outside, maybe checking it over before we left.

The man had disappeared on the other side as we got closer, and it wasn't until we were within five yards that the man reappeared.

It was the smirk that caught my attention first. Then the bottomless black eyes.

“Hello, Little Love. Are you ready to have some fun?”

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AMORETTE



I was surprised the helicopter ride was so smooth. Parker was a good pilot. There hadn't been many opportunities for me to ride in a helicopter, but this was by far the best ride I'd been on. The way these things dipped to the side so easily would make me motion sick, but I hadn't experienced any of that today.

Although, I was incredibly bored during the ride.

We all had headphones on, but there was zero conversation. Parker had been focused on piloting and Grey messed around on his phone. Both were in the front while I was strapped so nicely in the back. No phone, no book, just the backs of two admittedly gorgeous, yet questionable, men to stare at.

We landed on a rooftop helipad after what I thought might have been a couple of hours. There was no way to be certain without a clock. As soon as we touched down, three men walked out to wait outside the ring with crossed arms and dark sunglasses. Dressed in all black, they reminded me of Vegas bouncers on steroids. The strong downdraft from the blades had their shirts billowing, teasing tan strips of chests and stomachs.

Each man had a 'kill first, ask questions later' vibe, and I stiffened.

Grey had grown on me. I had no idea what Parker did, but he'd let me go, even if it was for his own asshole amusement.

A brief fear skittered across my mind... What if they were more like the warehouse men than I'd thought?

It took less than a minute for my brain to discard that thought. They might not be heroes, but they weren't evil either. They couldn't be.

As soon as the engine started to die down, Grey and Parker unbuckled their seatbelts and hung their headsets on hooks. I followed suit, perching on the edge of the seat, waiting for them to get out and help me. I'd definitely need the assistance in this outfit. Unfortunately.

As the deafening sound of the blades slowly stopped, the footsteps of the men echoed over the concrete. They addressed Grey with a deference that seemed odd. He'd been nothing but his version of kind to me, which admittedly was a little harsh, but he hadn't tried to demand obedience.

Only how well did I really know him?

Grey ignored them, popping the door open and ducking in to stare into my eyes. Cupping both sides of my neck, he bent forward and pressed his mouth to my ear. "No one here knows how you came to be with us. It plays to your benefit and mine to be my lover. Can you do that?" he whispered.

His hot breath ghosting over my ear caused a full-body shudder. When he pulled back, he had a shit-eating grin on. I narrowed my gaze, wanting to point out it was a human reaction and I had sensitive ears, not that *he* made me shiver. But I didn't.

Instead, I nodded.

What he proposed made sense, and I didn't have to be a genius to know I could be in deep shit if people realized where I was before. Would men see me as fair game? Would I be an acceptable target for their anger?

In this, I was all too happy to play along.

"Good. Remember. Stay with me, unless I say otherwise." He smirked and I knew he wouldn't be saying otherwise.

Grey moved his hands to my waist and lifted me out, setting me on the ground in front of him. Close but not quite touching. When he turned to address the men, he tucked me into his side, his hand sliding down my back in clear possession, stopping just above my ass. I wanted to shoot him an irritated glare for taking advantage of the situation, but I didn't want to give myself away. I was also fairly certain his hand wasn't on my ass because it couldn't reach it. Bastard.

There was an air of annoyance wafting off the men as they continued speaking like he hadn't ignored them for the last few minutes. Whoever Grey was to them, it seemed their obedience only went so far.

Parker walked around the helicopter checking a few things, then he slipped his hands into the pockets of his black slacks and strolled toward the rooftop door, whistling a vaguely familiar song. He didn't glance at us once, apparently having better things to do inside.

Finally, Grey started to give the men orders or instructions or something. I wasn't quite sure since it was all in Spanish. When we returned to his apartment, I'd ask for a program to learn the language.

If there was anything I hated, it was being at a clear disadvantage. Back in the normal world, I'd have started working immediately to eradicate the weakness. Here, I was at his mercy. The fact I'd have to ask permission for anything grated against my pride, but this was all baby steps. I could suffer through any hit to my pride as long as I *survived*.

We started walking toward the door Parker had just gone through, and the men didn't try to hide their obvious interest in who I was. They leered and eye fucked me the entire walk to the door. But Grey didn't pay them any attention as he kept barking out rapid Spanish.

Shit, their gaze on my body was making my skin itch, but I'd be damned if I gave them the satisfaction of knowing it. Instead, I raised my chin, looked dead ahead, and added a little strut in my walk as they fell behind, because... Fuck them.

I had never cowed before men, not even in the warehouse, and I wouldn't start now. As much as I hated to admit it, Grey's presence at my side added to my bravery.

Damn him.

The sounds of our footsteps reverberated around the enclosed stairwell. Graffiti was scrawled over every inch of the concrete walls, but the floors were swept clean. Not like some of the dirty, trash-filled stairwells in Virginia.

Grey stopped my descent a few floors down and opened the door to the main building. "We'll take the elevator from here."

Holy shit. I tried not to make a show of glancing around at the opulence and large, sleek doors lining the hallway. We were in a hotel, by the looks of it. Which could be deceiving, obviously, from the wing Addict had kept me in. Although I had a strong gut feeling, this was a hotel where the fights were held. It just made sense.

A few maids were in the hallway with their linen carts, chatting happily to each other. When they saw us appear though, they cut off all conversation and dropped their gazes to the floor, cupping their hands in front of them.

I didn't like that.

Glancing up at Grey, I wanted to see if he thrived on this kind of regard, but he was moving his gaze between the men at our side and the hall in front of us. I'd seen wealthy men like him move around DC. Most of the population didn't exist to them. I wasn't sure how his callous attitude made me feel or why I would even care.

We rounded a corner to the elevator bay that was every bit as fancy as the hall. With shiny black marble and bright lights lining the ceiling, highlighting just how good the maids were at their jobs.

One of the men stepped forward to press the button, and when he stepped back, he was within my personal bubble. He didn't smile, but his gaze was proprietary as it swept over my chest and down to my ass.

Grey looped his arm around my stomach, growling at the man as he pulled me against his chest. He paled, and all three collectively stepped back.

I released a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding. A knot in my stomach loosened as I placed my hands over his forearm, thanking him the only way I knew how at that moment. He wouldn't let anyone touch me. He would protect me. And that made me like him a little more.

Damn it.

From that point, I didn't exist for the men. They didn't even look at me out of the corner of their eyes. Their deference when Grey first got out of the helicopter returned with a vengeance. They'd just needed a reminder of who Grey was... but now I was more than curious. It raged through me, begging me to ask all the questions I knew he would never answer.

If he had this kind of power, why did he act like he was also a roundabout victim of the life he'd been born into?

I pushed the thought from my mind as the elevator doors opened, and we stepped inside. The men allowed us to go first. When they did follow, the men stayed on the other side of the space, crowded against the wall to avoid touching me. It was hard to keep the triumphant smirk off of my face.

When the doors opened again, I'd get my first real look into what I was positive was illegal underground fighting. An unassuming, quiet ding sounded as the doors slid open and Grey walked me out.

This level was a cross between posh and industrial. Posh in the way the black walls and floors gleamed under the fluorescent lights. Industrial in the way the ceiling exposed all the lighting, ductwork, and whatever else was typically hidden.

Like a nightclub in the daylight, it seemed odd to be empty, even though thumping club music played from the speakers. The room wasn't terribly large, but there was a door at the end, which was apparently right where we were heading.

Grey scanned his phone at the keypad and the door unlocked. The next room or two were impressive. The right side was floor-to-ceiling windows, and the doorway on the opposite wall led to a sleek boardroom.

My brain fritzed over this new information as I was both shocked and disgusted at the way criminals did business. But I wasn't ignorant. I practiced law and knew better than most that the worst criminals were the wealthiest and liked the finer things in life, but it was different to experience it firsthand.

The hand at my waist squeezed and I looked up into Grey's mischievous green eyes.

"We're going into the conference room. The door will be open, but you can stay out here if you want. You can watch the staff get ready for the fight down below." He nodded toward the window.

"I'd rather do that," I said quietly. The men had already filed into the conference room, and I couldn't see them anymore. I wanted to avoid interactions with those men as much as possible. And it wouldn't hurt to know the layout of the fighting arena, assuming we'd watch the fight from down there.

He cupped the swell of my hips and tugged me closer. I wanted to snap at him, tell him the men couldn't see us from the conference room, but I held my tongue. Now was not the time to push him. And I shouldn't anyway if I wanted to make an ally out of him.

"I don't need to remind you to be a good girl, do I, Amorette?" His voice dropped, and he leaned closer, almost as if he would kiss me.

He didn't.

"I won't leave. I learned my lesson on escaping without a plan," I responded drily, glad my voice wasn't quaking the way my insides were from the weight of his combined touch and attention. But... he probably felt the trembling as his fingers massaged my flesh.

His sudden crooked grin was full of boyish charm, so at odds with his fierce features. No one would ever look at Grey and believe he grew up in the suburbs. There was something too wild about him.

“Good. Remember, this door will be open, and the main entrance opens only with the proper clearance from either side,” he warned me. Giving me another squeeze, he left me standing in the middle of the empty room.

There were no chairs, but this had to be the viewing box. It could be that they wouldn't bring them out until closer to the fight.

I walked over to the glass, making use of my time alone. I'd been to concerts before, with Grace and the rare college girlfriend, although those relationships never lasted under the staggering weight of my ambition. It was difficult to keep friendships alive when I was constantly studying or taking extra courses.

Below, an octagon ring stood in the center of the circular space, and instead of levels going up with steps, the room appeared to slope up the further away from the ring it went. It wasn't such a dramatic angle that people would roll toward the center, but it was enough that people in the back of the room would be able to see the fight. The same went for lighting. The ring was the brightest, yet further away from the center the lighting was sparse and dimmed.

The scene reminded me of the chaotic setup before a band took the stage. Tons of workers in jeans and greasy t-shirts roamed the floor carrying cables, chairs, and lights. A few women in tiny spandex shorts and sports bras strutted through the aisles, stocking waters and snacks at the end of each row.

If I didn't know this was illegal, that criminals ran the fights, I'd have thought this was something as legit as the UFC, only without the well-known branding. In fact, there was no branding at all. Not on the T-shirts of the workers, the girls' outfits, or any of the walls, doors, or chairs. The lack of information made the entire scene much more mysterious.

There were exactly three doors labeled *Salida*, which had to be the exits. That was it. There were no hallways, nothing hidden from view. Just an open room with three doors out.

I hadn't really believed I'd get the opportunity to run. But seeing how open the setup was, my heart still sank in disappointment.

Casting my gaze around the room one more time, I stopped on a familiar figure.

Parker hadn't been a thought in my mind since he left us on the roof. Grey had said he would let Parker share what he did for their crime organization, but he stood off to the side with his arms crossed and his feet braced apart, practically lordling over everyone down there. Did he work the fights too, and Grey just hadn't wanted to tell me?

He was probably fifteen or twenty feet away, standing caddy corner to me with the way the room curved. His devilish smirk was just visible from this view of his profile.

What was he smiling about?

Then it slowly made sense.

A blonde girl, nearly as tall as him with curves for days, approached him, running her finger down his bicep. He shook his head. With a heavy pout on her lips, she walked away.

It wasn't long before another girl approached. She was a little shorter and definitely saucy as she sauntered up, a wide grin on her lips. They had a short conversation, but he shook his head and she left too.

Another girl I hadn't noticed before appeared out of nowhere. She was short, probably not much taller than me, with long dark hair cascading down her back in shiny waves. When she started speaking to him, he dropped his arms and turned toward her—and toward me.

She was the one who interested him.

They chatted for a few minutes, and she stepped closer, pressing her large breasts that were on the verge of bursting

from her sports bra against his chest. He tipped his head back in laughter as one hand snaked down to squeeze her ass cheek.

It wasn't a gentle caress. It was a brand of dominance. If they knew each other, it could even be a sign of ownership.

He spun her away from him, until she mostly faced me.

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AMORETTE



This time with a gentler touch, he ran his hands down her sides, halfway down her thighs, before bringing them back up to cup her breasts.

The sheer, naked pleasure on her face was open for anyone to see.

I flushed as I darted my gaze to the workers running back and forth. A few sent glances up to where they were, though most didn't care at all, if they even realized what he was doing in the dim background.

What *was* he going to do?

I had an idea, but he wouldn't do that. Not in public like that...

But, hell, what did I know? I certainly didn't know him.

Parker buried his face in her hair, the tilt of his smile just visible, and she shivered. Did he say something to her?

Did she want this?

One hand trailed down her stomach, pushing under the band of her shorts. The cords in his forearm started to flex as his hand moved beneath the stretchy material.

Fuck, I was burning up. Tiny droplets of sweat beaded at the back of my neck while tingles attacked the top of my head down to the tips of my toes as I watched them move together.

She bit her bottom lip and turned her face up for a kiss, but he pulled back to avoid her. When she realized he wouldn't

kiss her, she dropped her head onto his chest and ground her ass against him.

I shifted my legs together to quiet the sudden pulsing and raised my hands like I was going to touch the glass. Shit. I couldn't do that. My palms were sweaty, and I'd leave wet smudges.

"Keep going," Grey murmured as he pressed his back to mine, catching my hands and locking them to the glass.

I stiffened, panic quickly descending over my lust-addled brain.

"Shhh... I won't hurt you." He didn't make any other movements, waiting for my next cue.

An unbidden image of Randall's ugly face popped up, but I forced it out. He didn't get this. He didn't get to color every sexual interaction I had for the rest of my life. I needed to make this choice for myself. I decided if I wanted to move forward or pull the breaks. Not a ghost. Not a memory.

I forced my body to relax, pressing back against his hard stomach just enough to signal I was okay. That maybe I wanted to know what he wanted to do.

"Wher—"

"They just left. Didn't you hear them leave? Or were you too into the show to pay attention?" Grey tutted. "No matter what, you can't let your guard down, *mami*. That's dangerous," he whispered as he dragged his nose up my cheek.

I tried to draw in a breath, but it stuttered in my lungs as I tried to pull my hands away and only ended up grinding his hard dick into my back.

"Hmm. I should have known Parker would fuck around while he was here."

Oh shit. He caught me watching Parker. I tried to push back, but he kept me trapped in the cage of his arms.

He lowered his face until his cheek pressed against mine. Goosebumps rippled over my forearms and down my legs.

“Watch.” And we did. Parker cupped and squeezed and pleased the girl. The glass was soundproof, but from the way her mouth and throat were working, she vocalized her enjoyment very well.

Heat pooled in my stomach and I ground my own ass into Grey, mirroring the girl, before I caught myself. Grey’s nearness as we did something forbidden excited me in a way I’d never experienced. It was heady and dark. His rich woodsy scent enveloped me, invading my senses until he was the only thing that mattered.

I craved his next move.

“This is his thing, you know? His kink.” Grey’s husky voice had my eyelids fluttering shut. “He loves fucking in public. The more dangerous, the hotter it gets him. One time, he got a blowjob under the table while our father berated us. If he had found out, that could have been Parker’s head.” He removed one of his hands to spread across my stomach, and then he moved lower and lower until his pinkie was so, so close to my clit.

And what did I do?

I left my fucking hand on the glass, and I stopped breathing. I wanted this. I wanted *him*.

“Do-does sh-she want that? She’s not—” Words were hard. I was torn between being turned-on so fucking hard and abhorred that this was like the warehouse.

“No, this isn’t one of the galleries. All the women here are employed and can walk away anytime they want,” he whispered, spreading his legs and adjusting behind me so his body lined up better with mine. Not perfectly, since he was too tall, but definitely closer. Then he pulled his other hand off mine and cupped my breast, squeezing just the way Parker was handling the girl.

I moaned, and wetness seeped between my legs.

How long had it been since I’d been touched this way? Since I’d felt the heat of desire so much, it threatened to incinerate me from the inside out. “So,” I sucked in a breath as

he rucked my dress up enough to slip his hand beneath the clingy material, “many girls approached him.”

“Mhm,” Grey hummed against the crown of my head as he slid his fingers through my folds, gathering some of my wetness to circle my clit with masterful skill. “Parker’s known for his...particular predilections. And he’s young, attractive, and high enough in the Institution to draw these women in like flies to honey. They all want a taste of what he can offer. Does it look like she’s unwilling?”

At that exact moment, the girl’s knees gave out, and if he hadn’t banded an arm just under her breasts, she would have collapsed on the floor.

“No, she looks very, very eager to be in his arms.”

“Are you eager to be in mine?”

When Parker steadied the girl, he pressed a hand to the middle of her back to bend her over. Behind me, Grey did the same. Arching my back and tipping me forward until my face nearly touched the glass.

“Can they see us?” I gasped as his large hand smoothed over my ass.

“No, it’s a one-way glass. Tell me, Amorette, do you want to be here with me?” The smile in his voice taunted me. He knew I’d have fought to get away if I didn’t want this moment to forget everything except for how his touch made me feel.

The bastard was going to make me say it.

Gritting my teeth, I pushed my ass back against his hand and slid my hands down, leaving sweaty streaks against the fogging glass.

Parker peeled the girl’s shorts down.

Grey gripped the sides of my dress at the hips and slowly slid the material up to reveal my ass, the cool air raising goosebumps over my exposed skin.

“The words, Amorette.” His voice took on a steely note. “Or I stop, and I’ll lock you in the conference room where you can take care of yourself. But...” He cupped the outsides of

my upper thighs as he molded himself to my back. “It won’t be nearly as good as what I can make you feel. You might come, though it will be an empty, sad moment of satisfaction.”

I squeezed my eyes shut and turned my head away from his words that were stripping me bare in a different way.

“Do you want this? Do you want me?” He nuzzled the tender, delicate spot under my ear.

Shit. I wanted this, but I didn’t want to tell him. It picked at my pride to tell my captor I wanted him *this* way.

Then the bastard dropped his hands and started to back away.

“Fuck. Fucking fine! Yes. I want this. I want just a moment to escape. Does that make you happy?” I spit at him, the burn in my cheeks extending to the tips of my ears.

“Extremely, *mami*. Extremely,” he murmured, using one hand to gather my dress on the middle of my back as his other went to exactly where I needed it most.

One finger circled my entrance, then pushed inside. The invasion had me biting my lip, until he pulled out and massaged my clit.

“Fuck,” I bit out. That wasn’t where I wanted him.

His dark chuckle slid over my heated skin like warm, melted honey. “You want more, don’t you, *mami*? Are you aching to be filled up?”

I cursed him again. But he didn’t make me wait. That one finger turned into two, and he pumped them inside me with just enough of a twist that his thumb bumped against my swollen nub.

Vaguely, I recognized his rhythm matched Parker’s as he fucked the girl bent over for him.

Grey pushed his hand up my torso, loosening the tie so he could palm my breast, rolling the nipple between his fingers then pinching.

“Ouch!” I yipped.

“These tits, *mami*, I knew they’d fill my hand like this. You’re so small, so tiny, but fuck, you have nice tits,” he mumbled to himself.

Parker started to pick up his pace, and Grey mimicked him, his hand slapping against my pussy and his fingers rubbing against my G-spot.

My legs started to shake, and I curled my fingers as I neared the peak that was coming up fast. I whimpered and whined, enjoying the slight bite of pain but hating it at the same time.

Grey leaned down and caught the meaty part of my shoulder with sharp teeth, then chuckled under his breath when I bucked against him.

“Mmm. You love that, don’t you? You want just enough pain to enhance the pleasure. You’re not little love at all, are you?”

I didn’t answer him. I couldn’t even think from all the feral emotions whipping around inside me. There was no concept of who or where I was as I chased that elusive high that was almost within my grasp.

“You are my *wicked* love,” he said against the column of my neck, then bit down hard enough to leave a mark. I yelled again, then groaned.

It was happening; the quaking and shaking were the precursors of the explosion waiting to detonate.

“I can feel you. You’re there.” He thrust his fingers harder against me, then planted them as he ground his thumb rhythmically against my clit. That was all it took. I sobbed my relief as wave after wave of hot, sweet release swept over me. Tingles pricked over my skin, leaving trails of both fire and ice.

When I started to come down, Grey held me to his chest as he smoothed gentle touches over the sensitive hood, pulling shiver after body-wracking shiver from me.

He laid wet kisses up my neck and across my jaw as I caught my breath.

Parker and the girl were gone, no longer putting on a raunchy show for the crew below.

Since my brain was an asshole, thoughts started crowding the forefront of my mind, slowly killing my high. One thing stood out above all the others, and I couldn't keep it to myself. I was too curious.

“You could have fucked me.” I had been so horny, so desperate for a release, I would have let him. I wanted him to...

Grey straightened up, pulling me with him until we were both standing tall. He used two fingers under my jaw to tip my head back and slightly toward him.

He slowly dropped his head, brushing his hot, dry lips against mine.

I'd never been someone who needed human touch or affection to survive and thrive. But this kiss, after what he just did to me, was the intimacy I hadn't realized I craved. Especially after watching how cold Parker was with that girl.

The scene had been hot. Hot enough to have me throwing my good sense out the window, but it didn't take away the fact that it was emotionless and a means to an end for Parker.

He could have had any girl in his arms, and he would have been the same, touched her the same. They were all interchangeable to a man like him.

But Grey hadn't made me feel like I was just a hole to fuck. Hell, he hadn't fucked me at all. Every touch and pinch had been for my pleasure and my pleasure alone.

I was still drifting on the lingering endorphins swimming through my blood when he pulled back and met my gaze with turbulent green eyes.

“When I take you, and I will—you can't deny it will happen now—I want you to know it's my cock inside you, and not you wishing it was my brother's.”



I SPLASHED cold water over my face and tried to calm down the outrage and embarrassment that wouldn't disappear. It had been hours since Grey ruined the moment we had shared.

But, fuck him. He was an asshole if he thought that was the kind of woman I was. Maybe those were the only types of women he had experience with, but too fucking bad.

He had doused any tender feelings growing inside me with gasoline and lit the match with his asshole words.

I had used every ounce of strength I had, which against his large frame wasn't much, and pushed him away as I shrieked all my pent-up anger to the ceiling.

Grey knew he'd pissed me off. He just didn't care. Didn't see anything wrong with it. When I turned back around to face him, he was leaning against the glass next to my messy handprints with an arrogant smirk painted across his face.

A lock of his blond hair had fallen in his face, adding to his bastard aura.

The rest of the day, he'd pretended I wasn't fuming as he'd taken me on a tour of everything except how to leave the building. Then he sat me down close to the ring as he took calls and spoke to a few more workers. The fighters—or who I thought were the fighters—had also come over to chat with him.

I'd pretty much ignored him and everyone he spoke to. It only served to amuse him, and any time he sent me a knowing smirk, I devolved further into the petty mindset I knew would get me into trouble, but I couldn't help it.

Since I'd been taken, I'd finally allowed myself to let go, and trusted him enough to take me there. Then he ruined it with his remark.

Like I wanted his brother. Please, it was like any random porn playing in front of me. Only it had been hotter, because they gave fuck all about anyone around them.

Now the music was booming and the floor was so packed there was standing room only. Grey stood and pulled me to my feet with a hand on my arm.

“For the fights, we’re going to watch from over here. When they start, people jostle to get closer to the ring,” he explained. The crowd parted quickly, either because they recognized who he was or because of the dangerous vibes he was throwing off. As he led the way, his fingers trailed down my forearm to link with my fingers.

I quelled the urge to rip away from him, because honestly, I knew I was being ridiculous. And two, as much as it rankled me, I enjoyed the familiarity. Funny how small things I never thought about or even thought I’d have again meant something.

He took us to the back where Parker had stood earlier. The section was now roped off, with guards standing at the corners. Parker was already sprawled in one of the foldout chairs on his phone. He didn’t even look up when Grey lifted me over the rope before stepping over it himself.

“Why not watch from the box?” I asked, willing my face not to heat.

Grey shrugged. “The box is removed from the action. If I have to be here, I want to hear flesh slapping against flesh.” He grinned, and the blush I fought against raged to the surface.

I went back to ignoring him as I took a seat a few places down from Parker. I’d be damned if I gave him any reason to throw insults around again.

Grey took the seat next to me and draped his arm around the back of my chair.

“Nice to see you two fabulous lovebirds together,” Parker said without looking up from his phone.

At least in this, Grey and I were on the same page because we both fucking ignored him.

“So, what exactly do you do? You’re the manager of the fight club?” I left my indignation at the door and injected as much interest as possible into my questions. Which wasn’t

hard, since I was interested in what he did. For information's sake, if nothing else.

“Something like that.” He grinned and twirled a lock of my hair around his finger.

I lifted a brow and waited, hoping he would humor me and not try to piss me off more.

Blowing out a breath, he shook his head once, then came closer and lowered his voice. “There are different factions in the Institution. Each faction runs a different type of business. You could consider me the CEO of this particular sub-company. Does that help?”

Yes and no.

“How many factions are there?”

He tapped my nose and gave me a closed-lip smile.

I scrubbed a hand down my face and turned my body to look directly into his eyes. “If you're the CEO,” I tried really hard not to sneer over that word. I failed. “Then why can't you shut down the other faction? Get rid of that business altogether.”

His good mood sobered just a little as he dropped his hand to my leg, his thumb brushing against the bare skin of my inner thigh. “It doesn't work that way. Even though I run a sub, I'm not at the top of the food chain. And I never will be. Sure, I could attempt to go after Maikel, but then I'd die. Why would I risk myself—and lose—for people I can't help in the long run anyway?”

“Because it's the right thing to do,” I whispered, knowing my words were falling on deaf ears. The funny thing was that I was beginning to waver on my conviction too.

Not that I didn't want to save the women. I would if I could.

Not that I didn't want to escape. I would take the chance if it came.

Suddenly, I was realizing a truth about myself that became clearer the further I was removed from the horror. I did want to

live, and I wanted that so bad that even the evil I'd railed against initially was starting to fade into the background.

It was easy to pretend now.

"Ah, my wicked love." One side of his mouth curved up in a mocking grin. "We covered this. There is no right and wrong in this world. There's alive, and there's dead. There are queens, and there are pawns. You just have to ask yourself which side of those lines you want to fall on."

With no response to that, I dropped my gaze to his hand on my leg. The music kicked up even louder, and the MC came over the speakers. It was time for the fights to commence.

"I love how you're educating her, Grey. You might actually be able to keep her if she listens to you," Parker said absently as he continued to scroll on his phone.

Why was he even here?

Grey fired back at him in Spanish, an insult, I was sure. But instead of getting fired up, Parker belted out a laugh, glancing at Grey for the first time since we arrived.

"Shit." The laugh on Parker's face fell as he stood up. "Vicente's here." He hopped the rope and worked his way through the crowd. The crowd didn't open for him the way they did for Grey, but they still moved out of his way.

"*Hijo de puta*," Grey muttered as he stood. Smoothing his hand down his shirt, he glanced down at me. "You'll want to stay here, Amorette. You can use the time to think about which side of those lines you want to be on."

Then he was gone too.

My heart raced inside my chest as I searched the room for them, but they had both disappeared.

Minutes passed slowly. It must have been at least thirty to forty-five minutes by now, and there was still no sign of them. The guards had already had a shift change. Even the rope seemed unnecessary now that the fights were well underway. Everyone apart from the guards was pushing closer to the ring, knocking over chairs and pushing people down.

“Excuse me,” I called, leaning toward one of the two guards. If I tried to leave, would they stop me? Could I convince him I needed to get a taxi since Grey left me here?

The man glanced down, then around him as if he wasn’t sure I was talking to him.

“Do you speak English?”

“*Sí, un poco.*”

I told myself I was done with half-brained ideas, but I was in a city. In a hotel, with taxis outside. If I didn’t take this chance, I didn’t know when I’d get another opportunity.

Putting on my sweetest smile, I stood and stepped closer to him. “My boyfriend isn’t going to be able to come back tonight. Can you walk me to a taxi?”

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GREY



Vicente led us back into the conference room off the viewing box, and I was never more glad that I hated being up here. He typically didn't care about our fucks. But if he knew my wicked love lived with us, he'd mess with her for shits and giggles.

I didn't care when I was on the whipping post, but I'd rather see her crying sweetly from an orgasm than crying out from strips getting taken off her back.

Parker shut the door, and I crossed the room to drop into the chair at the head of the table. This was my domain, and Vicente could fuck off if he thought I'd pander to him here. He'd know something was up if I suddenly kissed his ass. He liked my crazy, anyway.

Regardless, Vicente was a testy *cabrón* who enjoyed plucking at peoples' strings every chance he could. I guess I at least inherited that from him.

