

# BRUTAL ENFORCER

BELLA ASH

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BELLA ASH

# *Blood*

**Men have always wanted to control me.**

My ruthless father.

Then the man my father picked me to marry.

And finally, my kidnapper, Omar Castillo.

The Castillo family's brutal enforcer.

The Beast.

They say there's not a family in Miami that hasn't been touched by his bloodshed.

Including mine.

He single-handedly mowed down twenty of my family members without breaking a sweat.

Now, he's locked me up, far away from the city.

A pawn in the cartel's game.

I'm scared he'll kill me next.

But I'm more scared of the way he makes me feel.

Of the chills he sends through my traitorous body.

The hunger in his eyes.

I have to escape.

But the only way to get off his island prison is through him. To make him believe I want him.

He underestimates me.

Everyone always has.

I will burn this island to the ground before I give in.

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## CHAPTER 1



## Omar

“We’re losing him!” Someone, a nurse maybe, in pale blue scrubs, pushed the “Code Blue” button on the wall. I could hear the footsteps pounding on the linoleum floors as the code team rushed into the tiny ICU hospital room, filling it from corner to corner as they assembled, shouting orders at each other.

I watched as a nurse lowered the hospital bed, threw down the railing, and started chest compressions.

“Fluid wide open,” someone shouted.

“We’ve lost the airway. We need to intubate!” someone else yelled.

A respiratory therapist squeezed his way to the top of the bed and forced a tube down Angel’s throat while this small nurse stood beside my brother, shoving her palms into his chest. CPR didn’t look the same in real life as it did on TV. There was far more movement. Far more shouting.

“Swap out,” the nurse called. Another nurse replaced her, his hands the only thing keeping my brother alive.

Vaguely, I could hear Emma crying. Sobbing, really. She was begging for something, *anything* to be done that would save Angel—that would save her husband. Lili, my sister, had her arms around our sister-in-law, and I stood, staring, as they forced my brother’s heart to beat. *This isn’t happening*, I thought over and over again. *We were just celebrating Manny’s birthday*. Why did Angel even go to that damn hospice? So

what if the man was dying? The whole point of sending him there was to ensure he did die alone.

“He needs another surgery. We have to go back in.” A nonsense doctor, puffed up with his own importance, stepped in front of me. “I need your permission.”

“Mine?” I sounded dumb even to my own ears.

“His wife’s,” the doctor said, and I could *hear* the man calling me a dumbass in his head.

Emma howled. “Yes, yes, whatever you need to do!”

Lili soothed her with a hand over her shoulders. “You have to calm down,” she begged, bringing a hand to Emma’s belly. “This isn’t good for your blood pressure or the baby.”

“Fuck. Off. Lili!” Emma glared at my sister, and if I didn’t know her better, I’d say that the woman looked like she was capable of actual murder. Lili, for once in her life, cowered and stepped back. “You do whatever you have to do to save my husband.”

“We’ve got a rhythm!” a nurse announced. “It’s weak, but it’s there.”

“Let’s get him to the operating room,” the doctor ordered, and suddenly the entire team was moving, rolling Angel’s bed out of the room and down the hallway. Emma’s cries only got louder as he was taken out of sight. If I remembered correctly, her mother died in a hospital; this was doubly traumatizing, then.

I grabbed the doctor before he could get too far away. “Save my brother, do you understand?”

He frowned. “Mr. Castillo.” He pronounced it *wrong*. My free hand clenched into a fist, but I couldn’t punch this man. Not when Angel’s life lay in his hands. “Your brother is in critical condition. We thought we got everything last night. I won’t know if there’s additional damage or to what extent until I get in there. There are too many factors to consider here.”

I gripped the front of his scrubs, hard enough that I saw a tremor of fear run through his face. *Good, he should be afraid*

*of me.* “If my brother doesn’t make it,” I murmured, low enough that only he heard me, “neither will you. Do you understand?”

He nodded jerkily. “I understand.”

I let him go. “Good. Now go do your job.”

Once he had disappeared in the same direction as Angel, I turned back to my sister and sister-in-law. Emma was falling apart, and Lili was hanging on by a thread, I could tell. It had been bad enough when they’d brought him in last night. The hours in surgery. The measured optimism from the medical staff. We’d all held our breaths, pacing the hospital halls. Waiting. Then *this* happened. My vision turned...hazy. Almost red-tinted. Someone needed to answer for this.

My father was responsible. There was no way two Rojas assassins lay in wait at my father’s hospice and *only* shot Angel. They were working for my father. “He needs to die.”

Lili jerked to attention. “What?”

I held up a hand to stop her tirade. “Padre,” I explained. “He did this. He needs to die...so do all of the Rojas scum.”

She sighed, almost in relief, until I turned and stalked away. “Wait!” she called after me. She shuffled a sobbing Emma into a seat and ran after me. “What in the hell do you think you’re doing?”

I grunted. “What I’m good at.” I looked at her, and whatever she saw in my face scared her. I could tell just by the way her body froze. “Stay here. Call me if you learn anything.”

Lili grabbed my arm. “Don’t do anything stupid, like get yourself killed, all right? I can’t be down two brothers in a single night.”

I glared. “You still have two brothers, and it better stay that way.”

“Omar!”

“No, stop,” I said and turned her toward the waiting room. “Look after Emma and keep me updated. I’ll be back soon.”

“Please,” she said. “Don’t.”

But there was no stopping me. People would die tonight, and I sent up a fervent prayer that Angel wouldn’t be one of them.

## CHAPTER 2

## *Lyse*

I should have insisted on lower heels. If I made it to the end of the night without losing my toes, I would call it a success. A warm hand touched my bare back, and I did what I could to suppress the shudder that ran up my spine. “Lyse, love,” my fiancé, Felix Suarez, said, “come meet Dr. and Mrs. Fitzgerald.”

*They donated a ton of money to his city comptroller campaign,* I thought as he steered me toward a table full of wealthy, elderly people. While planning the engagement party, he had given me an extensive rundown of the guest list, and I painstakingly memorized each one. I fixed my face into a smile before we reached the table. “Myra, Harold,” Felix said in what I liked to think of as his “politician” voice, “I’d like you to meet my fiancée, Lyse Rojas.”

Myra’s eyes widened as she took me in. Harold’s gaze traveled the length of my body and back up, though his eyes didn’t get much higher than my breasts, but he hid the smirk that played at the corners of his mouth by forcing himself to frown slightly. I did what I could to keep my face pleasantly arranged. It was the same reaction all night long.

Did Felix not realize what it looked like? Having me on his arm? Felix was a handsome man, to be sure, but he was going on fifty this year, and I was twenty-five. I couldn’t decide whether he was ignoring the looks or if he truly didn’t realize it. “It’s very nice to meet you,” I said cheerfully. “Thank you for coming to celebrate with us.”

It was the same thing I'd said to dozens of people tonight, and while most people had done their level best to be pleasant in return, Myra Fitzgerald, I could see, was not going to do that. "How old are you, Ms. Rojas?" she asked. Her tone was snide.

I thought Felix would jump in, but he was already chatting to other donors at the table. "I'm twenty-five, ma'am," I said.

She huffed. "I didn't imagine that Felix would fall for such a thing."

She was calling me a gold-digger, or worse, and a part of me wanted to lean in and whisper that her old pal Felix had made a deal with my father ten years ago. When I was fifteen and gangly and hadn't caught up with my own looks. They were planning this big wedding before I ever graduated from high school; my father had been ready to sign me over on the day I turned eighteen. It was only Felix's insistence that we wait that had saved me...for a little while longer, anyway.

I wanted to tell her all of that and watch her eyes go round with the shock and disgust that would surely follow. I wanted the gossip to spread through the ballroom and fall around both my father's and Felix's shoulders like iron weights.

Instead, I smiled more brightly. The stretch was starting to ache. "Felix has always been so kind," I said. "It's no wonder I fell in love with him."

Myra scoffed. "I'm sure," she said without an ounce of the pretend civility the others had managed. *Fucking bitch*, I thought.

Before I could think of something to say, dinner was announced by the harried wedding planner that my father hired, and Felix excused us and led me, hand still on my back, to our table. He pulled out my chair and waited for me to sit before he pushed me in.

Across from me, my parents sat side-by-side, looking every bit like a king and his most faithful lapdog. Would I look like that in fifteen years? Cowed and beaten down by years spent with a man I didn't love? It was too depressing to comprehend.

The waitstaff came around with plates laden with steak, twice-baked potatoes, and steamed vegetables, but the moment I picked up my fork, my father's eyes were on me, glaring. My stomach twisted and grumbled — with all the preparations this morning, I hadn't had time to eat — but I dutifully went into “demure” eating mode, which meant mostly pretending to eat so that no one caught me in an “undignified” moment. My mother had taught me at a young age what it meant to be always on display: I could always eat later when no one was around to watch me.

Felix, meanwhile, was chewing a hearty piece of his steak with gusto. “This is delicious, isn't it, love?” he asked without so much as glancing in my direction.

“It is,” I agreed, and in my voice, I heard my mother. For my father, she was always pleasant and agreeable; she never had a cross moment. In private, I knew how much she sobbed and begged God to visit her with “the cancer” so as to end her suffering sooner.

I managed to finish the steamed vegetables on my plate — they were bland and tasteless — without anyone else glaring at me, and I moved enough of everything else around so that my plate looked finished enough by the time the waiter came for it.

As the plates were being cleared, Felix stood up, friendly politician grin firmly in place. “Ladies and gentleman,” he announced, pitching his voice so that it would reach all corners of the room without needing a microphone. *Are politicians taught how to do that?* I wondered. There had to be a class or something like that. “I wanted to thank you all for coming to celebrate my upcoming wedding to this wonderful woman.” He looked at me. “Stand up, Lyse, love.”

I pushed myself up and tried not to wince as my shoes tightened painfully across the top of my foot. “Thank you, everyone,” I said and leaned into Felix's side, the picture of happiness.

Felix beamed at me. “I know Lyse and I aren't the most traditional couple, but I have always been blown away by this



smart, caring, beautiful woman, and I was never happier than the day that she agreed to be my wife.”

I remembered that day well. Felix and my father went into his office and came out two hours later with the announcement I would be marrying the politician. There had been no beautiful proposal; Felix hadn't even spoken to me. I didn't receive a ring until three months ago, and it was brought by a courier with the instruction that I should wear it from now on.

Felix continued to talk about our phony courtship, mentioning the innocent dates we never went on and how we circled each other for months before making anything official. Like the information on his political constituents and donors, it was information that I also memorized before tonight. The story of our relationship was of utmost importance; Felix couldn't come across like a predator.

His speech would end with a kiss; I had already been warned. It would be our first, my first, and I had been dreading it since my mother told me about it a week ago. I didn't have to do anything beyond stand here and not look disgusted, but there was no way to prevent it.

Felix turned to look at me, and my muscles went rigid. His smile hadn't slipped an inch, but his eyes were dark in a way I'd never seen before. I had never been excited about my upcoming marriage, but I'd also never been afraid of Felix before.

I couldn't say that anymore. Not when he was looking at me like he wanted to possess me, body and soul.

My eyes slipped closed as he leaned in. *Just get through it, I told myself. It's just a kiss; if a sixteen-year-old can handle it, so can you.* I felt his breath brush my face, felt his heat coming closer...and then the world exploded around us.

The door of the ballroom burst open, and the room filled with the sound of gunfire and screams. “Get down!” my younger brother, Matteo, yelled out, and the members of the Rojas family dropped, covering our heads like we'd been taught all of our lives.

I tugged Felix down with me. He let out an *oof* as he hit the ground. “Stay down,” I hissed at him and pointed toward the exit that was away from the bulk of the noise. “Head that way.”

Felix gave me an affronted look for a second before he began to crawl as directed. *I’m never going to hear the end of this*, I thought as I followed, keeping my head low. Something — *somebody* — crashed into a table above us, and the table collapsed under the sudden weight. I yelped, jerking back in order not to get hit, and when I tried to find Felix again, he was gone.

Crawling as close to the fallen table as I could, I used it as cover so I could look around. I expected to see an attack, men against men, but instead, there was only one man. My body went cold. Omar Castillo. *La Bestia!*

He had a gun in each hand, and he was shooting into the crowd of people, completely ignoring my cousins and distant relatives attacking him with chairs and knives from the tables. *Apá is going to be mad that Felix convinced him the men couldn’t be armed today*, I thought almost numbly as I watched Omar downing my relatives left and right, leaving them to choke on their own blood.

I had to get out of here. Matteo had gotten Apá out, just as he was supposed to as the family’s enforcer, but without Felix, I was on my own unless I got the attention of the men who were currently fighting for their lives. *I can do this*, I told myself. Just like I’d been taught: *Keep out of sight and keep moving*.

My knees ached as I pulled myself along, cursing as I slipped on my dress again and again. I only made it a few feet when I heard a soft, pitiful whimper from beneath the table I was ducking behind.

I should keep going. I needed to get to an exit and find my family and Felix. The sounds of the dying men behind me and the gunfire made my ears ring...but I couldn’t ignore that whimper. I lifted the tablecloth, and the two boys huddled beneath shrieked, holding each other all the tighter. “Ernesto,” I cooed, “Gabriel, are you okay?” The twins were the youngest

of us, only seven years old, and while their father was already trying to make “men” out of them, they were the sweetest boys I’d ever met. I crawled under the table, letting the heavy swing of the tablecloth fall down behind me.

The boys threw themselves into my lap, shivering and whining. I shushed them and petted their gel-slicked hair. “It’s okay, *mis amores*,” I whispered against their heads.

“Mama said to get down,” Ernesto sobbed gently. “She hasn’t come back.”

*She had better be dead*, I thought savagely. My cousin Yessica wasn’t Mother of the Year material, but I thought she was better than leaving her children to fend for themselves like this. “When it gets quiet,” I told them, “we’ll find her, okay? We just have to wait.”

“We’re going to die,” Gabriel cried, clutching me all the tighter.

“We’re not,” I insisted. Even the Castillo Beast knew better than to attack a woman and two children. He might mow down every man in the ballroom, but unless we were caught by a stray bullet, he wouldn’t touch us. “There’s rules about these things,” I said. “You know that.”

Gabriel shook his head. “He’s crazy,” he said and more tears fell from his eyes. “He shot papá.”

I tightened my grip on them and rocked them, uttering soft, nonsensical comfort words, but fear was taking root in my stomach. We needed to get out of here. Even if he wouldn’t actually hurt us, there was only so much a child could see before they were harmed irreparably.

## CHAPTER 3

## Omar

I couldn't see through the red haze. I couldn't hear through the pounding in my ears. I was bleeding, of that I was certain, but I couldn't tell from where. It didn't matter; nothing hurt right now. That would come later, after all of the Rojas were dead.

A hand, weak and frail, wrapped around my ankle, as if the man could stop me. I looked down. His chest was awash in red. It was leaking from his mouth and his nose. *Internal bleeding*, I thought, *and a lot of it*. I smiled and knew it was nothing more than an ugly slash across my face. Lili had told me it was the most terrifying smile she'd ever seen...and that was saying a lot, considering who our Padre was.

My muscles froze for a moment at the thought of Padre, the former head of the Castillo family, but then that hand squeezed around my ankle and brought me raging back into the present. I met the man's eyes, not wanting to waste a bullet on a dying man, and brought my boot down on his face. Blood and thicker viscera splattered outward, drenching my boots.

I stepped over the corpse and kept going. It was quieter now. Most people had fled or were in some part of the dying process across the ballroom floor. *Get moving, cabrón*, I told myself. *Someone will have called 911 by now*.

Of course, the Rojas would throw their fancy engagement party at the Biltmore Hotel. They couldn't have kept it to their own territory. Neutral ground meant more witnesses and more chances for the police to get involved. The Castillos' deal with the Miami PD only extended so far. They couldn't look the

other way after this. I needed to get this done and be gone before they got here.

I swept through the ballroom, reloading my gun and putting bullets in the few men on the ground who were still breathing. A dozen of Luis Rojas's men were dead, but it wasn't enough to satiate the bloodlust rushing through me. The man himself and his bastard of a son were missing.

My gut burned with the need to eradicate every last Rojas scum.

Nothing but ripping them off the face of the earth would make up for what happened to Angel, who was back in surgery and fighting for his life. He had been shot four times; the bullets had ripped through his torso, perforating his stomach, liver, and spleen. He'd spent hours in surgery, the surgeons plugging up holes where the bullets had torn through him, only for his heart to stop in the ICU.

Lili called me after I left the hospital. She'd had to ask the hospital staff to sedate our sister-in-law before Emma hurt herself or the baby. Watching them forcefully inject the hysterical woman had torn my sister up, and she worried she hadn't done the right thing.

I tried to reassure my sister, but as far as I was concerned, there was only one right thing to do, and I was doing it now.

A noise beneath a table to my right drew my attention. I kicked it over and beneath it, a young woman clutched two boys to her. Rojas boys.

I aimed the gun in my hand, and the woman stood, raising her arms to make herself as large as possible. "They're innocent," she said, voice steady and controlled, despite the fear that was so clear in her dark brown eyes.

She was a beauty, that was for sure, even cloaked in fear and horror. Her hair, as dark as her eyes, tumbled down over her shoulders, having come loose from an elaborate plaited updo. I knew who she was immediately: Lyse Rojas. She was the eldest child, but she wouldn't inherit the keys to her father's kingdom; those would go to her younger brother, Matteo. Lyse

was destined to become the wife of Felix Suarez, a politician steadily climbing the ladder to bigger and better things.

“No Rojas is innocent,” I spat at her.

Her dark eyes went hard, anger overtaking her fear. “They’re *children*,” she hissed. “What kind of man aims a gun at a child?”

“Like your father has never gone after a kid before,” I said, thinking of Manny, who had managed to get away from a drive-by shooting with a graze on his arm, which had left a knotted scar.

Her lip curled. If she was surprised I knew who she was, she didn’t show it. “They are not my father,” she said. “Why should they pay for his crimes?”

I found her fire, her willingness to put herself between the children and my gun, intriguing. Attractive. But the rage burning through me was louder than that. “Why shouldn’t they?” I countered savagely. “Why shouldn’t I visit as much pain on Luis Rojas as he has on my family?”

The fierceness in Lyse’s eyes wavered and grew wet. “They don’t know anything about that,” she said. “They’re seven years old; they aren’t involved with family business.”

“Not yet,” I growled, “but they will be. It’s inevitable.”

Her arms shook slightly from the way she was holding them out. “It’s part of the life we live,” she said, “but it doesn’t mean they are at fault *now*.”

I didn’t have time to argue semantics with her. Why was I still standing here? *Put a bullet in all of them and move on*. But when I raised my arm to aim again, the sounds of distant sirens reached my ears and a thought occurred to me: take her with me. “Let’s go,” I said.

Lyse looked at me like I’d grown a second head. “Go where?”

I pointed the gun at her. “Are you in any fucking position to ask questions?”

She swallowed hard. She glanced behind her at the boys. “If I go with you, will you leave them alone?”

Letting out an annoyed growl, I wrapped a hand around her arm and yanked, dragging her closer. Lyse tried to pull away, but I clamped down on her arm even more. I could feel the bones in her wrist yielding to the pressure. She made a helpless, pained noise. “I’m not negotiating,” I spat.

“Please,” she begged, bottom lip quivering. “I won’t scream. I won’t fight. Just leave them alone.” The sirens were closer now. Keeping my grip firm, I dragged her through the ballroom. I heard her breath stutter. “Ernesto,” she called over her shoulder, “take your brother and go. Don’t look back.”

I heard the Rojas boys scuttling through the carnage. I should have turned around and ended them then and there, but I kept moving, forcing Lyse to step over the bodies of her family as we headed to the side exit that would dump us outside.

She tripped and nearly wrenched her shoulder out of its socket. “What the fuck are you doing?” I spat, looking down at where she was nearly sprawled on the floor.

“My shoes,” she said. “They’re —”

I glanced at the spikes she had been balancing on. “Ridiculous,” I muttered. “Take them off.” She kicked the shoes off...and lost nearly five inches. I towered over her now. “*Mierda.*”

Reaching down, I grabbed her around the waist and heaved her over my shoulder. She let out a little *oof* as my shoulder dug into her stomach. She weighed next to nothing. *Good*, I thought. It made running easier.

I carried her out the side exit to the waiting SUV I’d left by the hotel’s dumpster. I considered throwing her into the cargo area, but then I couldn’t keep an eye on her, so instead, I opened the driver-side door and deposited her onto the seat. “Crawl across the console to the passenger seat,” I growled. “If you try to open the other door, you’ll be dead before you get your feet on the pavement.”

She scuttled across the seats, and I climbed in beside her, slamming the door behind me. Lyse had crushed herself against the passenger door as much as she could, but she



didn't try to get away. *Smart girl*, I mused and started the engine. I cut the lights to make the SUV hard to spot in the growing darkness.

Even as the police cars pulled up outside of the Biltmore, the size of the hotel's property made it easy to maneuver around them. Once we hit the road, I flipped the lights back on and kept to the speed limit. The picture of a law-abiding citizen. "You're bleeding," Lyse said. "A lot."

I grunted in acknowledgment. My shirt was wet with it and sticking to me: it was going to hurt peeling it off later, but that pain could wait until I'd gotten to the safe house.

"If we get pulled over—"

"We won't."

Lyse scoffed and tried to hide it, as if she couldn't help the sound that escaped her throat. "Are the Castillos so untouchable?" she asked.

I pictured Angel again. The breathing tube down his throat, the nurse forcing his heart to beat. The stampeding sound of their footsteps as the team raced down the hall to take him into surgery, again. "No, we aren't so untouchable, but tonight I'll kill anyone who tries to stop me." My words were sincere—a promise—and Lyse fell silent.

*Good*, I thought. *No need to make conversation; it's a waste of time anyway*. Lyse's fate was sealed the moment I recognized her. With Angel back on the operating table, none of the Rojas were safe. Not even her.

## CHAPTER 4

## Lyse

I expected to be taken to the Castillo compound and locked up, but the longer we were in the dark SUV, I came to realize that wasn't Omar's plan. I had been prepped for being taken hostage before — Apá wanted both Matteo and me to know it was always a possibility — but training wasn't the same thing as being huddled in the front seat of the enemy's car, driving into the night.

I watched the road signs and did my best to memorize them. Once I could contact Apá or Felix, I would tell them exactly where I was, confident in my ability to remember. Omar Castillo would *not* get what he wanted from me, whatever that ended up being.

But when he turned onto a road and headed toward the marina...everything stopped. Panic spiked through my veins and wrapped around my heart, squeezing it until I couldn't draw a breath. *There's no way he's going to put you on a boat,* I told myself over and over. *It makes sense to put a safehouse near a marina for a quick exit.*

My fears were quickly confirmed when he turned into the marina's parking lot and cut the engine. "Where are we going?" I asked before I could stop myself. What was wrong with me? I was so good at holding my tongue literally any other time, but now?

Omar smirked at me, humorlessly, and it was truly unfair to be this close to *La Bestia*. The man was terrifying, to be sure, but he was also handsome. Devilishly so. "It would be better for you if you didn't ask questions."

I sank my teeth into my tongue to stop the torrent of words that wanted to fly free. When he came around to open my door, I thought about kicking it open and smashing him in the face or clinging to the door handle and refusing to go with him, but considering how easily he threw me over his shoulder at the Biltmore, I could only imagine how easy it would be for him to break my fingers so that I couldn't grip anything at all.

I climbed out of the SUV, hissing a little as my bare feet touched the crushed oyster shell gravel. Omar's big hand wrapped around my wrist again, and he tugged me toward the dock. The gravel sliced into the balls of my feet, dug into my heels, and by the time we stepped onto the wooden dock, my feet were a bloody mess. I could hear the water slapping against the pilings, but I couldn't see it. My heart leaped into my throat.

I could *not* get on a boat. I couldn't swim.

When I hesitated, Omar pulled me along until we stopped at a slip with a fairly large boat. "I can't—" I started, but he simply picked me up and set me onto the boat's deck before climbing aboard himself.

He pointed at a seat that was directly in front of the wheel. "Sit and do not move." I sat where he indicated and wrapped my hands around the nearest rail, gripping it until my knuckles ached. Omar untied the boat from the dock before he went to the steering wheel and started the engine.

He quickly backed out of the slip and steered the boat out into the pitch blackness. *He's going to dump me*, I thought, holding even more tightly onto the rail as if it would save me. *He's going to throw me out of the boat; no one will ever find me.*

I tried to tell myself that I wasn't making any sense, because why would he take me if he wanted to kill me? He could have shot me at the Biltmore if that were the case...but logic was taking something of a backseat at the moment.

"You know I'm a Castillo, yeah?" Omar asked, and I nodded, tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth. "Answer me."

My jaw was tight, but I somehow formed the words. “Yes. You’re the enforcer.”

Omar chuckled, and it was an ugly sound. “Enforcer,” he said, as if he were molding his mouth around the word. “My brother’s protector.” His voice took a bitter note. “I failed at that because of your family.”

My stomach filled with ice. Angel Castillo was the newly appointed head of the family, and Apá *hated* him. What had he done? “Did my father—?”

“Don’t act like you don’t know,” Omar spat.

“I don’t,” I insisted. “I promise that I don’t.”

Again, he let out that bone-chilling laugh. “I suppose you don’t,” he mused. “You were too busy with preparations for your fancy engagement party.”

The words brushed against my skin like broken glass. *Don’t talk to him*, I chided myself. There was no point in making conversation with *La Bestia*. He was more animal than man—the level of violence tonight proved that—and given the amount of damage he took himself, I had no idea how he was even still standing.

The boat bumped along over waves, and my stomach twisted sickeningly. I was suddenly glad Apá hadn’t allowed me more than a few bites of dinner; it seemed like a kindness now. “Seemed like a nice party,” Omar continued. He would almost sound friendly if it weren’t for the undercurrent of bitter anger. “Your husband-to-be is quite a step up from some low-life cartel boss, huh?”

I sank my teeth into my tongue again until I tasted blood. Between his taunting and the splashing of the water, I was in hell. How had I ever thought being at home was bad? This was far, far worse. As we dipped and bounced again, I groaned, wishing I had somewhere to lie down.

“Does your fiancé know about what your father and brother get up to?” Omar asked, and then chuckled, as if he’d made some kind of joke. “Of course he does. You were probably a part of that deal, I imagine.”

“Fuck you.” It was something I had never dared say aloud, not even in the privacy of my room, but there seemed to be no point to keeping my mouth shut now. Before he inevitably killed me, I wanted the opportunity to say the things I had never been brave enough to say.

Omar didn’t react to my words at all; instead, he continued to taunt me. “Shall I include Felix on my list? Right behind your father and brother?”

I looked back at him, glaring when I saw the savage grin that cut across his face. He was trying to goad me. *Pendejo*, I thought. Felix held little love in my heart, but Matteo... “My brother had nothing to do with whatever my father did. Apá barely lets him do anything yet.”

Omar snorted. “Now you want me to spare Luis’s *second in command*?” Again, there was that ugly laugh.

“He’s twenty-three; he’s acting as my father’s—”

“Enforcer,” Omar finished for me. “I know. Which means that he was perfectly aware that your father sent two of his men to gun down my brother.”

The words were a slap to the face. “Is Angel dead?” If he was, it would mean war, true war, with a lot of death on both sides. *What was Apá thinking?* Sure, the Castillos and the Rojas were enemies, and minor members of each family were lost from time to time, but then Apá went after Angel at his club. Then, he went after Angel’s wife. Now this.

My father had always been an impulsive man. He was driven by his baser desires more often than was dignified for a man of his position. But he wasn’t outright stupid....though his decisions lately seemed to indicate otherwise.

“Not yet,” Omar answered after too long a pause. “But even if he lives, it won’t save them. Or you.” The threat was timed with a wave that splashed over the wall of the boat. I yelped; a shiver ran down my spine. Omar laughed again, and this time, he sounded *delighted*. It was even worse than his ugly laugh. “Are you afraid, *conejita*?” he taunted. “Afraid you won’t get to have that big white wedding after all?”

I whipped around to look at him. “I can’t *swim*, you insufferable *pendejo!*” I snapped. “I’m not afraid of you!”

Omar’s nasty smile vanished, and something cool and deadly took its place. “You’re not afraid of me?”

He cut the engine, and we were suddenly adrift. He came around the steering column, unblinking as he stared me down. He wrapped his hands around my upper arms and yanked me out of my seat. My fingers fell away from the rail that I had a death grip on like they were made of sodden paper. A low moan of fear leaked from my throat. “I thought you weren’t afraid, *conejita*,” he tsked.

“I’m not,” I lied.

Did he have to be so...big? Omar was the largest man I’d ever seen, tall and broad. His hands were huge, and although his muscles were barely flexed, my feet were barely brushing the deck of the boat. He held me like it was nothing. Something hot and sharp zinged through my veins. My breath came out in a shudder.

Omar’s eyes, dark and fathomless, dipped to look at my mouth for a split-second, and I considered spitting on him. Then he swung me out. My toes scraped the top of the boat wall, and then there was nothing beneath me but thick, wet blackness.

I couldn’t stop the scream that filled my lungs. “Please!” I shrieked, trying to get a grip on his arms and failing. “Please, no!” I could already imagine the suffocating darkness filling my lungs until there was nothing to do but succumb to it all.

Out of all the ways to die, drowning had always frightened me the most, because I had never learned how to prevent it besides avoiding water at all costs. I wanted to beg him to shoot me; it would be a mercy to do that before he dumped me. But I couldn’t do anything besides sob and try to cling to him.

Instead of dropping me, however, Omar hauled me back over the side of the boat and dumped me onto the deck. I curled into a ball, making myself as small as I possibly could, looking every bit the scared bunny he’d called me before.

“Remember,” he growled, “if I wanted you dead, you would be.”

I swallowed hard. “Why don’t you?”

Omar returned to his place behind the steering wheel, and the boat roared to life again. He adjusted the boat to counteract the drift, and then we pressed on into the night. I kept waiting for Omar to answer me, but it didn’t take me long to realize that he wasn’t going to.

It didn’t matter anyway. I was alive at his sufferance; he had made that perfectly clear. I stayed huddled in the bottom of the boat, not looking at him or anything else. It was the only way to keep myself together. I had always felt alone within my large family, but until now, I had no concept of what it meant to be truly alone.

On my own and trapped with my enemy. *Give me a way to survive*, I begged the universe.



## CHAPTER 5

## Omar

The darkness had stretched on forever, but finally, I saw the familiar dock's light. Even from a distance, I could make out two dark figures waiting for us. Pascal and Efrain didn't stay on the island full-time, but they lived on a close enough Key that they could get there in less than an hour.

*Gracias, Liliana*, I thought, near delirious. The blood loss was starting to make my vision swim, and while it still didn't hurt much more than a beating from Padre, my clothes were growing tacky now. The bleeding had gotten worse after I picked Lyse up. I maneuvered the boat next to the dock, and Efrain jumped to tie it off for us.

"Jefe! You look bad," Pascal called.

I didn't reply. Instead, I pulled Lyse from where she was still crouched on the deck. "Get moving," I told her. She resolutely didn't say anything, but she followed my instructions, wincing when Efrain took her hand to help her down.

"Put the boat in the dry dock," I told Pascal. "No one can know that I'm here."

Both men nodded, instantly more alert than before, and as they went about their work, I pushed Lyse up the dock. "We're going to the house," I told her.