I just had no strings to pluck.

In fact, I enjoyed throwing myself on the whipping post to piss him off. Although I'd prefer he not know about our *little problem* as Andre had referred to her.

"Boys, it's a great turnout tonight." Vicente gripped the back of a chair, grinning wildly. His dark hair, which was just starting to silver at the temples, was brushed back neatly and matched the vibe of his pristine navy suit and white shirt that was open at the collar.

Before I left the roped section, I smoothed out my face.

While my brothers were looking for ways to avoid him, I'd always enjoyed finding ways to fuck him back. And showing absolutely no emotion was one of them.

“Vicente,” I rumbled out as Parker walked down to the other end of the room and propped himself up against the wall. Out of all of us, Parker was the one most unaffected around Vicente. He was who he was and didn't care about the fallout. Seemed to love it even.

When neither of us said another word, Vicente made a sound and waved a hand. “Yes, I'm doing just fine, thank you. I'm happy to see you, too.”

Silence.

“I came to tell you how proud I am of you for your work with Donnie. The next morning, he opened his doors with nary a grumble to assist my men. Only minimal bruising and use of all his limbs. Thanks for that. I know how you enjoy breaking people. His turnabout was a beautiful thing.” He smiled wistfully at the ceiling, his white teeth flashing.

Sometimes, he looked just like Andre, the only brother who had inherited any of his features. Outside of our height, the rest of us looked like our mothers. Thank God.

Then again, in times like this, even with Andre's face, he had expressions I'd *never* seen on my brother.

“How did you do it? When I asked, he just tried to spit on me.”

“You allowed that?” Parker remarked drily with a mocking smile.

Vicente shrugged. “Eh, he's been my doctor for decades. I won't end his life for that. Not when there's no one to take his place right away.”

Which meant, at some point, Donnie would die at Vicente's hand. Donnie had been “in the life” since Vicente started the Institution. He would have known what that kind of insult would mean. I'd bet Donnie was purposefully baiting

him. Either he had a death wish, or he was testing how far he could push Vicente.

That was one of my favorite pastimes, but I had leverage Donnie didn't have. At least *some* leverage. Because at the end of the day, Vicente only valued things until they were no longer useful.

"Well?" Vicente speared me with his dark gaze.

"I hit him where he hurts most."

The sly grin slithering over his face brightened in delight. "My favorite kind of punishment." When I didn't elaborate, he scoffed and pushed away from the table. "You two are no fun. At least Andre tries to play my games."

And I bet Andre would be livid to hear him say that.

"Are you here to watch the fights?" I asked, rocking back and forth in the chair. He rarely came to these events, so that he was here at all was not to be taken lightly.

"Nah, I know you run a decent ship. You could really teach Lafe a thing or two about that. His men run all over him, and he lets them," he said, his face sour in distaste.

"We'll be sure to coach our dear brother on the intricacies of how to maim men who anger him." Parker smirked and shoved his hands in his pockets.

"Is that a smart-ass comment?" Vicente's smile started to slip.

"No." Parker shook his head. "That's what you've taught us to do."

And the smile ratcheted back up in wattage. "Well, then, yes."

I glanced at the door, ready to get back to Amorette. I wouldn't admit it to anyone, but I itched at the thought of her being by herself. All it would take was one small idea in her head, and she'd run. When I'd given her the tour earlier, I purposefully didn't take her near any of the exits or lobby.

She'd scowled the entire time, sneaking fury-filled glances at me when she thought I wasn't looking. I hadn't gotten off, and I'd regretted it immediately when we left the box.

I nearly pushed her into an empty room a few times to take what I should have taken before. Instead, I walked around all damn day with a stiff dick.

But I was serious. I wouldn't fuck her while she was thinking about my brother in any capacity. Get her off? Absolutely. I wasn't going to pass up a chance to make her sweet for me, and she did turn sweet.

She melted in my arms with the sexiest little whimpers that had my dick straining against my zipper.

Soon.

And I wouldn't mind a little fight when it happened. I was thrilled she loved a taste of pain with pleasure. That suited me perfectly.

"Grey," Vicente said my name with such force it must have been the third or fourth time he called for me.

"Hmm?" I stared blankly at him.

"Care to share what's on your mind?"

When I lifted my gaze to his, there was a twitch in his left eye as he tried to smile.

Just looking at his face heated my blood. I hadn't been in his presence this long without a whipping post in front of me in a long time. If I stayed any longer, I might end up slapping him around. Vicente didn't deserve a closed-hand punch. "Not particularly. I have the fight to oversee and need to get back to the floor." I stood. This visit was a waste of time. Just Vicente trying to flex his muscle by making us walk like puppets on a string.

"Fine, fine. I need to get back to the airport anyway. Also, Bruno sends his regards. He told me he's positively excited to meet you in the ring. In his eyes, you're the best fighter in the game. He can't be considered the best until he's won against the best."

“He won’t win,” I said as I headed toward the door. Parker followed behind me.

“I don’t know. He’s been training hard. Bruno has even asked for the use of knives in the fight.”

I let go of the handle and turned around.

“I know, I know. We typically don’t allow weapons in the ring. But I thought, hey, why not. It’s not like you aren’t a master with knives. So, I approved it. You would not believe the bets that have started rolling in when *that* announcement spread.” He chuckled.

“When was that approved?” Parker asked, fingers curling and uncurling at his sides.

“Oh, about lunchtime today.” Vicente’s gaze narrowed on me.

“All fights are supposed to be cleared through me, regardless if I’m the one fighting or not. We don’t allow knives.” He’d see this as a weakness, like I was afraid. It was more like I wanted to run the fights how I wanted them ran. He had no place in my business as long as I continued to pad his pockets.

“This is just me exercising a little of my power for the greater good. Don’t worry. It won’t happen again. At least, not for a little while.”

We stared each other down.

Did he know?

It didn’t matter, I did things my way, and he wasn’t going to change that.

“Fine by me. Thanks for the heads up. I’ll be sure to have my knives sharpened before the fight.” I *was* a master with knives. I’d just have to convince Andre not to lose his shit.

Although, if Bruno did win, a knife wound was a hell of a better way to go than getting my face pummeled repeatedly. He was a beast in the ring. He’d go for the neck, then keep stabbing until blood coated the entire floor. Bruno really was my kind of fighter.

I looked forward to it.

Parker and I slipped through the door, and as soon as we cleared the club's top floor, Parker had his phone out, sighing as he typed on it.

“What are you doing?” I stopped his fingers from typing.

“Letting Andre know the stakes have been upped for the fight, you dumbass. What did you think I was doing?” He rolled his eyes.

“You don't care about any of this stuff. You never did.” I let go, because fuck it. Andre would find out anyway. This way, I wouldn't have to be the one who told him. And right now, with dark energy crawling under my skin, I was likely to take him to my private ring to blow off some steam.

Andre wouldn't appreciate that in my current mood.

But I did need an outlet. Why hadn't I fucked Amorette?

The smell of her still teased my nose, keeping my dick from softening completely.

He sighed. “That doesn't mean I want you to die. You're really fucking up all my plans.” Parker shoved his hands in his pockets and strode off, probably to find another small dark-headed girl to fuck.

I hadn't told him we'd seen. Partly because it would amuse him and partially because it would turn him on to know we'd watched. But I had his number.

The pre-fight was already over, and a mid-level fight was up now. As hard as I tried to push through the crowd, Jan, one of my managers, stopped me and pulled me into a dispute between two rival gang members in the audience.

That stuff was a waste of my fucking time, and Jan knew it. But I'd cleared up the issue real quick when I gave them the option of separating or not leaving the club at all. We were working on renovations in another section of the hotel, and they could easily become part of the concrete pad.

Predictably, they backed down and I was on my way again.

Just in time to see Amorette on the arm of mother fucking Ramos.

I broke into a run, but they slipped through the exit door before I could reach them. If I didn't catch them before they got to the service elevator, we might lose Amorette in the very real sense of the word. And not to some ridiculous suicide honor death Lafe had tried to offer her.

Was she fucking stupid?

The door was firmly shut by the time I got closer. A stumbling man reached for the door, and I shoved him into the wall to get him out of the way.

"Hey!" he slurred.

But he was already forgotten as I stormed past him. The hall Ramos walked her through was the one that led to the private garage. At fucking least it was a long stretch of hallways to get there.

I took off into a sprint, and once I rounded the corner at the end, there they were.

He'd just pressed the elevator button, and she was smiling, chatting happily at his side.

Didn't we just talk about what kind of world this was? There were pawns and queens. She was doing a damn fine job of setting herself up as a pawn.

I loved the fight in her, but I could do without the stupid.

Walking off with a stranger? Fuck.

Walking off with a stranger after I explained this world to her? She needed to get her ass spanked as soon as we were back at the compound.

He smiled, speaking his broken fucking English when I knew he was fluent.

What an idiot.

When he glanced up, the bashful smile I was sure she bought dropped from his face like a heavy fucking stone.

At least one thing was good about this. I hated Ramos with a passion. He was the happy soldier who handed me over to Vicente last week. And he'd just touched what he should have known was *mine*.

Vicente wouldn't do shit to avenge him. Even if he did send him down in the first place. Shit, that was probably why he wanted to go to the conference room. Now, who was the idiot?

The satisfaction sweeping through me when he took a hurried step back didn't dim the rage that had been simmering in my chest for the last hour, at all. So, when I barreled into him, catching my shoulder in his stomach, and rammed his body into the wall, I laughed.

This was going to feel great. Exactly the outlet I'd been looking for when fucking was off the table.

Ramos grunted and Amorette gasped. But I didn't pay any attention to her. I'd deal with her in a minute. Right now, all my focus was happily on this motherfucker in my arms.

Stepping back, I gripped his collar in my fist and landed a punch across his cheek. Then his nose and left eye.

I was an equal opportunity fighter, and every inch of his face was about to be one giant bruise. If he lived long enough to bruise that deeply.

It took four punches for the blood to appear. Six for it to spray against the wall when I clocked his jaw, snapping his head to the left.

His grunts settled into long, low groans from the consistent pain dealt across his face. I long stopped laughing, but I was mesmerized by the blood.

"Grey. Please, stop." Amorette tugged on my arm, tears in her voice. "He didn't do anything. Please. It was me. I asked for him to take me to a taxi."

Her words faded into the background as I grew bored of his face and dropped him. As soon as his body hit the floor, I reared back and kicked the shit out of him. I preferred to use

my hands and feet occasionally, except right now I wished I had a nail-filled bat.

Each hit I got on him expended a little more energy, releasing endorphins through my body. This was why I fought. This was the monster Vicente had turned me into.

Funny, I'd never considered myself a monster.

Yet when I glimpsed at the look of eclipsing horror on Amorette's face, I knew she saw me as one. She, who was so narrow-minded, couldn't see underneath a pretty mask if it bit her in the ass.

I'd be this monster because this was who I was.

Ramos? He was one of Vicente's senior guards. He was also, on occasion, a scout for Maikel. He made my crimes look like petty child's games on Amorette's supposed scale of morality.

Stupid girl. She was about to leave us for a trip back to the Gallery. Or worse, a ride straight to Vicente. And *that*, she should fear.

The bloodier Ramos got at my feet, the more I leveled down. After I landed a strong kick to his face and his skull, nose, or whatever, crunched from the force, he stopped moving.

I sighed, a smile playing on one end of my mouth. That was just what I needed.

Amorette stood in the same spot. She'd long stopped trying to pull me away from Ramos. My little fighter was tenacious, but no match for my strength. She was barely a gnat around my head when I was lost to the blood lust.

Tears streaked down her face, tinged in black from her mascara. She wasn't looking at me. She only had eyes for the waste of space at my feet.

"I killed him," she whispered to herself.

Rolling my eyes, I grabbed her arm. Not hard enough to bruise, but enough so she'd know running wasn't an option.

“Yeah, poor fucking him,” I scoffed, unable to keep looking at her.

Shit. I thought we’d had a connection. Maybe not the sweet love ordinary people fantasize about, but an attraction. A mutual respect.

But now?

After she pulled this shit? She was lucky I was here to save her.

“You didn’t have to do that.” She tried to yank herself away, but it was pointless.

“Oh yeah, I did.” Some of the fury I’d worked out over Ramos’ flesh leaked back in through the cracks, trying to fill me up again. Vicente was too close to settle down entirely. I needed to get out of here, fast.

She didn’t say anything else as I walked her to the elevator and scanned my phone, then hit the button for the top floor. That was as close as we’d get to the helipad.

I used my free hand to text Parker and let him know to meet us there. So much for all my plans.

“What about the fight?” she said, her voice firm but shaky at the same time.

“Who gives a fuck? My manager will deal with it. I’m suddenly tired of being here.” I pocketed my phone as we got out on the top floor and headed toward the stairwell.

She was quiet the rest of the way. But when we reached the helicopter, under the dark night sky illuminated by the city lights, she turned away from me.

“You should have taken your anger out on me, not him. Not when I asked him to help me.” Her words grew steadier until she was spitting fire at the end. “I want to go home. Can’t you understand that? My life isn’t here. It can’t be.” Her hands curled up into tight fists as she spun back around. Tears once again falling freely.

Yeah, it sucked, but I was wrong about her. I wasn’t about to spend my time chasing after a woman who didn’t have two

brain cells to rub together.

I laughed—a long, loud, disbelieving laughter.

“Sure, keep telling yourself that. But I don’t touch women. Never have, and I never will. This is the time when you decide what you can live with. Be careful who you ask to help you, little wicked love,” I sneered. “Because then you’re just as guilty of turning people into *your* pawns.”

Her chin dropped.

I shocked her.

Good. Maybe this was a lesson she’d remember.

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AMORETTE



Parker had called through the door that day when they were all in Grey's apartment. He'd warned me that Grey was a psycho. I hadn't really paid attention to his words. Not like I should have.

I wasn't sure if it was because Grey seemed like the nicest one of the bunch, so I latched onto him, not wanting to believe he was just another dead end on my path to escape. Or maybe I was still in shock from everything that had happened up until that point. It wasn't until that night that I'd really been able to catch my breath.

Either way, as I sat in the back of the helicopter, the scene kept replaying in my head on a traumatic, bloody loop. I'd tried. God, how I'd tried to stop Grey from beating that man to death. Once, I thought Grey was about to clock my jaw with his elbow, but I'd jerked back in time.

When it became terrifyingly clear Grey wasn't going to stop and the man was past the point of walking away, I stepped back. I watched him through what seemed like a frosted plexiglass. So close, yet his movements were distorted, hazy, except for his grin that got wider with every strike and every kick.

He *killed* that man.

And he *enjoyed* it.

Grey really was a psycho.

For the return flight, Grey decided to pilot. Which left Parker beside him without anything to do. He turned around for the tenth time to grin at me.

Not a friendly, *I enjoy having you here*, or *I hope you had fun* type of grin. No, this was a facetious grin that said he loved my brand of stupidity and the trouble it caused.

Grey never looked back once. He wasn't exactly tense, more like I ceased to exist to him. And as crazy as it sounded, it bothered me. I was like a kid in trouble when they knew they did something wrong, and the parent ignored them instead of disciplining them.

The lack of attention *hurt*. Even knowing he was crazy, it still hurt.

I glanced down at my hands. How did I get in this position? And how did my head get so screwed up?

Before I knew it—maybe because I dreaded it—we landed.

Andre and Lafe were walking around another helicopter, deep in discussion. Well, Lafe was talking *at* Andre, wildly waving his hands while Andre continued his work of checking it over, straight-faced. Whatever they were doing, Andre was dressed for business, and Lafe wore the only things I'd seen him in, jeans and a T-shirt.

Why was I thinking about their clothes? Or acting like I had seen them more than once or twice a piece?

The vibrations slowly stopped as the blades slowed down. I handed my headset to Parker, and he hung them up. When they both opened the door, I climbed out on Parker's side. Grey still wasn't looking at me, and Parker seemed the safer bet. Ironically.

"She's with you," Grey said as he shut his side and started heading toward their warehouse home.

"What?" Parker called after him. "No way! You wanted her, she's yours."

Grey stopped in his tracks and turned around as Andre and Lafe silently joined Parker. I stood off to the side, unsure if

this was the moment life came crashing back around me again.

Was I dumb for trying to escape?

Maybe.

Could I have saved that man's life if I'd just tried to leave on my own?

Yes, and I was going to suffer for that every single day. The sudden tension radiating off Andre as he watched the scene had my feet itching to make a run for it. But I didn't. I'd really learned my lesson when it came to stupid decisions.

"That was before I realized she needed a babysitter. I don't have time for that. There are other things I need to be focusing on."

"What happened?" Andre barked as he glared at me.

Even with trying to turn over a new, safer leaf for me and all the innocents around me, I couldn't cower away from him. I lifted my chin defiantly as I met his gaze.

"Grey was the one who thought it was a good idea to play house," Parker remarked with a smirk, watching his brother gleefully.

Only the psycho didn't rise to the bait. He just shook his head and looked at Andre. "She tried to fucking escape. With Ramos. I killed him, by the way. Vicente was already up our asses for whatever reason. So, you might get a phone call soon." Grey shrugged and turned away from us, heading toward the trees. "Someone else needs to watch her."

Shit, was I a toddler? The way they talked about me both shamed and enraged me. I didn't want to be here. They were the ones forcing me to be.

"Are you fucking shitting me?" Andre yelled, tossing his hands up as he spun toward the other helicopter. "I don't have time for this. Parker—"

"Nope. Sorry. I have other things I need to be working on. Especially a job that should have been done yesterday. Lafe, looks like you're the lucky winner." Parker clapped Lafe on

the back as he followed after Grey, who had already disappeared through the trees.

Lafe didn't say anything. He stood utterly still as he watched the back of Parker until he was gone too. His jaw clenched rhythmically like he suddenly drew the short straw. Or that he had to clean up his own mess. Maybe both, I wasn't sure.

Andre glared at Lafe as he started to climb into the helicopter. "I need to go. I didn't like what I heard when Pilar called. I'll see you when I get back..." He jabbed a finger at Lafe. "Don't fuck this up. More than your conscience is on the line."

The helicopter started up, and that familiar whirring I'd gotten so accustomed to over the last two hours eclipsed any other sound. My dress swirled around my legs and my hair beat at my face as the helicopter lifted. Then Lafe held his hand out in front of him for me to precede him on the path.

That was fine with me. I didn't want to be here either, and my ears needed a break.

I also needed him to shove me wherever he was going to put me so I could have a good cry. My eyes had been suspiciously dry the entire ride back. But now that solitude was so close, an unwanted ball of emotion lodged in my throat, cutting off my airways and forcing tears to my eyes.

Andre was gone as the sound of the blades grew more distant. Which was great. Focusing on that helped to rein my unruly emotions back in. If I were lucky, Lafe would return me to that same apartment. Funny, I'd missed human interaction so much, and now after what happened at the hotel, I ached to be left alone.

I couldn't even call Lafe Addict to myself anymore. Because of his bad deeds, I'd tried to distance myself from him and make him less human. But hell. I was a hypocrite.

An innocent man died tonight because of me. I was no longer the shining white hero I thought I was. Realistically, I

knew what happened wasn't so black and white, yet it didn't change the fact that I felt stained—dirtied up a bit.

We reached the doors with Lafe trailing close behind me. Every few steps, I swore I felt his breath across my nape. I opened the door, heading for the stairs, but he gently took my arm and steered me toward the hallway where Grey's apartment was.

He didn't say anything, and I didn't either. For me, I was afraid the dam would burst on everything bottled up inside me. Why was *he* so quiet?

The door he stopped at was closer than the one to Grey's place. He punched in a code, scanned his phone against the keypad, and opened the door.

Using the palm of his hand at the small of my back, he scooted me toward the door. I resisted and I wasn't even sure why.

These men weren't out to hurt me. I believed them about that now. Kill me? Maybe, if I kept causing them trouble, that was a very real possibility. Although I doubted they would hurt me just to hurt me.

And that took some of the wind from my sails.

Once we were both over the threshold, he shut the door, locked it and reset the alarm.

When he turned, he leaned back against the door and regarded me with an unreadable expression. "This is my apartment. Lucky for you, I don't have to be anywhere over the next week. Same thing as Grey's. The alarm will sound if you open any of the doors or windows. Don't try it. You won't like what happens."

He pushed past me, and I blindly followed him, unsure if I was even aware of what I was doing at that point. Lafe headed toward the kitchen and pulled out the drawer closest to the fridge.

His place was much different from Grey's. Where Grey's was modern and sleek, Lafe's was... a collection of mismatched items. Nothing was that old or threadbare. It was

more like he didn't care about matching sets or an overall tone and picked things up for practicality.

I glanced back at him when I heard a loud sniff, and he was screwing the cap back on a small canister. I'd never been around drugs, but I knew immediately that was what he'd done even if I'd missed the action.

"Drugs are bad for you," I commented. Why tell him that? I didn't care what he did. It didn't matter to me at all, yet it felt like my mouth was on autopilot.

"You don't say." He dropped it back in the drawer and pushed it shut. He had the fancy soft close drawers, because it barely made a whisper of a sound.

I trailed my fingers over the white granite countertops next to where I stood, just to give myself something to do. Then I glanced down at the floor.

On my foot was a splatter of dark, dried blood.

My stomach rolled.

I searched the kitchen for paper towels, snagged one, and frantically wetted it in the sink and scrubbed the skin. That was when I saw a few more splatters up my legs and one on the hem of my dress.

"No, no, no, no." I chanted as I wiped away all evidence of the guard who was only trying to help me. The weight of my actions was too much, and the tears I'd mostly been able to hold back escaped, hotly trailing down my cheeks.

Once it was all gone, I dropped the paper towel to the floor. I couldn't touch it anymore. I fell back on my ass, hugging my knees to my chest, and sobbed.

I was not a crier.

I never had been.

Neither was Grace, to be fair. *Maman* always said we were her tough little girls, ready to face anything. To conquer anything. I think *Maman* needed to believe that as much as we did.

But just a few weeks away from home, and I barely recognized myself.

Arms bundled me up and carried me through the apartment. I closed my eyes. I didn't want to see where he was taking me. Then I knew when he set me down on what could only be a couch.

I curled up in a ball, resting my head against the back as I let the tears fall, hating the way I felt weak, despising the hand I had in that man's death. It was just too much.

Maybe this would be the last time I cried like this.

The death of my innocence. I snickered and ended up choking on my spit. I'd never considered myself innocent. I was cynical and distrustful because of the nature of my job. Grace was always the shiny one who saw the world through some princess lens of perfection only she could wield. The world was there to be enjoyed, according to her. Yet, innocence was the only thing I could liken this feeling to.

I used my skirt to wipe my face and opened my eyes.

Lafe sat in the leather chair next to the couch, his hands steepled as he watched me. Images of the first time I saw him flashed through my brain. He was the same kind of beautiful, with his blond hair casually tousled around his head. His brow was furrowed as his gaze seemed to track the tears stains on my face.

It was awkward sitting here while he watched me break down. The tears seemed to come easier in his presence than the others. Did they confuse him as they confused me?

"Grey doesn't take to people at all. Not really. But he liked something about you. Was he mean to you?" Lafe asked, like he needed to know that answer.

I shook my head.

"Did he accidentally hurt you? He does like a little pain."

He assumed we'd had sex. Lafe wasn't as far off the mark as I'd like him to be. Grey was a killer, and I'd let him touch me. Nearly begged for it.

“No,” I said softly.

“Then why did you try to leave?”

I closed my eyes and dropped my head back, hopefully obscuring the view he had of my face. “I told you, just like I told Grey. I don’t belong here. I’ve done nothing wrong. Back home, I have a family, a life, a career. You all can’t keep me.”

His labored sigh had me opening my eyes to see him scrubbing at his. “Is that what you think? That we want to keep you like some doll?” An incredulous note threaded through his voice. “You have no idea what’s really going on. I know you think you aren’t a threat to us, but I assure you, you are. And I was the stupid *fâne* who had a momentary lapse of judgment. I saw something in you that I didn’t want to see broken. And all you’ve done is spit in our faces when we haven’t done anything to you.”

I had. I had done exactly that. He’d saved me in his own twisted way, but I’d only wanted to go home. Hearing how he viewed it though, I felt like an ungrateful brat, especially when my trying to leave had nothing to do with him.

“Let me educate you on something. Then maybe you’ll understand why we won’t let you go home.” His sapphire eyes burned from within as he leaned forward, as if he was about to share his deepest secrets with me.

I didn’t want to know, but at the same time, I couldn’t open my mouth to stop him.

“Andre, Parker, Grey, and I...we’re brothers. But you already know that don’t you?”

I nodded.

“What you don’t know is that we’re the sons of the largest crime lord in South America. He has his hand in pretty much every profitable criminal activity. He’s on every “Most Wanted List” you could possibly think of. He has politicians, police, and many major military intelligence agents in his pocket. The only way he deals with insubordination is death. If you’re lucky enough not to be locked up with his pain master first. You thought Randall was bad? You have no idea.” He shook

his head, like he was shaking free some long-forgotten memory he wished had stayed buried. “Everyone knows our connection to him. He doesn’t make it a secret. That’s the kind of information you’d be taking with you if we just graciously let you go.”

“I didn’t ask for this!” I spewed. At this point, I was a broken record. There were no other words to describe what had happened to me or why I shouldn’t be held accountable.

If I was honest with myself, I *had* started to come to terms with it, but after watching Grey...my mental map had been set back five steps.

“I know you didn’t.” Lafe softened his voice, and for the first time, I felt like he held some remorse for my situation. “But that doesn’t change the fact that I love my brothers, and I would never place them on Vicente’s chopping block. Because that’s what would happen. I liked your spirit. But Killer, we aren’t the enemy you want us to be.”

His words speared my heart, and damn him for making me empathize with him. Grace was my other half, and if it came down to it, I could never leave her out to dry. Not for anything or anyone.

Fuck. But like the stubborn bitch I was, I didn’t let it go. That understanding turned to damned righteousness.

“You weren’t there. I watched Grey kill someone just because I asked him to help me.” I thumped my chest. “I did that. I asked for help, and Grey beat that man to death.” Those traitorous tears of mine start to burn the back of my eyes again. “You can’t tell me you’re not the bad guys. You’re murderers, kidnappers, and who knows what else.” I brushed the tears away as if that would stop him from seeing my breaking point.

He laughed darkly, standing up. “I never said we weren’t the bad guys. Everyone you come into contact with has some sin staining their soul, I’m sure. But we aren’t the worst. There’s true evil out there, and we aren’t it. However—” He stepped back like he couldn’t wait to get away from me. “I want you to think about something. Grey, the psycho, the

murderer as you called him, he saved your ass. Ramos? The guard he killed? He was Vicente's top guard. You were never going to escape with him. And I don't want to think about what he had planned for you when you so prettily put yourself in his hands."

He took one more step and pointed to the closest door. His layout was the same, so I knew what that room was.

"That's the guest room. It's yours until we figure out what to do with you."

Then he disappeared through what was probably the master bedroom.

I could barely process his words, though. My brain was still stuck on what he'd said about Grey.

That couldn't have been right. He couldn't have saved me. No, he'd stopped me from escaping, and that was it, right?

I needed to find him. I needed to know exactly what had happened. Only, I had to convince Lafe to let me out. And this time, I needed to do it the right way.

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PARKER

The spreadsheet of potential jobs and risk factors on the computer screen held zero interest for me. They were all solid opportunities. None I wanted to personally oversee, but my team could handle these danger levels just fine.

I spun in my desk chair as *Bloody Romance*, a Chinese drama, played in the background. Languages came naturally to me. At least the romance languages, but Mandarin was proving a little more challenging.

The rules were completely different, as were the characters. It was also a tonal language that really made the brain work. Like with other languages I'd learned over the years, my absolute favorite way to understand the language was to immerse myself in their movies, music, and culture as much as possible.

I couldn't always get away to travel, not with Vicente breathing down our necks, but I could play movies and music when I was in my home.

Today though, I was only half listening. The last few days I'd been too deep in my thoughts to focus on anything. Most especially the one big job I still hadn't completed. I'd get a phone call about it soon, and I wasn't sure if I was dreading or anticipating it.

I felt everything he hadn't said at the fights. He never attended any of the businesses without a reason, even if it was to fuck with our heads. Nevertheless, he wouldn't do that to Grey.

No one acknowledged it, but for all the times he had Grey whipped, everyone knew he was the favorite. I used to be jealous of that warped affection, but as I grew up and learned just how fucked up the entire life was, I became glad I was barely more than a nuisance to him.