The pathway up the dock was lit, and I watched as Lyse limped along the center of the dock, as if she were trying to walk on a tightrope. As if the dock was going to suddenly shrink on both sides. The dress that she was wearing dipped low on her back, and despite myself, my eyes followed the line

of exposed skin. When she moved just right, the dress would show the beginning of the swell of her ass. *What kind of man puts his woman in a dress like that in public?*

I shook the thought away. It didn't matter if Felix Suarez wanted to broadcast his and Lyse's wedding night for Only Fans so long as he was desperate enough to do whatever I needed to get her back. I doubted there was any love between the pair — seriously, the man looked like her goddamn grandfather — but I was betting that Felix liked that she was shiny and new and just for him.

I was counting on him wanting to keep her that way, too.

The house sat farther uphill than the dock, and while it was slight and barely noticeable on a normal visit, I was puffing by the time we reached the massive porch. The lights were on in the house, and the door was unlocked. Everything was ready for us.

Helena, the summer caretaker, met us in the wide, airy foyer. She didn't live on the island year-round, but she was able to travel here quickly from Key West. The Castillos took care of the entirety of her bills whenever she wasn't working. It kept her quiet and returning to the island each summer. "I wasn't sure if my sister had called you or not," I said by way of greeting.

Helena shrugged. "She called, and I came," she said. "Just like always." Her eyes roved over me. "You look awful."

*Gracias, Liliana*, I thought again. Of course, my sister would know that I would come here. I looked at Lyse, who was looking around at what she could see of the house in surprise. Like she thought it would be dank and dark inside. Maybe she did. "Get her settled upstairs," I told Helena, who still seemed to be categorizing my wounds. "To a room with an outside lock." Looking at Lyse, I added, "Behave for her, *conejita*."

I watched both women ascend the stairs before heading to the office that was tucked into a back hallway. Opening a desk, I pulled out one of the burner phones that we kept stocked and dialed Lili's number. She picked up after a single ring. "Omar?!" Her voice was shrill.

I winced. “*¡Cálmate!*” I said.

“Are you safe, *idiota?*” she asked, her voice no longer in danger of shattering glass.

“I’m safe,” I assured her. “Are you and Emma going to be okay for a little while on your own?”

Lili was quiet for a moment, and then she sighed, soft and sad. “Emma is falling apart,” she said. “I tried to get her to come home with me, but she refused. I don’t think she’s going to leave the hospital unless we load her into the car by force.”

“Do it if she refuses to come home tomorrow, all right? She can’t just sit at the hospital and waste away.”

Lili snorted. “Sure thing. I’ll further traumatize our pregnant sister-in-law, shall I?”

“Lili—”

“Save it,” she barked. “What were you thinking? Going to that hotel? The police were here asking questions.”

“That’s standard. They have to go through the motions, remember? How many times did they come to question Padre over the years? Nothing ever comes of it.”

“This was different, Omar. If these officers knew Angel or our deal with them, they didn’t act like it. They kept threatening to get a warrant to come back and search the house for you, and I think they meant it.”

My sister was a strong woman. She was only twenty-three years old, but she had proven time and time again that she could handle the pressures of being in a family like ours. She trained harder than the bodyguards most days, and even if I was reluctant to admit it, she was a better shot than me. Lili wasn’t easily frightened by anything...but she sounded scared now.

My heart stuttered in my chest. “*Lo siento, Mija.*” It wasn’t often that we spoke softly with one another—our relationship was far too antagonistic for that—but I couldn’t muster up the usual ire.

“Why were you so reckless? It’s like you didn’t even think.”

“I didn’t,” I admitted. “I was angry, and I wanted revenge. I still do.” My thoughts touched on Lyse, upstairs under lock and key. “I’m going to fix this, okay? I’ve already got a plan in place.”

Lili scoffed. “No offense, but your plans tend to suck if you’re not carefully monitored by an adult.”

“Fuck you,” I said without any real heat. She had a point. I was not the planner of our family; I was the executioner. Angel was the cool, level-headed one; I was the muscle. It had been that way since we were kids, and I’d grown half a foot taller than him. “I promise that I’ll fix this, okay?”

“You better.”

I was more than happy that she didn’t ask exactly *what* I had planned. It was harebrained at best, I’d admit, but I didn’t need her to point that out to me. Instead, I asked, “Is there any change at the hospital?”

Lili sniffled. I could picture her rubbing at her eyes in annoyance; she was never one for tears, my sister. “Angel is out of surgery. They removed his spleen altogether, and they patched some bleeds in his liver that they thought they fixed earlier, but they reopened.”

“Has he woken up yet?”

“Would you be hiding away somewhere if he was?” Her tone was snide, but I chose to ignore it. For now. “The doctors said that it would take some time for his body to heal, and it would be best if we kept him sleeping while it did.”

“They’re going to keep him sedated?”

There was a pause. “I don’t like it, but I’m not sure what else to do. They said if he woke up while he was still healing and freaked out, he could undo all their work. Emma signed off on the breathing tube and the medicine to keep him under right after you left, as part of the paperwork she had to sign for the surgery. I think that’s part of what got her all worked up.”

What a fucking mess. Just two days ago, we were celebrating Manny’s birthday and eating Emma’s fried plantains. Now, I

wasn't sure if I was ever going to see my eldest brother again, and I was stuck in a time-out in the middle of the Caribbean.

"Keep an eye on Emma's blood pressure, okay?" Angel had told me that at the last visit to their doctor, Emma's blood pressure had been a little elevated, and while I wasn't entirely sure what that meant, I knew it couldn't be good.

"I'm already on it, but coming from you, that's actually one of your better ideas," Lili admitted.

"I *can* get a few right, you know."

She laughed, real and deep from her belly, and it helped the knot between my shoulders relax a little. "You really, really can't, Omar," she said. "They've got your picture all over the news, asking people to come forward if they have any information about your whereabouts."

"Did they at least use a good one?"

Lili laughed, just like I'd intended. A wave of graying dizziness washed over me; I groaned, having to sit down. "Omar? Are you okay?"

I leaned back against the desk chair's headrest and counted down from twenty slowly to get my breathing and heart under control. "I'm fine."

"You're a rotten liar, *pendejo*."

I laughed, on the edge of giddy hysteria that came with blood loss and shock. "That's not the first time I've been called that in the last few hours."

"What the hell does that mean?"

I tried to explain, but it was like I couldn't quite wrap my brain around the language anymore. "I need to get myself patched up, all right? I need to go."

"How badly are you hurt, Omar?" Lili demanded, ignoring my goodbye.

I sighed and tried to shake my head, as if I could clear it that way, but it only made the dizziness worse. *Shit*. "Enough that I

need to go get it taken care of,” I said. “I’ll call you soon, okay?”

“From a different number,” Lili reminded me, as if I needed it.

“I know.”

She was quiet long enough that I thought she might have hung up the phone, but then, very quietly, Lili said, “I love you, Omar. Stay safe.”

“I love you. Tell Emma that I love her and the baby too. I’ll get home as soon as I can.”

“You better.”

We hung up, and I snapped the burner phone in half, tossing the pieces in the trash can beside the desk. It might be overkill to destroy the phone after a single call, but I was going to use an overabundance of caution from here on out. I couldn’t keep playing fast and loose when Angel needed me to keep shit in line. I couldn’t be the reason that we lost everything.

As I stood up, my vision darkened and I swayed, stumbling around the desk and into the closed office door. The sound echoed through the house like a booming clap of thunder.

## CHAPTER 6



## Omar

Pascal and Efrain hauled me onto the kitchen table, and I gritted my teeth as pain exploded through my shoulder.

“I thought the house had been struck by lightning,” Pascal joked. “Next time you pass out, try to land on the couch, huh?”

“*Hijo de puta.*” I turned my head as Pascal tore open the sleeve of my shirt, trying to assess the wound. There was blood everywhere. Usually I’d be able to patch up minor injuries myself, but this was in an awkward spot to do single-handedly and my vision was still swaying.

“Do you need some help, *jefe*?” I tried to turn toward Helena’s voice, but pain, real pain, ripped through me, and I hissed, jamming my eyes closed. “Move!” she barked at Pascal and Efrain. I could hear their footsteps receding.

I hummed softly. “Check out my shoulder? I’m pretty sure it’s still bleeding.” Helena came around the counter with the first aid kit, and by her sharp intake of breath, I knew that it wasn’t pretty. “How bad?”

“Were you... shot?” she asked. “It looks like a bullet hole.”

*Fucking hell.* Was I? Wait, no. I tried to think, tried to make sense of the adrenaline-fueled rampage I’d gone on. Had there been other guns drawn? I couldn’t remember getting shot, but really, could I even trust my dizzying memories right now?

“What do you want me to do, *jefe*?”

If it was a bullet hole and I left the bullet in my shoulder, it could get infected, and while we were fully stocked with

medical supplies on the island, there wasn't a doctor onsite. It was an hour by boat to the nearest Key and even longer to a proper hospital.

Helena started pulling things out of the first aid kit — gloves and bandages and a pair of forceps — and swore. “We’re out of lidocaine. I’ll need to find you something else before we can get started.”

I shook my head. “Just get on with it.”

“*Jefe*—”

“Just do it,” I assured her. She turned to the liquor cabinet, got out some of the primo rum and shoved the bottle into my hand. I took a healthy swig and felt the alcohol settle like lead in my stomach. I looked back at her. “I want to go to bed sometime, Helena, *por favor*.”

She wasn't comfortable performing minor surgery, and it showed in the way her hands shook as she held up the forceps. I missed Lara, our full-time housekeeper in Miami. She was well-versed in fixing up any number of injuries; she'd even assisted in Lili's birth because our mother had to start pushing in the car on the way to the hospital.

“Use the light,” I panted, “and feel around for anything small and hard. If you don't feel anything, we'll do stitches and leave it be.”

Helena started praying to the Virgin Mary as she touched the wound with gloved fingers. “Take a breath, *jefe*,” she commanded, and then her fingers were pressing in.

“*La concha de tu Madre!*” I tried not to jerk away from her.

She explored the wound as quickly and gently as possible. “I don't feel anything,” she said. “Maybe it was a puncture from a blade.”

A blade, yes. I saw flashes of silver in my memories. There'd been lots of knives drawn. It was possible it was a knife wound. My whole body was shaking; there was sweat pooling at the small of my back and dripping down my face. Keeping myself awake while she mopped up the blood was a struggle. It felt like a fire had been set beneath my skin and my body

wanted nothing more than to fade into darkness, to protect itself from the pain. “Will liquid stitches work?” I asked, wanting nothing more than to be in my bed.

“I don’t want to risk it. Traditional stitches will be more likely to hold after so much damage...though it would be even better if we could do medical staples.”

“I’ll add it to the list,” I said. “Angel and I will see about getting them for all of the kits.”

*Angel and I.* That was how it was forever; Angel and I discussing things before Angel made the final call. That was how it should be. I didn’t want his job. No matter how often my father offered it to me, I didn’t want it. I especially didn’t want it if it meant Angel dying or becoming a vegetable in a hospital bed.

Despite not wanting to be caught in a spiral of dark thoughts, they helped to distract me while Helena closed the wound. It took more than forty minutes for her to get everything sutured shut, and I was a sweaty, shaking mess, but finally, she cleaned everything and taped a bandage over it all. “We’ll need to change the dressing every morning and evening,” she said, “and watch for signs of infection.”

I nodded, then winced when that seemed to pull at the skin she’d just sewn together. “I promise I’ll look after it.”

Helena shook her head and pointed to her own small, birdlike chest. “*I’ll* look after it,” she insisted. “I can’t send you home to Miami with one less arm or some other infection. Your brother would never forgive me.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell her about Angel, but I kept my mouth shut and didn’t say anything. The little skeleton crew didn’t have to know the details of why they’d been called to the island. They just needed to do their jobs. I would tell them if and when it became pertinent for them to know.

“*Gracias,*” I told her. “I’m going to find a large painkiller and head to bed.”

Helena touched my arm. Her fingers were light against my skin, but she kept me from leaving all the same. Helena, like Lara, had been around since my childhood; it was unsurprising that we all looked to these women as surrogates for our mother. Angel had some memories of her before she killed herself, and so did I to an extent, but mostly Lili and I wondered what it would have been like to have a real mother.

“What?”

Helena looked unimpressed. “Don’t sass me, Mr. Enforcer,” she said. “I remember washing your mouth out with soap.”

If I thought too hard about those particular memories, I could practically taste the Dial bar that she had shoved into my mouth. “Please don’t mention the soap,” I said. “I’m already nauseated enough.”

“What are we doing with your guest, *jefe*? I put her in the room that locks from the outside, like you said, but you never said what you were planning to do with her.”

“Nothing,” I said, quick to answer. “I’m going to have her call her fiancé, the city comptroller, and have him get the police off my back.”

I waited for her to call me brilliant, but when it didn’t happen, I looked over at her. “What’s the matter with my plan?”

“What’s the *matter*?” I could tell that she wanted to shake me a little bit, but instead she helped me sit up on the edge of the table. “Omar, what can a city comptroller do to oppose the police?”

I shrugged, and even that hurt. “He’s trying to run for state Congress. That has to mean he’s influential, right?”

Helena shrugged. “If he wins, I would say that’s true, but *wanting* to be in Congress doesn’t make a politician a bigwig. How is he going to help?”

I was getting annoyed at her candor. Helena wasn’t the type to pull punches, even when I was hurt. She was never the type that tears worked on, either; it was one of the reasons that Padre liked her. She was the right amount of harsh...though

that hardness had a limit at times like this. I didn't want her logic tonight. "For Lyse's sake, he better figure it out," I said.

Helena's eyes widened. "Lyse? As in, Lyse *Rojas*?" Her hand slipped into her pocket, and she drew out a delicate rosary to run through her fingers. "Why would you bring that girl here, *jefe*? If this is some romantic getaway—"

"What could possibly be *romantic* about me showing up all bloody and then locking her in a room that only opens from the outside?" I demanded. "I think I have a little more game than that, thanks."

"You're deflecting."

Helena was right; I was deflecting. "She's leverage," I said, "that's all. If her fiancé can't help her, I'll throw her off the dock myself."

A look passed over Helena's face, and I couldn't tell if she wanted to tell me off, or if she was terrified that I so casually mentioned killing someone. *Be more careful*, I told myself. *You can never quite tell who's spying anymore*. "She's scared," Helena said. "Maybe you should—"

"Scared? Why on Earth does that matter? She's a means to an end; all she has to do is stay in her room and speak into the phone when I give it to her."

Helena ducked her head; her eyes were suddenly staring with great interest at my gore-soaked shoe. "The Rojas family is dangerous," she said after a moment, "but I don't think that girl is. She seems incredibly...sad."

I snorted. I couldn't help myself. "I killed over a dozen of her cousins. If she were happy about that, I might question her attachment to her family."

She pressed her lips together, clearly annoyed with me, but not wanting to admit it. "Do things your way then, *jefe*," she said, as if to wash her hands of me. She reached into her pocket and drew out a key; it was my responsibility to care for the prisoner since I brought her here.

I pressed a quick kiss to her forehead. "Thank you for the guilt trip and the clarity. And for sewing me up."

Slowly, I made my way to the stairs at the front of the house. I eyed them, wary; there was a couch in the office that I could crash on, but there wasn't a bathroom with a shower on the first level, and I was in *desperate* need of a shower.

Exhaustion spread through me as I forced myself to climb the stairs. My stitches pulled. I thought when I got to the landing that I might hear Lyse crying or wailing in her room, but the second floor was deadly quiet.

Suspicious, I went down the hallway to the room that I knew she was in, and I opened the door, ready to throw her back in if she tried to escape. Lyse didn't move; instead, she was standing by the one window in the room and looking up at the sky.

"Those are bulletproof windows," I said by way of greeting.

Lyse turned around and forced her lips into a smile...though it looked more like a mockery of one. Her eyes were dry, and they weren't swollen. She hadn't been crying at all. "I know," she said. "I have a set on my windows at home. Plus, I have the bars on top of that to keep me from going anywhere that I'm not supposed to."

"You still have the bars on your windows?" I remembered when Lili got hers off; she exited through the window more than the front door for the next three months, just because she could.

"Those aren't going anywhere," she said. I didn't like the faraway look in her eyes. It was as if she were compartmentalizing herself so that she could remain calm. How much of this had been trained into her since birth? And how much was survival strength? "My father can't have me running away, after all."

The way she said it told me that she had done it before. Or thought about it and told the wrong person. My vision blurred, and I dug my hand into the doorjamb to keep myself upright. I didn't have time for this kind of chat. "We're going to call your father and fiancé tomorrow," I said. "We'll see just how desperate they are to get you back."

Lyse shook her head, but she didn't say anything. Her indifference irritated me. "In case you get any ideas about trying to run in that little head of yours, know that you're surrounded by water on all sides."

She flashed a dark look in my direction. Fear masked by anger. That was better. "You don't have to remind me," she muttered.

I clung to the door, managing a smirk. "I just thought you'd like to know that an adult can drown in as little as two inches of water."

At her haunted look, I closed and locked the door behind me.

## CHAPTER 7



## *Lyse*

I watched the sky turn pink and gold through the window.

The lighter it grew, the more I could see the spiderweb of metal embedded between the panes of glass that made it shatterproof. I had attempted to sleep, but it had proven impossible. My body was on high alert, and it refused to relax.

The door lock clicked, and the tension between my shoulder blades ratcheted up even more. I took a breath and schooled my face into something neutral. *La Bestia* walked in carrying a tray. “I’m not eating that.”

Omar set the tray on the dresser; annoyance flashed across his features for a brief second. I hated to admit that he was even more handsome when he wasn’t coated in a layer of blood and gore, but it made it easier to see how *tired* the man looked. *Good*, I thought. *I hope you never sleep again.* “Helena made it, not me, but if you don’t want it, I don’t care.”

My stomach chose this moment to growl. The scrambled eggs and toast on the plate *did* look appetizing, and there was orange juice and coffee. Probably the nicest meal any hostage could hope for. Squaring my shoulders, I walked past him, took the plate off the tray and retreated to my spot on the bed. I picked up one of the thick slices of toast and brought it to my lips. Before I took a bite, I looked over at him. “Is this my last meal?”

“If you keep reminding me how much I want you and your whole clan dead, it will be.” From his pocket, he pulled out a flip phone. He didn’t have to tell me that it was a burner; I was familiar with them at home. “You get to pick who you call:

your father or your fiancé. Who will make a deal in order to get you back?”

I took the phone from him and quickly dialed Felix’s number. Apá might negotiate for my surrender, but I couldn’t be sure that if he came here, Omar wouldn’t kill him outright. There was no telling what *La Bestia* would do when he was finally in the same room as the head of the Rojas family, especially after what my father did to his brother.

Besides, if the police were already involved, my father would be of no help. While we were able to control the police in our small territory, we didn’t have the same far reach as the Castillos. Felix, I knew, had police connections that my father coveted. He could help...I hoped.

When I went to lift the phone to my ear, Omar wrenched it out of my grip and pressed the button for the speakerphone. “Hello?”

I had never been quite so happy to hear my fiancé’s voice. “Felix?”

“Lyse?” To say that Felix was surprised was an understatement: I had never heard his voice go so high before. It would have been funny if we weren’t in this situation. “Are you okay? Are you safe?”

“She’s not dead, Mr. Suarez,” Omar growled. “That should make you happy enough for now.”

“You son of a bitch!”

Omar tutted gently. “If you listen to what I’m about to say, I promise she’ll remain perfectly safe with me. If you don’t—” He let the threat hang in the air and my stomach twisted sickeningly.

“What do you want, Castillo? If you touch a hair on her head, you’ll live to regret it.” He spat out the question in a way that sounded so much like Apá that I was taken aback. Around me, Felix was always polite in a distant sort of way. He stared too long at times, but overall, he remained a consummate gentleman. But now, he sounded just like any of my male relatives when they were threatening someone.

“You’re a man with connections, correct?” Omar asked, ignoring the threat entirely. *It’s not like he couldn’t crush Felix to death with his bare hands*, I thought, and I found myself staring at Omar’s bulging muscles. A little tingle set off in my belly.

Felix was quiet for a moment. “What do I need to do?”

“Get the police to back off,” he said. “I want to come home to my family.”

“You’re asking for the impossible. Your face is *everywhere* right now; the feds are getting involved in this. I can’t.”

Omar let out a growl that shook me to my core. I cowered away from him, afraid that he would snap. “If you ever want to see Lyse alive again, you’ll make it happen.”

“Don’t you *touch* her.”

There was something about the way he said it that made my skin crawl. Omar, however, grinned savagely, like he’d just been handed the keys to the kingdom. “That’s what gets you off, eh, *pendejo*? You want your little wifey to only ever have you.”

I clenched my hands into fists, my fingernails biting into my palms. “Felix,” I said and didn’t mask the shudder in my voice. Let him think it was my fear of Omar — that was there too — and not disgust. “I need your help. Please.”

“Lyse,” Felix sighed. “Tell me that he hasn’t touched you.”

“He hasn’t,” I promised and glanced up at Omar, who was grinding his jaw. He nodded for me to continue. “But I’m afraid that he will if you don’t do what he says.”

Omar reached out and touched the apple of my cheek with his fingers, and I jumped back as if he’d scalded me. “She’s very pretty, Mr. Suarez. I would hate to ruin her.”

“I need a guarantee that she’ll be safe.”

“I won’t lay a hand on her so long as you do what I ask.”

“I’ll need some way to communicate with you. A number or an email or something.”

Omar scoffed. “Are we going to be texting buddies, *pendejo*? No, I will contact you in twenty-four hours, and you will let me know whether your precious fiancée gets to come home or not.”

Felix made a noise that was full of frustration and anger. “You have no idea how big of a fuck-up you are,” he said. “Twenty-four hours isn’t enough time to clean up the mess you made. Twenty people are dead or seriously wounded; you’re on camera stomping a man’s face in.”

There wasn’t a hint of remorse on Omar’s face. If anything, he seemed...impressed with the number. I was going to throw up. “How long do you think I can remain civil, Mr. Suarez?” he asked. “I’m not a patient man; you’ve seen what I can do. I have Lyse *all* to myself. There’s no telling what kind of games we could play together waiting for you to make this go away.” Omar reached out, viper fast, and wrapped his fingers around my wrist. He squeezed until the bones felt like they were going to snap. “Sing for him, *conejita*,” he murmured, and I yelped.

“Felix, please!”

“Stop, stop, *stop!*” Felix yelled. “I’ll do it! Give me one week, and I’ll do it.”

Omar wasn’t thrilled with the amount of time, I could tell, but he accepted. “One week; I won’t touch a hair on her head.” Then he shut the phone, cutting off Felix’s reply.

“Will you really not touch me?” I asked in the silence that followed. Last night, my biggest fear was that Omar would throw me off the boat on the way out of Miami. But today?

He looked at me with a storm raging in his dark eyes. “If he hasn’t fixed this in a week, I’m going to kill you, and I’m going to send you back to your fiancé in pieces. Do you understand?”

I swallowed. My throat felt like it was closing up. After watching him brutalize my family at the hotel, I knew it wasn’t a threat, it was a promise. My blood ran cold as the memory of gunshots rang in my ears. If I hadn’t been there

with my cousins, if I hadn't found them first, Omar would have put a bullet in each of their tiny skulls. Of that I was convinced. I didn't want to die here, alone on this island. I didn't want my body to be dumped in the ocean. I tried and failed to keep the tremor out of my voice. "I understand."

He reached out and touched my cheek again. "Behave, *conejita*." Then, he was gone, locking the door behind him as he went.

I looked around my prison cell, really taking in my surroundings for the first time since I arrived. It was furnished and relatively comfortable. In the bathroom, there were luxury products and what seemed to be a never-ending supply of hot water, which was impressive for an island. In the dresser, I found plain but wearable clothes to swap my gown for.

But I was trapped behind a locked door and shatterproof glass. It was just me and these four walls. Could I survive a week locked up like this? I wasn't sure. At my father's house, I was never alone. Even if I looked like I was alone, there was a guard somewhere keeping an eye on me. I couldn't be spoiled, after all; I was my father's best bargaining chip. I thought living in a panopticon was suffocating.

But being stuck with my own thoughts was far, *far* worse. I clambered onto the bed and wrapped myself in the goose-down comforter, taking solace in the soft blanket. While I contemplated what exactly I could do for the next seven days, another thought took root in the center of my brain. If I could somehow get off this island without killing myself, maybe I could run and keep running. I could find somewhere to go where no one had ever heard of the Castillo or Rojas families, and I could settle there, far away from this kind of life. I wouldn't have to marry Felix or bend to my father's whims. I would be free. I stood, wrapped in the comforter, and stared out across the seemingly unending ocean, watching the waves break upon the shoreline.

*What a stupid idea*, I berated myself. Even if I wasn't stuck on this godforsaken island, there was still nowhere to run from here.

*Stay sane; that's all you have to do.*

## CHAPTER 8

## Omar

The phone on the nightstand was ringing. And ringing. And ringing. I groaned and grabbed it, pressed the green “answer” button, and held it to my face. “What?” I snapped.

“What do you mean *what?*” It was Lili, and she was *pissed*.

My body jerked like a live wire. “What’s the matter? Is it Angel?”

“He’s the same,” she said. Her words were soft now. “He’s not worse...but he’s not getting much better either.”

I rubbed a hand through my hair, wincing as my fingers found the snarls formed by the pillow. Even though it had been more than twenty-four hours since we got here, I still ached all over and my shoulder was burning beneath the bandage. I was going to need Helena to check for infection. “So, beyond the obvious, what’s happening?” I wanted to go back to sleep, but that wasn’t likely to happen. Now that I was conscious, my body hurt too much to relax.

“Ademir called this morning for Angel.”

*Fuck*. Ademir was one of Angel’s business associates from South America, and part of the Corazón Syndicate. “What did he want?”

“He’s got a shipment of guns coming in, but the boat is experiencing some kind of issue. It’s close to the island, and he was hoping to get some assistance in fixing it...and maybe storing some of the product.”

“What did you say?”



Lili went quiet, and I knew exactly what she'd told him. "Now who's the stupid one?" I demanded. "Why the hell would you tell him yes?"

"He's Angel's biggest business connection! What was I supposed to say? It's not like I can say no to them and expect us all to live."

She was right, of course, but it didn't do a thing to calm the jagged way my heart was beating against my ribs. "How far out are they?"

"Ademir wasn't sure — just that their coordinates put them near the island. When they get there, do what you can to help and *don't* let them know about Angel."

I scoffed. "I'm not a total moron, you know."

"You are," she argued. "We've had this discussion already."

"I know how to protect Angel." My voice was harsher than I had intended, but keeping Angel safe had been my job for most of my life. It was one of the only things that I did well, and Lili was not going to take it away from me with a few flippant words. "Okay?"

Lili sensed the shift in my tone, and while she didn't comment on it, she did drop the attitude. "Let me know how it goes," she said. "Ademir wasn't all that happy with *you* being who his people were going to deal with. He kept asking why Angel couldn't meet them at the island to coordinate."

"How'd you cover? So I know?"

"I told him that Emma was far enough along that she didn't want him so far away."

It was a good excuse, a plausible one. "Okay, that's good. It'll keep it simple, then."

We ended the call, and I ditched the burner after cracking it in half. I probably didn't have much time, but I jumped in the shower long enough to work out some of the stiffness from my body. I did my best to keep my stitches out of the water—it was too soon to get them wet—but didn't bother applying a new bandage, leaving it for Helena. By the time I got

downstairs, Helena had breakfast ready for me. “I’ve already taken food to your guest,” she said as I sat down.

“Don’t call her a guest.” I tucked into my eggs and immediately burned my tongue...then everything tasted like nothing. *Fucking perfect.*

“*Fine,*” Helena hissed. “I fed your hostage.”

I grunted. “She’s still alive, I’m assuming.”

“Of course. Like I’d let anyone die under my watch. She’s a timid thing, isn’t she?”

*Conejita.* “I’ve already told you, it doesn’t matter what she’s like. She’s temporary.”

Helena rolled her eyes, and I dutifully ignored it. “My brother’s business associate contacted the compound this morning. They have a boat in need of repair and some crates that’ll need to be stored until they can be moved to the mainland.”

She barely batted an eye and started loading plates into the dishwasher. “Should I get lunch prepared for our guests?” Helena looked at me. “Or are these ‘not guests’ too?”

“These are VIPs,” I said. “We’ll wine and dine and do anything we can to avoid talking about anything happening on the mainland. Understand?”

“Of course, *jefe.*”

After Helena finished clearing up the breakfast mess, she had me take off my shirt so that she could reapply the dressing on my shoulder. She prodded at the wound and made *hmm*-ing noises. “Having fun?” I griped as her fingers dug at my tender flesh.

“Oodles,” she deadpanned.

“If Angel heard you talking like this...”

“What? You think I’m afraid of him?” She pinched the back of my arm and laughed when I cursed. “You and Angel think you’re so tough, but we all know that housekeepers hold the real keys to the kingdom.” She patted my uninjured arm. “It

looks good. No redness or swelling, no discharge...you *probably* won't lose your arm."

"*Gracias.*"

I hurried out of the kitchen, and called Efrain and Pascal to the drydock to explain about our impending visitors. "Did they say if it was the engine giving them trouble?" Pascal asked.

"Lili didn't say. The only thing Ademir relayed to her was that the boat wouldn't make it to Miami in its current state."

"What's it carrying?" Efrain asked, the far more serious one of the pair.

"*Armas,*" I said. "Knowing Ademir, probably big ones."

Both men tensed. Drugs weren't necessarily easier to deal with, but a lot of weapons in one place could get really ugly really fast. "We'll get their boat fixed as quickly as possible," I said.

Around midday, a boat drifted into view. It was definitely struggling. Through a pair of binoculars, I could see that they were basically paddling along. "Get the dinghy," I told Efrain. "We'll tow them in."

They ran to get the dinghy and lowered it into the water; then we all climbed aboard. It skipped across the waves, rough from the tearing wind. But it didn't take long to reach the boat. "We'll tow you in," I called to the men. "You're not taking on water, right?"

They confirmed that they weren't sinking, and Pascal threw them the rope. Once everything was secure, we turned for shore.

When we reached the dock, Pascal helped a couple of the men unload their cargo while Efrain went to check the engine. "Can you fix it?" one man asked as he returned to the dock, obviously anxious.

Efrain made a humming sound. "Shouldn't take more than a few hours," he declared.

"No overnight?"

*As if I would allow that.* “No,” Efrain assured him, glancing at me.

The man also looked at me. “Ademir mentioned that we could store the load here? Our timeline is off for delivery.”

I nodded. “Yes, we can accommodate that.”

“It will be...safe here?”

“We regularly use this island for storage. We’re in international waters here, so the worry about the Coast Guard is next to nothing.”

“And will we be seeing Angel while we’re here? Ademir wishes for us to extend a greeting.”

Angel largely stayed out of the Syndicate’s arms business, but he wasn’t opposed to further business arrangements with the man. It would make sense if they were trying to get Angel into a meeting now that the Castillos were helping them.

“He’s back in Miami, unfortunately,” I said. “His wife is expecting, and she hasn’t wanted him too far from home.”

The man rolled his eyes. “And is Angel Castillo so whipped for his wife that he would miss a business opportunity?”

I clenched my jaw, aggravated. “Did Ademir share what happened to my brother’s wife?”

He nodded, largely unimpressed. “She was taken. It’s not so uncommon...and he got her back, so all’s well.”

“Maybe,” I conceded, “but the man who took her was *obliterated*. Angel’s wife and their child are the most important things to him; I wouldn’t be so flippant when talking about them. Even if he’s not here to hear you, I can hear you.”

I fully expected the man to say something else derisive, but he must have decided to take me at my word. Instead, his dark eyes were studying me, taking in the bruises and cuts. “What are *you* doing here? So far from your brother?”

I gestured to my face. “Obviously, I’m licking some wounds.” I jerked my head toward the house. “I brought a friend with

me to help with that.”