It wasn't like I could waltz away and live abroad as a civilian integrating into society. I was too fucked up for that. I was, after all, what this life had shaped me to be.

I cared too little, I played too much, enjoyed trouble much more than I should. It was just everything that was Vicente that boiled my blood.

So why had he been at the fights? And should I be concerned?

That was something I couldn't answer. The endless possibilities and paths went round and round inside my head. Concern wasn't really in my repertoire of emotions anyway. At least, not when it came to most things.

Turning to a much more achievable goal, Little Love came to the forefront of my thoughts. As far as I knew, Grey hadn't gone to see her over the last few days. Not that I'd spoken to either him or Lafe.

For all of the unbreakable bond we shared, we hardly spoke at all. Barely spent time together.

But I'd seen him with her. He was as smitten as I'd ever seen him. I'd been shocked when he handed her over once we reached the compound.

If Andre had his way, he'd cart her back to Maikel's or to one of his contacts, never to think of her again, or so he thought. But Grey would never forgive him if he did that. With the way Lafe saved her, I doubted he'd be fine with that turn of events either.

Nonetheless, he wasn't firm in his convictions. He swayed like grass in the light breeze.

Me? I enjoyed the way she really shook up their lives. I didn't want any harm to come to my brothers, it had always been us against the world for our entire lives. But I loved how

she flustered them. Angered them because they felt out of their depths.

However, Little Love trying to run away with all the wrong people and putting us in a bad position wasn't acceptable. Not at all.

I reached for my phone to dial Andre, but Grey's name popped up first. Hitting answer, I put it on speakerphone.

"Well, hello there, brother. How are you?"

"What's wrong with you?" Grey grunted.

A peel of laughter bubbled up as I rocked back in the chair. "Nothing. Just thinking about our little love." I paused, leaving it open for him to fill in all the gaps of what he'd been doing over the last few days.

Instead, all I got was a grunt.

"I take it you haven't collected her from Lafe yet?" I gave him a friendly little nudge.

"I wondered who had her," he said quietly. "But that's not why I'm calling. Have you talked to Mia?"

Hm. I wasn't sure I liked the conversation change. And I damn sure didn't enjoy him talking about my closest friend. The bastard.

"No." Which was true. She was too busy to take my calls right now.

He cursed. "I need access to the level of fighters she usually sends me. The ones Andre found are shit. I could pummel them in my sleep. It was more fun to put Ramos in his place than it is to try and train these snot eaters up."

"That's a fabulous image you just placed in my head. Those are fighters from our own guards Andre sent you. The top ones, if I'm not mistaken. Shouldn't that concern you if they're not up to par?" I didn't really care, that's what we had military-grade guns for. All of our men were equipped with M-4s, and 50 cal's were spread out on the roof. But if I were him and I managed our security, I might be a tad more concerned.

“He picked out the greenest of the recruits. I didn’t recognize one senior-level soldier. So no, I’m not concerned. They all have to start somewhere, and I have trainers to work with them. But I’m in need of a good sparring partner to keep my level of fighting up.”

“You’re not finally worried about the upcoming fight with Bruno, are you?” I tapped my pen on the desk. It wasn’t like my older brother to be worried.

“No,” he snapped. “He is one of the greatest fighters we’ve got, though. I’d rather be prepared than breeze into the ring cocky and puffed up on my own inflated ego.”

“Fine, fine. Next time I speak to Mia, I’ll ask her where she normally gets the fighters. I’m surprised you’re going through me for this.”

“She’s not answering my texts,” he rumbled.

I bit back a grin. Of course, she wasn’t. She was on a critical job right now. But poor Grey wouldn’t know that. He’d think she was angry with him.

“Back to our little love. I was just getting ready to call Andre about her background check. Want to join in on the conversation?” I dangled that sweet carrot in front of his face. I jerked back when he snapped back at me.

“*No*. Let me know when you figure out where the hell Mia got those other fighters from.” He hung up.

Well then. That wasn’t anything how I thought that conversation would go. Shit, I was rethinking everything. I should call Lafe and see where his head was at before I made any rash decisions.

I spun around in my chair again, debating how best to approach this.

Biting the bullet, I called Andre to see where he was with her background check. I thought he would have sent it out to the rest of us for giggles, but sadly, he kept whatever he found to himself.

Either he found nothing of concern, or she was related to a high government official. There was no in-between with this type of response. She shouldn't have been taken if that was the case, but mistakes were known to happen.

"Yes?" Andre answered as the sound of typing hummed steadily in the background.

"It doesn't take this long for your contacts to run a background check. What did you find on Amorette?" I asked, pressing the tip of the pen against my bottom lip.

All sound on the other end of the line stopped.

"Andre?"

"Oh, I'm here. I've just been trying to work out how to solve this fuck up of Lafe's without making him hate me any more than he does. At least Grey isn't going to be an issue." He sounded relieved.

"I wouldn't bank on that. You didn't see them together at the fights before she...made questionable decisions." His touch had been too proprietary for me to believe he'd just walk away. I could be wrong, but I rarely was.

"I fucking hope he's done with her, because I really don't know how we're going to handle her ass." Whatever he did muffled the last few words, then he sighed.

Fun. A challenge. "Is she related to the US President? A daughter of a CIA agent? What's so difficult about Little Love?"

"For one, she's an attorney." My eyebrows shot up my forehead. Was she old enough to have completed school? I thought she was twenty, maybe twenty-one. "But the type of attorney... She works at a law firm that specializes in divorce. Battered women of wealthy men are their specialty."

"So..." I started slowly. "What you're saying is she's a crusader for justice." Fuck. That put all of her actions in a completely different light. She wasn't just some girl trying to get back to her life. She had a calling that would go against everything we were. "Of course, Lafe would take this girl," I said when Andre remained silent. Rubbing my temples with

my thumb and fingers, I ran through everything I knew of her personality. “Can you send me the report?”

“Sure. I actually just sent it to all three of you. But I can tell you the highlights while you read it. Amorette Monet Black. Daughter of Jean Black, a French ex-pat. Identical twin to Grace Black, a popular fashion model who’s apparently been in high demand this past year. Older brother, Louis Pissaro Black, died of the flu at age fifteen. Amorette was seven at the time. Father left when they were two, never to enter the picture again.”

“So typical, if unfortunate, childhood.” I clicked on the report in my email and started scrolling. Her volunteerism in homeless shelters, women’s shelters, and mentor programs for underprivileged kids was going to be an issue. I could already see it. “Wow. I’m impressed.”

“Tell me, which fun fact in our findings impresses you?” Andre asked drily.

“She’s smart. Motivated. She graduated high school as a junior with quite a few college prerequisites. Top of her class. Finished law school six months ago when she should still be prepping for the bar. Too bad her moral compass is so lily white,” I murmured, still scrolling.

“Precisely. Lafa stole the one person who would happily see us all put in prison. Or six feet under, depending on how much of a crusader she is.”

I switched browsers and looked up the sister. That they were identical piqued my interest. Immediately, tons of shots of her popped up at fashion shows, on magazine covers, and in gossip rags. It was strange seeing an identical version of Little Love in mainstream life. Here, I’d seen her swimming in a plain t-shirt, with no makeup and tangled hair. It just didn’t give the same vibe. Although, she had looked rather fetching in her little black ensemble the other night.

Zooming in on a runway shot, I scrutinized this other girl. Immediately, I could tell the difference. Where our little love was stubborn, ballsy, and slightly mutinous, this other girl was on the polar opposite side of the spectrum. She was gorgeous,

and she knew it. The sparkling eyes and seductive smirk contradicted the innocent vibe both girls threw off. How was she a model as small as she was? It had to be her unique *I'm innocent but fuck me dirty anyway* look. I much preferred the challenge of our little love. This other girl was interesting, to be sure, but I couldn't see her stimulating the mind like Amorette.

"I don't know," I mused, twisting in my seat once again. "With this type of education and clear ambition, we could benefit from having her here."

"No," came Andre's quick and immediate response. "I don't like it. Someone like her will never willingly cross the line of crime. Why are we even entertaining letting her stay? All so Grey can have a fuck buddy when he finds it in his black heart to forgive her for hurting his ego?"

"I'd say feelings. Ego too, but he definitely got his feelings hurt."

"Doesn't matter," he growled. "I say we take her back to Maikel's. Let him do with her what he will."

I shook my head; this wasn't like Andre at all. "You might think you could do that, but you'd never be able to follow through with actually leaving her there. You've seen her, stared into her beautiful mutinous eyes. You couldn't do it."

"Please tell me you don't have a thing for her too. You've all lost your heads. Did you dip into Lafe's stash and not tell us?"

I chuckled. "You know I don't touch that shit. And no, I'll let Grey and Lafe fight over her affections. For such a small, innocent-looking thing, she's stuffed full of savage temerity. I have other things I need to focus on."

Andre scoffed. "The best thing for us is to get rid of her."

"What would Pilar say?"

"Leave Pilar out of this." He paused. "She sends her love."

I grinned. She was my favorite of the mothers. The most normal and well-adjusted. Probably because she grew up in

the life, she understood her role with Vicente better than any of the others.

“How is she?”

“Fine. Vicente was a little rougher than he normally is with her, and she was shaken.”

I straighten up. If it wasn't for the affection I felt for Pilar, Mia, and on occasion, my brothers, I'd have believed I was a sociopath. And I didn't take it well when she wasn't happy. “What did he do?”

“It doesn't matter. But she said the next time you visit the mansion, you are to see her, or she's not making your favorite dish anymore.”

My grin snapped back. If she was making threats, she was okay. “What's your backup plan? Because dropping Little Love off where Lafe found her isn't going to work. If it didn't hit that small drop of conscience you have left, think of your brothers. Do you want them to hate you? Because Lafe already does, you'd just give him more ammunition and a reason not to get over himself. Grey might not want you to know it, but his hate would fester under his skin until he pummeled you to death in the ring. You know how he gets carried away when he's having fun.” And bloody vengeance was his preferred pastime.

“Then what would you have us do, Park?” Defeat dripped from his tone. “Give her free rein and opportunities to escape? It wouldn't matter if she narked, except Vicente would happily flay us on the table. From that type of transgression, I doubt we'd walk away.”

“Hmm...I think you're going about this all wrong, *mi hermano*. You don't have to silence her. You only have to make it so she can't ever go back home.” I picked up the phone and stood. The silence on the other end was deafening as I walked to the window to peer outside.

The lyrical dialogue of *Bloody Romance* continued to play in the background as I scanned the yard. A storm was coming.

Low gray clouds swirled above, and the moisture in the air practically kissed the glass. We were due for a good rain. They were my favorite, washing everything clean.

“I don’t know how we’re supposed to do that.”

The moment I’d been waiting for. “Well, Andre! I’m glad you asked. I have quite a few ideas on the matter. The question is, do we bring Lafe and Grey in on our plans or let them remain oblivious while holding their dicks in their hands?”

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AMORETTE

Days I'd been inside this apartment with Lafe.

Most of the time, he avoided talking to me. I also contributed because I did my best to stick to this bedroom except for when I was hungry. Then, seeing him in the kitchen was unavoidable. He was always in the main living space. Typing on his phone, working on a laptop, or watching me behind a blank mask as I got what I needed and went back to the bedroom.

I'd only seen him sleeping twice, and both times didn't seem to last long.

He didn't cook for me like he had in the other apartment, and I hadn't seen him eat. More than once, that first day passed through my mind.

Not sleeping, barely eating. Those were signs of drug use.

Even though he seemed so healthy before, at least from a weight perspective.

Now, I was tired.

Tired of sitting in this bedroom with nothing to do. Tired of thinking and picking over every single one of Grey's actions and potential motives behind them. So tired of replaying the death scene over and over every time I shut my eyes. Beyond tired of crying.

This whole surreal experience was a test of my character. It also broke open my perspective and rearranged my worldview into something very different.

I rolled to a sitting position and swung my legs over the side of the bed. A light groan escaped my lips as I stretched and twisted. There was still some lingering soreness, but days of doing nothing helped. I wasn't one hundred percent better, but I was on my way.

Outside of when the brothers had jerked me around or slammed me into something, usually when I was trying to get away, they'd left me alone.

Padding quietly to the door, I opened it and headed toward the living room. I didn't necessarily want to talk to Lafe, but an uncomfortable conversation had to be better than being alone with my thoughts. I'd had too much of that lately. He couldn't be as hard on me as I was on myself.

I couldn't take another hour of wondering if I had almost put myself right back in a bad or worse situation.

Grey was still a bad man. That was unquestionable.

But did saving me lessen his thirst for blood? Did it color his crime in a brighter, more understanding light?

I wasn't sure, and my brain hurt from picking it apart.

I rubbed at the side of my forehead where a stress headache had gathered, then stopped in my tracks.

Lafe sat on the couch with his hand resting on his stomach. His other held the remote on the arm of the couch.

He looked worse today.

Much worse.

Dark purple bruises were stamped under his eyes and his cheeks were sunken in. Even when he looked at me, his dull eyes seemed not to really see me. I could have confused him for a statue if it wasn't for the constant trembling encasing his entire body.

We went on like that for a few minutes. Me waiting to see if he would say anything, him seeming not to realize I was even there. Not really.

Shaking myself mentally, I bypassed him and went into the kitchen looking for medicine. I didn't want to feel bad for him. Or to understand him at all, but as I searched the cabinets, guilt settled on my chest.

What was I going to do? I didn't have a phone. I was locked in by an alarm. I could talk with him. Try and feed him. Get some water in him in case he was dehydrated.

That was all I could do.

I found the medicine in the far corner cabinet. If it was supposed to hold medicines, then Lafe did a poor job of stocking it. The headache medicine was the only bottle. There were still a few shelves lying at the bottom like he couldn't be bothered to put them up.

The stark difference between his place and Grey's was eye-opening. Maybe troubling.

Grey was a health nut. His cabinets were stocked with spices and food. Dishes. The fridge was stuffed with lean meats with an assortment of fresh veggies and fruits.

Then there was Lafe's.

The cabinets were mostly bare, with the exception of some mismatched items. The fridge had an expired jug of milk for the box of some kind of kid's cereal. The wording reminded me of Froot Loops, but the picture was more of a Captain Crunch cereal.

I was probably lucky there were a couple of cases of bottled water in the corner. Grey had had a filtration water thing on his counter, but Lafe didn't have that. Did that mean the water here wasn't safe to drink? I didn't want to chance it.

After I swallowed a couple of pills and ate a few spoonfuls of peanut butter, I paced around the small space.

Lafe couldn't see me from where he was sitting. If he could, he was so zoned out. I didn't think he would think anything of it.

Shit. I should at least feed him. Maybe convince him to call someone for groceries. If he called one of his brothers,

they might drop off the groceries and see something was wrong. Then I could stop the new guilt surging to the top of my tangled emotions. I'd had enough of my own mess, thank you. I didn't need to add this to it.

Hell, I didn't know. Maybe this was normal for him. He'd shown signs of addiction from the very beginning. But somehow, I couldn't see those men just letting him destroy himself.

The man who gave me an ultimatum in the apartment was stronger than this. He wouldn't have been on the verge of overdosing. Was he close to overdosing?

Stomping around the kitchen, I checked the bread. It was moldy. I did find a pack of saltines in the back of the pantry. I hastily made some peanut butter crackers, snatched a bottle of water from the case, and headed to the living room.

Calming the heat in my steps, I slowed down before he could see me. Good thing, too, because his gaze was already cast toward the kitchen when I appeared.

Was he just listening to me in there?

He didn't say anything as I perched on the table in front of him and held out the paper plate and bottle of water. "You look like you're hungry. I would have made you a sandwich, but there's pretty much no food." When he didn't take them, I set the plate on his lap and the bottle next to me. Maybe the smell would tempt him.

Glancing down at the food then back up to me, he kept silent and simply ground his jaw. Because I wasn't a complete ass and I did want to help, I continued.

"If you call the maid or someone, I can tell them what we need." *And maybe they'll take a good look at you while they're here.*

"Why?" he croaked.

Why did I want to feed him? Why was I trying to help him at all? I wish I could be sure of my answers, but I wasn't. Except, I might have viewed this as a little payback.

Over the last several days, I stopped viewing him as the monster. Now, I only saw him as a broken man.

“No,” he jerked to an upright position and recoiled away from me. “So you can try and escape again? Fucking, no.”

I flinched. Even though he was high on something, he meant the words. And I had earned them. It wasn't wrong of me to try and escape when I could, and as much as I didn't want to, I understood why there wasn't even the possibility of trust.

Grey had tried to give it to me.

And I'd shit all over it for a sliver of a chance to return home.

With a death staining my soul, I could honestly say fleeing wasn't my top priority. Not hating myself was now at the top of that list.

“I won't try to leave. After Grey killed that man... I don't want a repeat of that. Call someone. Have them bring some groceries. We still need to eat.”

“Fuck no. I'm not giving you a chance to stab me in the back. I should have never taken you from Maikel's.” He shot to his feet and started pacing around the living room. His hands twitched, and his gaze shot to me every few seconds as if he expected me to attack him.

The sting of his words tried to bury its way into my chest, but I brushed it off as best as I could. It could be the drugs talking. That was the most likely answer. Otherwise, Lafe would have been hostile from the very beginning.

But the fact that he now didn't see me as worth saving... It was stupid. If he felt that way, it was because I had been trouble for him. But they wouldn't let me leave, and I had no reason to trust them.

Except the more I watched and studied them, the more suffocating guilt landed on my shoulders for making their lives harder.

“I’ve changed my mind. I won’t leave, I promise.” I twisted to the side of the table to face him. “Can I call Grey?”

He chuckled out a harsh laugh. “Oh, hell to the fuck no. Grey’s the last person who wants to hear from you. After he took you out? And you fucked him over like that? Do you even have any idea how much hot water we’re in because of what Grey did?” He scoffed and clenched his jaw.

I was speechless.

Shocked.

Grey was in trouble for saving me? They all were?

Fuck! I didn’t understand enough about who they were or the lives they lived. Grey had shared a few things. Lafe too. But...

Could they really be in trouble because of me? If danger was anything like Grey’s outburst, that would mean possible death. Should I ask?

No. I couldn’t. Lafe wasn’t in the right frame of mind to give me truthful answers. And why should he? I hadn’t cooperated with them at all.

Sinking down into a vat of self-loathing, I tried to—shit. I pressed my palms against my eyes. I had no idea what I was thinking. My brain was on a hiatus while my heart beat painfully against my ribs.

“I didn’t mean for that to happen,” I stated quietly, but I was a broken record at this point. They didn’t give two fucks about what I meant to happen. Or why I chose to run.

Ha. The old saying about good intentions streamed through my fractured thoughts.

“So, you didn’t mean to slip away from Grey while he was with our insane father? You didn’t care what would happen when he came after you?” He stopped and faced me, his hands out to his sides. “Because you should have known he would go after you.”

Some of the fire was back in his eyes. I wanted to be thankful he wasn’t about to pass out on the floor, but the more

riled he got, the worse he ripped into me.

I could handle anything when I was wronged. Unfortunately, I found out that I could barely function when I felt like I deserved their censure, even if only on a small level.

“How was I supposed to know Grey would react that way?” I tried to keep my voice to a reasonable volume, but each word was shriller than the last.

“Because I fucking told you!” he screamed so hard veins popped out in his neck. “That day Andre found you, I yelled it through the door. I told you he was a psycho!”

I stilled.

Then I was saved from answering when the alarm panel beeped. It took a minute for the lock on the door to disengage, and when it did, my heart plummeted through my stomach.

Andre strolled in, his hands casually stuffed in the pocket of his jeans. He looked the same as the last time I’d seen him. Maybe a little tired, but mostly the same. Of all the brothers, he was the most striking in looks. Angular face, dark brows, wide set mouth with a fuller bottom lip.

He was also the most dangerous.

After the greeting he first gave me, even catching the struggle in his eyes, he’d have already gotten rid of me if he could.

As he stepped further into the living room, he didn’t immediately try to scare me. Then his gaze traveled over a clearly agitated Lafe, and me sitting less than four feet away from his brother. His body went as taut as a bowstring. At any moment, he could attack.

My heart started beating a rapid tattoo and the sound dimmed as I waited to see what he would do.

Instead of racing to capture me, he questioned Lafe in Spanish, who answered back with terse responses. Back and forth they went until Andre shook his head and pulled out his phone. He dialed a number on speaker, and when someone answered, Andre shot off what might have been instructions.

I jumped when I heard Grey's name.

Was he coming here? Would he speak with me if he did?

When Andre hung up, he held his hand out to me. "Come on. Lafe needs some time alone before he can be your keeper again." His words rolled together smoothly, colored by his accent. Of all the brothers, his was the strongest. Parker didn't have one. If I hadn't met him here, knowing the little I did of his family, I would never have guessed he wasn't born in the US.

Lafe's was different. Sharper. And Grey's was barely more than a hint.

"No. You said I fucked up. I did. Okay. You can tell Vicente this is all my fault, yes?" Lafe tugged at his hair as he bent at the waist.

Shaking his head again, Andre curled his fingers in a twitchy motion. He was getting impatient, shifting his weight from foot to foot.

I glanced at Lafe, not sure what to do. He didn't want me to go with Andre, and I didn't want to go with this brother either.

What if he was trying to save me from the one brother who would hurt me? I hated that I was second-guessing all my decisions. On top of that, it felt a little like betrayal.

"Where are you going to take me?" My words were slow, hesitant as I closed my fingers around the edge of the table.

He raised one eyebrow. "Not to your death, if that's what you're worried about."

Hardee har har. Not the answer to make me trust him. But he didn't need my trust, did he? And he was the last damn person who would have mine.

Then I glanced at Lafe. He was strung out, and he needed help. Right? I hoped that was what Andre was trying to do.

"I need specifics. Why are you taking me, and where?" I persisted.

He sighed, closing the last few steps between us and taking my arm. This time, he was...not gentle, but not abrasive either.

“Come. My dear brother needs to crash, and he won’t do that with you here. I should have thought of that before letting him take you,” he muttered, twisting his lips into a self-deprecating smile.

“I’m fine. Just...Give me a few hours to level out. Then you can come back and check on us. Send Anton to guard her if you need to.”

The alarm beeped again, and Grey stepped in.

As much as I hated it, I drank in the sight of the one friendly face I’d found here. Grey looked exactly like he had when I last saw him. His muscles might have been a little bigger, but he definitely wasn’t losing any sleep with me gone. He didn’t even look at me as he crossed to Lafe, focusing on him instead.

His brows crinkled together. “Come on, *pendejo*. You can’t function like this. Let’s get the good stuff into you, and then I’ll sit with you while you crash. ‘Kay?’”

“I already told Andre I was fine.” He jerked out of Grey’s grip.

“You’re not fine, *hermano*. From the looks of it, you’ve slept less than a whole night since I came back from the fights. You can fight with me later, after you’ve slept. I owe you an ass-kicking anyway for pulling this shit. I could have told you she wouldn’t try to run again. Not so soon.” He dropped his head a few inches to be at eye level with Lafe.

Grey still didn’t look at me, and I was torn between a strange despair and quickly building anger. Nothing made me more furious than when people talked about and around me like I wasn’t there. I hated it in the law firm, and I hated it here. Maybe worse from someone who’d finger fucked me so recently.

They locked gazes until, finally, Lafe nodded. Grey started to lead him away, but I jumped up.

Who knew when I'd see Lafe again or what they'd do with me now that the person who'd tried to save me was going to drop soon? Andre tried to slide his arm around my stomach to stop me from approaching Lafe, but I sidestepped him.

I wasn't sure how I was quicker than him, his reach alone was close to the length of my body. "Lafe." I caught his hand, and he instantly tried to yank it away.

Raising my hands in surrender, I softened my voice. "I just wanted you to know..." I took a deep breath. When the thought struck me, and the quickness of his retreat pressured me, I hadn't realized how hard this would be. Uttering these words felt symbolic, like I was letting go of something vital inside me.

In a few short minutes, his eyes had glazed over again. I hoped he'd remember this tomorrow because he'd never know how pivotal the words were to me.

"Thank you for saving me."

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AMORETTE



Andre had a firm hold on my arm as he guided me down the hallway. Instead of moving to another apartment, we left the residential wing. Men dressed in all black passed us once we were in the common area. If they thought there was anything wrong with Andre leading me around, they didn't show it.

Hell, they didn't even bat an eye. Why would they? Andre and his brothers ran this place, and they wouldn't raise a finger against him.

I caught sight of the woman—Blanca—heading up the stairs, and I started to step toward her, but Andre pulled me along behind him. I hadn't seen her since that day. Was she okay? Did she hate me? Would she have understood why I did what I did?

“Come on, little *bronca*. I have better things to do than cater to you. I'm not my brothers,” Andre said as he continued to tug me behind him.

Fuck him.

We passed a kitchen and another gym before coming to a heavy metal door. Andre hit a few buttons on the keypad and after a beep, it started to swing open. He ushered me in ahead of him.

At least he'd stopped being so rough. I should be thankful for the small mercies with this asswipe.

Inside the large office, Parker swung from side to side in the desk chair as he watched something on his phone. He must have heard us come in, even though he didn't glance at us once. Not until Andre walked around the desk and smacked the back of his head.

“Out of my chair.”

He snorted and stood, walking around to the other side. The space was everything I would expect to see in an executive's office. Sleek modern furniture, moody large landscape prints on the wall. A desk setup that had to cost at least ten grand.

The pretentious air both fit and didn't with Andre's barely leashed violent tendencies.

“Little Love, so we meet again.” Parker took my hand and...encouraged me to take a seat. Once my ass was in the chair, he turned to face me. “I hear you had my dear brother in a state.” He smirked.

What kind of relationship did these men have? Grey was the only one who seemed to care about Lafe at all. If Grace was strung out, I'd be tearing the world apart to get her the help she needed. I wouldn't rest until we'd put together a plan and she stuck with it, even if I had to sit on her.

She would do the same for me, because we loved each other.

How was I supposed to continue my life here if I didn't understand them?

“Are you going to ask how Lafe is doing?” my question slipped out, betraying my irritation with his blasé attitude.

He dipped his chin as his smirk spread into a smile. “Ah-ah. Little Love, you aren't getting attached to Lafe, are you?” I stiffened. “He's not the relationship type. I can tell you that his attempting to kill himself with powder while at home means he has no love lost for you. You took a man who had very clear boundaries when he sampled his wares and forced him to cross them.”

“I didn't do anything to him,” I whispered.

He was trying to shock me, and damn it, he succeeded. But I wasn't to blame for Lafe's choices. He was a big boy. He decided what he did or didn't put in his body.

No, Parker reminded me of the sleazebag husbands I helped take to the cleaners. The ones who tried to make their wives feel like everything was their fault.

I realized I was shaking my head and glaring at him when he snickered. "Fuck you. Fuck you, too." I flicked my gaze to Andre, who just raised his brows.

Standing, I backed away from the desk. When neither made to detain me, the false sense of security sent a burst of courage through my blood. How dare these fucking men treat me like my being here was my fault. Like everything that happened to them was *my* fault.

Hell no.

"Either let me go or send me back," I ground out, even if the words tasted like ash in my mouth.

Andre rubbed a finger over his brow and sighed. He was such a different man here than he'd been the other brief time we'd met, but he was still a bastard.

"We can't let you go. I was coming to get you so we could talk about your situation here," he said as he folded his hands over the glossy desktop.

"We're also not taking you back." Parker shrugged like he could care less, but it wasn't his decision.

"Why? Make me understand. I really want to know why you want to keep me here. It's not like you like me. It's not like you have any sort of attachment to me. If what I've gathered is true, my presence is making your life a hell of a lot harder than it was before." I tossed up a hand, then braced my weight against the back of the empty chair.

With them both sitting, I felt stronger, bigger. The illusion of having the dominant position added a spark to my already building anger. Parker's amused expression made me believe he knew it too.

“Listen, we started off on the wrong foot,” Andre began but paused when I snorted. It wasn’t the carefree snort Parker had made when Andre took his chair back. This was an ugly, rude sound that told exactly what I thought about our start.

Andre shook his head, his mouth dipping into a frown. “I won’t apologize. My first and only priority is my family—” could have fooled me—” and your being here disrupted that. But Parker’s right. Now that you’re here, I couldn’t in good conscience take you back to Maikel’s.”

I kept my gaze glued to his face, searching for any tell that he was lying. Someone like Andre, who had weak morals and no aversion to violence, didn’t strike me as someone who would care about something as small and inconsequential as his conscience.

“That’s not a business we’ve ever wanted any part of—”

“Then why? Get rid of that branch. Save those women,” I demanded, wincing at the shrill tone of my voice. Grey had argued why they couldn’t, but his excuses weren’t enough.

Would never be.

Shit, maybe I wasn’t accepting my fate the way I thought I was.

Parker tipped his head to the side. “Has no one explained to you where you are? Who *we* are?” He seemed genuinely curious. Even morbidly fascinated.

“She knows something,” Andre muttered.

“I know who you are—” I shouldn’t have admitted that. “Grey told me why your hands are tied. I just don’t understand it.”

“Short story long, Little Love, we’re not the biggest, baddest men in the Institution. We’re toward the top of the food chain, to be sure, but we’re not *at* the top. Our psychopath father holds that title, and the only way he’d allow us to dismantle that operation was if he put us in body bags afterward. Then he’d find someone more sadistic to take Maikel’s place. Assuming we killed him.” He leaned back, gently rocking the chair. “That’s the thing you have to

understand with Vicente. He would find someone worse than Maikel just to spite us, regardless if we're around to care or not. On top of that, Vicente chases the money. There's too big of an industry in sex trafficking for him to let there be a void there."

Unfortunately, his words made sense. He phrased it in a way that penetrated my unwilling thoughts more than Grey's had. Or maybe, I just needed to be told the same thing over and over again for it to sink in.

"From your frown, I'd say you at least see why we wouldn't risk it." Parker chuckled like there was something funny about letting that business continue.

"Amorette." My name rolled off of Andre's tongue as he pulled my attention back to him. "The bottom line is, Lafe risked his life and ours by taking you. Now, we have to assume Vicente knows what he did. The damage is done, and we're not about to take you back there so Vicente can abduct you. And he would. He would take you from there and question you on why we took you, what we did with you, and try to garner any information, no matter how insignificant, that could fuck us over. We can't allow that." He shook his head.

Some of the blusters left my sails. Now this fit with my first impression of Andre. He didn't want to take me back because it didn't sit right with him. He didn't want Vicente to get his hands on me on the off chance I knew something their father didn't.

Joke was on them, because the only thing I could tell was that their security was impeccable, and their decor was tasteful. Nothing a crime lord could use.

"Now, let's talk about how you can work for us." Parker slapped his hands on his thighs as he sat forward. The hard sunlight cast deep shadows over his already sharp face, giving him a forbidding air. "We've run your background check, and —"

"What?" I shouted, backing away from them. That meant they knew about Grace. Could they use her against me? I

couldn't allow that to happen. I'd take the suicide route before ever letting her get roped into this cluster fuck of a life.

"Calm down," Andre said coolly, his lids lowering.

"Why would you do that? I could have told you anything you needed to know." I tried to settle the fear in my voice, but I was afraid it still leaked through.

Parker stood, watching my every move as I took another step back. "Amorette, we needed to know you weren't a danger to us. We also wanted to figure out how we would incorporate you into our businesses," he spoke with deliberately measured words.

"And," I choked out, barely able to hear myself over my racing heart. All I kept picturing was Grace shoved in one of those cages at that warehouse. That...that would break me in a way I wasn't sure anything else could. "What did you find?"

"Come sit down, and I'll tell you." If those words were from anyone else, I'd believe they were concerned for me. But these men had probably never felt concern for anyone in their lives. Not unless it was each other, and I still wasn't convinced that was the case, no matter what they said.

Forcing each foot in front of the other, I went back to the chair. I didn't sit down. I couldn't.

"I guess that's good enough," Parker sighed, taking his own seat, and running a hand over his head. "If you're concerned for your sister, don't worry. We have no plans to use her as leverage against you."

My spine snapped straight, and I stopped breathing.

"Relax," Parker waved a hand. "I didn't tell you that to scare you or intimidate you. I'm being honest. Unless you decide to take a bath with a toaster or rendezvous with an entire bottle of pain pills, you're here to stay. I think I can speak for all of us when I say we'd like to have as amicable of a working relationship as possible."

I glanced at Andre. For now, he seemed content to let Parker do the talking. Now, if Andre shared his opinions, he didn't let it show on his expressionless face.

“You swear you will never—*never*—use my sister against me?” I didn’t even try to pretend Parker wasn’t spot on. If they’d done a full background check, they wouldn’t have had to try hard to get every personal detail about her. She was too famous, too in the public eye, for them not to find pages and pages of pictures, interviews, and stats about her. She was one of the very few short women to make a name for herself in modeling. Because she stood out, everyone wanted to know her.

She meant everything to me, I couldn’t let her get hurt. Not even to save myself. And that was the source of unimaginable fear when I hadn’t experienced even a tenth for myself.

“We understand wanting to keep your family safe,” Andre stood, pressing his palms flat against his desk. “If nothing else, that’s something we can agree we understand about each other.”

And just like that, they bought my compliance. Swallowing all the spit suddenly pooling in the back of my throat, I moved around the chair and slowly sat down.

Parker shook his head. “I don’t like this defeated look on you, Little Love. This isn’t why Lafe saved you.”

The skin around my mouth quivered as too many emotions shook my core. “What am I supposed to do? Shout my excitement from the rooftops that I’m not a forced prostitute?” Damn, now I was just tired.

That fucking smirk appeared again, and I ached to smack it off his face. “No, I don’t expect that. But your fighting spirit is what’s keeping you alive. I’d hate to see you lose it,” he murmured.

“What else did you learn about me?” I needed to change the subject away from why they took me, steering it away from Grace.

Andre answered. “Your sister is your only family. You’re a new junior associate fresh out of law school. Graduated top of your class, early.” He sounded impressed. He should be. I had

most of my prereqs completed before I graduated high school. “No known partner, no hobbies, no debt.”

Listening to him list off exactly how focused my life had been didn't sit well with me. It sounded like my life was empty, boring, when it was anything but. Not that it mattered what they thought, I enjoyed the life I'd built for myself. I made a real difference when so many people didn't.

Parker slid to the edge of his seat. “Which brings us to what you can do for us. With your knowledge of the US laws —”

“No.” The word slipped through my lips before I even realized it. I didn't have much negotiating power, not when they knew Grace's identity, but I had to try.

“No?” Parker asked.

“No,” I confirmed. “Anything else? I studied law to save people. Women. Children. I don't want to use it to help criminals navigate the justice system.” I wasn't above pleading. Not for this.

They wanted me to comply? Fine.

They wanted me to work for them? Done.

But I wanted to keep that part of myself locked away from this place.

Andre took his seat again, resting his elbows on the edge of the desk. “That presents a bit of a problem. Using your education was the easiest way to fit you into our world. And it's a skill we could use.”

I drummed my fingers against the outside of my thighs. “I'll read contract documents. I'll give feedback. Just keep me away from finding loopholes for you to exploit in the US. That's my hard limit. Give me another job. I'll do that too. I'm a hard worker, as long as it doesn't involve sex trafficking of any kind.”

After a brief pause, Andre nodded. “Done. Except for policing Maikel on certain matters, we aren't involved in that business at all.”

I released a heavy breath. That assurance took some of the weight off my shoulders. It wasn't ideal, this wasn't even moderately what I wanted my life to be, but it was better than the alternative.

“What else are you in need of?” I reverted to my professional voice, surprising myself with how easily it came back to me.

“Let us think about it. What are your skills?” Parker rubbed his chin as he regarded me thoughtfully.

What skills did I have outside of the law? My heart thumped against my chest as I racked my brain for something useful. Something that criminals would need. “I'm decent with numbers but have no real accounting experience.” Not unless you count balancing your checkbook. “I have an excellent poker face in the boardroom. And I...as a result of my schooling, I'm an excellent researcher.”

Parker regarded me with a gleam of approval in his black eyes as Andre nodded.

Good. I'd impressed them, although I didn't have a clue how they'd find something useful from that hodgepodge set of skills. Studying law really had been my life. That and spending time with Grace.

The pang in my chest wasn't as sharp as it had been any time I'd thought about her. Maybe because I was reasonably certain they wouldn't use her against me. Whatever the cause, I'd take it.

“All right, Little Love. Let's go.” Parker stood up and extended a hand.

“Go where?” I glanced at his hand without taking it.

“To my place.”

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AMORETTE



“**A**m. Don’t be such a snob.” Grace laughed as she fluttered about her studio kitchen.

It was New York City, meaning her place was the size of my master bathroom back home in Virginia, but every inch of the place dripped money. The floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out over the city, the ceiling-high cabinets in the kitchen, the Moroccan tiled shower. The only thing that really surprised me was the lack of a closet.

As a model, Grace had tons and tons of clothes. But she loved the city more than she did space, so she used airtight containers to rotate through her favorite wardrobe, depending on the season.

Grabbing her footstool from under the cabinet, she stepped on it to reach the coffee off the top shelf.

“Why did you get a place with such high ceilings? Isn’t it annoying having to drag that stool out every time you need a glass? Or coffee, since you drink it every day. Actually, why didn’t you put the coffee on the bottom where it was reachable?” I reclined back on her daybed.

“Because, twin, I had other, much more important things to put on the bottom shelf.” She grabbed the beans and hopped down.

I leaned to the side to see what was on the bottom shelf. “Mini bottles? Really?”

“Not everyone is a boring prude like you. I just turned twenty-one and I’m not going to be young forever. I’d rather enjoy it now. And everyone knows pregaming is a smart financial decision. I can also confirm it wasn’t roofied since I started drinking at home.”

That was the sad reality for Grace: she’d almost learned the hard way. If the bartender hadn’t caught the man trying to drop powder in her drink, she could have been hurt—all the more reason for me to go into law. The first time someone hurt her, I’d use every resource at my disposal to make sure they rotted in a dark, dank cell for the rest of their life.

The funny thing was, we were identical, yet not many confused us. There was something about her that just glowed, making people, both male and female, want to be around her. Like she was the fiery sun in a tiny package, and everyone else gravitated around her.

It was hilarious, actually, because she could be a bit of a snobbish bitch. And I meant that lovingly.

Then there was me. The hard-nosed sister with a chip on her shoulder. It cracked us up when we heard whispers about how different we were. But there was truth in those whispers. We were on completely different ends of the personality spectrum, yet I couldn’t imagine life without her in it...

I shuffled out of the guest room, counting the steps to the coffee. Parker was apparently just as much of a coffee addict as I was. He had one of those fancy espresso machines and an assortment of fresh coffee beans.

There was even a bag of Kopi Luwak, which I made sure to steer clear of.

Grace was the only reason I knew what it was. As a rising star in the law firm, I had been invited to several black-tie affairs and rubbed elbows with some of the elite crowd in DC. But it was Grace and her love of fine and fancy things that exposed me to Kopi Luwak. The coffee bean that was essentially eaten and pooped out by a wild civet cat. My crazy boujee sister loved it.

Rubbing the sleep from my eyes, I slammed right into a hard wall.

No, a hard chest. Arms came around me before setting me aside.

“Not a morning person?” Parker asked, his voice rough from sleep.

I grunted. I was a morning person, but I’d tossed and turned most of the night. Partly because I was in a new place, and mostly, because I missed Grace.

I’d been able to compartmentalize my grief, but after my conversation with Parker and Andre yesterday, I couldn’t push her from my mind.

There was no use trying to kid myself, either. The way it hurt to remember her, clashing with my need to hold onto as many memories as possible, I was grieving.

I couldn’t figure out if it was a good or bad thing that I didn’t have any pictures of us together. No keepsakes. If the brothers decided to trust me, and if they knew where my phone was, I could possibly pull some photos and videos from there. But those were some very big ifs.

It was more likely that they didn’t know where my stuff was, and it was pointless asking. We weren’t at a point where I would blindly believe them, if we ever got there, and I’d kill myself picking over their answers.

Because it was his kitchen, and I was inconveniently attached into my manners, I rummaged through the cabinets for the toaster and bread while he started the coffee.

If I had expected him to make me a cup, I would have been sorely disappointed. I’d made an extra piece of toast for him, and I was tempted to eat both pieces.

But it would serve me better if they weren’t treating me like a prisoner. I buttered it and slid it across the counter toward him as I took his place at the espresso machine. I’d toyed with it yesterday after he’d dropped me off, figuring out the basics at least.

He grunted his thanks, and the crunch of his first bite echoed through the quiet kitchen.

After I prepared my cup, the warm liquid sliding down my throat did wonders for perking me up. He made a pleased sound when he took his first sip, and I stopped.

The sensual sounds coming from each of us were too much, alluding to something more intimate than what this was. Scenes of him fucking the fight girl crept into my head. Her bent over, his large hands spanning her hips, the way the flesh of her ass jiggled on each thrust. The rest was fuzzy because Grey had clouded my head. With burning cheeks, I grabbed my toast and coffee mug and headed toward the living room.

The one nice thing about being in the apartment with Parker was the freedom. He didn't have a mile-long list of rules or stare me down anytime I was in the same space he was, which admittedly wasn't often.

He treated me like a roommate.

Logically, I knew he probably had the doors and windows locked and any other precautions they had that I wasn't aware of, but he didn't make me feel like a prisoner.

As soon as we walked through the door, he showed me the guest room, where a few things were in the kitchen, then he left. Just like that.

It was refreshing.

Parker moved around the kitchen as soft sounds of cabinets closing and items hitting the counter traveled to the living room.

When he did reappear, he had a couple of plates in hand. He scowled when he handed me one, like he wasn't sure why he went through the trouble. Had he never done anything nice for someone?

"Thanks," I muttered. It smelled delicious. Eggs and toast with salsa and guac. Nothing crazy. The slice of toast would have held me over for a few hours, but the savory scent wafting off the hot plate pulled a rumble from my stomach.

I was still hungry, apparently.

Flopping onto the other end of the couch, Parker reached to the end table and grabbed the remote. He turned the TV on and paid me no more attention than if I were a fly on the wall as he dug into his food.

Delirious laughter threatened to bubble up my throat as I realized how the tables had turned. I snuck glances at Parker the entire time he sat next to me, and I caught myself outright staring a few times.

He had to have felt my gaze on him, but he didn't react at all.

My brain was struggling to reconcile who they seemed to be as men, and who I knew them to be as criminals. Parker, especially, was a mystery to me. I wasn't convinced there was any true goodness inside him.

Then the way Lafe looked the last time I saw him popped into my head. That killed the amusement. He'd been so bothered by my presence that his gaze had been glued to me anytime I was in his vicinity.

I wasn't to be blamed for his decisions. But that didn't mean I didn't feel a little irrational guilt. Or maybe just sympathy for him.

"I have some things to take care of. I'll be in and out over the next few days, but once I'm done with this job, I'll start integrating you into my operations. We'll see how you do with me before we cut you loose with any of my brothers. We all know they'd fuck it up anyway," he huffed the last few words under his breath.

His black-eyed stare pinned me in place. Had he been expecting a response? My mind momentarily blanked as I replayed his words. There wasn't a response required, but I gave one anyway. Mainly because the intensity of his scrutiny heated my skin to an uncomfortable level, and I needed to distract him.

"What's your part of the business?"

He smiled faintly, then blinked and broke the spell I'd been under. "That will all come in due time, Little Love. For now, make yourself at home. The bags by the door are some clothing items that should fit you." He cast his gaze quickly down to my chest then back up, leaving a burning trail in its wake. "Shame on Lufe for making you stay in pajamas the entire time." He tutted as humor flashed in his gaze, warming the frigid ice in his obsidian depths.

"Thank you," I coughed. It grated to show any kind of gratitude to these men, but I owed it to them, didn't I? In some ways, more than others.

"Perfect. Press star one on the keypad by the door if you need anything. It will ring straight to my cell." Then he was gone.



OVER THE NEXT FEW DAYS, we'd fallen into an easy routine. We'd chat about useless things when we were together, but more often than not, he was absent. Our conversations went something like, I made an extra plate, it's in the microwave, or you're not allergic to anything, right? I got shrimp for dinner.

Sometimes we ate together, and sometimes he disappeared with his plate to his bedroom. The one thing that was constant was the strange amiability between us.

I wasn't fooled into thinking he suddenly trusted me. In his shoes, I wouldn't trust me at all if my siblings' lives were on the line. But when I wasn't actively trying to escape, he seemed...unbothered by my presence.

We weren't friends, but we weren't enemies in this space either.

"Get dressed. I'm going to a meeting, and I'm taking you with me." Parker appeared from his bedroom dressed in casual business attire.

I didn't need any additional encouragement. The opportunity to leave these four walls was highly welcome. He

didn't offer any details as I rushed through dressing in a white button-down and black pencil skirt.

There were other more casual options, but if I went into the meeting with him, I wanted to blend in as much as possible. That was one thing I learned from Grace. Clothes were as much armor as they were for accentuating our best features.

Whoever picked out my sizes did an excellent job, even down to the bra and shoe size. I slipped on ballet flats just in case running was necessary.

Grinning to myself, I left my room to join Parker, who waited by the door. If he thought I was cracking under pressure, he wasn't far off. All I could think about right then was how much my mindset had changed. How I was planning for worst-case scenarios that didn't involve escaping.

His gaze dropped to take in the outfit, but he didn't say anything. No assurance I'd dressed appropriately or mocking that I'd been too presumptuous. If anything, he had an air of impatient indifference as he held the door open for me to walk through.

We silently walked down the hallway toward the commons. He must have been confident I wouldn't try to run because his strides were twice as long as mine, and I had to hustle to keep up. Not only were my legs much shorter than his, but the skirt was also tight around my knees, preventing me from opening my steps.

Why would he have doubted my compliance? He discovered the one thing in life that meant something to me. Bitterness threatened to creep in, but I forced it out. There was no room for that kind of emotion when I was trying so hard to let go of my previous life.

Sweat had begun to bead around my forehead as he opened the door to his right and pointed at a few chairs around a table. "Sit there. I'll be an hour. Maybe two."

Then he left me there as he went through another door that resembled an office, as far as I could tell from the quick

glimpse.

What the fuck?

He brought me so I could sit in a quasi-lobby? If this was his plan, I would have rather sat in the apartment than here. Was he laughing at me when I came out dressed for a business meeting?

Irritation and embarrassment fought for control inside my chest. Just when I started to forget that he was the bad guy in this scenario, he did something assholeish.

The door to the hallway opened, and Grey stepped in. Like almost every other time I'd seen him, he was dressed in gym shorts and a black sleeveless shirt. Except for when he'd taken me to the fights, his wardrobe consisted of one outfit and two colors, white and black. His steps faltered when he noticed me, then he moved toward the door Parker had gone through.

"Wait." I stood, but he shut the door, effectively closing me out.

I sat down in a huff.

The entire time I'd been with Lafe, I'd gone over what I'd say to him. The questions I'd have. I had a chance to speak to him now, and he acted like I wasn't worth the time.

About twenty minutes passed when the door opened, and Grey stepped back out. I didn't waste my chance.

I jumped in front of the exit, spreading my arms to block his way. He could easily move me if he wanted to, but I hoped he would hear me out.

"Grey..." I started, losing my train of thought as he glared down at me. An unruly lock of dirty blond hair fell in his eyes as his lips curled away from his teeth. The warmth that had been there previously was absent, hurting something I didn't want to identify in my chest.

"I have to train." He motioned for me to step aside.

"Can we talk? Please?" My voice cracked over the plea. I rarely begged, and that I was doing it here, with him. That hurt too.

The more he studied me with that blank-faced stare, the more my stomach sank. He wasn't going to humor me. After the stunt I pulled, he really was done with me.

Lowering my arms, I started to move. When he sighed, I stopped. That was a resigned sigh. Like he was considering talking with me. This was it. My chance. Anticipation or maybe adrenaline shot through me as he pulled out his phone and typed a quick message.

Was he giving in? Was he going to take me back with him?

I winced, hating the vulnerable, needy turn my thoughts had taken. I didn't need these men. I didn't even like them. They were a means to an end, that end being a long life.

And answers. He had answers to things that had plagued me for the last two weeks.

"Come on," he sighed. He took in my outfit and shook his head. "I do need to train, and you'll just have to keep me company. You can't do anything in there."

I was also still recovering, although I was much better than I was when Lafe rescued me.

"You let Parker know?" I didn't need Parker or Andre searching the place for me. Andre's form of greeting was all too fresh in my mind.

"I did."

We were a few doors down from the gym, and I was impressed I recognized where we were before he opened the door. This place was like a giant x. Four branches intersecting in the middle to create the common areas. One wing for "guests," one for business, and one for residential. I hadn't been down the other wing, but as soon as I was allowed to roam, I'd check it out.

Cautiously.

The gym was empty inside, much like the other time I'd been in here. I searched for signs of blood on the mats, but it was so mottled with brown splotches the entire floor had probably been covered in blood at one time or another.

Grey walked around the room, flicking on lights and turning on music. His effort to avoid looking at me was overtly obvious, except his eyes met mine through the mirror every few minutes, like he couldn't not drink me in when he thought I wouldn't notice.

Suddenly, I wasn't so alone in my feelings—

“Are you enjoying my brother?” he asked as he pulled his shirt over his head and draped it over a metal chair by the mirrors.

“What?” I barked. Squeezing my hands into tight fists, I tried to remind myself why I wanted to talk with Grey. But he was reminding me that he was a bastard.

“You're staying with Parker now, yes? You haven't fucked him yet?” He glanced over his shoulder as he started stretching his arms and back. Muscles rippled from the movement, drawing my eye to his long-cut form.

Pressing the sides of my fists to my forehead, I fought the urge to scream at him. But that wouldn't get the answers I wanted. Desperately *needed* so I could understand what happened that night.

“No,” I forced out. “I haven't.”

He grunted as he continued to move his body through stretches. I stood there, awkwardly drinking him in, waiting to see what bastard comment was going to come out next.

“Good. Why did you want to talk?” Grey asked, like there was nothing to say.

“You killed that man,” I accused. Fuck, this wasn't the way I needed to approach this at all. And yet, I couldn't help myself. “You enjoyed it.”

He shrugged while walking over to a cabinet and pulling tape out of the drawer. “I hated Ramos. He needed to die. He signed his death warrant when he led you to believe he'd help you.”

“Why did you hate him?” I needed assurance that I hadn't gotten an innocent man killed. Lafe had intimated as much,

but I needed to hear it from Grey's lips.

"He was a cruel fucker. He enjoyed doing Vicente's bidding too much. He enjoyed causing pain. Should I have let him take you?" He smirked as he flicked his gaze to mine, then focused on wrapping his hands.

"No, I...I—" The words stuck in my throat. I couldn't thank Grey the way I had Lafe. Not when I'd watched him beat a man to death. Because I was the catalyst.

He had saved me. I was grateful. But I also struggled with the fact that the man died because of me.

Did it diminish the guilt to know Ramos was a bad man? I didn't know. But I was grasping at the details in hopes it did.

"What did he do? Tell me why he was cruel." I needed specifics, not just Grey's word that he was evil.

Dropping the tape, he sauntered over to stand toe to toe with me. I had to tip my head back to look him in the eyes. The heady, masculine scent that was all Grey swirled around me, bringing back sharp memories of how it felt to have his hands on my body, inside me...

"You don't trust me? My wicked love is okay with getting finger-fucked in the club but not with the death of a bad man? A man who would have done unspeakable things to you once he had you alone?" he taunted me.

"Tell me. What did he do," I whispered, itching to touch him, to feel the one person I'd allowed to touch me in this hell hole. It didn't matter that he was a bastard.

"You want me to tell you how he whips the soldiers who get on Vicente's bad side? Or what about how he took the daughter of his nemesis because he could? Do you want me to give you the gory details about how he delivered her abused, mutilated body back to him when the man had given up hope of ever seeing his daughter again? Because, unlike so many in this institution, that man actually loved her." He raised a hand to capture a lock of my hair, twirling it around his finger. "It's worse to see the abuse your loved one went through before death, rather than to imagine it. Did you know that?"

Something broke inside him that day.” Grey’s words were so soft even as he shuffled closer.

“I have my sister who I love more than life itself. I just wanted to see her again.” My eyelids fluttered shut as he let go of my hair to graze the edge of my jaw. Such tenderness from hands that could cause so much pain.

“Your old life—that’s gone. You won’t ever return. But if we trust you, if you’re with us and not against us, you could see your sister again.” He dangled that cruel carrot in front of me. I wanted to reach out and snatch it to my breast, needing the hope he was giving me, but I couldn’t.

“How am I supposed to show you that?” Our words were barely audible, just loud enough for our ears alone.

“When I figure it out, I’ll let you know.” He dipped his head.

Except, even if they trusted me, I didn’t trust them. I would never bring Grace into this world and put her at risk. If these men decided to let me visit her, someone else might figure out who she is to me. Then use her against me. I couldn’t risk it.

His lips brushed the edge of my mouth, and I sucked in a sharp breath. “I just want to live.” The truth ripped from my tongue without my consent. In that heady moment, where I was drunk on his closeness, the promise of his touch, I had to admit to myself that it was true.

I’d moved past the overwhelming shame of leaving the women behind in that place. I would save them if I could, and if the opportunity arose, I would do what I could to shut it down. But until I knew what that was, I would thrive in the only way I could. I hoped that one day, I’d be able to remember who I used to be.

“You are living, Amorette. Your life has just changed. Taken a new course. That happens in your world, doesn’t it?”

I nodded, softening my lips as he brushed his over mine.

“Just don’t forget, anyone you ask to help you escape, you’re signing their death. The sooner you accept that, the

easier you'll settle here. Everyone is a pawn, and by endangering others, you make them your pawns too."

"I'm done. I won't run. I'm done trying to escape," I put as much conviction in my admission as possible.

Grey snaked his hands around my waist, gripping the band of the skirt to push me against his chest. He didn't say anything else as he slammed his mouth against mine, his tongue sliding past my lips when I gasped.

"I've thought about this for days," he said, unzipping the skirt and pushing it down, cupping the inside of my thighs to pick me up. The rough edges of the tape scratched against my skin. I wrapped my legs around his waist and my arms around his neck as he moved us until cool glass pressed against my back.

Oh hell, this was a bad idea. The glass was definitely going to crack. Although I couldn't bring myself to care as he used one hand to rip the buttons on the blouse and slide it down my arms, trapping them behind my back.

"Are you wet, Wicked Love?" he cooed against my neck as that free hand of his traced the seam of my pussy. "You are," he hummed. "Good. The first time was for you. This time is for me."

I yelped as he bit the curve of my breast and tugged my panties to the side. There was no warning when the thick head of his throbbing cock breached my walls.

He paused then grunted as he thrust the rest of the way in.

"Oh fuck," I groaned as I shook my arms out of the shirt, then cupped the back of his neck. I dropped my forehead to his shoulder. A light sheen of sweat coated his body as he paused. Then he pulled out slowly and pushed back in. I whimpered from the stretch and small bite of pain.

It had been so long since I'd been with a man. And it had never felt this intense. This mind-consuming.

His fingers bit into my ass as he started setting a brutal rhythm. I bounced against his chest as he angled my hips to

stroke my clit with each thrust. Almost immediately, the pressure of the oncoming orgasm started building in my core.

In an embarrassingly short time, I came apart on his cock, pulsing and grinding as much as I could while pressed against the mirror.

“Fuck, fuck.” Grey let out a string of Spanish as he dropped us to the floor, holding my legs in the crook of his arms while he powered against me.

I almost covered my eyes to hide the way his face twisted up from the pleasure, but I didn’t. Instead, I got a front-row seat to the tortured expression on his face as raw sounds spilled from his lips.

His brows scrunched together as his top lip curled and the skin around his eyes crinkled. He was savage in his beauty and wild in his lust.

I was mesmerized.

He quickened his pace and before I knew what was happening, a second, softer orgasm rolled over me. But I kept my eyes open. I couldn’t look away if I wanted to.

Grey’s sounds became sharp, abrasive grunts and groans, and he dropped his head back with one final long, loud exhale. His chest and abs flexed as he nudged against me two more times, his fingers digging into my thighs where he still held me suspended over his lap.

What had I just seen? None of my lovers had ever looked like that when we’d made love. Was this why? Because this was uninhibited fucking?

Releasing my legs, he dropped down on top of me, still pulsing inside as he pressed open-mouth kisses to the long column of my throat.

Fuck, that felt too good.

I couldn’t even justify to myself why I needed to touch him, but as soon as he was within reaching distance, my palms slid over the taut, slick muscles. There was so much strength

inside this body. So much pent-up violence, and yet I felt safe under him.

Just knowing what he was capable of, seeing how he unleashed his desires with me, had my pussy throbbing and stoking my own libido.

This was sick. I shouldn't be turned on by this, right?