I didn't want to mention Lyse at all, but if they happened to hear her while in the house, I had to have plausible deniability.

The man's face broke into a grin. “Sly dog. Angel approves you doing this?”

He was fishing: the number of times he brought up my brother's name wasn't a coincidence. “Angel and I have had free use of this island since we were children. He doesn't begrudge me a vacation when I need it. Now, let my man work on your engine, so you can be on your way. My housekeeper will have lunch ready for us, I'm sure.”

Thankfully, the promise of food distracted the man, and by the time we finished the meal, Efrain had their engine purring. They hopped aboard and said they'd be in touch about when they would return to pick up the crates.

“Crisis averted, *jefe*?” Pascal asked.

I nodded. “But now we have a metric fuck-ton of guns in our dry dock.”

“One problem at a time,” Efrain said.

*Ain't that the fucking truth.*

## CHAPTER 9

## *Lyse*

I thought nothing was more maddening than being stuck in my father's house, but I was wrong. Hell on Earth was being stuck in *this* room, waiting for something to happen.

Omar had given Felix a week to sort things out. It had already been three days, and there had been nothing but radio silence on Felix's end. Helena brought most of my meals, but Omar came in each evening with my dinner. He didn't speak to me, but he made sure that I ate before he took the tray away. He was fulfilling his promise to Felix: making sure I was well taken care of while in Castillo custody.

Lying on the bed, staring at the cracks in the ceiling, I realized that I couldn't do this for another four days. I would bash myself against the walls first. I had to think of a plan that got me out of this room. Running wasn't an option. Omar would kill me before he let that happen. But what if I got him to trust me instead? Then I could try to slip away when the time was right. Or maybe I could convince him to take me back to the mainland.

Even in my head, it sounded stupid. Why would *La Bestia* ever trust me? Not only was I a Rojas, I was the eldest daughter of the man who put a hit out on his brother. He would be totally within his rights to kill me...or ruin me.

An idea, reckless and utterly stupid, came to mind. If I could make him want me, then I might be able to convince him to let me out of this room. Then I could plan my escape. Surely there was more than one boat on this island, though the

thought of operating one on my own sent a chill through me. Could I really do it?

The sun was sinking in the sky, and I knew it was getting nearer to dinner time. If I was going to do something, I had to be ready. Only I wasn't sure exactly what I was trying to do. I'd been earmarked for Felix since I was fifteen years old. Apá had been adamant that I remained *untouched*, meaning not even hints of attraction to anyone else were allowed.

But I wasn't completely innocent: I knew how men looked at me. I knew how *Omar* had looked at me the night that he brought me here. Even as angry as he was, he'd been attracted to me. Hell, Felix's ultimate fear was not that I would be killed, but that I would be ruined before he could have his way with me.

*Maybe I can kill two birds with one stone*, I thought as I scrambled off the bed and headed into the ensuite bathroom. I stripped off my clothes and left them in a heap on the floor, turning the shower on as hot as it would go. I yelped as I stepped into the cubicle; the water practically sizzled when it hit my skin. It hurt, but it helped ease the tension between my shoulders.

I quickly shampooed my hair with the coconut-scented products that were surprisingly good quality for a prison cell. Once I was scalded clean, I turned off the water and reached for my towel. I roughly dried my hair and finger-combed the locks until they fell in wet curls across my shoulders.

Instead of getting dressed again, I took the damp towel and wrapped it around my body so that it was tucked beneath my arms and hung down to my thighs. I stood in the bathroom, heart pounding against my ribs, until I heard the door unlock. Then, steeling myself, I walked out as casually as I could manage, like I hadn't just rehearsed this whole thing in my head.

I ran directly into Omar, whose eyes grew large when he realized that I was nearly naked. I slapped my hands over my chest, holding onto the towel like it was a lifeline. "You can't even *knock*?" I demanded. My voice was a touch too high;



there was a phony quality to it that I hoped he wouldn't notice.

But, of course, he did.

“What are you doing, *conejita*?” A dangerous smirk worked its way onto his face; his eyes traveled down my body, and it felt like his hands were on me. A shiver zipped up my spine. “Do you have any idea what you're doing?”

I tried to deflect as best I could. “What do you mean? I'm not doing anything. You're the one who barges in here whenever you like.”

His smile dropped. “It's *my* house, *conejita*. I can go in any room I want *when* I want.” Omar put the tray of food down on the dresser, his eyes never leaving my body. I tried my best to maintain the front that I hadn't been anticipating him...but it was a losing battle, and we both knew it. “I don't think you have any clue what it means to seduce a man.”

Heat spread across my cheeks. “I am *not*—”

“You are,” he said. “*Pobre conejita perdida. Pobre virgen.* Asking for something that you can't possibly handle.”

His taunting was infuriating, but the look in his eyes made my body quiver in a way it never had before. The aura of danger that radiated off him was exciting, and I throbbed between my thighs. *The plan, Lyse*, I reminded myself. *You had a plan here.* Of course, that plan was shoddy and bound not to work, but I had to try *something*.

“I'm not asking for anything,” I insisted, but even as I spoke, I squeezed my legs together to try to relieve some of that ache. Omar saw the movement, because of course he did, and his eyes filled with fire.

He crossed his arms over his chest, *tsking* at me. It wasn't fair for him to be so attractive: I tried to conjure up the image of him spattered in the blood of my family, but it did nothing to calm the storm that was beginning to rage inside of me. How was I already this flustered with only his eyes on me? “What would your father say, *conejita*?”

His voice was deep and rough, and I realized suddenly that I'd *never* wanted anyone like this in my entire life. Knowing that I would soon belong to Felix had only ever made my skin crawl. What was so different about Omar? Why did I not tremble in fear at the look he was giving me now? Why did I want him to look... to touch? Heat spread down my chest.

"You and I both know that good girls don't act like this."

He was calling my bluff, but I refused to back down. Taking a deep breath, I loosened my grip on the towel. "Who said I was a good girl?" I said, and let the towel drop to my feet.

For a moment, I forgot how to breathe. His dark eyes roved over me as if he'd never seen a naked woman before, and I had to fight the urge to cover myself. Why did he suddenly look even bigger than he had before? I assumed a haughty mask and ignored the flush heating up my face. I'd never been naked in front of a man before; I'd never been stared at like this before.

Omar stepped toward me, obviously expecting me to retreat, but I stood my ground. "*Impresionante*," he said and reached out to touch my cheek with the tips of his fingers. My whole body was shaking, but still, I didn't drop my gaze, and I didn't try to dive back into the bathroom. "Has anyone ever touched you before?"

I shook my head, imagining the horror of what would happen if anyone had ever tried. "My father would have killed them and me."

"Then why offer yourself to me like this? Don't want to go into your wedding night completely clueless?" I shivered again, but this time it was from the disgust that rolled through my belly. *Doing this will free you from him*, I assured myself. *Freedom twice over*. It made this moment even headier: the idea that I could find a way to free myself from Omar *and* Felix all at once. "Do you want me to touch you, *conejita*? The same man who decimated your family just days ago? Really?"

His words hit like a blow. By saying yes, I would be betraying my *entire* family, and we both knew it. Betraying them in order to return to them. I felt a stinging behind my eyes and

blinked it away; I tried to straighten my spine as best I could so that I looked confident in spite of the vulnerable position I was in. “Yes.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Yes, what?”

I bared my teeth at him. Damn him for making me say it. “I want you to touch me.”

Omar, moving with the grace of a predator, shoved me down onto the bed; he pinned my wrists above my head, effectively making it impossible to move. My breath caught in my throat, and I could feel my pulse rabbiting in my neck. His eyes bored into mine, and for a moment, I thought he would kiss me, but instead, he leaned down and whispered in my ear, “Have you ever touched yourself, *conejita*?”

I hadn't. When Felix first came into my life, I had begged my father to send me to a nunnery. I didn't want any part of the older man. My body ached for weeks from the punishment that he put me through. I had done all I could to divorce my mind from my body at that point, as it didn't belong to me anyway. “No,” I admitted softly.

Omar let out a heavy breath. His lips touched my neck, surprisingly soft. I shivered at the tickle of his lips, gasping as he mapped out all of my sensitive places. He reached down and hooked his hand around my knee, drawing my thighs apart, and I whined at being so exposed. He shushed me and touched that aching place, running his fingers over my damp sex. Omar chuckled. “You're already so wet for me.”

I didn't know what to say to that; I hadn't done anything on purpose...except for dropping the towel like I had. When he touched my clit, a glancing thing, like he hadn't meant to actually put his finger there, I cried out at the sudden sensation.

“That's the spot, huh?” He circled my clit, and I bucked against the pressure of his fingers. Omar laughed, as if I had done something amusing, and the sound shivered up my spine. “You know what feels even better?” He shifted so that he was still thumbing that sensitive bundle of nerves, but he was able

to press one finger inside of me. It stretched and pinched for a moment, but then the fullness felt *good*, necessary even.

I moaned, helpless under the onslaught of his touches. The slight pain of his weight on my wrists helped to ground me a little, but I was losing myself to the pleasure that speared through me. I thrust my hips into his movements, trying to ride the rhythm that he'd set. My muscles were winding tighter and tighter, and I *needed* it to release. I wanted to fling myself into the overwhelming heat that was growing between my thighs.

“*Omar.*”

He looked at me, still smirking. “Are you going to come for me, *conejita?*”

Was I? I didn't know, but something was certainly happening. Something big and overwhelming and so, *so* good, and—

Omar removed his hands and let my wrists go. His weight, oppressive and welcome at once, disappeared. It felt as if he'd dumped ice-cold water over my head. “Wha—?”

His eyes were flat and cold. “If I actually wanted you, I would have taken you already.” He turned on his heel and left the room, slamming and locking the door behind him. The hot arousal that had been so all-consuming just moments before felt like spoiled milk in my stomach. I drew up my knees and held myself as sobs racked my body.

*I am such an idiot.*



*Omar*

With a pounding heart and pants that were far too tight, I forced myself to walk calmly down the hall. I hadn't made it more than a few feet before I heard a wail from behind me. *So, my little bunny finally broke, huh?* Seeing Lyse Rojas naked, with her body practically begging for me, should have been easy to turn down. She was the goddamn enemy, after all, but all those luscious, untouched curves cried out to me. It would

have been a shame to turn her down entirely, and if she was going to act like a slut, who was I to treat her any differently?

I ignored Lyse's crying and headed to my office on the main floor. It was time for my check-in call with Lili. "Should I pick up Ms. Lyse's tray in a little while?" Helena asked as I passed by.

I shrugged. "Do what you like." Felix had three more days to come up with a plan to get me home; if not, she was a dead woman anyway. "If you want her fed, you'll need to take her food from now on. I can't be bothered."

Helena squawked at my response, but I ignored her. I kept walking to my office, took out yet another burner phone and called my sister. She picked up immediately. "*Idiota*," she hissed as a way of greeting.

"*Hola*. How's Angel?"

Lili made a sound like an angry cat. "No better," she said. "The doctors still have him sedated; they're too afraid to wean him off right now. And the police returned with a warrant this morning to search the house."

"Did they find anything?"

"No, moron. They're looking for you!"

*Shit, of course*. "How's Emma holding up?"

"I'm worried. She's so stressed out, and her blood pressure—" Her words were choked off, and I could hear her crying. In all twenty-three years of my sister's life, I hadn't heard her cry this much. "If Angel doesn't wake up soon, she's going to lose the baby."

## CHAPTER 10

## *Lyse*

“Are you okay, *mi amor*?” Helena asked. She’d returned for my breakfast tray; I hadn’t touched the food on it.

I nodded from where I was lying on the bed; I hadn’t gotten up much the last few days, not even to bathe. It was the grossest I’d ever felt, but I didn’t give a damn. Each sunrise and sunset felt like the last one, and there was a weight on my chest that was only getting heavier. Every time Helena came in, she looked more and more dour, but she tried to hide it behind cheeriness and smiles that didn’t quite reach her eyes.

Today, Omar would be calling Felix back. “I’m all right,” I told her. “Thank you for breakfast.”

Helena glanced at the full tray and picked up the glass of orange juice. “You have to drink this,” she said. “I won’t leave until you do.”

I didn’t want the damn juice, but Helena had been kind to me since my arrival. At first, I thought she was a spy for *La Bestia*, but she was as exasperated at the man as I was at times. She loved him, that much was obvious, but she also cursed him out under her breath. It reminded me of how my mother treated my brother at times.

I sat up and took the glass and sipped it. “Happy?”

Helena wasn’t impressed. “Finish it, and I will be.”

I frowned but dutifully drank the juice, then handed her the empty glass. “Happy now?”

She reached out and ran a hand through my hair. “I’m sure your Felix will come through for you,” she said.

There was a scoff from the door; Helena jerked her hand back and turned around. Omar was standing in the doorway, watching us with the look a cat gets when it plays with a mouse. “He had better.” He jerked his head toward the hallway. “Get out,” he said to Helena. “We have a phone call to make.” Helena glanced at me, sad, but Omar snapped his fingers. “*Ponte en marcha!*”

The housekeeper left, and for the first time since he pinned me to the bed, Omar and I were alone. It was like being in a cage with a tiger. Without a word, Omar handed me the phone—a different burner than the first time I called Felix—for me to dial Felix’s number. My fingers shook as I tapped the buttons. *Please have a solution*, I thought.

“Hello?”

Omar held up a hand: it was a warning for me to stay quiet. “You’ve had your week, Mr. Suarez,” he said.

Felix paused, and my stomach dropped. It wasn’t good news. Whatever he was going to say, it wouldn’t end well for me. “Can I speak with Lyse?”

I glanced at the man who seemed to tower over me and hated myself for the spike of arousal in my veins. Despite the pain he’d caused me, my body still remembered the pleasure that he’d brought to me. It was like nothing I’d ever known before, and even if I’d rather set myself on fire than admit it to him, I wanted him to touch me again. “Go ahead,” Omar grunted at me.

“Felix?”

“Are you okay? Are you...safe?” He wanted to ask if Omar had touched me; I could hear it hanging in the air.

My mind conjured up the image of Omar leaning over me and how sinfully good his hands felt against my skin. “I’m fine, Felix,” I said in as flat a voice as I could manage. “I’ve just been waiting.”

“Good. That’s good.”



“I’ve held up my end,” Omar interrupted.

Felix was quiet again, and my eyes slipped closed as I waited for the inevitable blow. “Lyse, love, I’m so sorry.” Tears welled in my eyes, but Felix continued, and each word was another nail in my coffin. “The feds want you brought in, Mr. Castillo. The only thing keeping them from finding you is that *I* have been dropping anonymous tips that you are in Orlando and Tallahassee and fucking Atlanta. Keep that in mind.”

Omar was furious. His face had gone still, but I could see the way his eyes roamed over me. “How did you want me to send your fiancée back to you, Mr. Suarez?” Omar asked in a deceptively calm tone that did not match his face. “Whole or in pieces? I will pay for the shipping container either way.”

I didn’t know what I expected as a reply, but it wasn’t for Felix to *laugh*. “You should let your brother stick to the idle threats, *La Bestia*,” he snarled. “They don’t suit you.” He made a noise akin to *oops*. “I suppose that plan only works out if Angel ever wakes up again.”

“Leave my brother out of this.” The words came out in a painful growl, as if his mouth were suddenly filled with overgrown, razor-sharp teeth, and he was having trouble forming words around them. *More beast than man*, I thought. *That’s what Apá always said*.

“I’ve seen him, you know,” Felix continued, and my stomach began to cramp with fear at the dangerous look on Omar’s face. The man was going to put his fist through my skull and make Felix listen. “The once great Angel Castillo, hooked up to a hundred different tubes just to stay alive. He’s *never* going to wake up; I sincerely hope you know that.”

I tried to move away, but Omar’s arm shot out, and in a terrifying mockery of what happened between us, he wrapped his fingers around my wrist. This time it was all pain and I cried out. “Felix!” I begged.