The cool air eventually penetrated the heat of our coupling. Chills erupted over my arms and my nipples pebbled as he sat up, slipping from my core. It was when hot liquid leaked down the inside of my thigh and crack of my ass that bitter logic laughed in my face.

What did we just do?

And why wasn't he concerned? No, if anything, he was enthralled with rubbing his fingers through his cum, scooping up the liquid and pushing it back inside.

"We didn't use a condom."

"Why would we? We're tested regularly, and you would have been tested as soon as you were taken." He pushed two fingers inside, massaging that sensitive spot. My eyes threatened to roll back in my head.

I squirmed, focusing on his face instead of what he was doing to me. I was almost afraid to ask the next question. "Birth control?"

That wasn't really an issue. I'd had an IUD for most of my adult life, and I wasn't due for a new one for two more years. Still, he shouldn't know that. Not unless they hacked my medical records too.

"Now that's not an issue either, is it, Amorette?" One side of his mouth lifted. "If they found no evidence of birth control, they would have given you the shot. Either way, I know you're protected.

Protected.

Such a funny word. And one that drove home how much I had been violated at that warehouse and I hadn't even known

it. Had someone shoved their fingers up my vagina when I was drugged and found the string?

I would take apart that place, piece by piece. Maybe not soon, or even in the next year, but I'd find a way to stop their abuse of women. And get a little revenge along the way.

I might as well, right? I'd already crossed one line into the dark side.

What was one more?

“Now, let's talk about where you're staying.” He grinned.

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AMORETTE



If Grey noticed my change in attitude, he didn't comment on it as I gathered my clothes and tried to put them back on in some semblance of professionalism.

Not that I had a job here yet. Or even any passion to follow.

As for Grey, he slipped on his shorts, no underwear, no shirt. When he turned around, the corners of his lips flirted with a smile as he reached for a shirt hanging off to the side.

“Here. For old time's sake.” He smirked, the bastard.

The door to the hallway banged against the wall and a few seconds later, Parker appeared with his hands in his pockets. “Well.” His gaze dragged over my wrinkled, messy outfit. “This is unexpected. Grey, I thought you were upset with our little love?”

Grey flipped him off over his shoulder as he pulled the shirt over his head.

I frowned at Parker. Why would he be an ass and bring that up?

“Regardless, love birds, I came to steal Amorette. I have to make a quick run to meet with one of my managers onshore, and I thought she'd like to go with me.”

Leave? Get a break from this place? I wanted to jump on the option. Shout my excitement to the ceiling, except regret and something suspiciously like fear gripped my chest.

The last time they took me, I nearly lost the one connection I'd made here. I flicked my gaze to Grey. I wasn't sure I even had him back now.

How could they trust me after I tried to leave? They couldn't be so blind as to trust my word, even though I wouldn't make the same mistake twice.

"Why do you look so dubious, Little Love?" Parker grinned as Grey joined us.

"Are you taking me to my death?" It was a forced, blunt question. They might have thought I was kidding. I wasn't. I had to know what they were thinking, and I'd lost my patience to pussyfoot around the subject.

One side of Parker's mouth curled up in a disbelieving sneer. "Seriously? You're going to be dramatic? Do you really believe I'd keep you at my place for days, only to kill you?"

He was right, maybe I even went too far, but I didn't understand these men. At all. Their entire life experience was so different from anything I could comprehend, it made it difficult for me to figure out their thought process. My default seemed to be thinking the worst about them. Always.

I wasn't sure how I was supposed to change that. Or if I even could.

With a burning face, I cleared my throat. "That *was* dramatic," I agreed, yet I couldn't force myself to apologize. "But after the way the last trip went, I don't see you taking me out so freely again."

In their positions, I wouldn't trust me. Every move and breath would be suspect.

"Are you going to enlist a stranger to help you go back home?" Grey asked lightly, but his tone said it was rhetorical.

"Of course not. I learned my lesson," I spat.

"Then there's no need for us to put you under house arrest." Parker slipped his fingers under my arm and trailed them down to my wrist, stopping just short of holding my hand. "You wear your heart on your sleeve," he started,

moving us toward the door. “And your morals are like this pesky little cone you wear around your neck. You know the ones dogs wear after surgery?”

“What is that supposed to mean?” I tried to pull away from him, but he gripped my wrist a little tighter. Grey followed quietly behind us, even as we walked toward the commons.

“It means, Little Love, that you would never place someone else in danger to save yourself. Especially when you can’t tell the good guys from the bad. Now that you realize what fate you’d force on someone else, I don’t have to worry about you. But we’ll work on that character flaw later.” His eyes twinkled as he glanced down at me.

“It’s not a character flaw,” I argued weakly. But it was in this life, wasn’t it?

I imagined anyone who possessed it didn’t live very long.

“Morals aren’t wrong,” Grey added as he moved to my other side. “You just have to learn which lines are absolute hard stops and which ones are negotiable. I’d suggest you hide your rules fast, though, *mami*, because they make you too predictable.”

Grey wasn’t smiling as he glanced down at me. He was dead serious.

And damn, but he was right too. Anyone who wanted to manipulate me into compliance wouldn’t have to work very hard once they knew what lines I wouldn’t cross.

Once we were outside, Parker started steering me in a different direction from the helicopter pad.

“Where are we going?” I tried to keep the suspicion out of my voice, but ingrained habits die hard. “I can’t go on an errand like this?” I looked down at my blouse and twisted skirt. I barely had it zipped before Parker barged into the gym.

Parker took another look at my sad excuse for work attire. “It’ll have to do. Once we get there, there’ll be a bathroom you can fix yourself in, but I can’t delay this trip. Rod is waiting for me.”

Not ideal, but better than him dragging me around in a t-shirt. Grey seemed fond of it, but I needed the armor around these men. I needed every advantage while trying to mold myself into someone who could be here.

“You didn’t answer my other question. This isn’t the way we went last time.” I turned my head toward the trees where a small gathering of helicopters and one airplane sat.

“We’re taking a boat since we’re just heading to the shore. Our island is about an hour from the coast of Ecuador.” Parker opened a door in the brick wall and spread his arm to let me go through. “Why are you still following us?”

I looked back to see Parker addressing Grey.

He shrugged and stepped through, leaving Parker to shut the door. After nearly a week of not talking to me, now he couldn’t seem to leave my side. It was stupid, more than stupid, but I wanted to smile at the sudden change.

Afraid I’d lose the fight, I faced forward.

A marina of wooden docks was just off the shore with a collection of various boats. A life of crime against women, children, and who knew what else certainly paid well.

Shit, that wasn’t fair of me. These guys weren’t in the trafficking piece; the sooner I remembered that, the better off I’d be.

Wait. Blanca stood next to a small speedboat. Dressed in a white sundress with oversized black sunglasses, and she appeared to be waiting to take a leisure ride. Was she waiting on us?

The boat was nothing like some of the ones I’d seen back in the states, but big enough to house a handful of people.

“Is she coming with us?” I asked, my hands sweating from a combination of the heat and the anticipation of getting to speak with her. Parker and Grey probably wouldn’t let me talk with her alone, but I had to apologize.

Needed to.

“Blanca? Why? Are you nervous?” Parker smirked.

I gave a tug and managed to pull my arm away, then shoved his shoulder. “Why are you such an ass?”

He cackled as he righted himself. Grey only shook his head and continued walking toward the boat.

Instead of asking the question again and coming across like an insecure crazy person, I followed Grey. He stopped next to Blanca as they exchanged a few words in Spanish, then he stepped onto the boat. She followed after him without even looking at me.

Shit. I wouldn't be her favorite person after knocking her out with a skillet. Why would I be? I had just hoped she'd understand why I did what I did.

I knew she wasn't punished. The brothers had shared that much.

She still deserved an apology.

“You don't get motion sickness?” Parker glanced at me as he shut the small door and went to the steering wheel, where the key was left in the ignition. A marina full of boats belonging to the most dangerous criminals was a great deterrent from theft, it seemed.

“No,” I answered softly, casting my gaze at Blanca, who had taken a seat close to Parker. She still refused to acknowledge me. When we approached the boat, she might not have looked at me because she was thinking of other things. Or...something.

But now? She was very clearly avoiding eye contact with me. I kept my gaze on her for a few minutes. She had to have felt the weight of my attention on her, but nothing. Blanca appeared non-fussed and carefree while chatting in Spanish to Parker as he slowly let us out of the Marina.

“Here.” Grey handed me a pair of sunshades and a ponytail holder out of a compartment before he shut it and took a seat on the bench next to me.

“Thank you,” I murmured, sliding the sunglasses over my face and pulling my tangled hair into a low bun. Asking why

they had these things was on the tip of my tongue, but it was pointless.

They were attractive men near the top of the food chain. I'd witnessed firsthand how women threw themselves at Parker. I let my gaze linger on his body now that I had dark glasses to cover my eyes.

He was different from Grey. Grey had a fighter's body. Long, muscled strength in every single movement. Parker was maybe an inch or so shorter, leaner. I hadn't seen him without his shirt, but something told me he was no less muscled. Maybe not as defined, but he had that same dangerous aura as all the brothers.

Grey didn't attempt conversation, and with the wind whipping by us, I wouldn't have been able to understand him.

I turned my face up to the sun, closed my eyes, and enjoyed the ride. I hadn't been on a speed boat before. All my boating experience had been on a pontoon boat. This was different. Powerful but smooth.

For a little while, I forgot where I was and who I was with. I was just happy experiencing simple pleasures.

Then the boat slowed. We must have gone over the wake of another boat because the gentle rocking motion had the water splashing against the sides.

Opening my eyes, I caught Blanca glaring at me. But when I dropped my head to face her, she snubbed her nose up and turned back toward Parker.

On the shore, a man waited for us as Parker guided us into an empty spot. Grey stood to grab the ropes and tossed them over. Both brothers worked on getting the boat secured.

While they were occupied, I took a deep breath and approached her. She stayed seated but tipped her head back to see me. Wearing such dark sunglasses, I couldn't get a read on her.

At least I knew she spoke some English from the day she entered the apartment. She'd seemed nice then, which was

partly why I'd beat myself up so much over what I thought I had to do to escape.

In hindsight, I realized how naive I had been. But I was making better choices going forward.

"Blanca," I said, then took in a breath through my nose. My chest expanded with the movement. "I wanted to apologize."

"Why?" she snapped.

"Why would I apologize?" I asked hesitantly.

"Yes. No one held a gun to your head. No one forced you to hit me. Lafe is a good man. A kind man. And he showed more kindness to you than you deserved. He should have left you with Maikel in that hellhole." A string of Spanish curses flew from her lips as she stood up, grabbed her bag, and brushed by me.

When I turned around, Grey was watching me with an indecipherable look while Parker murmured to the dock worker.

"That didn't go so well," I muttered. It was what I had expected, but I was still shocked it had gone so poorly.

"Don't worry about it," Grey said as he extended a hand to help me off the boat. Although I didn't require any. This boat was perfectly made where the door was level with the dock. It was so steady; it only rocked a little as I climbed off.

"That's easy for you to say. I have a conscience," I whispered more to myself than him.

"That's a tool people will only use against you. You don't have to kill it completely, but it would be better if you at least hid your true feelings. And Wicked Little Love, all your shame was in your eyes as you tried to talk to Blanca. Now she has that weapon to use against you."

"Why would she?" I glanced up at him as he placed his hand at the small of my back while we followed behind Parker.

“Because she can. Because you gave her that advantage.” Now Grey sounded exasperated with me. I couldn’t even blame him. Even I felt thick-headed right now, when most of my life I was ahead of the curve, wondering when everyone else would catch up to me.

It was a novel feeling I loathed.

“You’re saying I need to think the worst of everyone,” I said drolly. “Then I’ll be successful here?”

His lips twitched, but he squashed it before he outright smiled. “That would be a start.”

Just like when Parker took me with him this morning, he’d forgotten about me as soon as he was distracted with whatever work he was doing. I almost asked Grey if he wanted to walk around the pier until Parker was done, but Parker stopped and cast an impatient gaze back at me.

“I thought you wanted to find a way to assist in the business?”

Jolting, I stepped forward and straightened my ruffled clothing as much as I could.

I wouldn’t say I *wanted* that. But I sure as hell didn’t want to compromise my integrity any more than I had to. “I do.” Without using the law went unsaid.

“Amorette, meet Rod.” Parker motioned me closer, and I closed the gap with a few steps.

Rod was a Hispanic man with rich dark skin like he spent his days lazing on a pool deck. He wore stark white pants and a shirt to deepen the already stark contrast. His jet-black hair was artfully swept back from his face, giving him a fierce look until he smiled. The blinding white teeth softened some of his hard edges as he extended a hand.

“Pleasure to meet you, miss. Parker’s told me quite a bit about you,” Rod gushed in a thick accent.

That couldn’t be good. I placed my hand in his, mainly because my manners wouldn’t be denied. Even as I shot

Parker a questioning look, I returned the sentiments. “Same, Rod. Nice to meet you.”

He smiled wider and dipped his head. “I reserved a table at Mea Culpa, if that is okay with you?” Rod glanced at Parker.

He nodded, but a furrow appeared between his brows. “Leon?”

“Out of town. Only his *mamá* is in.”

Parker narrowed his gaze but didn’t make any other comments.

“Amorette,” Rod turned back to me as we started moving toward the street. “Parker shared that you are a...” He glanced at Parker for a second as he searched for the right word.

“Researcher,” Parker supplied for him, giving me a discreet wink.

Scents of delicious, cooked steak and seafood carried to us on the breeze, competing against the damp salt air. What I assumed was the restaurant we were going to, had a glamorous patio looking out over the water with various yachts and speed boats spread throughout the bay and docked at the marina.

“Ah yes, researcher.” Rod smiled with a hefty dose of kindness.

Was this a career criminal? I hadn’t even thought to ask the brothers if they had legitimate businesses I could be a part of instead of the dirtier sides.

We ascended a few stone steps and Rod opened the door for our entrance. The hostess greeted us, but after a look from Rod, she dropped her gaze and stayed at her stand.

Now I saw it. The mask he used when talking to me.

We didn’t say anything else as he led us outside to the best table on the patio. It was right on the railing with a heart-stopping view of the water while holding a decent amount of privacy.

Did the brothers own this restaurant too?

And who was Leon? Or his mother, for that matter.

Grey pulled out the chair closest to the water, and once I was seated, he took the seat next to me. If he felt out of place in gym clothes while we were all in various states of business attire, he didn't show it.

Shit, I'd never gotten to go to the bathroom to fix myself. Although my quick smoothing had helped, so my outfit didn't scream that I'd been sexed-up now. The leftover wrinkles could have been from the wind on the trip over.

"Amorette," Rod said, pulling my focus from the water. "We have a series of jobs coming up, and I could use some assistance with the prep." He pulled a file out of his bag.

"Let me fill her in." Parker raised a hand. He took the folder and slid it across the table, pressing it closed so I couldn't open it. "In this folder are a series of paintings and sculptures. We need to prioritize the most valuable items. What I'd like you to do is research the origin, artist, and progression of ownership, to the current location. Can you do that?"

He took his hand away, and I flipped the top flap of the simple manilla folder open. This was huge. I hadn't asked Parker what branch of the organization he ran, because I hadn't wanted to know.

This was smuggling, wasn't it?

Mirth twinkled in the depths of his dark eyes as he nodded to the file's contents. He enjoyed this, giving me crumbs to see if I could follow the trail.

This wasn't a file so much as a series of photographs with a small scrap of paper clipped to each one. The writing...was in Spanish.

The first picture was a small Egyptian statue of a woman on a throne. Most likely a goddess. The second was a colorful, delicately painted vase. From the style, I assumed it was Chinese but undoubtedly Asian in origin.

The third picture was a portrait of a man from several hundred years ago. I at least recognized the artist's name on this scrap of paper. Rembrandt.

I froze.

If these were as valuable as I thought they were, they'd be estimated in the millions, and that was on the conservative side. This was more than smuggling.

I glanced up, and Parker's smirking face filled my vision. "Something wrong, Little Love?" His gaze dared me to cause a scene. To flaunt my morals in front of all three of them.

I wanted to. *Fuck*, how I wanted to.

But they knew too much about me. About...Grace.

I pressed my shaking hand to the table so they wouldn't notice the fine tremors running through me. "No. But I'll need you to translate the notes for me. I'd also like to enroll in a Spanish course."

The humor vanished from his face as he sat back, canting his head. Then his expression lost its cruel angles. "Happy to. There's one more." He flipped the page to reveal a painting of two black women. "Four pieces of art. All should be located within the US, given the last known owners." Parker leisurely flipped all the pictures back into their original spot, then tapped the top photo. "This is important, Amorette. This is your test on if you can be trusted or not," he spoke in a grave voice.

I glanced over at Grey, but he was messing around on his phone, not paying any attention to us.

Parker closed the folder as a young waitress approached our table, and as he ordered wine for the table, he pulled the folder back in his lap.

That was the end of the business discussion. Throughout the meal, which was fantastic, Rod asked polite questions, never too invasive, as he told random hilarious stories about growing up in Ecuador. Everything was surface level. No secrets were traded, and no personal questions were asked, but I found myself relaxing after my first glass of wine. By the time the second was almost gone, I was all smiles as Grey cupped the back of my neck, rubbing his thumb over my pulse.

I could almost forget the circumstances of how I came to be here. I was eating good food, with good company, and getting clear affection from my lover.

Tomorrow, I'd hate myself, but for now, this was a breather I desperately needed. Maybe if I could pretend during moments like this that everything was normal, I'd be able to make it in this new life with new rules.

The sun had started to drop in the sky, setting fire to the water. Parker had just settled the bill as Blanca appeared through the crowd.

How had I forgotten about her? Where had she been?

Grey was next to notice her as he stood up and tossed his cloth napkin on the table. "I believe it's time to head back. I need to get a few more hours in the gym before I call it a night."

"I need to go to the restroom before we get on the boat." I grinned up at Grey.

"I can show you where it is," Rod said as he started to push away from the table.

"I have it." Grey waved him away.

"I have to go too," Blanca announced, still avoiding my stare.

Some of my drunken happiness fled. She pivoted and moved through the tables. With Grey on my heels, I double-timed my steps to keep up. Blanca took us right to the back hallway where the restrooms were. The ladies' on one side and the men's on the other.

"I'll be waiting here," Grey called as I hurried to follow Blanca. I didn't want her to lock herself in a stall before I got a chance to say my piece.

"Blanca," I caught her arm. "I—"

"Get your hands off me!" She yanked away from me. Muttering in Spanish, she left me standing in the middle of the bathroom as she shut herself in one of the stalls.

“I’m sorry.” I hadn’t moved from my spot. It didn’t feel right to pee without getting this off my chest. Closing my eyes, I weaved forward and rested my head against the wooden stall door. “I didn’t want to hurt you. I just needed to escape. Can you understand that? It was never personal.”

She didn’t say anything as the steady stream of her pee echoed from the stall. I waited until she came out. Blanca could yell at me, slap me, I didn’t care, so long as she lessened some of this guilt that had been riding my shoulders.

When she opened the stall door, she stopped short. She was young. Maybe a few years older than me. And I’d made her a victim of sorts. There was a cynical air about her, yet at the same time, she lacked the desperation I’d seen in so many women trying to flee their abusive relationships.

She was treated well by the brothers. And probably by her family.

How lucky for her.

“You didn’t want to be here, yet you hop from brother to brother. You didn’t want to hurt me, even though you caused me more harm than any of those men.” She shook her head like it was pointless trying to talk to me. Skirting around me, she washed her hands and quietly slipped out the door.

Her words turned over in my head.

I was the villain to her. I was the bad guy. She thought so highly of these men and poorly of me. My thoughts spun in circles as my hazy brain tried to make sense of how this could have happened. How I could have let this happen.

She was right. I chose to make her collateral damage. In a way, I had villainized myself, and I hadn’t even realized it. Saving myself didn’t give me the right to hurt her in the process.

Coming out of my useless pity party, I did my own business and washed my hands.

Then a scream came from the hallway. Was that Blanca?

I dropped my wet paper towels on the floor as I sprinted to the door, throwing it open and coming to a sliding stop.

Blanca's hands covered her face as she slid down the wall, soft cries barely making it past the barrier of her hands.

A short, stocky man dressed in black slacks and a white button-down had Grey pushed to the wall with a hand anchored to his throat and a gun under his chin. So much like the way Andre greeted me.

Grey had his hands up as he stared down the man in front of him.

The man growled at Grey, but I couldn't fucking understand anything he was saying!

He lowered the gun, pointing it directly at Blanca as he continued to speak to Grey. He was talking about Blanca. He had to have been. She never raised her head, but her muffled cries turned to sobs, and the man removed the safety from the gun.

No. I couldn't do this. Not again.

He had another gun stuffed in the back of his pants, and when it looked like he was actually going to shoot Blanca, I rushed forward, throwing myself into his back and grabbing the gun at the same time.

His gun went off, firing into the wall.

Without thinking.

Without any thought in my head except *not fucking again*, I removed the safety, cocked the weapon, raised the gun, and fired.

Blood splattered over me.

I couldn't tell if it hit Blanca or Grey. I just saw the damning little speckles on the blouse I wore.

"We need to leave, now, *mamá*." Grey's voice echoed around me. He pulled the gun from my grip, tucking it into the band of his shorts, then swept me off my feet. He yelled

something at Blanca as he moved deeper into the restaurant. We passed people.

Didn't we? I wasn't sure. But soon, we were outside, and he was running toward the boat.

What had I just done?

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ANDRE



“**Y**ou should have the pictures in your inbox,” Hannah said before the line clicked.

Well, fucking hello to you too.

Hannah was one of my best employees. Efficient, skilled, and lacking people skills. But who needed those? They were a waste of fucking time for the most part.

I clicked open my email, and there it was. Parker’s brilliant idea actually worked. Better than worked. Now to decide what to do with them.

Each image on the screen showed a very telling story of how Amorette Monet Black, an up-and-coming domestic victims advocate and attorney, was not here against her will.

They were taken at a distance, but the quality was such that the photographer was within five feet of the table. Thanks to Parker’s planning, he had Rod reserve the most visible table at Mea Culpa. Not only were they in full sight of anyone entering or leaving the restaurant, but the marina and passersby as well.

Genius.

The first image was Grey politely pulling out a chair for her, and her smiling up at him so sweetly. I snorted. I couldn’t fucking stop it. Had Parker filled Grey in on what he was doing? Because this wasn’t Grey. He couldn’t give two shits about manners or appearances or anything so useless.

That was more Parker's game. Or mine. You play the cards that allow for the best outcome. Always.

The next was Parker reviewing the images in the file with her. His index finger pointing something out, her bent over it, lost in thought. Grey's profile as he studied her was also visible.

The Institution was so well known in South America, and by default, our family, that anyone, civilian or not, would recognize them.

The time stamp was every five minutes on the rest of the pictures. Each one, Amorette was a little more relaxed and happy. She was rolling with laughter in some.

I had to admit, Grey caressing her neck was a nice touch.

Glancing at my clock, I pushed my chair away from my desk. There were a million and one things I needed to do, but for the moment, I wanted to bask in something finally going right.

The one question taking up my mind—release the pictures to the press, or show Amorette as leverage?

Either way, her rabid fight to return to the US would wither to practically nothing. I was still on the opposing side here. She was a sweet piece, but nothing worth losing one of my brothers over.

Except, Parker thought she could be of use.

I rolled my eyes. He probably wanted to fuck her, and it was clouding his judgment.

Sighing, I stood and stretched. A run would help invigorate me, provide a little motivation to deal with Vicente's goons.

The burner cell rang on the desk. That was strange. It was the one I kept—we all kept—for emergencies only.

I snatched it up, hitting the green button.

“Yes?”

“We have a problem.” Parker's dry, unbothered voice came down the line.

“I don’t like those words. What kind of problem?” I paced around the office, needing to move. Seconds went by with only the sound of Parker’s breathing. The bastard held me in fucking suspense. Parker knew I hated that shit.

“Well, either Vicente believes we’re liabilities not worth keeping around, or there’s another player on the board pretending to work for Vicente.”

Shit, shit, shit.

Swiping my hand through my hair, I spun around and logged back into my computer. I needed to see what open jobs I had on the table and what he asked for.

Grey always bit my ass about it, but I kept detailed notes on every single interaction with Vicente. Who he targeted, why, and the outcome.

Even for my brothers.

They’d think I was crazy, and maybe I was. I was the paranoid creature Vicente molded me into. But this way I could keep a clear record and not forget a single thing that could be used against us at a later date. And if there seemed to be a loose thread...

I took care of it before it became an issue.

Shit. There were three open requests between the four of us right now for Vicente. I needed to check on the progress to see where we stood. If anything had gone wrong. But if it had, we should have been notified.

“What the fucking hell happened?” I shouted.

“Our *pendejo* brother—” A litany of Grey’s cursing filled the background. “Escorted our little love to the bathroom with Blanca, giving this man a perfect opening to corner them.”

“Did you bring him w—”

“Now, brother, I would have loved to. No one gets answers quite like you do, but unfortunately, no. Our little love apparently has a will of steel when it comes to taking care of business.” His smile came through loud and clear, but I wasn’t seeing anything to fucking smile about.

“What is that supposed to mean? Are you okay? Is Grey okay?” I spat, finding the document I needed. It was in Excel, with different tabs for each type of interaction in chronological order. Color-coded too.

“Why yes, I’m glad you asked. It seems Little Love doesn’t like it when someone she cares about is threatened.” He chuckled. “I’m sure Grey could have handled it, but this was the best-case scenario. Amorette took care of the gunman. While not ideal, this is a perfect solution to our problems.”

“Is she there with you now? Where the hell are you?”

“We just docked. Grey is carrying her inside.”

“What do you mean she took care of the gunman? I wish you’d fucking tell the story instead of dancing around the details!” I locked my computer, then my office, and took off toward the back doors.

I needed to see both of my *estúpido* brothers to ensure they were okay. And maybe, just maybe, Parker will have explained what happened by then.

“Amorette was the straggler, and when she came out of the bathroom, she had the perfect opportunity to snatch the man’s second weapon right out of the back of his pants. Who carries a gun visible like that?” He scoffed.

“She saved Grey?” My steps slowed. Why would she save one of her supposed captors?

“Oh yes. But they’d already made up. If we’re splitting hairs, the gunman was technically aiming at Blanca when Little Love shot him. Did you see any weapons training in her background? Where’d she learn to handle a gun?” he mused. The sounds of his footsteps meant he was coming toward the compound.

“Why was Blanca with you?” She wasn’t part of the plan.

“Because she wanted to see some friends. Stop being an ass.” Parker sighed just as I rounded the corner.

There Grey was, leading a blank-faced Amorette through the door. His brow furrowed as he watched her. His lips were

moving, but there were too many people and too much space between us for me to hear what he said to her.

I didn't have to push past our men. They separated for me as I stormed toward Grey. Parker came into view through the glass so I hung up the phone.

As I got closer, I noticed the red speckles covering Amorette's white shirt. There were a few spots on Grey's shirt as well. Their hands and faces were clean. That was good. Someone had at least done that much cleanup. Probably Blanca.

Parker thought we were invincible, and Grey never cared about such things.

"What happened?" I put my fists on my hips as I stopped directly in front of them.

Fury flashed in Grey's eyes as he pinned me with his gaze. "Some *cabron* thought he could corner me in a hallway." He glanced down at the current pain in my ass. "He had a message for us..."

"And? Don't be an ass like Parker. Tell me the bottom-line details." I stepped forward.

Amorette didn't even flinch. It didn't look like she was there at all. Her face was completely devoid of emotion, her gaze vacant.

Great. She was in fucking shock. So I couldn't question her. This was the problem with bringing in outsiders. They never knew how to act.

"I can't tell you more than that. Amorette shot him before I could take him down. The only thing that came out of his mouth was that he knew who I was, and I needed to comply or *we*, what I'm assuming is our family, would be very sorry." He dropped a hand on Amorette's shoulder and gave her a light squeeze.

Still no reaction.

"Where's Blanca?" I left my gaze on Amorette. Her lack of reaction was starting to become concerning.

“Stayed back to spend a few days with her family. She was shaken. You know how Jorge shelters her.”

I did. He was only so successful because they worked with us. Jorge would never have been able to save her if he'd worked in any of Vicente's other businesses.

Parker strolled in, hands in his pocket and a smug twitch of his lips.

Grey looked over his shoulder. “Can you take Amorette back to your place? I need to fight.”

Bloody someone's face was more like it.