My fiancé said something, but I couldn’t hear it. Omar dragged me across the room that had been my prison cell, and for the first time in a week, I left it. I had done nothing but

wish to be let out for days, but now, I would give anything to run back to the relative safety of those four walls.

Omar dragged me down the stairs; the only thing that kept me from tumbling down and staining the light oak floor with my blood was his steady grip on my wrist. The foyer came into view, and then we were outside in the sunshine.

Despite the fear pressing down on me and the muffling in my ears, I took a deep breath. It smelled like sand and surf and sea salt here; it would be perfect...except for the part where I was being dragged off to a certain demise.

There was a shack not too far off that I thought he was headed for, but at the fork in the path, Omar steered us down toward the dock. My chest tightened tenfold. “*No*,” I moaned and tried to tug my arm out of his grip. My shoulder exploded in pain, but Omar didn’t even react to the desperate sobs coming out of my mouth. He just kept walking. I dug my heels into the sand, but that did little to slow us down. “Omar, *please*.”

“Shut. Up.” The words were thrown over his shoulder.

We hit the dock, and the wooden planks slapped under our feet. I couldn’t breathe. The world was closing in around me, and I was starting to get tunnel vision. Omar walked us out to the very end of the dock. He wrenched me around so that I stood in front of him, looking out at the horizon.

Even in my panic, I could see how beautiful it all was. The water was a deep azure; the sky seemed to go on forever. It was something I wished I could paint. Even thinking the word *paint* made me ache for my set at home. The last thing I’d committed to canvas had been a dour, abstract piece; I’d done it the day my engagement ring came by courier.

Now, I would give anything to be able to whitewash that silliness away and paint this view instead.

“Look down,” Omar growled at me.

I shook my head. “No.” If I did, I might start screaming and not stop. Or I might throw up. Either option sounded terrible.

His giant hand cupped the back of my head and forced me to look down. The pilings of the dock disappeared into all that

blue. I could see fish...but I also noticed that despite the clearness of the water, I couldn't see the bottom. "It's fifteen feet," Omar said, loud enough that I knew he was really talking to Felix. "She can't swim. Can you, *conejita*?" He crooned the pet name, and my skin crawled.

"Lyse?"

Omar *tsked*. "How much do you actually know about the woman you were going to marry?" he asked.

"And what the hell is that supposed to mean?" Felix's panic had bled back to anger and frustration, but all I could focus on was that my toes were curling over the edge of the dock. *How embarrassing is it to pee yourself before you die?*

"Your little bunny is a feisty little thing," Omar taunted. "That's all. Shame you'll never get to know that side of her."

"Did you *touch* her? *Bastardo!* I will see you rot in jail for this!"

Omar let go of my wrist but quickly grabbed hold of my shoulder. His fingers brushed my collarbone, almost intimately, before he tipped me out over the water. "*Stop!*" I cried, grabbing at his arm. "Please, Omar, don't do this." The man groaned out loud, as if I'd done something pleasurable to him. "I'll do anything," I begged.

"Don't offer him anything," Felix demanded, but his voice was tinny and far away. "The big moron won't hurt you! It's against those stupid rules of your organization. No women or children!"

Omar seemed to freeze at that, and for a moment, I thought Felix might have gotten through to him somehow. Maybe he'd reminded Omar of his humanity just enough for it to kick in. "You are absolutely right, Mr. Suarez," he said, and I shivered at his tone. "The rules of my organization *are* stupid. Thankfully, I don't always abide by those rules, especially when they don't suit me. If you thought that I wouldn't hurt her, and you would be able to skate by until the feds found me, you thought wrong." He squeezed my shoulder, and I

whimpered under the touch. “Say goodbye to your pretty fiancée.”

He shoved me hard, and I went toppling into the water. It happened so fast that I didn't have enough time to scream. Buoyancy kicked in for a moment, and I rocketed upward, sucking in a breath and screaming for help. I thrashed my arms and legs, trying desperately to keep myself above water, but it was hard to keep myself oriented because I'd never learned how. The water sucked me back under, no matter how much I fought, and even though I was able to breach the surface again, I knew it was a losing battle.

Glancing up at the dock, even as I fought, I zeroed in on Omar. His face was a stone, and he turned away from me, not watching as I sank for a final time below the warm, blue waters of the Caribbean. *Don't open your mouth*, I told myself. *Don't suck water into your lungs*.

But, of course, that was advice for a rational mind. My lungs burned for oxygen, and in a panic, I sucked in and tasted salt.

## CHAPTER 11

## Omar

“**S**he really can’t swim,” I said, mostly to myself, but I could hear Felix swearing and pleading in turn on the other end of the line as Lyse’s splashing ceased and she sank beneath the blue currents.

*I don’t feel anything, damn it.* I had killed more men than anyone on my father’s security team. Lyse was just one more person. She was the daughter of my enemy. She was *nobody*.

But I’d never killed a woman before, and there was a lump in my chest that I couldn’t quite breathe past. I stepped to the end of the dock when she didn’t come up again and looked down. Lyse thrashed beneath the surface, though she wasn’t able to push herself upward any longer.

*You had that woman spread out beneath you,* my mind whispered torturously. I’d had her gasping and pleading for me and walked away with her scent on my fingers...and now I was watching as she drowned.

“*Hijo de puta.*” Dropping the phone onto the dock, I dove off the end. The water was warm and clear, but the salt stung my eyes as I kept my sight locked on Lyse. It was hard to tell if she was still conscious or not.

It was easy enough to reach her — she hadn’t quite hit the sea floor — and once I had my hands on her, I kicked off from the bottom and sped back toward the surface. It took less than thirty seconds for the whole retrieval, and when we were in the sunshine again, I held her above the surface with one arm and paddled over to the dock ladder with the other.

Climbing up the ladder was difficult, but since Lyse was unconscious, I balanced her on my shoulder. Pain speared through me. *My fucking shoulder.* The stitches were definitely torn.

When we reached the top of the ladder, I set Lyse down on the dock and pounded her once on the back. The force of it startled her into breathing again, and she began to cough roughly, retching up salt water.

Keeping my eyes on her, I picked up the burner phone. I could hear Felix screaming at me. “Señor Suarez,” I said, spitting out the taste of salt.

“Is she dead?”

I held out the phone so that he could hear her struggling to take breaths. She was in pain, that was for sure, but she was alive. “Can you hear her? She swallowed half the Caribbean, but she’ll live. For now.”

“Keep your hands off of her. Do you understand me? If I—”

“Who do you think you’re speaking to?” I kept my tone flat. It was a trick that I learned from Padre and Angel: there was almost never a reason to yell. Remaining calm and emotionless would get my point across far more harshly than if I screamed at him to shut the hell up like I wanted to. “Do you think that I’m somehow weaker now that my brother is in a coma? Or because the police have searched my home?”

“Do you have any idea who *you* are speaking to?”

“Felix.” Lyse’s voice was rough; it sounded like her throat was torn to pieces. “Shut. Up.”

The voice on the other side of the phone paused in its ranting. “Lyse? Love?”

Lyse looked up at me, and when I nodded, she said, “Do you want me dead?”

“No! Of course not!”

“Then shut up and do what he says.”

A smile tugged at the corner of my mouth. There was a fierceness beneath all that trained fragility; I had seen it in the hotel, when she jumped in front of my gun to protect her cousins, and as sure as I was that her father had done his best to beat that streak out of her, it was easily her most attractive trait. “Your fiancée is surprisingly mouthy, Señor Suarez. I like that in a girl.” That sent Felix off on another rant about keeping my hands to myself. The man sounded near-frantic, and it was precisely where I wanted him to be. “Make this right,” I advised him, “or next time, I won’t pull her out.”

I threw the phone behind me; it made a satisfying *plop* as it hit the water and sank. Lyse was staring at me, eyes wide and soaking wet; her hair was a dark tangle. *A beautiful mess*, I thought absently, and my stomach clenched. Despite my threat, I wasn’t sure if I’d actually be able to let her drown. It was the first time in my life that I’d made such a threat against a woman.

I reached out a hand for her. “Come on.”

Lyse’s eyes traveled up the length of my body and met mine. “Absolutely not.”

I gritted my teeth and tamped down the irritation that flared through me. “Get up, or I’ll pick you up.” Lyse tried to push herself up, but her body was exhausted, and she nearly tipped off the dock when she attempted to stand.

My hands shot out, grabbing onto her before she could plunge back into the water. She was such a tiny thing. It was hardly any effort to lift her up and fit an arm beneath her knees. “Wha—?”

“My shoulder is fucked,” I grunted. “This puts less strain on it.”

“Put me down.” I ignored her and walked back up the dock toward the house. Lyse struggled in my grip, but she was as weak as a drenched kitten. “Seriously, Omar, put me *down*.”

I didn’t bother looking at her, and halfway to the house, she settled into the cradle of my arms. Lyse didn’t trust me — she



would be a fool to do that — but she'd given up fighting me. For now.

By the time we reached the house, my shoulder was throbbing, but I didn't put her down. I...liked her in my arms, not that I would ever admit that out loud. Chances were good that Lyse would still die, if not at my hands, then in the ensuing war between our families. Or at the hands of a jealous Felix once he found out that his sweet little virgin wasn't nearly as innocent as he thought.

Even if I *barely* touched her, Lyse was still bold enough to drop that towel and imprint the image of her naked flesh in my brain.

Pushing that thought as far down as it would go, I opened the front door and kicked it shut.

“What in the hell happened?”

Helena was staring at us with wide eyes. “Go run a bath in Lyse's room,” I told her.

Her eyebrows furrowed, and I half-expected her to argue. “*Sí, jefe.*” Then she was rushing up the stairs like the Devil himself was coming after her. I snorted. Maybe he was.

The soft *thump* of Lyse's head against my shoulder brought my attention back to the woman in my arms. Her eyelids were fluttering; she wasn't quite asleep, but the last hour had finally caught up to her. It was on the tip of my tongue to say something, but what? I'd spent every day from the moment I brought her here telling her that if her fiancé didn't comply, then she would die. I threw her off a dock and watched her almost drown. What could I possibly say now?

What would I even want to say?

I carried Lyse upstairs to her room. I could hear Helena pattering in the bathroom when I set her down on the bed; Lyse didn't move an inch as I let her go. *She's going into shock.* “Make sure the water's warm!” I called.

Why did I care? My mind kept circling back to that. There was no reason for me to care a whit about her, but seeing her like this, a pathetic, wet tangle of a person, gave me a pang.

“I can take over, *jefe*,” Helena said as she stepped into the room.

I nearly nodded...but stopped. It would be easier to let Helena deal with this, yes, but I didn't want to leave the room. “I've got it.”

Helena gave me an unfriendly look. “Omar, if you—”

I turned on her, and for the first time in all her years of service, Helena shrank away from me. Like she was afraid that I might actually do something to her. I backed down, rolled my shoulders in an attempt to unwind them, and winced as pain lanced through me for my trouble. “I'm not going to hurt her,” I promised, guiding Helena to the door and into the hall.

Helena was suspicious; I couldn't necessarily blame her for that. “Why the change of heart?”

I shrugged and glanced back at Lyse, who was starting to sway. *Shit*. I had to get her out of those wet clothes. “I threw her off the dock,” I said, ignoring Helena's gasp. “I intended for her to die.”

“But you rescued her.” It wasn't a question, but I nodded anyway. “*Why*, jefe? I've never seen you change your mind once you decided that someone was going to die.”

I glanced at Helena. “I don't know.” The words were nearly a growl. “I just couldn't.”

For some reason, that seemed to *delight* her. “Get her into the tub and get her warmed up,” she said. “I'll get her some hot tea.”

“Good. Hurry up.”

Helena rolled her eyes at me, patted my cheek just a touch roughly, and scurried down the hall. The silence that followed as I shut the door echoed around us. *Get moving*, I told myself, knowing that I was stalling.

“Come on, *conejita*,” I said, approaching the bed, but when I touched her arm to pull her up, Lyse jerked like I'd struck her. She was coming back online, so to speak, and if I didn't move

quickly, she would work herself into a full panic attack. I'd seen it happen before.

As gently as I could, I got Lyse standing and reached for the hem of her shirt. She resisted a little, making a sad, whimpering noise, and I calmed her the same way I might calm one of my father's horses when it was frightened. "I'm not going to hurt you," I promised, saying the words over and over as I worked the shirt over her head.

We repeated the process, me saying soft words of comfort as I pushed the shorts that were slightly too big over her hips and down her thighs. When I reached around her for the clasp on her bra, Lyse's breath caught in her throat. "Don't."

I stopped and dropped my hands. "You need to get in the tub and warm up." I spoke slowly, making sure to enunciate my words, in case she was having trouble understanding me. "Do you want my help getting in?"

Lyse shook her head. "No." But she didn't move. Her eyes were trained on me, as if she were expecting me to attack her. I couldn't exactly blame her.

"Do you want me to leave? I can send Helena to you."

She stared at me for a moment, but then, slowly, she shook her head again. "No."

Frustration rippled through me, but I did what I could to hide it. It wouldn't help anything to get mad at her...even if I had no idea why I was trying to help. *You're getting bent out of shape over a Rojas*, my mind spat at me. "What would you like me to do, Lyse?"

She was shaking all over now; I could hear her teeth chattering. "Can I get in like this?"

Sitting around in wet clothes was certainly not *my* favorite thing — I couldn't wait to change, actually — but if that's what she wanted, who was I to argue with her? "Sure."

Lyse turned and, on shaky, colt legs, headed into the bathroom. I trailed after her: I didn't want to chance her drowning in the tub. I still needed her for leverage, after all.

*Sure, tell yourself that.*

I shook off the intrusive thought and followed her into the bathroom. Lyse was trying to swing her leg over the edge of the tub, and I knew she was going to fall. Her arms shot out as she tried to catch herself, but there was nothing to grab onto.

In one step, I was there to catch her, and even though she tried to jerk away, I held onto her. “Let me help you.”

This time, I didn’t give her an option. I lifted her, easily, off her feet and set her in the tub. “Are you going to stand there, staring at me, the whole time?” she demanded.

Another flash of irritation, but I bit it back as best I could as I knelt beside the tub. The look on Lyse’s face was unkind, and my answering smile matched. “I’m not standing,” I pointed out and reached for the shampoo.

“What are you doing?”

“I told you,” I said. “I’m helping.”

With my mother dead, and Angel needed at the right hand of my father, I grew up with Lili as my companion. I was put in charge of getting her ready when our housekeeper was busy: I had washed and styled her hair more times than I could count. Padre hated how much I doted on Lili, but Angel encouraged it. I think it was his way of ensuring that I didn’t just become a weapon for my father’s use. Not that I was saved from that fate anyway. At the very least, I knew that I could handle this particular task.

Gently, I worked the shampoo into her nest of hair. The salt water was already making it feel brittle. Her bathroom was stocked with a conditioner in the same scent as the shampoo; a leave-in conditioner would make detangling everything easier. *Get a fucking grip*, I told myself. Lyse wasn’t my girlfriend, or even a friend; she was my hostage, and if Felix let me down again, I’d kill her. I had to.

I pushed that thought from my mind and did what I could to detangle her hair with the conditioner. I found a comb on the vanity, and that helped. Lyse, for the first time, looked

relaxed...or as relaxed as a woman who was being held captive could get.

Her face, tipped back with her eyes closed, exposing the long line of her throat, made my chest constrict, and I struggled to catch my breath. "Helena is bringing you tea," I told her as I stood. "Stay here until she comes to help you out of the tub."

Lyse hummed in agreement, her eyes still closed, and I hightailed it out of the room as fast as I could, needling my chest with my knuckles. Why did it suddenly feel like I was the one who'd almost drowned?

## CHAPTER 12

## *Lyse*

Felix had failed, and I should be dead.

So, what the hell happened?

That was something I tried to figure out for the rest of the day. Omar had stood on that dock, watching me drown, only to save me. It didn't make any sense.

What bothered me more was his sweetness afterward. It contradicted everything I thought I knew about *La Bestia*. He wasn't *allowed* to be sweet to me. It went against every rule in the book...and it was making me hopelessly confused.