Parker opened his mouth, but Amorette spoke before him. “No,” she whispered. Then started shaking her head.

“No?” Grey questioned her.

“No, I don't want to go with him, or you. I...” She sucked in a breath, her bottom lip quivering. “I can't do this right now.” Her head started jerking from side to side.

I sent a glare around the floor and the men present made themselves scarce.

“You can go to the gym wi—” Grey tried to offer her another option, but she wouldn't hear it.

“No!” she screamed, loud and long, fisting her hands at her sides. When she tipped her head back to look up at him, tears glistened in her eyes. The whites were now pink, making the blue impossibly large and luminescent.

“Little Love,” Parker started, reaching a hand forward, but she slapped him away.

“Please,” she cried, her voice so thick I could barely understand the word. “I need to be alone. I can't...I can't believe I did that.” She pinched the bridge of her nose and squeezed her eyes shut.

“Do what? Save my life? Blanca's life?” Grey asked incredulously.

“Kill a man!” she shrieked. Then softer. “I killed a man.” Tears started to fall. From everything I knew of Amorette,

she'd hate that she showed that weakness in front of us. "I'm a murderer. I—Take me to the apartment I stayed in when I first got here. Just...let me fucking break in peace." Her top lip curled as she spat the words at Parker and Grey.

How did we get here? We had a younger, softer version of Lafe stuck in our care.

I sighed. The fury she felt, the anger. It wasn't directed at Grey or Parker. From all my years of struggling to make Lafe stronger, I recognized this for what it was. She hated herself. At least right now.

"Come on." I curled my fingers for her to come closer to me. "I'll take you up there."

"The birdcages are for—" Grey snarled in Spanish, but I cut him off.

"I know what they're for. However, she doesn't want to be around either of you right now. And I can't have her running off, being stupid, when I need to be figuring out who targeted you." I gave Grey a pointed look.

He shrugged. Bastard.

Now that the man was dead, he didn't care. The threat, or at least the immediate threat, was gone.

"I told you what I know. Parker already got the footage." Grey tried to touch Amorette's shoulder, but she yanked away before he could reach her. His fury cooled to something more frightening as one of his eyes twitched. "I'll be in the gym."

He walked away without another word.

Amorette didn't care as she wiped the tears away.

Parker frowned as he studied her. I cleared my throat, and he flicked his gaze to me. "My office in ten."

I placed my hand on the small of her back to lead her up the stairs instead of gripping her arm like a prisoner. Even though I didn't have time for this shit, I couldn't bring myself to bark at her or push her around the way I had before. She seemed so soft right then, like the smallest amount of stress

would have her fractured shell crumbling into something that couldn't be repaired.

And I wasn't a complete asshole. Or maybe it was because, in a time when she could have sat back to see if that was finally her time to escape, at the expense of my brother's life, she saved him.

At the expense of her own morals, evidently. But she had the balls to go through with it when under pressure.

Maybe I was starting to see what Lafe saw in her the first time. It didn't change my opinion. We were better off without anything for Vicente to hold over our heads.

We'd hold onto those pictures of her looking so cozy with Grey while laughing with Parker. As soon as Vicente realized how close she'd gotten to them, no matter if it was a ruse, he'd have a bargaining chip I never wanted him to have.

I opened the door to the apartment, and once she was inside, I locked the door from the outside.

I hated feeling like I owed her something, damn it. As I walked down the stairs to figure out what Parker had and where this threat was coming from, Amorette's tear-stained face played over in my mind.

This life was going to break her. Hopefully, Lafe would survive that realization since he was the one who saved her in the first place.

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LAFE

I finished off a few emails to my suppliers and sent them off. Then handled a couple of issues with my street boys. Things that should have been done two weeks ago, but life since I brought Amorette here wasn't anything like it used to be.

At least not for me.

My thoughts were too loud and my guilt too consuming. I'd put us in this fucked up mess. Me and my stupid fucking conscience.

I sighed as I walked out to the living room and sank onto the couch. It was the exact spot I'd resided in through most of Killer's stay with me.

Why did I do things the way I did? I scrubbed a hand over my face and dropped my head back against the wall.

Exhaustion stopped the answer from forming. I'd slept so much since the comedown. If I slept anymore, I'd never wake up again. It was hard to find it in myself to care. Andre's life would be much easier. Parker wouldn't give a shit either way. Maybe Grey would care, in the way Grey cared about anything.

But if it wasn't fighting or fucking, life didn't hold interest for that bastard.

I guess I should also count myself lucky Grey took the time to get me sorted. Then he stopped by every few days with his healthy meals. Probably to make sure I was still breathing.

My brothers thought I would OD one day, but I had very strict rules. With Amorette here, I just needed them to stay awake. To make sure she didn't run. Looking back, I didn't need to. At that moment, though, she was the enemy who would slit my throat in my sleep and send everyone I loved to their deaths.

The mind worked in funny ways.

"Knock, knock!" Parker called through the door.

"Go the fuck away!" I yelled back, slumping further into the cushions. That asshole being here couldn't mean anything good. He'd laugh at my sorry state and mock me for my weaknesses.

"Sorry, no can do, dear brother. I'm afraid I'm in the hall until you open the door."

"Like hell," I muttered. If I gave him enough time, he would go away on his own. Parker had patience in certain situations, but this wasn't one of them.

"I know what you're doing. You're not going to outwait me. Here. How about a little game of tap-tap."

"Tap-tap?" I grumbled. What the hell was that?

Then it began.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

The *skitstövel* used his finger to annoy the fuck out of me. Like some backass version of Chinese water torture.

Fuck this shit. I went to the bedroom and shut the door, but either his tapping got louder, or I knew it was there so my mind was playing tricks on me.

I threw the covers over my head, and it still assaulted my eardrums.

After a solid ten minutes of that wretched sound, I stormed the door, unlocked it, and threw it open.

"Are you fucking happy?" I snarled at a smiling Parker.

Stuffing his hands in his pockets, he rocked back on his heels. “Delighted. You look like shit.” An insult delivered with a smile. The very definition of Parker.

“Fuck you.” I turned around, leaving him to come in on his own. If he wanted to be an ass, he could shut and lock the door behind him.

He chuckled under his breath. After he took care of the door, he followed me to the couch. While he looked around the place, he whistled.

“You know, Blanca would probably come help you clean up this mess.”

I sneered.

“You didn’t keep it like this when Little Love was here, did you?” He raised his brows. “Girls like her, they aren’t too fond of pigsties. If you lay with pigs...” His lips curled as he trailed off.

“You get dirty,” I deadpanned.

Parker full-on smiled and stretched back against his chair. His gaze constantly moved around the living room, and he didn’t try to engage in any more conversations.

Closing my eyes, I almost forgot he was here.

I was just so tired.

My phone rang in the other room, jolting me out of my doze. I jerked up and stared right into Parker’s eyes. He had been watching me while I slept. That would have disturbed me with anyone else. With Parker, he had always been odd. And I trusted him with my life.

For the most part.

“I checked the fridge while you napped. I see you’ve been eating Grey’s food and drinking the water supply,” he said as the phone stopped ringing.

I grunted. What did he care?

“You’re not even going to ask about her?”

I cut my gaze to him. Grey hadn't said one word about her when he'd been here. Not surprising since she pissed him off.

Killer had taken up more of my thoughts than I would ever admit. Mostly about myself and why I couldn't leave her there. Yet, every once in a while, a stray thought would pop in about where she was. Did she hate us? Were we scum to her because of our forced careers?

Did she see our weaknesses the same way I did?

"Your silence is giving you away, Lafe." Parker leaned forward and slapped my knee. "I'll put you out of your misery. Little Love is firmly planted in our lives now. I thought you'd be happy to know she doesn't need constant supervision anymore."

I perked up, my curiosity getting the better of me. "It's been a week, maybe a little more, since I fucked it up. How did that happen so fast?"

He had to be fucking with me. The way she was driven by her righteousness wouldn't allow her to bend so easily. It was why I stayed coked up to watch her.

"Ah, but, brother, you forget she has a savior complex." Parker grinned and paused. When I glared at him, he shook his head in amusement.

Everything was a joke to him.

"We're putting her to work. She's going to research potential projects for me." He waited to see if I'd have anything to say about that, and when I didn't, he continued. "So, I took her to meet Rod and let the public see her with us. It helps that she made up with Grey." He shrugged like he never doubted that for a minute. "Everything was going splendidly until Grey took her and Blanca to the restroom." His jaw worked, the first sign that whatever happened next angered him.

"Why was Blanca there?"

"Not important." He waved my question away. "The important thing here is, a gunman caught Blanca and Grey in

the hallway. It seems that either Vicente wants us off the board, or another player is trying to break into the game.”

I furrowed my brow as I sat forward. Where was my water? My mouth was parched and this news was starting to give me a headache.

“What does that have to do with Amorette?” I croaked, thinking I had an idea where this was going.

“Well, because Amorette came out of the restroom and to their rescue. She saved the day. Or at least thinks she did.”

“She took care of the gunman?” Why would she do that?

“More than took care of him. She killed him. Shot him with his own weapon. Which, he had shit for brains to have a second gun stuck in a visible place. He deserved it.”

Parker’s glee in recounting the story was bordering on morbid. He was thrilled that she jumped in to save them.

But I still came back to the question—why would she do that? For them? Maybe for Blanca. Grey would be seen as her captor, the same as Maikel and me. Right?

“Don’t you see what this means?” He grinned and leaned forward. “Little Love isn’t quite so bright white as she wants to be. In her lovely little head, she’s now a murderer.”

“Hm.” But what would that do to her psyche? Parker was flying high that she wouldn’t try to leave. I was more concerned in my fogged-out brain that she’d push for revenge, since we were the catalyst that led her to this defilement of her character.

“You’re absolutely no fun,” he sighed as he fell back in the chair.

“I don’t think this is the easy solution you think it is,” I warned.

He waved his hand again. “Stop being paranoid. You should be past this stage in your comedown.”

I growled.

“Accept this for the boon it is. Now Grey can keep his fuck buddy, and you can keep your sanity. You can stop beating yourself up for taking her. Anyway, I had another reason for coming here.”

He pulled out his phone and opened an app. When he turned the phone my way, it was a mostly clear image of Killer sitting in the living room of the birdcage.

Why did they put her there if she wasn't a threat anymore?

“She asked. That's why she's in the birdcage. But don't worry. Grey won't let her be there for long.” He shook the phone until I took it from his hands.

Killer was sitting on the couch, staring blankly into the room. I recognized this behavior. She was in shock.

“You put cameras in there?” I had to check the timestamp to make sure it was actually live and not a picture or a loop.

“We should have done that ages ago. I only had cameras installed in the living room and kitchen just to make sure she was still breathing. I had a feeling she'd go back sooner or later.” He reached out to take the phone back. “I'll send you the link. That should take off the sharpest edge of your distrust. You can watch her. Make sure she's not plotting our murders,” he said with a smirk.

Without any other comments, he strolled to the front door, and right before he closed it he said, “You should lock this behind me.”

Asshole.

It was another ten minutes before he sent the link to the app with the login details.

I logged in immediately.

Killer was still in the same position, missing all the fire that had drawn me to her.

It was intrusive and wrong to watch. Still, I did. I watched her for hours. It was addicting. She moved between catatonia and screaming rages. Tears were present only half of the time.

Parker had added three cameras. Two in the living room and one in the kitchen. The only time I couldn't see her was when she went to the bedroom.

When she'd disappear, I itched, constantly flipping between all three angles while I waited for her to appear. She was digesting her first kill. Coming to terms with it.

I followed along with her, remembering my own screwed-up initiation into the life. In a way, it was cathartic. Until days passed, and she was mostly a zombie at this point.

The intrigue and connection had worn off, leaving behind the guilt of watching her when she wasn't aware.

She'd claimed her name, Killer.

And I added another deed to my sins.

Stalking.

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AMORETTE



A knock came at the door, and I hopped up to see who it was. I'd been locked in this apartment for almost two weeks, with barely any contact with the brothers.

I was being a coward, but it was easier for me this way.

The second day I was in here, a security worker showed up then proceeded to install a keypad on the door. I wasn't sure it was so much an alarm system as it was a way to communicate if I needed it.

He'd shown me three buttons.

Andre, Parker, and Grey.

There was a fourth button, but it wasn't labeled.

Was that supposed to go to Lafe? Did they plan to leave me here long-term?

The way my brain warred with my conscience, that might not have been a bad thing.

I tried to open the door, but then I remembered it was locked from the outside.

"Come in," I called.

Only one snick sounded before the knob slowly twisted open. Blanca stood there. I glanced down at her hands, expecting to see groceries, but they were empty.

When she cleared her throat, I realized I'd been staring at her.

“Sorry, come in.” I stepped back, but she shook her head.

“Walk with me?” she asked hesitantly, staring at my nose.

“Yeah, uh, sure. Give me a second to get dressed.” I left the door open as I quickly changed out of my pajamas and into a pair of gym shorts and a t-shirt. Then I grabbed a pair of flip-flops from the closet.

Andre, of all people, had brought me a number of things before I went to bed. He didn’t speak, he didn’t even look at me. He just set the bag down inside the door, sighed, and left.

“Ready,” I said, blowing a strand of hair out of my face as I stepped into the hallway. “Um...” I didn’t have a way to unlock the door. Or lock it.

“I have the key,” she said in her accented voice. It was softer today than the first time she’d entered the apartment. It was also less sharp than when she dressed me down in the bathroom.

She shut the door and locked the bottom lock. When she turned around, she waved it in the air. “I would give it to you, but...” Her gaze traveled to the wall beside me.

“I’m enemy number one. I get it.”

“No, you’re not.” She took a deep breath, then started walking down the hallway. Not toward the commons, but the other way. “I think you’re only in there because you asked to be.” Her sweetly accented voice twined around me.

How did she know that? She hadn’t come back with us.

“You know this is where they keep visitors they don’t want here, right? It’s a pretty cage that turns into a glorified prison whenever they need it to be.”

“And how often does that happen?” We passed a dozen doors before we reached the one at the end. How many times had these rooms been completely full?

“Not as often as you’d think. But you shouldn’t be staying up here. It gives the men the wrong impression.” She lowered her voice as she pushed the door open, revealing a pristine concrete stairwell.

This was nothing like the dirty stairwells in DC.

“Are the men dangerous to me?” I wasn’t sure I believed her. More like I was curious what her answer would be.

She shook her head vehemently, her dark shiny hair sliding over her shoulders from the motion. “No. Absolutely not. Not with the brothers’ clear obsession with you.”

I doubted them putting me in the apartment that doubled as a cell proved any kind of obsession. If anything, I was an inconvenient problem they weren’t sure what to do with.

A hint of a smile flirted with my lips. I was always a pain in Grace’s ass. Looked like the same could be said for these men too.

“I don’t think you’re reading that right.”

“Oh, I am. They never bring their women back here. That Lafe smuggled you in says as much.” At the bottom of the stairs, she pushed the door open to the outside. The thick, humid air seemed to stick to my skin as we entered the courtyard.

Blanca pointed to a path that led to the outside wall. Following her instruction, I went ahead of her. As the path widened, she joined me back at my side.

“I don’t think I see it your way at all.”

She shrugged. “Doesn’t matter. That’s how everyone here sees it. But it just takes one...idiot...to mistake the meaning of you in that wing.”

Two guards came into view as we neared a metal door. Blanca made a demand in Spanish, and they nodded as one used a key to open the door. It swung outward. Again, Blanca let me precede her.

The two men were young, but fit. Similar to the men I’d seen at the warehouse with all those evil assholes. I stared just as hard at them as they studied me on my way past them.

Because old habits die hard, I tried to get a glimpse into their character. Were they bad men? Did they hold any decency or regard for women?

I sighed, facing forward once I was past the wall. The one thing this experience taught me was that not everyone was who they seemed. Throughout my life and career, I'd banked on being a good judge of character, but I was starting to realize I didn't know as much as I thought I had.

Things weren't so black and white.

If they were...

Ugh. I needed a break from my thoughts.

On this side of the wall, the trees and foliage were thicker, even with the small houses not so far away. It was cute, quaint. Almost like stepping back in time fifty years.

"The beach is this way. I thought you might like a change of scenery," she said, hesitation sticking to her soft words.

"After being cooped up in the apartment, this is great. Thank you."

We walked in silence, and once we made it to the white stretch of sand, she walked us right up to the edge of the water, the soapy foam licking over my toes.

"Thank you," she said as she turned to face me. The wind from the ocean was strong and seemed to whip her words into the void. No one outside of our small bubble would ever hear what she said to me. "You didn't have to save me, but you did. Especially after I said..." She paused as if she had lost her words. With a renewed fire in her eyes, she shuffled closer. "You didn't have to do that. So...thank you."

I nodded, wiping the side of my palm across my eyebrow and down the side of my cheek. The words *you're welcome* sat on the tip of my tongue, but how could I tell her that, when I struggled so much with the decision to take that man's life?

Her gaze snapped between each of my eyes until she was satisfied with what she saw. Then she sat down right in the wet sand and motioned for me to follow suit.

I did, and we probably sat there for an hour. The sand swept out from under me as the tide got higher and higher. The

sun started to dip in the distance, streaking soft oranges and violets across the sky.

The salt in the air, the breeze on my skin, even the chilled water lapping at my legs...

Reminded me I was here. I was alive. Life seemed simple here on the shore. Like I wasn't a monster for not even hesitating.

It was a reset I needed. We'd see how long it lasted. My thoughts had been so loud in the apartment I'd eventually numbed myself to them. This was...

This was nice.

All too soon, someone approached. His form was small and grainy but became more apparent the closer he got.

Grey.

My heart flopped in my chest as he ran toward us. Dressed only in a pair of gym shorts, sweat glistened off his skin from the setting sun.

He approached like he knew we'd be out here.

Grey sent Blanca a pointed look and she stood, wiping the wet sand from her shorts as much as possible.

"We might not ever be friends," she said. "But I wanted you to know that I was wrong about you."

I watched Blanca head back toward the wall as Grey dropped down next to me.

He looked good. His blond hair dark from sweat and slicked back. His face sharpened by shadows and his light green eyes bright from the reflection on the water.

"Are you over your tantrum now?"

I sputtered. How had I just been thinking about how much I missed being around him when he was a literal asshole?

"Tantrum?" I leaned away from him, afraid I'd punch him if he kept up his asshole remarks.

Sighing, he splashed water away from us. “Come on, *mami*. You’re upset over something that you should be celebrating. If Blanca hadn’t wanted to take you on a walk, you would still be sitting in the apartment, wallowing in self-pity.”

My mind whited out. The way—He—Fuck.

“I took a life, Grey! Do you understand that? I fucking took a life like it was nothing.” My pulse thrummed in my ears and my hands shook.

“It wasn’t for nothing.” He looked at me like I was the densest person he’d ever met.

Yeah, well, I didn’t understand him either.

Like watching a movie reel, tiny specks of blood sprayed over me. I watched a breathing body fall limp to the ground.

“Then what was it for?” I whispered, looking at him through hot tears. “Why was death the necessary action?”

Grey took my chin in his hands and gently, but firmly, pulled my face toward his. Dipping closer, he looked deep into my eyes with zero sympathy, and I wasn’t sure what to do with that.

“Because you’re still here. I’m still here. Blanca is still here.”

“But he didn’t have to die!” I shouted, digging my hands into the wet sand to anchor myself.

“So fucking what! If you hadn’t killed him, I would have. Or Andre. Or any one of us. Because that’s the world we live in.” He dropped his hand like I burned him. “I can’t fucking talk to you. Come on. We’re going back to the compound. And you’re not going back to that fucking cage. Pick where you want to go, but not there.”

He stomped up the sand, apparently secure in the knowledge I’d follow after him.

And I did. I followed the bastard because I was weak. Right? That was the only reason I could think of for why I’d blindly listen to him.

Or maybe, a voice whispered in the back of my head, I didn't want to find out what happened when I didn't listen. I'd done that before, and I'd nearly gotten myself abducted. Again.

There was no waiting on me. By the time I reached the wall, Grey was already opening the door. The guards avoided my gaze this time, like Grey's displeasure meant I was back on the enemy list.

At the next door, I rushed inside, but there was no sign of him anywhere. A few guards were milling around, but no one paid me any attention at all.

I could go back to the apartment, but I didn't have a key. Then again, Blanca's words came back to me. And Grey's. The last thing I wanted was for anyone here to question my place with the brothers, even if I didn't know it myself.

All it would take was one idiot, just like Blanca said, for me to get hurt or worse, killed.

Assuming a bit of my old mentality, I dashed the tears from my eyes and lifted my chin. If I pretended I knew where I was going, no one would bother me.

Someone must have let the men know I wasn't a prisoner, because all the faces I passed were new. Not a single one I recognized.

Bypassing the residential hall, because how was I supposed to pick an apartment to go to? Andre, as...civil as he'd been the last time I saw him, I didn't trust him.

Parker was a shit-stirrer.

Grey made my blood boil.

Lafe was the one brother I actually did want to see, if only to check on him. With the way he was the last time I saw him, I doubted he'd want to see me. And really, what right did I have to force my presence on him?

I huffed out a laugh that grated over my own skin. That was too innocent of thinking given my current circumstance.

Never faltering, I headed down a wing I hadn't been in yet. That was where the offices and gym were, then the residential wing. This particular hallway had a couple of doors. No keypads, though.

This must be for public use.

I picked the closest door and walked right into a theater room. Dark red curtains framed the screen, and speakers blared as waves crashed against the lighthouse.

Shutter Island.

One of my favorite Leonardo DiCaprio movies.

Unlike a traditional theater, rows of reclining seats were absent. And in their place, a few couches were scattered around the room.

When I walked forward to toss myself down on a loveseat, I stopped. Lafe was sprawled over the center couch.

He twisted his head my way. The rise and fall of his chest sped up as he watched me. If he had an issue with me being here, he didn't show it.

I took a step toward him. Then another, waiting for him to object to my presence. He didn't.

When I was next to the couch, he dropped his feet, making room for me.

Unable to tear my eyes away, I drank him in. Each time the scene changed, the movie lighting would highlight his beautiful yet haunted features.

One time it was the scar over his eyebrow. Another was the deep divot at the bow of his lips.

Dressed in a t-shirt and pajama bottoms, he seemed right at home stretched out over the couch. Calm, and if not content, perhaps comfortable. Such a drastic difference from the paranoid man I'd lived with for a few days.

The rest of the movie played out, and I eventually started watching the screen, but my gaze would flick back to him

every few minutes. I was mainly ecstatic that he seemed to be doing so much better.

Call it a guilt complex, because I knew his drug use wasn't in any way my fault, but I did feel like my presence was the cause of that one episode. And that bothered me.

The credits started rolling, and he muted the sound and dropped the remote onto his chest. When he turned his attention to me, his expression remained stoic, and that made me nervous.

“Are you okay?” I almost reached out a hand to touch him. Not to comfort him but to comfort myself. Another long bout of solitude made me ache for touch.

My desire for human connection both bothered and soothed me. It helped me remember that I was a flawed person but at times, like now, it was difficult to fight my impulses.

He released a hard breath. “What are you doing here?”

The movie ended, and the screen turned blue, illuminating the room more than the movie had.

I shook my head. “I was on the beach with Blanca, and Grey walked me inside, but he took off. So I explored.”

He slowly nodded, like he was unsure what to make of that. “You made up with Grey then?”

That was a loaded question I didn't want to touch.

“Have you been sleeping?” I redirected the question back to him.

“Have you tried to run away anymore?”

Ouch.

“I think I can admit when I was stupid. And trying to run away with a stranger was stupid.” There. I admitted it. “I also apologized before I left your place. Do you...do you remember?” I dropped my head, shielding my eyes with my lashes.

“Oh yeah. I might have been coked out, but I remember everything about those days.” A note of morbid humor rang in

his voice.

I didn't see anything funny.

"You look good," I said. Glancing at the door, I bent forward, ready to stand but he shocked me.

"You don't. Even in the blue-washed lights, I can see the dark circles under your eyes. You look like you've lost weight and from the puffiness, I'd bet you cried recently."

His honesty was both welcome and hated.

Focusing on the welcome part of my reaction, I twisted toward him. "I have cried. Too much. And I can't sleep. Not more than a few hours. Murder doesn't agree with me."

Lafe sat up, the remote bouncing off his leg and skittering across the floor. Neither one of us paid attention to it.

"You mean Grey hadn't talked you into believing your life is greater than everyone else's? That killing is a part of life? The strong survive, and the weak die?" His questions were rushed. Packed with emotion.

I chuffed out another watery laugh. "He tried. But I'm not built that way."

He set his feet on the ground and leaned back against the couch. Looking forward, he gripped his knees with his hands. "Yeah...Me neither."

What an...unexpected answer from a man who helped run the cartel, or whatever the hell organization this was.

"You haven't killed?" That wasn't something I ever wanted to ask anyone, but I had this drive to understand why he said that. In the back of my mind, I knew, logically, that I was searching for someone to who I could relate to, even on a superficial level. Realistically, I could admit I was curious.

It was a strange feeling after flashing between burning in a vat of self-loathing and numbness.

"I have." His voice was flat. "Too many to count, probably. And I will again, I'm sure. But some kills, they're not needed. They stain the small fragments of my soul I've tried to keep

clean. I've tried to explain that to my brothers, but they just don't understand."

That was exactly how I felt. Like I had this one shining part of myself that nothing could touch. I had thought it to be my morals, my beliefs, but the foundation of everything I thought I knew was cracked and threatening to crumble.

My soul. That was what I'd tainted.

I was no longer innocent. I was an accomplice.

And it burned like nothing I'd ever experienced before.

He stood, grabbed the remote from the floor and held it out. I took it with a trembling hand.

His face and body were shadowed as he towered over me. "Here. Stay and watch a movie. Take a nap. You look like you need it."

I waited for the anger to rise, like anytime Grey antagonized me. But it didn't. Lafe wasn't being an asshole; he was telling me I needed sleep.

When he reached the door, he gripped the edge as he glanced down, then over his shoulder.

"I *know*. Parker and Grey have both told me what happened. Some deaths...they're wrong. They dig under your skin and never let you forget the piece of shit you are. But you shouldn't feel that way about that *skitstövel*. He would have taken your life and spit on your dead body. Men like that don't deserve your tears or your guilt."

Then what kill got under your skin?

If he had stayed, I would have asked him. I wouldn't have been able to help myself. Instead, he was out the door before he even finished speaking.

I didn't nap, but I did turn over his words for the next few hours.

The next time I saw him, I'd have to thank him once again. For putting things in a different perspective that I hadn't been able to reach on my own.

But would he appreciate the gesture? Would I hate him if he didn't?

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GREY



There went that beautiful spray of blood across the floor as Roberto's head snapped to the side right before he crumpled to the ground.

"Damn it, Grey," Parker snapped. "That was the last fighter willing to train with you. What are you going to do now?" He jumped off the counter where the stereo was and braced his hands on his hips.

I shrugged. I might as well be practicing with a punching bag for all the fight these men put out. They were scared of me, and they lacked real drive. That was a combination that didn't make for a good sparring partner.

"Where the hell is Mia? She actually knows what the fuck she's doing. These pansies? They're trash." I nudged Roberto with my foot. He groaned as he started to wake up.

Parker turned his head and pinched the bridge of his nose, his jaw rhythmically grinding as if I was the problem here. I wasn't the one finding shit for brains men who couldn't train a garden hose how to leak water.

Fucking useless.

"She's supposed to call me later today. I'll ask her where she normally gets the fighters for you."

Good. Great.

I left Roberto on the floor as I walked over to my water bottle, squirting some in my mouth, then some over my head.

“If you hadn’t walked in here with twisted balls, he might have lasted longer. At least to run a few drills with you.”

Looking back at Parker, I let my face say exactly how ridiculous he was. I grabbed the towel hanging on the rope and wiped my face before tossing it into the hamper.

“What the hell is the matter with you? You’re radiating anger, and for what? Do you need to get laid?” Parker stepped up until we were toe-to-toe.

I shoved his shoulders. “Get the fuck out of my face,” I growled.

“You want to fight someone? You need a challenge? I’ll give it to you.” Parker kicked off his fucking loafers, slinging them across the room. Then he quickly unbuttoned his shirt and pulled it out of his slacks before tossing them to the side.

“What’s up your ass?” I tried to turn away, but he stopped me with a hand to my shoulder. He yanked me back around, and I ducked as his fist swung straight for my nose.

Fine. He wanted to fight? I needed to let off a little steam and my brothers were the best workout here. *I* trained them.