*Maybe that's what he wants, I thought. Maybe it's just another tactic to torture me with.*

I pushed myself up on my elbows in bed: my prison remained the same. It was the same beige walls that I had endured for the last week, but it felt different now. Safer, somehow? The world outside of these walls was full of uncertainty. Here, at least, there weren't any surprises... outside of Omar's shifting personality.

Helena should be coming upstairs with my breakfast tray soon. Since the older woman had an issue with me being in pajamas past a "respectable time in the morning," I went to the drawer and retrieved more oversized clothing, pulling on shorts and a tee shirt.

So far, Helena had been precise in what time she brought me meals. Breakfast came around 8 a.m., lunch around noon, dinner at 5:30 p.m. I could have set a watch by her

predictability. But the digital clock on the bedside table soon read 8:30. Then, 9:00. Then, 9:15.

Fear chewed at my stomach. *Is this his new plan? To starve me to death?* It seemed like something that Omar would do...but the shockingly soft look on his face while he'd washed my hair kept popping into my mind. That man couldn't be the same one who threw me off the dock yesterday, but he was, and there was no telling what he had planned next for me.

Sudden, white-hot anger filled me, and I threw myself off the bed, intending to pound on the door until someone answered or it broke. Whichever came first.

But when I reached the door, I could see that it was cracked open. It wasn't *locked*. There hadn't been a slip-up in the last week — that door was always locked unless Helena or Omar was coming in or going out — so what was happening now? Was this some sort of trick?

Blood pounded in my ears as I pulled the door open and peeked out, fearing that Omar would somehow be waiting for me in the hallway. But there was no one.

Emboldened, I stepped out into the corridor. Everything was bright and white, just like it had been the night we arrived, and it looked so damn...cheerful. Full of sunshine. It felt like the world's biggest lie, given what I knew about the Castillos and Omar in particular.

Not that my own family was any better. We put on the same mocking pageant of normality as well, despite the small empire that my father was trying to build.

The house was unnaturally quiet as I padded down the hallway. The carpet was plush and soft under my bare feet, which I hadn't noticed the last time I was out of my room, but then again, I'd been mindless with terror. Now, I barely made a sound as I headed to the stairs. *Good*, I thought. *Maybe I could walk right out the front door of this hellhole.*

But where would I go? The thought of being anywhere near the water made my stomach churn.



I slipped down the stairs, the oak floor cool under my feet, my eyes darting to every corner as I made my descent. The stairs led into the foyer; the front door was right there...but I didn't touch it. It was futile to even try. Instead, I made my way down the little hallway that surely led to a living room or the kitchen.

Or both, as it turned out. The room was cavernous: half dedicated to a lounging space, and the other dominated by a chef's dream kitchen. Helena was standing at the stove, prodding at what looked to be sweetbreads that she was shallow-frying in a pan.

The smell of cooking onions made my stomach burble. I wasn't sure if Helena heard me or sensed me, but she turned to me with a wide smile. "*Mi amor!* It's so good to see you in my kitchen! You must be starving."

I was. I hadn't had much of an appetite yesterday for obvious reasons, but it was hard to match her radiant energy. "Thank you for making breakfast," I mumbled as she shooed me onto a stool at the large, gleaming island. She turned and plated up some of the finished sweetbreads, and added some scrambled eggs that I hadn't noticed to the plate as well. "Eat," she said as she dropped the plate in front of me. "You're too skinny as it is."

I hummed, smiling down at the healthy portion of food. "My mother would *not* agree with you there," I said, and I felt a pang when I pictured my mother's frowning countenance. She and I might not have had the greatest relationship, but I was sure that my being gone was worrying her sick. *Poor Madre*, I thought. That thought disappeared with the first bite of my breakfast. I let out a little groan of delight. It was easily the best thing I'd eaten so far this week. The smoothness of the eggs soothed the leftover sting in my throat from choking on saltwater. "*Gracias*, Helena."

The older woman waved me off, but her grin was wide and proud. "It's nothing," she assured me. "I just thought this morning warranted a special kind of meal."

Her words felt like a kick to the chest, and all the good feelings drained out of me. My eyes darted around, looking for Omar and his threatening glower. “Where is...he?” Even saying his name felt like it might summon him, and while I knew that seeing him was unavoidable, I wasn’t ready yet. Which man would it be today? My captor or my savior?

Which would I rather see?

“Omar is busy this morning,” Helena said with a shrug that could mean a million different things. *Busy* could mean doing paperwork in an office...or smashing the skull of an enemy. That was an enforcer’s job, after all. It was the role that Apá expected Matteo to fill, even if my tenderhearted little brother would never be anywhere near as ruthless. He didn’t have it in him.

Omar Castillo, however, did. In spades. He seemed to relish the destruction that he caused. “Why did he let me out?”

Helena shrugged again. “You’ll have to ask *el jefe* that yourself. He doesn’t tell me much.”

I laughed, and it wasn’t a happy sound. “Now, why don’t I believe that?”

She wagged her eyebrows at me. “I would be a poor housekeeper indeed if I didn’t lend an ear to my very stressed-out employer at times,” she said, “and I’d be an even poorer one if I let any opportunity to eavesdrop pass me by.”

Helena said the last in a dramatic whisper, and I laughed again, more genuinely this time. But just as suddenly as the burst of laughter came, it died, and my stomach twisted. “He nearly killed me yesterday, and now I’m sitting in his kitchen. Why?”

“I wish I understood the way his mind worked, but Omar has always had his own way of processing things.” She raised her hand when I opened my mouth. “Not that I’m excusing what he’s done to you. It’s despicable how he’s behaving.”

“Do you know what happened in Miami?”

She gave the same, delicate lift of her shoulders. “I’ve gleaned enough information from what I’ve heard. He killed a lot of

your family, didn't he, *mi amor*?"

I forced myself to eat another bite of the sweetbreads, despite my swirling stomach. "My father sent men after Angel. He's in a coma." Her gasp told me that she hadn't quite known that part. *Mierda*. "That's why Omar went after my family."

Helena was quiet for a long moment. "It doesn't make it right," she said finally, not looking at me.

I reached out and touched the woman's arm, bringing her warm eyes to mine. "It's okay to be glad," I told her. "You're loyal to the Castillos. You obviously care for Omar; I'm sure you feel the same way about Angel."

Helena's carefully constructed neutrality cracked, and her eyes filled with tears. "Those monsters ran me ragged in the summertime," she said, voice breaking ever so slightly. "But I do adore them. If Angel—" She whimpered, unable to say the words, and I squeezed her arm gently, comfortingly.

"He's going to be okay," I said, even though I had no idea if that was actually true. "He's Angel Castillo. He's strong... even my Apá is frightened of him."

Helena stepped back and wiped at her eyes. "Eat," she said thickly. "No more talk about what we can't change, yeah?"

Dutifully, I took a bite of eggs. "Tell me about my newfound freedom," I said, changing the subject just like she wanted. "Am I to return to my room after this?"

The older woman shook her head. "You have run of the island, according to Omar."

"Run of the—?" She couldn't mean that. *La Bestia* would never be so kind. "All of it? Why would he allow that?"

"Where are you going to go?" Helena threw the question that I'd asked myself earlier back at me. "Unless you build some kind of signal fire to get a passing boater's attention, we're pretty isolated here. It doesn't make any sense to keep you trapped in that room until you lose your mind."

It was a trick. It had to be. "Are you sure?"

“The only places that you can’t go are his office and his bedroom...though I can’t imagine that you’d want to be in either of those rooms.”

Absolutely not. I wanted nothing to do with the Castillos’ business, nor did I want to be anywhere near Omar’s bed.

Except...it was nearly impossible not to think of the way he had touched me. Even if it had all been a cruel joke, a punishment for being so brazen in the first place, he had evoked feelings in me that I hadn’t known were possible.

I shouldn’t be thinking about it now, not after what he did, but still, the word “bed” had brought it to the forefront of my mind. “So, if I wanted to spend the day outside, I could do that?”

Helena reached out and patted my cheek. “I think that’s absolutely what you should do, *mi amor*. You have been cooped up in this house for too long.”

After finishing my breakfast, and helping Helena with the dishes despite her protests, I walked out the front door and into the sunshine. I hadn’t actually seen much of the island the day before; I was too terrified as Omar carted me outside.

The sun was high in the sky, and it was hot, but as I stood on the porch, blinking while my eyes adjusted, my chest relaxed for the first time in a week.

The beach sloped to the edge of the blue water, and terrifying dock aside, it was beautiful. The water stretched out to the horizon, brushing the sky.

*I want to paint.*

It had been so long since I’d touched a canvas. My hands suddenly ached for it.

Spying a piece of driftwood, I walked down to the beach and smoothed the sand. Picking up the driftwood, I began to draw. It was messy and not good at all — drawing shapes in the sand with a stick wasn’t exactly the best of materials — but the more I added to the drawing, the less tension there was between my shoulder blades. Painting and sketching had

always been a source of peace. For the first time in far too long, I got to feel it again, and it was glorious.

That was until a loud rumbling sound erupted from somewhere on the island, sending birds scattering into the sky.

## CHAPTER 13

## Omar

“The engine is too loud,” I told Efrain. “If I need to go back to Miami at a moment’s notice, I can’t be seen or heard, yeah?”

“*Sí, jefe,*” the older man said. “Pascal and I can work on that. Though it might take us three or four days.”

I nodded. I didn’t know when Angel’s condition might change and I wanted to be prepared. I glanced at my watch: it was nearly eleven. “Keep me updated,” I said and patted Efrain on the shoulder as I walked away.

I had already grabbed a burner phone from the office. I was going to need Pascal to pick up more when he went for the grocery order on the mainland, what with the near-daily update calls I was making. I stepped out of the dry dock to call in. Lili picked up after a few rings.

“*Idiota.*”

I sighed; it said something about how stressed we both were that I didn’t have it in me to rise to the insult. In fact, it was almost a relief to hear that she could still be sarcastic. “How is he?”

“The same.” Her voice was devoid of emotion. “The doctors want to lighten his sedation later in the week, and Emma and I talked about it and she signed off on that plan. If he doesn’t start to come around after they lessen the sedation—”

She didn’t say it, but we both knew what it meant: if Angel didn’t start coming around, he was probably never going to. “He’ll wake up,” I promised. “He’s not going out like that.”

“Yeah,” Lili intoned. “I know.” But she didn’t believe it; she was losing hope, and I couldn’t exactly blame her.

“Tell me what’s going on.”

“I was never meant to be in charge,” she said.

I actually laughed. “Lili, you are more qualified than me to take over the day-to-day operations *by far*. You and I both know that.”

She made a sound that was almost a snarl. “Tell *that* to your Tíos. They don’t think that a little girl like me can handle all the pressure. There’s talk of a take-over.”

If any of our Tíos took over, Angel would have a hell of a time getting that power back. There would be bloodshed and more death. It would be all my fault. “I’ll come home,” I said. “I’ll stay in the compound, and—”

“You can’t,” Lili interrupted me. “We just got raided *again*, and a few of our guys were arrested outside of Elíseo. We wouldn’t be able to keep you hidden.”

*Mierda*. “I can dye my hair, wear a disguise if I have to.”

“Your hair is the *least* recognizable thing about you,” Lili deadpanned. She wasn’t wrong: I was six-foot-seven and nearly as wide. Angel and I had always been known around Miami, and it wasn’t always for the Castillo name. “How’s your plan coming along?”

I sighed. “There was a setback, but I’m working through it.” Felix Suarez had better come through. I might not be sure if I could go through with killing Lyse, not after yesterday, but I could still destroy him, and if something happened to my family while I was in exile, I would.

Lili didn’t plead with me to work faster; she didn’t remind me that the family needed me. She knew that I was doing what I could...it simply wasn’t good enough.

“How is Emma?”

“The baby is doing okay,” Lili said carefully. “They’re monitoring Emma’s blood pressure.”



The words were good, but the tone said something else entirely. “But how is *Emma*, Lilitiana?”

There was silence on the other end of the phone; it stretched so long that I wondered if she’d actually hung up on me. Finally, Lili sighed. I heard the clicking of her throat, as if her vocal cords were dry and rubbing together. “Emma and Manny are sitting vigil at Angel’s bedside. I put Manny with Emma to keep an eye on her and to help keep her mind off things, but now they’re both losing their minds. It’s a mess.”

It wasn’t all that shocking that Manny was as upset as Emma at what happened. Manny idolized my brother, and Angel and Emma doted on the youngest Castillo. They treated him better than his own parents. Ever since he’d shifted to homeschooling in order to take on more of the family business, he rarely left the compound. “I don’t like the idea of Emma staying at the hospital all the time, but at least the doctors can keep an eye on her and the baby, right?”

“That’s what we’re paying them to do, yes,” Lili said. Her voice was crisp again.

“I’m not questioning your choices, *Mija*,” I soothed. “I know that you’re doing the best you can. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“I know you will. I better go. I’m going to finish going through Angel’s emails. Ademir sent a message thanking him for the use of our dry dock. He’s pressing for a meeting, and I’m going to try and push that off.”

“Don’t—”

“Let them know that Angel is hurt,” she finished for me. “I know, *idiota*. He will find out eventually, but I’ve no intention of telling him anything right now.”

“*Gracias*.”

We bid each other goodbye, and I headed to the dry dock, destroying the phone and tossing it into the rubbish bin as I did. “Whatever you’re going to do to the boat,” I announced, startling Efrain and Pascal, who were talking with their heads bent together, “you have two days. Do you understand?”

Efrain's brows knitted together, but Pascal put a hand on his friend's shoulder, keeping him from saying whatever thought first came to mind. "*Sí, jefe,*" Pascal said. "We're planning it out now, and we'll work around the clock if we need to."

*I need to get them a raise,* I thought. The island's skeleton crew were paid handsomely, just like any of the others who worked for the Castillo family, but Padre tiered everything. Those closest to him were the ones who reaped the most benefits. I wanted to make sure that Angel and I took better care of our people who were loyal, no matter how close they were to the seat of power. "If there's anything that you need, let me know," I said. "I'll make sure that you get it."

I left the dry dock; my presence would only slow them up. What to do now? Lili hadn't needed me to do anything administrative. I could have volunteered to look at Angel's emails for her, but Lili was more than capable of handling the task. She also had the best chance at putting Angel's South American partners at ease until he could step back in.

Eventually, I would have to figure out how to play businessman if Angel remained in a coma. Lili would have to teach me. As much as I would love to turn over operations to her, my Tíos were a prime example of why I couldn't: they would never accept Lili as our leader, and while she could solve her problems the way Angel had, with carefully placed bullets in the right set of people, that might not be enough to overcome the traditions of our family.

Unsure of what to do with myself, I was heading to the house when a figure on the beach caught my eye. It was Lyse. She was holding a piece of driftwood and seemed to be...drawing something in the sand. *An SOS message?*

I wouldn't blame her. The woman had to be confused...I knew I was. But I also couldn't have her trying to escape or sending messages to passing tourist planes.

I crept closer and saw that she wasn't writing out HELP or anything of the sort. Instead, she was drawing. It was a landscape; it might have been somewhere real or imaginary.

But it was beautiful, especially for a sketch made in the sand.  
*What could she do with proper materials?*

She was so absorbed in the drawing that she didn't notice how close I'd gotten. I stood for a moment, watching her work, and it was...fascinating. Entrancing. *She's beautiful*, I thought.

I shook the rising affection away. I could get away with attraction to the woman: she was beautiful, and I was stuck with her on an island. I had no other options for my wayward thoughts. But the warm feeling in my chest? That was unforgivable.

I got close enough to could reach out and touch her, and she *still* didn't notice that I was there. Either she was far too confident that she could defend herself, or she was comfortable in her surroundings and didn't think that she was in any danger.

The idea made my stomach burn with rage. Not because I *wanted* her to be afraid of me, necessarily, but because she *should* be afraid of me. It wasn't smart not to be. But when I opened my mouth to...what? Scare her? Scold her? All that came out was: "That's beautiful."