Dipping my shoulder, I rammed it into his stomach and ran him into the wall. The glass shook as he used an elbow to the side of my head, but he couldn’t get enough force behind it to do any real damage.

I laughed as he swept my feet out from under me.

“You’re a crazy fucking psycho,” he yelled as he landed a punch across my cheek. The sting invigorated me.

For the most part, Parker matched me in speed and skill, but my punches landed heavier than his did. As we rolled around the floor, trading hits, I felt the tension seeping out of my body.

Most people thought I just loved doling out pain. That was part of why I loved the fight, but I also enjoyed receiving it too. It reminded me I was alive. Nothing hyped me up quite like a good beating.

Parker straddled my waist, and when he reared back to deliver another punch, I hooked my leg around his neck and yanked him to the floor. He gurgled a curse as I rolled us over, then scrambled to straddle his back, gripping his neck and pushing his cheek into the mat.

Grinning, I pressed harder until he pounded the floor with his fist.

“Let up, bastard. I’m done.”

“Hm, I like the look of your face squished like this.”

“Because you’re a sadist.” There was no heat in the word.

No, that was Vicente. But I could admit the apple didn’t fall far from the tree.

Roberto slowly moved to a sitting position as I hopped up and released Parker.

“See, your too-wide grin said you enjoy the fight too much,” he griped, but like before, he didn’t really mean it.

“What’s up your ass?” I tossed a towel at him to wipe the blood from his busted lip. It was already starting to swell. If he didn’t get ice on it soon, he’d have a fat lip for the next day. But he was a big boy. He could take care of himself. “You’re never this involved in our shit.”

I gave him my back as I turned off the stereo and started shutting off the lights. Roberto rubbed his forehead as he stumbled to the outside door. I probably wouldn’t see him again. He was the little brother of one of the soldiers, but he didn’t seem like he had the grit to stick around.

No loss there.

“You’ve also never fought against Bruno.” He punched the bag hanging in the corner like he needed to get out a little more energy. I was more than happy to go for a second round.

When I turned around to offer another go, he’d already slipped his arms in his shirt, though he left it open. I raised a brow. That wasn’t like him either. Was he planning on spending time with Amorette?

Just the thought of her had my blood set to boil.

She was the best fuck I'd ever had. She was also so fucking noble she was cutting off her nose to spite her face. Andre told me she worked in a law firm that often fleeced high-profile men in favor of her clients in their divorces.

I'd seen the list of some of the cases she'd worked on, and I'd recognized more than a few names. How could she be so ignorant of the world when she worked against men like that?

"And? I've wanted to fight him for years. He's a fucking prick." I opened the door to the hallway and waited for him to join me before going through it.

"Weapons are allowed." Parker dropped his voice to a whisper. "Something has changed, Grey. You don't feel it?"

Nothing had changed. Vicente was the same sadistic man he always was. As long as my brothers and I played the game, he wouldn't give a shit what we did. But he would capitalize off of us in any way he could.

This fight between Bruno and me? As his best fighter and illegitimate son, the bets were through the roof. Hell, I'd even thrown money into it. Betting on myself.

"Fine, don't answer." He rolled his eyes. We reached the mouth of the hallway when I noticed Amorette coming out of the other hallway. What had she been doing down there?

Pulled by a magnetic force, I drifted toward her.

What was it about this little firecracker that I couldn't stay away from? Even when I wanted to shake some survival instincts into her.

"Wonderful. I was done with the conversation. I'm glad you were here to participate," Parker spat sarcastically as he followed behind me.

"Little Love," he greeted. "What are you doing out of your birdcage? I didn't realize you were ready to face the world again."

I stopped a foot in front of her as Parker crowded her side. Narrowing my gaze on him, I warned him to leave. I wanted to

convince her to come to my apartment, and I couldn't do that with Parker's heated gaze raking over her body.

She glanced up at him, the faint bruises from lack of sleep making her eyes too bright.

His gaze softened when he got a good look at her. Maybe he had a heart after all. Although with Mia, that was never in question.

Amorette glanced at me, then bit her lip as she turned back to Parker. "I went down to the beach with Blanca, and then I watched part of a movie with Lafe."

Parker's eyebrows kissed his hairline.

I glanced behind her, but Lafe was nowhere in sight.

"He left a while ago, and I stayed in the theater to think."

"Did you come to any conclusions?" I poked, moving closer and grazing her side with my fingers. Not a caress, but enough of a touch to let her know I wanted to be close to her.

Her head jerked up and down. I bent close and whispered in her ear, "Breathe."

She inhaled and I grinned.

Maybe there was hope for her yet. I saw the grit inside her, she just needed to let go of all her hesitancy. Amorette thought too much about the wrong things. Put too much weight on the value of worthless lives.

"Come back to my apartment?" I pressed my fingers into her side and tugged her against my chest.

"All right. I'll see you love birds later." Parker backed up a few paces. Then to me in Spanish, "I'll let you know what I find out from Mia. Regardless of what you think, pitting you against Bruno is a sign something has changed. I just don't know what that would be yet. I've given Jorge carte blanche to run the outfit in my place for the next few weeks. Say hello to your new sparring buddy, unless Mia comes through." He dipped his head then spun on his heel, pushing through the crowd of soldiers.

There were always men coming and going in the compound. I never paid them much attention. After a while, they faded into the background. But today, they were staring very hard at Amorette. And I didn't fucking like it.

Erich, a seasoned soldier and right-hand man for our head of security, almost walked into the stair railing because he was watching Amorette so closely. I glared, and when he glanced at me, he paled and made himself scarce.

Good.

The other men followed suit, and within a few seconds, we were left alone in front of the glass.

“Come on, *mamá*. I have chicken in the crockpot. You can tell me all about these conclusions while I feed you.”

Her spine snapped straight as she squared her shoulders, and a grin tugged at my lips. Ah, yes. She'd made some decisions. Hopefully, they'll be the kind that leads her to my bed instead of back to the birdcage.

Letting my fingers glide down her arm, I caught her hand and tugged her behind me.

A few soldiers peeked out of the hall that led to the kitchens, shock on their faces.

I got it. I had a reputation. A cold one that I fostered as much as I could, which wasn't hard when I was away from the compound. But here, lately, I wanted to be myself. From their reaction, it would bite me in the ass.

Sighing, I shook my head.

“What's going through your head?” Wicked Love peered up at me behind a fall of thick, dark hair.

We entered the residential wing, and I tucked it behind her ear so I could see her face. “Nothing.”

I hit the code into my keypad and pushed the door open. The savory, spicy scent of chicken rolled over us as we entered my place. I'd put that on this morning and stopped by an hour ago to turn on the rice cooker.

Her stomach growled, and I steered her toward the kitchen, lifting her up on the counter to watch me while I got plates out.

Some of the fire she'd shown a few minutes ago dwindled as her shoulders hunched.

Fucking no. She wasn't going to retreat. She wasn't allowed.

"What conclusions did you come to, *mami*?" I asked as I spread the chicken over two beds of rice.

"You don't let up, do you?" She asked with an exasperated sigh, but I heard the slight amusement in her voice.

"Never." At least where she was concerned. Even when I walked away because she made me want to fuck something up, I always came back.

When she wasn't hiding it, she was full of fire, and I wanted to warm myself under her ferocious nature.

I handed her a plate, then opened the drawer to pull out two forks. She dug in while I grabbed two waters for us. Instead of taking the food to the table or to the living room, I leaned against the counter and watched her eat.

Her plump lips closing around the fork mesmerized me and my dick.

"Well?" I nudged her thigh with my elbow.

"I'm trying, okay?" She set her half-finished plate down beside her. I frowned, but she shook her head. "I haven't been able to eat a lot since—since that day. That was as much as I could handle."

"You haven't been sleeping either," I pointed out as I worked on my own plate.

"No," she agreed. "Most nights, I have nightmares." She laughed, the bitterness souring her alluring voice. "Funny, I never thought I'd be the villain."

I dropped my head, preparing myself for an argument. But I'd stay this time. Force her to see it my way instead of

walking away from her. “Am—”

“Let me finish.” Her small hand curved around my forearm. I loved the look of her skin against mine. The paleness against the golden tan of my skin I’d had my entire life. “I’m trying to acclimate. To be who I need to be for this life. But it’s hard. It’s going against everything I’ve been taught my entire life.”

“You have a sister, *si*?”

Her gaze shuttered. Setting my plate down, I moved in front of her, pressing between her legs and caging her body in with my arms.

“That’s not a threat.” I lowered my voice as I slid my nose against hers. “Andre told me you have a twin.” She stiffened but nodded. Good, I was glad she was starting to—if not trust me—at least have an honest conversation with me. “Imagine everyone you come into contact with is a threat to her life. Everyone wants to use her. Abuse her. Hurt her. What lengths would you go to protect her?”

Her hands fisted the sides of my shorts, her thumbs tucking into the band.

Ah, Wicked Love, you’ll be peeling them off of me soon enough.

Instead of waiting for an answer, I asked her another question. “Would you hurt someone to save her?”

She closed her eyes and nodded.

“Would you kill to save her life?”

Wincing, she nodded again.

“What if people wanted to degrade her, put her on display? Make an example of her pain. What would you do then?”

When she opened her eyes, her pupils contracted so quickly it seemed like the pale blue flared as if lit from behind.

“What would you do if she was abducted and taken to Maikel’s just like you were? What would you do then, Wicked Little Love?” I pressed my forehead to hers and grinned.

“I would burn the fuckers to the ground,” she growled, tugging me closer by my shorts.

“That a girl.” I crashed my lips against hers, our teeth clanking together as I gripped her ass and lifted her off the counter.

Her arms flew around my neck as I walked her to my bedroom, kicking the door shut in case one of my bastard brothers decided to pay a visit.

Tossing her on the bed, I pushed my shorts down and kicked off my shoes. I didn’t have to persuade Amorette to the same page, thank God. She frantically tore off her shirt and shoved her shorts off just as I caught her under the arms and set her against the pillows.

Climbing onto the bed with my knees, I pushed her legs apart and fell between them. I rubbed my nose against her pussy, inhaling that sweet, tangy scent. I loved the smell of an aroused woman.

But fuck, there was something about the innocence of my wicked little love. The headiness in the thought I was corrupting this sweet do-gooder. It was addictive.

I let my gaze roam up her body, taking my time to memorize every dip and curve, stopping on her plump, round tits. Fuck, I was hard as fucking steel.

Later, I’d learn her body with my tongue, but for now, I had a very specific use for it. I licked around her tiny, hooded clit. Her pussy was so pretty. All pink and delicate. One lip stuck out a little more than the other, and I made sure to pay special attention to it.

She threaded her fingers through my hair as I sucked her clit into my mouth, rolling my tongue over the sensitive bud and letting go with a small pop.

“Grey,” she whispered as her lids fell half-mast over her eyes. The sooty eyelashes giving her a siren’s power as she watched me feast on her.

I hummed and pushed her legs wider until she made a small noise in protest.

“Feel that pain? The stretch? It makes the pleasure that much stronger, doesn’t it?” I murmured, and I dipped to lick the sweet cream from her cunt.

She whined as I pushed just a little harder, all while tongue fucking the shit out of her. Wicked Little Love got off on the pain, and that built my fire even higher.

I had wanted to make her come first, but fuck, I couldn’t wait. Moving up her body, I gripped my dick, but before I could line myself up, this crazy girl attacked me, pushing me onto my back.

It was a move that shouldn’t have worked, but she caught me off guard and I bounced against the mattress. Her small hands spread out over my pecs and she slammed over my cock in one movement.

“Fuck...” I groaned as one hand clamped over her thigh and one cupped her tit. I rolled that pebbled little bud between my fingers, pinching just enough to elicit a groan.

There was no savoring with Amorette, not right now. She was wild and savage as she rode me like hell was on her heels. I started to roll up to catch her nipple between my teeth, but she shoved at my shoulders, forcing me back to the bed. Her nails bit against my skin and she slammed down harder.

I laughed, then groaned, and laughed again. She rolled her hips, and my eyes rolled back in my head. Whatever that was, it felt fucking amazing over the tip.

“I love watching your face,” she panted, and screamed as she came. Wetness surged over my dick as she contracted around me. “Don’t—come—yet,” she begged.

Hell, I squeezed her hips and tried my fucking best to hold off. But the pleasure was tightening my stomach and gathering at the base of my spine. It was going to take me under any second.

“Okay, shit. Okay,” she cried.

And that was it. I used her hips to pound her against me, gritting my teeth and dropping my head back.

My entire body trembled as I stopped fucking her. The muscles in my arms pulsed and my stomach clenched. I was sated but tense, like my body hadn't recovered from the untamed fucking I'd just put it through.

Once my breathing was under control, I opened my eyes to see Amorette watching me with soft eyes.

"I think I found a new kink."

I wanted to laugh, but I didn't have the energy yet. My lips did twist into a small smile. "And that is?"

"Watching your face as you come." Her fingers flexed against my chest where she was still anchoring herself. "I—hell. I've always been a girl that appreciated watching the act. The cock disappearing into the pussy. Except, I've never seen a man like you on porn sites." She huffed like her admission irritated her.

It should, because I was soaking everything she said up. And I'd use it against her to get my way.

I pressed a hand on her damp back, letting her know I wanted her plastered over me. She'd just started to get the hint when my phone chimed.

Fuck.

That was my work phone. I tapped her leg to get her off me.

When she slid off me, my entire body rocked from my still-sensitive dick. She made a strangled sound as our combined cum dripped all over me.

"Not an unprotected sex kind of girl?"

"No. Never." Her top lip curled.

"Don't worry, you'll get used to it." I grinned and grabbed her shirt as I rolled to the side of the bed. I wiped my groin and bent to get my phone out of my shorts.

Ah, hell. Maybe Parker was right.

"What is it?"

“I have a fight tonight.” I sent out a quick text to my brothers.

“Okay?”

“I have a fight tonight. And with this man, it’s always to the death.”

She gasped, but I was already mentally prepping myself for the next several hours.

Good thing I’d finished my knife.

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ANDRE



“**S**he should stay here,” Lafe argued as we gathered in my office. We had ten minutes before we had to leave, and Grey still hadn’t shown up.

“We’ve gone over this. Vicente most likely already knows about her. This is our chance to test how much he knows,” Parker rested one elbow on my desk and pressed his fingers against his temples.

My baby brother always took over the space like he owned it. Now wouldn’t be any different.

“Of course, he fucking knows, you *fâne*. You had her at Mea Culpa for lunch with one of your top men.” Lafe threw up his hands as he paced around my office. He pulled a small cylinder out of his pocket.

“Lafe!” I barked, bracing my hands against my desk. “Not right fucking now. Not tonight either.”

“Sorry. You don’t get to make that call. I know I fucked up before, but there’s no fucking way I’m going to walk into that club without something in my system.” He pulled the cap off and sniffed that shit right off the spoon attached to the lid.

I hated Vicente for putting him in charge of the drug runners. But what was one more offense in the long line of reasons I hated him?

Reaching into my top drawer, I pulled out my migraine medicine. Today had been a great day. But with this last-

minute fiasco orchestrated by Vicente, I could feel the ghost of one trying to press against my temples.

Grey and Amorette burst through the door, and I had to do a double-take. Grey was in his standard black fighting shorts and a muscle shirt. Amorette, though, sometime in the span of an hour turned herself into a sex kitten.

She had a bright red dress hugging her curves and accentuating her tits. Her obsidian hair fell in cascading waves around her shoulders, and her lips were painted blood red.

“You need to stay here.” I pointed at her.

Her eyes rounded as Lafe crossed his arms and nodded in agreement.

“You were just on the side of her going with us.” Parker, ever the troublemaker, quirked a brow. “What changed your mind, dear brother?”

I sneered at him. “I was on your side, until she walked in here like a fucking magnet for trouble. Vicente won’t be able to resist the temptation with her dressed in his favorite color. Was this your idea?” I glared at Grey.

He had the same bored look he always had when we spoke. “No. Blanca helped her get ready, but I’m not leaving her here. The soldiers are too interested in her.”

“They’re our men. We’ve vetted every single one and their families,” I argued. Because why the hell not. I was so fickle in that moment, but shit, my nerves almost had me backing up against the wall.

“You know, like I do, things can always change. A few of the men were staring at her with too much interest today.” He draped his arm around her chest and molded himself to her back.

Great. Fucking great. He was getting attached.

“Are you sure you’re not just in lust over a magic pussy?” Parker smirked and twisted his seat from side to side as his gaze licked over Amorette.

Mm. More like someone else wanted to get a taste of said pussy.

“Can you all speak English, please?” her voice was firm, and her pouty lips pursed to make her point.

I wiped my mouth with my hand to cover the grin trying to break free.

Not the time, Andre. Really not the fucking time.

As much as I hated to admit it, Grey was right. Vicente was a master board player and with the weird things happening lately, we needed to be cautious. Amorette was safer with us, even if she was in Vicente’s potential line of sight. And there was no fucking way any of us would miss this fight.

Grey wasn’t worried, but I was. Bruno fought dirty. Always. And when it looked like he would lose, he went for kill shots to take his opponent out quickly. I had done as much as I could to tip the scale in our favor, but there was only so much available to me before we risked getting our heads taken.

There was one thing I could do to alleviate my stress minutely.

Setting my face in a scowl, I caught Amorette’s attention and held it. Leaning forward, I injected every bit of malice I possessed. “You will stay with one of us at all times. *All* times. Am I understood?”

She gulped. “I understand. For the record, I won’t be running anymore. I’m done with that.”

A tick pulsed under my left eye as I looked for any sign she was deceiving us. She locked gazes with me, her breathing was normal, and her expression daring. Amorette seemed genuine.

“Good. Do you know what’s about to happen?”

Lafe shifted from foot-to-foot off to the side, the drugs already starting to work through his system.

“Grey has a fight,” she answered with only a little hesitancy. I flicked my gaze to Grey, who squarely met my stare.

“Grey has a fight with the best and dirtiest fighter under Vicente’s rule. This is a punishment, and it’s possible Grey could be grievously injured if not killed.” The last few words tasted like ash in my mouth. Usually, I wouldn’t put this into the universe, but I needed to make sure she understood how important tonight was.

“You wouldn’t let him die,” she whispered, and that quiet conviction speared through my chest like a hot poker. What did I do for her to truly believe that?

“We would never willingly allow that to happen, but you don’t know our father or how evil he truly is.”

Her hands gripped Grey’s forearm, and she pressed back against him. The move was so subtle, I’d have missed it if I hadn’t been tuned into her every twitch.

“You’ll stay with one of us at all times,” I pushed.

“I said I would, and I keep my word,” she snapped, and her light blue eyes flashed.

There was a bit of the fire my brothers had told me about. I was glad to see some of it for myself. She’d need it before the night was over if the fight went the way I thought it would.

Looking around the office, I met the gaze of each of my brothers. Like always, we would protect each other. But we’d use caution and watch how we exposed our asses. We couldn’t save Grey if we were dead too.

I hope Parker and Grey had filled in Amorette on just how dangerous our world was. She might have gotten a taste at Maikel’s, but she’d been coddled while she was here with us.

“Let’s go.”



BECAUSE VICENTE HAD ORCHESTRATED tonight's entertainment, the fight was to be held at his mansion. Pilar knew I was coming, but I'd have to apologize to her later on for why I wouldn't be seeing her this trip.

We should have taken the plane for comfort's sake, but with the volatility of mansion politics, I wanted to make sure we had a quicker exit. A lift off the ground was much easier to achieve rather than a runway if the night went to shit.

Parker and Grey kept tossing me confused looks.

I was the calm brother. The one who always had a plan, a contingency plan, and when that didn't work, I had a few bombs on hand to blow the place up and make our exit.

Right now, I was a jittery mess, bouncing my leg and checking my phone every few minutes to see if any news had come from any of my contacts.

Nothing. The lines were dead silent tonight.

The closer we got to the mansion, the more somber the air became. Except for Grey, who was oblivious as his excitement ramped up like it always did before a fight.

I glanced at Amorette a few times during the trip, and each time our gazes locked, as if she knew the exact moment I'd look at her. Each time, she also waited until I looked away.

And fuck it, but I had. I'd let her win those paltry dominance contests. There were much bigger problems that needed my attention for the time being.

The pad was brimming when we landed as soldiers, and the other high-rolling guests filed out of their own aircrafts. Each important business associate or diplomat had a team of security that cut daggers at anyone who came too close. I thought two groups would come to blows when the guards accidentally brushed against each other.

That showed just how high tensions were tonight.

I glanced at Parker and raised a brow.

Did he feel the brutally thick tension buzzing in the air? There was a low level of aggression that usually wasn't

present at these types of events.

Parker nodded, then turned forward as one side of his mouth dipped down into a deep frown.

Hell, we should just cut our losses and go to the private island I'd acquired last year for an occasion where we needed to go completely off-grid. If my shit-stirring brother, who couldn't be bothered with business politics, was taking this seriously, something was noticeably wrong.

We fanned out around Amorette, because as much as she was a liability, it was too late to turn back now. I took point, with Grey taking the rear. Lafe and Parker each covered her sides.

She was so tiny, and we were all of a similar, much larger height. So most people would struggle to even catch a glimpse of her.

"Mr. Medina," an attendant greeted, dipping his head and dropping his gaze as a sign of respect.

Ignoring him, as was expected, I passed through the open double doors. Several elevator banks were off to the right, the metal doing nothing to take away from the grand architecture of the lobby. We bypassed those and headed toward the back hallway. The two elevators in this hall were for family or senior ranking officers.

Vicente never claimed us as family, even if the entire Institution knew we were all his bastards from his favorite concubines. However, as leaders of our own respective businesses, and acting enforcers, we were afforded many of the same luxuries and respect as we would have if we were his legitimate children.

We were a few minutes late by design, which meant we'd have the reserved elevators to ourselves and not be subjected to any last-minute meetings with Vicente. Every advantage to keep ourselves and Amorette out of Vicente's line of sight was necessary. At least for tonight.

The elevator was a luxury box with space to fit ten people. Yet, with the five of us crowded inside, the higher we went

into the mansion, the thinner the air.

Unlike most fight clubs, when held at the mansion, the fighters were on the roof of one particular wing.

Someone like Vicente would have hated the way it went against the opulent beauty of the mansion, except he had it constructed in such a way it was a natural amphitheater, with stone benches for seats descending to a platform for the fights. The only thing he would need to bring in were lights, which were easy enough to disassemble.

As the elevator dinged and the doors opened, we stepped into the empty hall. Now, this was eerie. There should have at least been an attendant here to greet anyone in a position of power who was attending the fight.

I almost pointed it out to my brothers, but I didn't. We were late, after all.

The door to the rooftop opened easily, but it would lock once it shut. A way to keep the common attendees from accessing a private part of the mansion.

Booming Latin rap dominated the rooftop. Men and women, both young and old, mingled through the space. Some were dressed to impress; some were dressed to blend in with security. These types of events could always be counted on to have one thing.

Sex.

Many of the women from the Gallery were dusted in gold and dressed in sheer wraps around their hips, nothing to cover their tits as they walked around with trays of cocktails and hors d'oeuvres.

Except for a few discreet acts here and there, Vicente ran a classy event. The debauchery was always saved for the gallery. As the alcohol flowed, the women were choosing their targets to accompany them down after the fight.

Where the women at Maikel's gallery were barely coherent, these women, many of who were proud to serve him, were some of the best spies. I'd tried to flip a few before, but

I'd never had any luck. They were too blinded by his charisma and power. Snowed by his wealth.

We approached the bottom where the fight would take place. Grey's top manager broke away from a group of men to collect him. He bent in his ear, probably giving him whatever update on gossip, Bruno, or overall mansion details he thought might help him.

For all my brother's faults, he was respected by his men. The top advisors and managers would never betray him. Before he left with Garcia, Grey turned to Amorette. He swept the hair off her shoulder and bent down to lay a wet, licking kiss over her lips.

I could kill him.

We'd decided we weren't going to make her a bigger target than what she was. And he fucking kisses her in front of the pit of vipers?

"Well, that's my cue to check the pulse of the crowd, don't you think?" Parker clapped me on the back then wove through the crowd. Probably to find his next fuck.

"Don't let her out of your sight, got it?" Grey leveled fucking jittery Lafe with a death glare.

"I was the one who saved her in the first place," Lafe returned through gritted teeth. "I think if anyone is going to protect her, it would be me. Putting a target on her back before you enter the ring is not protecting her."

Grey's jaw ground as he looked across the floor to Bruno laughing with his team.

He really was a big motherfucker. He was five years older than Grey, but he had three inches and fifty pounds on him. And he had a fucking meat tenderizer in his fist.

Was that his weapon of choice? Fucking shit.

He grinned at Grey, flashing a missing front tooth. He'd lost it in a fight a few years earlier while he killed his opponent by strangulation. And the crazy fucker never replaced the tooth because it was a trophy from winning.

Someone said he'd had it encased in gold and glass and on display at his house.

"Be careful, okay?" Amorette caught his hand as he started to walk away. If I were anywhere else and not under the microscope, I would have dropped my head in my hands. This kind of stupidity couldn't be made up.

Grey at least knew better. And he better fucking prep her better next time too.

My lovestruck brother didn't answer, he didn't even smile. It was good to see he at least retained a few brain cells. These sharks would pounce on any advantage he gave up, and his out-of-character fondness for her was a weakness.

"You're not allowed to die. Not after you forced me to accept this fucking life." Amorette dipped her chin as a warning shot through her voice.

My psycho brother almost fucking grinned, but he managed to wipe it away and left her standing between Lafe and me.

"Come on," I grabbed her arm, much like I had when I led her through the compound, as I moved us toward the first bench. With Grey fighting, we'd be right behind his team.

Vicente could either be next to us, across from us on Bruno's side, or in the box with the announcer, lording over his people. With him, it depended on his mood. Only time would tell if this was a setup.

We shuffled Amorette between us, and I kept her half a step in front of us so she couldn't be snatched without us noticing. Yes, I was that paranoid.

At that moment, I looked up at the box and locked eyes with Vicente. A cruel smile tilted his lips and he moved his gaze to Amorette, drinking her in.

He shook his head at me; his meaning was clear.

How stupid can you be?

Well, pretty fucking stupid. He was in the box, Grey was entering a fight to the death, and Amorette was a blinking

neon light.

I scanned the crowd for Parker and found him, right in the center of the crowd, visible to almost everyone because of the bleacher-style seating. A girl with a full head of black hair was on her knees, hands on his hips, sucking him off as he glared at Vicente in the box. If Vicente noticed him, he didn't show it.

He hated public displays of sex outside the Gallery and as soon as Parker had learned that, he made it his mission to flaunt sex acts in front of him, practically daring Vicente to punish him.

Lucky for Parker, I—and later Grey—seemed to get the majority of the punishments.

The music stopped and the conversation died down.

“Gentlemen. Ladies. Lovers and fighters. Welcome to tonight's entertainment. I hope you've placed your bets because the pool is now closed.” The announcer's voice crackled over the speaker. “Tonight, we have special guest, Grey Morozov, and reigning champion, Bruno Vasquez.”

He went on to list stats and accomplishments that didn't matter one fucking bit. I turned my attention to Grey. His team was smearing Vaseline over his face and body, taping his hands. They did leave the tape on his right hand a little light.

Smart. He'd be able to handle the knife easier.

I almost whistled when his weapon glinted under the lights. It was a wicked long blade with a serrated edge. The curved length was as long as his forearm and most likely weighted for better impact.

No one made blades quite like Grey.

Amorette made a choked sound as the fight officially started, and Grey entered the makeshift ring and circled Bruno.

He should have had weeks to train. There wasn't a doubt in my mind that Vicente wanted one of them dead. But was it Grey or Bruno he wanted gone?

Never one to wait for the fight to take place, Grey suddenly yelled and attacked Bruno, but he was ready. They

clashed together in a series of punches. Neither seemed inclined to use their weapons yet. In that they both had the same mindset.

A quick fight wasn't any fun...

Watching them beat the shit out of each other was like watching a deadly, dangerous dance of furious fists and flashing weapons. For every punch that Grey landed, Bruno got one too. In the first five minutes, they were evenly matched.

Then they started to use their weapons.

Bruno caught Grey's side with the hammer, right over his liver.

Wincing, but showing no other outward sign of pain, Grey caught the skin on the outside of the thigh with his knife, leaving the skin in tatters from the jagged edge. Blood sprayed the mat and ran down his leg in dark ruby streaks.

Another hit from the hammer, this time to the hip. Another slash from the knife on the backside of the knee. It at least seemed like Grey had a strategy of where he sliced. Bruno was getting sloppy with his hits.

He got more in, but that fucking mallet haphazardly caught random parts of his body.

Amorette gasped, pressing her fingers to her lips as Bruno caught Grey's jaw with his meaty fist.

Stupid girl. She was giving everything away.

Grey stumbled, and I bent forward, ready to leap down if he fell to the ground. He didn't. One of Bruno's team caught him and pushed him back into the ring.

And that fucker caught him in the stomach with his tenderizer. Grey doubled over, spitting blood across the ground.

Then the moderator called a short break.

I started to breathe again as Grey chugged a bottle of water as his team spoke in low tones. He nodded, then stepped out

onto the floor.

Bruno took his sweet time drinking his own water, and once he finished it, he shot Grey a bloody smile, as one of his eyes was already swollen shut.

Both men were littered in quickly forming bruises. Bruno sporting a few cuts.

Vicente was sitting forward in the box as Pilar leaned against his back. He had bloodlust in his eyes as he waited for the match to start again. Pilar glanced at me but didn't make any gesture of hello.

That was good. She needed to steel herself for the night to come as his chosen companion tonight.

The fight resumed, but instead of attacking Bruno as was his typical style, Grey wove on his feet.

“Andre,” Lafe said, a frantic note in his voice. “Do you see that?”

I did. I just didn't know what to do about it. Intervention in fights could mean a death penalty for the interrupter and the one they rooted for.

“What? What's happening?” Amorette turned to me then Lafe when I didn't pay her any attention. I was too focused on watching Grey as he struggled to lift his arms.

Bruno stepped forward and started wailing on his face, his tenderizer forgotten as he dropped it to the ground.

“He was drugged,” I said robotically.

Grey had taken so many hits or the drugs were too strong that he was only upright because Bruno gripped his neck.

“Stop it!” Amorette screamed. She started to run out, but Lafe picked her up and swung her behind him.

I didn't wait to make sure he had control of her. I jumped to the bottom level, only one row down, and ran to Grey.

Men tried to stop me, but I punched one in the mouth and head-butted another. Then they let me through.

“Stop!” Vicente yelled through the microphone just as Parker, Lafe, and I placed ourselves between Grey and Bruno.

The crowd had gone eerily silent. We’d never interrupted a fight before. In fact, we were the monsters most of these *pendejos* were scared of.

Vicente covered the mic as he spoke to the announcer next to him. When he spoke into it, my stomach plummeted.

“It seems there’s been a violation of house rules. Grey Morozov has been drugged. Bruno forfeits the fight and, therefore, his life.”

Screams and whistles echoed off the roof as people geared up to get the bloodshed they’d shown up for.

“What?” Bruno whipped his head up to face Vicente. “I didn’t. I no cheat,” he bellowed.

But I didn’t wait for the executioner. In this, because Vicente had declared it, I pried the knife from Grey’s loose fingers. Parker yanked Bruno’s head back as I sliced the blade across his throat, taking too much enjoyment from the gurgled pleas.

Parker dropped him, and we turned back to Grey, where Lafe had shoved his shoulder under his arm to lift him from the ground. Parker took the other side, and I turned to the bench and froze.

Amorette.

She was gone.

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LAFE



“**S**he might have escaped,” I said, then rolled my lips together. I didn’t believe she’d do that, but did I really know her? No. “This would have been the perfect opportunity to leave.”

“Little Love wouldn’t have done that,” Parker argued as he glanced out the window.

We hadn’t stayed at the mansion. As soon as Bruno went down, pandemonium took over. On top of that, Vicente left with Pilar. If we had the *cajones* to stop him and question him, we couldn’t have because he was gone.

So what did we do? We fled to one of the few hotels not affiliated with Vicente.

We took the coward’s way. It was already a boon for Vicente to let us live for jumping between Grey and Bruno.

“I agree with Parker. She wouldn’t have run. Not then. Not when Grey was hurt. That’s not who she is.” Andre paced the small room with his hands clasped behind his back. He glanced over at Grey, sprawled over the bed still passed out.

We’d had Donnie come and check him out and treat his wounds. He’d assured us he would live and gave him a painkiller to ease his suffering when he woke up. I’d laughed, and after Donnie gave him the shot, he glanced at me. I waved his unspoken question away. It was too late anyway.

But Grey liked the pain. It wasn’t often that he had a real beating like this.

“Grey’s going to shit a brick. We literally handed her to Vicente on a silver platter.” Andre stopped and punched the wall. His fist crashed through the plaster, and he cursed as he shook his hand out.

Worry for that ridiculous girl clouded my mind, even as my thoughts just wouldn’t rest. I’d coked myself up too much. I wouldn’t sleep for at least two days. But I never slept when I was away from the compound unless I was completely wrecked.

“But Vicente didn’t set this up to kill Grey?” I ground my teeth, as was my habit when I had this many drugs running through my system.

Parker stopped, then let out a bitter laugh. “I think it’s not as simple as that. He wanted Bruno dead. He found out recently that Bruno had been letting some of his targets walk away alive because he had started working for Yair in secret. But...” Parker rubbed his forehead as he clenched his other hand into a fist, pressing it into the wall by the window. “I fucked up.”

“You fucked up?” Andre repeated slowly.

“I did. I fucked up.”

“How did you fuck up?” I walked over to check Grey’s pulse just to make sure Donnie had been telling the truth. He was being too still.

“Mia’s on a job for me,” he started, but we all knew that. They were best friends. Childhood friends. And she worked for him more than she did for any of us, even when she had been fucking Grey.

“The job I have her on is researching Vicente’s past. His family, his childhood, his business dealings we’re not privy to.” He looked away from us as if he couldn’t believe he was admitting this to us.

“What the ever-loving fuck, Parker? Why would you have her do that? He’ll torture her, then kill her if she’s lucky.” Andre gripped his hair as he swung toward Parker.

He squeezed his eyes shut and blew out a breath. “I think he’s already figured it out. I haven’t spoken to Mia in two days. I think that taking Amorette is a warning shot.”

“Vicente wouldn’t kill Mia. Not right away,” I argued halfheartedly. Her father was his biggest supporter. He’d turn her over to that sadistic son of a bitch before he killed her.

“And what, setting Grey up to take Bruno out was just a fun side benefit?” Andre sank onto the other queen bed.

“These are all hypotheticals, right? I don’t have concrete evidence for anything. But Mia said she was being followed the day before I took Amorette out. Then Grey’s fight gets called early. On top of that, Amorette goes missing. It’s too many coincidences in a short period of time.”

“Why? Why would you jeopardize us like that?” I shouted at him, tugging at my hair. This was going to be Suzette all over again, except this time, I’d have to watch people I loved get tortured and killed.

Vicente would never let them die without hurting them, us, for days, weeks, *hell*, months, first.

“I know you’re perfectly content to stick around, Lafe, but I fucking hate this life. I hate Vicente! You all want to stay here and be his foot soldiers, fine. But I was working on getting leverage to walk the fuck away from this life!” Blood rushed to Parker’s face and veins popped in his forehead and throat.

“You were going to leave us?” Andre asked, completely emotionless.

Andre had always worked to keep us together at any cost. I hated him as much as I loved him.

Parker shrugged, then faced the window again, bracing his arm against the wall as he watched the parking lot. “That’s irrelevant right now, isn’t it? The question is, what are we going to do to get Amorette back?”

“You’re positive she didn’t run?” I wanted to believe she was stronger, smarter, than that. But she’d tried to run before. To her, we were scum. Less than.

“I’m positive. Grey’s wrapped around her fucking pinky, and she looks at him with the same moon eyes when she doesn’t think we’re watching her,” Parker answered, a strange note of defeat in his voice.

This was grand. My sociopath brother—the one who was most like Vicente and didn’t give a fuck about anything—was defeated. What the hell was I supposed to do with that?

Nothing.

I was the coward of the four of us. Hell, the five of us. I’d taken Amorette because she’d been everything I wished I could have been. She had fire where mine had been beaten out of me. She had conviction where I had doubts.

I admired that she tried to escape so many times. It was proof that she couldn’t easily be swayed to save her skin. She was a fighter.

Killer.

“If what you’re saying is true, Vicente will take us out. Maybe not right away, but he’ll slowly kill everything important to us, then take our heads last.” Andre grabbed his glass of water and chugged half of it.

A twisted smile played at the edges of Parker’s lips. “It was always going to come to that, brother. Whether I helped this along or not, this was always going to happen. No one lives for long around Vicente. Even his favorites.” He sneered at his reflection in the window.

“We have to save Killer,” I murmured. “Grey will go on his own if we don’t help him.”

Parker nodded. “If you don’t help, I’ll save her by myself. She got into that mess because of our sorry asses.”

“You’ll start a war with Vicente over this?” Andre braced his elbows on his knees, watching Parker like he already knew the answer.

“Between Mia and Amorette, he already started the war. But will you help me finish it?” Parker turned and glared at Andre, then at me.

Taking a slow inhale and letting it out, Andre nodded. “I stand by my brothers. Always.”

“Lafe?” Parker turned to me.

My face screwed up. “I’m in, but I’m telling you now. I can’t survive losing anyone else the way I did last time. I can’t do it.”

“We’re not going to let that happen.”

“We don’t have to ask Grey what he’d want to do.” Parker glanced over at him.

Lights played over the wall as a car pulled into the parking lot. We all looked toward the outside, listening for someone coming closer. Laughter and shouts carried to us, but they were far away. Not our problem.

I turned to my brothers.

“So it’s war?” I asked.

“It’s war,” they agreed.

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EPILOGUE

AMORETTE

A car door slammed shut, jolting me back into semi-awareness. Someone was carrying me. The sound of a fountain trickled nearby. Then the squeak of a door, and I was inside again.

What happened? Why was my head killing me?

I'd been at... where had I been?

Two voices spoke over me, and I didn't understand a goddamned thing. Except for dad. Maybe.

Shit. I think I'd been...I'd been drugged.

I was handed off into another set of warm, solid arms. One single set of footsteps echoed around us as I drifted between an uncaring haze and budding fear. Whoever brought me here, didn't come with us as we moved deeper into the house.

Why couldn't I move?

Soft cushions depressed under my body as I was arranged on a couch. The subtle lavender and patchouli scent drifted around me as I managed to shift my head against the fabric. I felt safe, unbothered.

It had to be the effect of the drugs. I needed to wake up, but I just wanted to float off to sleep again. My eyes were so heavy.

No, no, no. This wasn't right. I wasn't *safe*.

It was a fight, but I managed to open my eyes.

A man crouched over me as he studied me with a deep furrow between his brows. I thought, anyway. There were two of him.

He said something, but his words were garbled syllables mashing together.

“English,” I croaked as I blinked to clear my blurry vision.

Slowly, he came into focus.

I was struck first by how handsome he was. Second, how cold.

My final thought was that he looked eerily familiar with his sharp features and harsh expression, but I couldn't figure out why while most of my brain was still asleep.

“Hello. My father tells me you're mine.” His dark velvet voice tickled my brain.

Oh shit, not this again. I'd wanted to escape the brothers so badly, but now I wished more than anything they were here. Maybe they would rescue me.

Would they? Had I given them any reason to?

Fuck, if I knew. I had been such a pain in their ass that they were probably happy to get rid of me. At least for Andre and maybe Lafe. Parker too.

Basically, my only shot for survival rested in the hands of a man I'd fucked but didn't understand.

The stranger pulled at the top of my dress, and I hoped like hell it was to cover my breasts instead of revealing them. With whatever drug still in my system, just staying awake was a battle, let alone moving.

“My name is Matias, and I also hear you used to belong to my brothers.”

To be continued in [CONVICT...](#)

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AFTERWORD

You made it! Thank you so so much for reading! I appreciate each and every one of you.

If you read the foreword, you know this story has been percolating in my head for years. I've always been intrigued by moral dilemmas and this one really dug in and wouldn't let me go. Amorette soon took form and the rest of her men followed not long after.

I couldn't have made this happen without the support of my bestie, Heather and our girl gang. Everyone needs a girl gang. 10/10 recommend. You can also thank them for the darker bits. They definitely pushed me for more. LOL

I hope you enjoyed the ride!

This will be a 5 book series, with each book releasing every 3-4 months. I'm so excited to share this journey with you.

If you're in the mood to check out my backlist, all links can be found in the next few pages for these books. If you're looking for something similar to this, The Cardinal Sins series is set in the same world! It's actually a shared world over a few series. Some of mine, some of Heather Long's.

You can catch a sneak peek at Kill Song (Cardinal Sins 1) if you keep turning the pages...

If you want to know a secret... Parker may or may not make an appearance in the CS series.

And if you're looking for a similar rec outside of my work, I can't recommend 82nd Street Vandals enough. And I did tell

you they share a world, right? ;)

Anyway, if you have strong stalking game...

You can stalk me on my [Facebook Author Page](#), [Bookbub](#), and you can also find me in my closed reading group [Blake's Book Babes](#). In the reading group you can interact with me directly, find excerpts and information on upcoming releases, as well as play games and enter for giveaways. I'd love to have you join me!

XOXO

Blake

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KILL SONG

Prologue- Vienna

I only had a couple of minutes left. After bath time, Daddy always let me watch one hour of television. Only one hour a day and *only* if I had done my school work and finished my chores. He always said more would rot my brain and I was a smart girl. Smart girls made smart decisions.

We said it every morning when it was time to do work and every night before bed. I glanced up at the cartoon on the television. Daddy laughed at this one, it was our favorite to watch. I finished the page in my coloring book as the episode ended and it was time.

I tore the page out carefully. Always carefully. Smooth edges. It was a complicated pattern and it took me all day to color on my breaks. I cleaned up my crayons and put my coloring book back under the coffee table after I wiped down the front of it and the crayon boxes. Daddy's rules.

I was already in my pajamas, but I wanted to give Daddy his coloring page and kiss him goodnight. I turned off the light in the living room and went to the basement door. If the chain was on, it meant go to bed cause Daddy was already busy. The door opened with one tug. No chain.

Yay.

I trotted down the stairs to the basement. Daddy was at his workbench. Fresh plastic lay over the floor and he was lining up his tools. He didn't have his smock on, so he really hadn't gotten started yet. At my arrival, he smiled.

“All done?”

I held up the coloring page in triumph. It had been a challenge for me to get the details exactly right. He set one of the tools down in order, then took the page and examined it carefully. I didn't shuffle or jump up and down.

“It's perfect, sweet girl,” he said with a slow smile of pride, and happiness ballooned in my chest. It was the first time I'd done it exactly right. Daddy always gave me a sheet to look at but I only got a minute to study it, then I had to replicate the colors exactly. “You ready for bed?”

“Yes, sir,” I told him, still grinning happily as he squatted down in front of me.

“Breath check.”

I blew on his face and he took a sniff of my minty clean teeth. Never try to fool Daddy that I'd done something when I hadn't. He waited for me to return with my own challenge.

“Hug check.”

I got hugs or I got kisses. I couldn't have both. I had to tell Daddy what I wanted.

He set my work aside with care, then scooped me up into a hug. Daddy gave the best hugs. I squeezed my arms around his neck and looked over his shoulder. I had the best Daddy, too.

“You need Daddy to tuck you in?”

Sometimes I did, but I was a big girl and Daddy still had work to do. I didn't need him to check under the bed for monsters, either. Monsters knew better than to mess with my daddy.

The monster duct taped to the chair stared at me, eyes bulging and face red, but I just grinned at him. The monsters couldn't hurt me.

“No, Daddy,” I told him as I leaned back and then kissed his cheek. “I can do it.”

“Good girl. Off to bed then.”

“Good night, Daddy,” I said as I raced to the stairs and I grinned at the monster in the chair before I waved goodbye to him. I wasn’t supposed to talk to the monsters, but it always made me feel safer to know Daddy had caught another one.

I skipped up the stairs and let myself out. Then I went up the next flight of stairs to my bedroom. I didn’t even bother with the lights as I clambered across to get under the blankets and I cuddled Monsieur Claude. The panda bear had been mine for as long as I could remember and I took the time to tuck him in with me. While we slept, Daddy would work, and in the morning the monster would be all gone.

Chapter 1- Merrick

“I have total faith in you, Merrick.” The nurse, who’d been something of a mother-figure to me while at the Lancaster Sanatorium, smiled warmly. “I’ll miss you, but I won’t be seeing you again. Call it a woman’s intuition.”

I’d been here for eight weeks, voluntarily of course. These good people were trying to cure me of a pesky little habit of mine. After one heartbreak too many, and putting too much faith in the wrong people, I figured it was time to seek treatment.

The staff had been great, the therapy sessions were the highlight of my day. Talking out your feelings with a group of unbiased strangers just really made me feel like I was making progress.

Bertha opened the door, and waited for me to walk out of the ward. It wasn’t top security or anything like that. Everyone was here of their own free will and could check themselves out at any time. She was just being polite, and I loved that about her. My own mother had been mostly distant, and Bertha would have made a great one.

“Come on now. It’s getting late. I’m sure you don’t want to spend another night with us old biddies.” She grinned, referring to the trio of elderly nurses who often shared her shifts.

I frowned. I loved it here, but I'd already stayed three weeks past the completion of the program. No one understood me the way these people did. No, I was starting down a slippery slope thinking like that.

Taking a deep breath, I hoisted the backpack over my shoulder and shoved my phone in my pocket. "It was great, and I appreciate everything you all have done for me. And you're right. I won't be back."

I had excelled in therapy and found the perfect coping mechanisms that worked for me when I was stressed. Armed with a whole new arsenal of tools, I was ready to go back into the world.

She called a final goodbye as I headed to the elevator.

Damn, this felt good. I'd pick up some dinner on the way home and celebrate my release with a big fat, juicy steak.

The doors opened to the elevator, and I stepped in, moderately happy to have it all to myself. It was almost nine, so not many people would be coming and going from Lancaster, except for staff, or the random releasee like me.

Soft, cheesy music played from the speakers as I started the descent to the first floor. A huge, cartoonish sign hung on the back wall with the text '*See something? Say something!*' printed across the middle in bold block letters. The whole thing screamed elementary school, making me chuckle at the nostalgia it fanned inside me. I loved all the signs lining the halls and bathrooms, reminding us to be good people and make good decisions. Actually, I probably should have paid more attention to them, and I wouldn't have needed therapy.

Cool, humid air kissed my skin as I stepped out onto the street. Not many people were out, and this part of town was always lacking in lights. Whistling an old tune, I stayed close to the buildings, stepping over the occasional homeless person or pile of trash.

Lancaster really should put more effort into cleaning up their neighborhood.

Approaching the one open bar on the street, I let my gaze wander down the alley right before I hit the front, and my steps faltered. That didn't look right at all.

Was I seeing things? I hoped so, because it looked like a man had a woman pinned to the wall. It could have been the shadows, giving them a sinister vibe. Maybe it was a lover's quarrel. There wasn't any screaming that I could hear.

But they were pretty far down the alley...

I forced myself to keep walking, unprepared for how heavy each step would be as I lost sight of the couple. My instincts were shit, part of why I checked myself into Lancaster in the first place, so I was probably imagining the wrongness of the scene.

See Something? Say Something.

Had that been a coincidence seeing that sign? Or a cosmic clue?

Fuck. It wouldn't hurt just to check the couple out, make sure the woman was fine.

Retreating a handful of steps, I glanced down the alley again. I probably didn't make the most inconspicuous of figures, sliding up to the edge of the alley and gazing around the corner like some great ninny with his duffel bag over one shoulder. Don't call me a peeping Merrick or anything, but see something, say something was a great idea. Still, I kind of didn't want to cock block strangers if I'd misread the situation.

However, the guy had the woman pinned with the wall, a hand around her throat and he seemed to tower over her. Granted, they were silhouettes amidst the shadows. Even cars in the distance seemed louder than any sound coming from the alley. Indecision bound me in place.

They were right outside a bar. They could be going for an alley quickie. She could be a prostitute and this was how she planned to pay her rent. Interrupting would be rude, particularly when I didn't have any cash on me to make it up to her if I scared off the john.

Dammit. Now I felt like a peeping Tom. Still, I lingered and when the man in the alley started lifting her up by the throat, I forgot all about my objections. The last time I checked, that wasn't a safe kinky sex practice. He would kill her or at least do her serious bodily harm.

My body moved before my brain fully processed what I would do when I got there. The guy towered over her, but I wasn't a small man. Still, I never thought of myself as a fighter. Right up until she hit him and he backhanded her. Though he let go of her throat—a good thing—she bounced off the side of the building and the rest of me saw red.

I slammed into him, fists flying. It was like every other part of my brain turned off, except for the part that said get him the hell away from her. My knuckles split with every blow I landed. The man staggered under my weight. While he seemed like a behemoth from afar, the collision of my fists with his face almost seemed to bring him down to normal proportions.

A distant part of my brain just observed the action. I was not a violent person. Not self-described or even diagnosed by anyone else. My time in the sanitarium had been more about my overwhelming need to please, and inappropriate attachments to people after a painfully short acquaintance. This? This wasn't like me.

And yet, I didn't stop. Each time I considered pulling back, the image of her being hoisted above him by one arm flashed across my mind's eye. He'd *hurt* her and if it was a kink thing, then she wouldn't have been fighting to get free, right?

Something wet splashed against my face and the hot spray of it jolted me out of the madness. My breath exploded out of me in harsh pants and I glanced from the bloody mess of the man below me to the woman who stared at me with a stunned expression.

The shadows softened her features, caressing them like a lover, and I swore she seemed more a part of them than our world. Holy fuck, she was beautiful.

And I saved her.

“It’s okay,” I reassured her. “I’ll keep you safe.”

Wow, the adrenaline pumping through my body was giving me such a high. I’d never been a hero before. It was like the universe bestowed this woman on me and I was her guardian angel. I almost started bouncing on the balls of my feet, but shit, that might scare her.

“What the fuck did you just do?” She sneered down at the man, kicking his upper ribs with the sharp point of her high heeled shoe. His body jolted, but only from the force of the hit. “He’s dead.” Her mouth formed into a perfect pout, and I wanted to kiss it. Take it away.

Then what she said registered. Dead?

Forcing my attention away from her, I glanced down at the man. His face was hardly recognizable. There was so much blood, but...it looked slightly concave.

Had I done that? Lifting my hands to catch as much murky light from the street as I could, I winced at the blood speckled forearms and heavier coating on my knuckles and fingers.

I should probably get a blood screening done. If I’d opened any scrapes on my hands, I didn’t want to catch anything from that filth.

That could come later, my first priority was this beauty. She could be scared, shaken up. Maybe even hurt.

“We should call the police, have an ambulance look at you.” Swiping my hands down my pants to remove as much blood as I could, I stepped closer, stretching a hand out to move her hair from her neck. I hoped this filthy animal hadn’t bruised her.

“No cops. I’m fine.” Her words were clipped, but the throaty tone made my cock twitch. That wasn’t the voice of an angel, more like an avenging temptress here to sing me to my death.

I loved it.

“Why are you grinning?” She barked at me.

I started to cover my mouth with my hand, but dropped it when the drying blood caught my eye. The stain was too fresh and I hadn't gotten it all off. She was my responsibility now, and I didn't want to scare her. Or traumatize her anymore.

"Sorry. Let me see your neck, I want to make sure you're okay," I said, injecting as much *trust me* vibes as I could. That was actually pretty good. All I had to do was mimic every therapist I'd seen throughout my life.

When my fingers were scant inches from touching the lovely column of her throat, she slapped my hand down. "Back the fuck up. You know what? I didn't do this. I'm golden. Have fun when the cops get here." Spinning on her heels, she waved over her shoulder as she hustled toward the street, the quick tap, tap, of her heels echoing down the alley.

"Wait!" I yelled after her. Shit, my duffle. It had skidded off to the side, thankfully out of the blood spatter trajectory. Once I had grabbed it, I ran after her.

Never stopping, she cast a slightly threatening look over her shoulder. "What now?"

"I need to make sure you get home safe." I scanned the street, making sure there were no other predators lurking in the shadows.

Shock registered in her expression. Granted, I'd been raised in a household with a very strict adherence to the rules. Things like opening doors for other people—not just ladies, but definitely for ladies; escorting those younger or weaker than you to their door; making sure the people around you were safe; were all things I was raised to always do.

Nothing would make me happier than keeping this beauty safe. I double-checked my hands. No blood. There was some on my shirt, but I could probably pull a jacket over that. The sun had rapidly begun its descent, so that would be helpful, right?

Although with the sun going down, so was the temperature. Something her shiver reminded me of as she gave

herself a little shake then stared at my outstretched hand. “Are you for real?”

The question bounced off me. Honestly, who could fault her? There were people at the sanatorium who talked to and about hallucinations. I’d overheard a number of fascinating one-sided conversations. Almost made me wish I could hear the other side of it.

Since she stopped, I narrowed the distance, then pinched her. I tried to keep it gentle but a sting was better. She slapped at my hand again and stared at me. The acrobatic maneuvers playing out in her expression had me leaning closer. Despite the sunset, the lights in the alley all seemed conspicuously out, so the shadows just threatened to swallow her.

“Did you just pinch me?” Disbelief etched into every single syllable.

“You wanted to know if I was for real.” I flashed her a reassuring smile or what I hoped was one. “You can pinch me, if you want to help me do a reality check.”

Her jaw snapped closed with an audible click of her teeth. I felt, more than saw, her look past me. Oh, I stepped into her line of sight. She didn’t need to see the body.

“I just want to make sure you get home safe,” I promised her again. “I’m not a creeper or some kind of deviant.”

Yes, I had absolutely pummeled a man to death but he’d been hurting her. He shouldn’t have done that. Maybe the fact I’d killed him should register more, but honestly, all I felt was grateful she was okay.

“I’m Merrick, by the way,” I added when she continued to study me. If she was concerned about stranger danger, then introductions should help eliminate that, right?

“Nice to meet you, Merrick.” Instead of disdain or caution, amusement filtered her tone. “While I appreciate the effort, I can get home on my own.” She started to take a step away then paused before I could even reach out to stop her. “And you really should get out of here—especially covered in blood like you are. It’s a red flag to law enforcement.”

I glanced down at myself.

“I have a change of clothes in my bag. Just give me one sec.” I set the bag down on a broken wooden pallet and stripped off the shirt. With care, I wiped my face and then my arms. I couldn’t really see them, but there was some hand sanitizer in the bag—I’d borrowed it from my room since they had bottles everywhere. I rubbed down with that, nose wrinkling at the smell in combination with the coppery scent of my clothes.

“Fold it inside out,” she said and I blinked at her a moment before doing what she said.

I got out of my shoes, a little loath to stand in the alley without being able to see the ground, but a pin light flashed against the ground. No glass or trash.

“Thank you,” I told her before hurriedly shucking out of the pants. They stuck uncomfortably to my skin, but I refused to focus on the why of that too closely. The night air raised goosebumps across my skin and I repeated the inside out with the pants, but they were pretty wet and I had a feeling that wouldn’t help.

She moved away in the dark before I could stop her, then returned with a crinkle of plastic. “In the bag.”

“You shouldn’t have to help me.”

“You’re right,” she agreed with me. “Now let’s go, quickly.”

The words spurred me into motion. I retrieved the hand sanitizer from my bag. Probably not the intended use, but it would work, right? Using it on my legs, I tried to not think about standing there in white briefs before I dragged on fresh sweatpants and a sweatshirt. They were from a local store, I’d picked them up on my way into the sanitarium. I was pretty sure they had the town name on them and some pithy slogan, but it wasn’t coming to mind.

Finally, I stuffed my feet back into my shoes and snatched up my bag. “Better?”

OTHER TITLES

Bastard Brothers of Carnage Series

Addict

Convict

Mazza Series

Marks of the Mazza

Bonds of the Mazza

Secrets of the Mazza

War of the Mazza

Astrid Scott Series

Pretty Lies

Ugly Truths

Busted Dreams

Vivid Fears

Brittle Hope

Fragile Minds Duet

Fractured

Altered

Standalone RH Romance

Pin-up Girl

Co-Writes with my Co-wrify

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[High Note](#)

[Last Word](#)

Standalone MF Romance

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WHO IS BLAKE?

Blake Blessing is no longer new on the Indie scene, but she's still ecstatic about this chapter in life. She is a mom, wife, art enthusiast, and author.

She attended ten different schools growing up, so books became her constant friend. Escaping into books of all different genres made life fun and exciting. Blake was also raised on music and still blasts it through the house and car at every opportunity.

She has a weird sense of humor and a penchant for chocolate milk. It only makes sense she would one day go on to write her own stories.

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