Lyse let out a little scream and whipped around. She held the piece of driftwood like a bat, swinging it wildly. I caught it and yanked it out of her hands, snapping it into pieces. The fear that I expected to see from her now radiated from her eyes, but her mouth was set in a defiant sneer.

"What the hell are you doing, *pendejo*? Sneaking up on me like that?"

She was screaming at me. It shouldn't be endearing, but I felt my lips curl into a smile. "Were you going to hit me, *conejita*? Really?"

Lyse scowled. "It would be what you deserve."

Her words set off more heat in my stomach...but it wasn't anger I was feeling. That damned spark of defiance made me want to pin her down and show her who was in charge. "Now you know how I felt after your family attacked my brother," I said.

I had meant for it to be teasing, but my words landed between us like a bomb. “I wasn’t the one who tried to kill you,” she pointed out. “Or your brother.”

“No,” I agreed. “You’re just a poor *conejita* stuck in the crosshairs.”

“Stop calling me that.”

I scoffed. “No. It fits you too well.” I reached out, and she shrank back, scared. *Good, Lyse, I thought. Be scared of me. It’ll be easier for both of us if you are.*

“Don’t. Touch. Me,” she growled. “Not ever again.”

I stepped into her space and grabbed her chin. “I’ll touch you whenever I want, *conejita*. You don’t make the rules here. I do.”

She yanked backward, freeing herself from my grip. “Fuck you, *pendejo*.”

## CHAPTER 14

## Lyse

Did I really just say that to the man who threw me off a dock? *Be brave*, I told myself. *What's the worst that could happen at this point?* “Helena said that I could come outside,” I said. “Was she wrong?”

Omar shook his head. His eyes were still smoldering and dangerous, but he didn't try to get in my space again. “No, she wasn't wrong. There's nowhere for you to go.” He crossed his arms over his broad chest. “So long as you keep out of my office and my room, you're free to roam.”

“And...you'll leave me alone?”

He gave me that snarling smile again, and my heart battered against my ribs. “I never said that, *conejita*.”

“Because you make the rules.”

Omar's smile grew into a grin. “Exactly right.”

The adrenaline that had kept me going for the last several minutes seeped away. “This is doing my head in,” I admitted and turned back to my sketch. It had gotten a lot bigger than I thought; I must have gotten into the zone. “Why didn't you just let me drown yesterday?”

“I need your fiancé to do what I asked, and he was waffling. I needed him to know that I was serious.”

“But.”

“Look, if you were dead, I'd have nothing to bargain with, right? It's not any deeper than that.”

My stomach twisted itself into knots. It was serious *to me*, considering it was my life that he was playing with. “That doesn’t explain why you’ve let me out now,” I pushed. “Yeah, I know I’m effectively trapped...but you didn’t seem to think that mattered for the week you had me locked in that room.”

Omar’s smile dropped from his face. He looked uncomfortable, and a savage part of me was glad for it. For once, the tables had turned, and it was a delicious feeling. “I got tired of taking care of you,” he insisted, but I could see it for the excuse that it was. “Now you can take care of yourself. Don’t expect Helena to cater to you, that’s not her job.”

I nodded. “Okay...do you treat all your hostages this way? Giving them just enough freedom to hang themselves with?”

His eyes slid past me to the sketch that I made on the ground, and I had the insane impulse to erase it, cover it up so that he couldn’t look at it. “I’ve never held anyone hostage for this long before,” he admitted. “Either their people don’t care enough, and they end up dead, or the demands are met, and we send them home.”

“Felix is trying,” I said, but my words felt very far away. Echoey almost.

Omar snorted. “Not hard enough.”

Well...he wasn’t *wrong* about that, but his words stung more than I thought they would. There was no love between Felix and me; he wanted to possess me, show me off, but he didn’t *love* me. If Omar had let me drown, he would have been upset about his lost acquisition. “Go away.” I wanted it to be a demand, but the words came out a broken plea. I picked up the pieces of driftwood, thinking that I could move down the beach to keep drawing.

“Can you draw like that on paper?” Omar asked. “Or is sand your medium of choice?”

I glared at him. “Sand isn’t *anyone’s* first choice...unless they were doing sculptures, I suppose.”

“That...did not answer my question at all.”

*Too bad.* But the soft look on his face was...deceptive. I knew that he would probably use all of this against me at some point, but it was hard to ignore him completely. "Yes, I'm adept with other mediums."

"Which do you prefer?"

I rounded on him. "Why do you *care*? Are you trying to be my friend? You almost killed me yesterday!"

Omar took my shrieking with surprising calm...though there was that dark gleam in his eye that made me tremble. I couldn't say whether it was from fear or desire. *What is wrong with me?* "I'm curious," he said with a shrug. "You're...not like the Rojas family members that I've met before."

"Because we're all such terrible people?" I scoffed. "*Madura de una vez.* Both of our families have done terrible things to the other, and that isn't likely to stop anytime soon."

That dark gleam sparked into true anger. *Mierda.* "Your father —"

It was too late to back down now. If Omar was going to hurt me, I might as well make myself heard first. "Apá went after your precious brother, I know." I sneered. "You wiped out a *quarter* of my family single-handedly. It hardly seems a fair trade from my perspective, and yet, I'm not trying to actively murder you."

Omar stepped into my space, and it was my pride alone that kept me rooted to the spot, facing him. "My brother is worth a hundred of you Rojas scum," he spat. Even in the face of his rage, however, I saw how his eyes dipped away from mine. He was looking at my mouth, at the rapid rise and fall of my breasts as I breathed. He *wanted* me.

Well, wasn't that a far cry from "if I actually wanted you, I would have taken you already"? "I may be scum because of the family that I was born into," I said, dipping my head in acknowledgement, "but you want to kiss me."

Omar snarled and wrenched back. "I do *not*." He was indignant; his expression stole a giggle from my throat. "Who the hell do you think you're laughing at, *conejita*?"



He was going for his “threatening” tone, but I just giggled harder. Something about this whole situation struck me as incredibly, maddeningly funny. Maybe it was the knowledge that I was probably going to die before it was all over. Maybe it was the fact that drawing in the sand had been my first taste of peace in far too long.

“I like to paint,” I said instead of answering his question. “Oils, mostly, but I’ll use acrylics if there’s nothing else.” I pointed at the horizon, and its swirling blues and greens. “I would *love* to get a chance to paint a view like this, but I had to make do with the sand.” I crossed my arms over my chest, tipping my head to one side. “Does that answer your question?”

Omar looked exasperated, but that scary anger was gone. My comment about him wanting to kiss me was forgotten...at least for now. *Good*, I thought. *I should have never said that.* “I’m surprised your father allowed you to pursue something like that.”

“Art?” I laughed again, and it had an edge of hysteria in it. “Apá knows nothing about it.”

Omar sat down on the sand and motioned for me to sit down as well, and against all rational sense, I sank down beside him. “My Padre knew everything about our education. He had his hands in whatever we learned. I’m surprised that your father —”

“Apá only cares about what Matteo learns,” I said, cutting off whatever he was going to say. “My mother handled my education until I went to college; she encouraged me to find a passion that wouldn’t interfere with my duties to my family. Art became a refuge of sorts.”

Omar hummed softly beside me, and I hazarded a glance at him. I shouldn’t be talking to him like this. It was incredibly stupid, almost as dumb as my plan to seduce the man. “Padre never cared much for the arts.”

“My mother just wanted me to find something that would keep me busy,” I said with a shrug. “She had no idea that I would fall in love with it.”

“Or that you’d be so good at it.”

Omar said the words absently, like he hadn’t meant to at all, and I could feel the heat rising in my face because of it. “I’m not.”

“Don’t be modest.” He turned his dark eyes to me. They were hard and unreadable, like he couldn’t decide whether he was angry about something or not. “If you’re good, say it. There’s nothing wrong with being good at something.”

I looked at my sand creation. It *was* good. Not as good as what I could do with paper or canvas, but certainly better than what most people could achieve at the beach. “That’s an okay piece,” I said, pointing. “But I can do better.”

Omar chuckled, and I shivered a little. It was such a warm sound, so unlike his usual cold, sarcastic demeanor. “Oh yeah? What’s the best thing you’ve ever done?”

A smile worked its way onto my face as I recalled the dips and whirls of color that had come together, as if by magic, to become the face of one of my friends who paid for a portrait to be done. “I did a portrait for one of my—” I cut myself off, sinking my teeth into my tongue to stop the words. I’d almost told him the biggest secret that I kept close to my heart.

Of course, Omar caught what I’d said. “You’ve sold pieces, haven’t you?” He let out a low, impressed whistle. “You’re bold, *conejita*. I’ll give you that.” He looked at me. “Do your parents know?”

The question was so patently absurd that I laughed. “Am I still breathing?” I drew my knees up into my chest. “If my father thought for a moment that I was making money in order to escape....”

The night that I asked to become a nun instead of marrying Felix came to mind. He had never done more than slap me before. But that night, Apá had not held back. I could still hear the ringing of my mother’s screams as she begged my father not to kill me.

I wasn’t allowed out of my room for weeks, not until all of the bruises had faded. Only then had I met my future husband, and

I made sure to be just as congenial and sweet as I could be. I'd charmed Felix that day and cemented our impending engagement.

I had new paints that afternoon: a gift from my mother for "doing what needed to be done."

Omar reached over and tucked his finger beneath my chin, using it to make me look in his direction. "He shouldn't have put his hands on you."

I jerked my head away with a derisive snort. "That's really rich coming from you."

He scowled. "I'm not your father," he said. "I'm not your family."

"Like your family has never hit you?" I shot back.

That angry tension had returned, and we were both on edge. I knew what my brother endured in the name of "training," so I could only imagine what the great Gustavo Castillo had done to prepare his sons for a world like ours.

Omar stood and shook the sand off himself. "I'll leave you to draw, if that's what you'd like. Don't bother Helena for lunch or dinner. If you want something, make it yourself. And stay —"

"Out of your office and bedroom," I intoned. "I know."

Omar stared down at me for a long while, long enough that I nearly asked if he wanted something, but then the sand crunched softly as he walked away. What the hell was going on? I wanted to pick up the pieces of driftwood and hurl them at him. It felt like every time I felt the ground beneath my feet, Omar would come along and yank it away.

I was terrified of the man, of that I was certain, but beneath the terror, there was something else. Desire, possibly. Make that definitely. Desire for the man who washed my hair and talked to me about art. Desire for the man who probably still wanted me dead.

## CHAPTER 15

## Omar

“So, there’s no amount of money—” I swore as the man on the other end of the line, a business contact of Angel’s, hung up. The boat that Pascal and Efrain were re-outfitting was nearly finished, but I still didn’t have safe passage to Miami. I *needed* to get to the mainland, and I wasn’t going to hold out hope for Felix Suarez anymore. Not nine days later without a word.

I didn’t know what I was going to do with Lyse if he didn’t come through, but that was a problem for another time. Right now, I needed to find a way back. Lili was going to come apart at the seams if I didn’t.

But down every avenue I looked for some help, I came up against a brick wall. Either no one wanted to help me because I wasn’t Angel, or they’d heard that he was in a coma, and they were content to let the Castillos burn so that they could take over when we were gone.

As if I’d ever let that happen.

I should have used the guns the Corazón Syndicate had stored here as leverage and I was kicking myself for not thinking that far ahead, but at the same time, I knew better than to piss them off.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Lyse’s dark hair bobbing by the window. She was outside again: I didn’t think she’d been inside for more than a few hours to sleep each night since I’d left her door unlocked. *Exploring again*, I thought absently. She was a curious little rabbit, that was for sure.

“You must have had good news.”

I jerked at the voice and looked toward the door. Helena stood in the doorway of my office, the only one brave enough to open the door without knocking. “What are you babbling about?”

She crossed her arms, mocking me. *If she were a man, I’d shoot her.* “You were smiling,” she said. “I thought that might mean good news.”

I shook my head. “Nothing good yet,” I said.

“So—?”

“I *wasn’t* smiling.”

“Whatever you say, *jefe*.” Her tone conveyed her disbelief, and I *barely* resisted the urge to flip her off. It would be the incredibly juvenile thing that she would expect of me...but I couldn’t do that anymore. “Lyse has become quite the outdoorsy type since you unlocked her door, hasn’t she?”

“Really?” I feigned disinterest. “I hadn’t noticed.”

Helena scoffed. “I’ve seen you, *jefe*. Your eyes follow her all the time, and if she’s not near, you’re looking for her. You doubled the amount of time you normally take for dinner just waiting to see if she’d show up.”

Heat spread across my face. It wasn’t like I’d thought about it *consciously*, but of course, the moment she said it out loud, I realized that was exactly what I’d done for the last two nights...and I’d been disappointed when Lyse had taken me at my word and not expected Helena to feed her. Instead, she had taken to grabbing small snacks throughout the day and kept to herself.

“She’s been...distracting,” I admitted.

Helena practically beamed. “You like her.”

“I don’t.” I didn’t. Being attracted to someone wasn’t *liking* them. “I’m not a child with a crush.”

“I never said you were.” She smiled in a far too motherly way, and I felt a pang. I hardly remembered my own mother, but

Padre had a knack for hiring matronly women to care for his children. Helena might exasperate me on a daily basis, especially lately, but she saw me in a way that Padre never had. It could be absolutely humiliating. “But I’ve never seen you so invested in a woman before.”

“She’s my—”

“Hostage, I know.” But Helena and I both knew how keeping someone hostage went, and this wasn’t it, especially not after the conditions of release weren’t met. She should be dead. Or under lock and key. Instead, I was allowing her to amble around as she pleased. “But it doesn’t change the fact that you’re treating her as if she’s special.”

I ground my teeth together. “I know.”

“*Mijo*.” Helena tutted. “It’s okay to realize that she isn’t the Devil, you know. I know she’s a Rojas...but people aren’t always *just* their family.”

It was a concept that was hard for me to swallow. The Castillos were a unit; we moved and operated for the greater good of the whole. It left little room for individuality, and it was *abundantly* clear that when I made decisions for myself, I made mistakes. Separating Lyse out from her family was hard to do.

“It wouldn’t matter what I did anyway. I slaughtered her family for what they did to Angel. We couldn’t move past that.”

“Do you want to?”

Helena was goading me, and I knew it, but it was hard not to rise to her challenge. “It wouldn’t matter,” I insisted. “She can’t swim. She’s *terrified* of deep water, and I threw her off the dock and watched her drown.”

She studied me for a long while. “There’s nothing you can say,” she agreed. “But if you have feelings for her, you could do something for her. *Show* her that you have feelings for her.”

I stared at her blankly. “Like how?”

“How do you normally get women’s attention, *mijo*? It’s not that different.”

Was she kidding? “I’ve never tried to seduce a woman that I’ve done such an injury to.”

Helena scoffed. “Are you Omar Castillo, or aren’t you?” she asked before turning and walking away.

Before Emma became Angel’s wife, my brother had only had casual relationships; he had little interest in settling down with anyone, but he disliked the messiness of hookups and would only indulge occasionally. Unlike my brother, I had few qualms about finding a fling for the weekend.

But I didn’t have to seduce those women. So long as I showed an interest, they came to me...and seduction wasn’t exactly the same as romance in any case.

*Romance? A Rojas?* I snorted. I should put a bullet through my skull for the very thought.

Still...I glanced out the window and caught sight of Lyse again. She was making her way down to the beach where she would, undoubtedly, draw again. She’d been doing that a lot, but ever since that first time I caught her, she had erased everything before I could get close enough to get a peek.

While I pretended that I *wasn’t* staring, a thought came to mind. There was something that I could do for her. It might even make her smile.

After checking in with Lili — no change in Angel, though they were going to start lightening his sedation — I locked my office and went to seek out Lyse.

Since I’d unlocked her door, she’d stayed on the beach near the house, but today, I found her on the other side of the island. It faced the open ocean; the water was a little darker, and the beach a little more unkempt. She sat in the sand, eyes set on the horizon, like she was trying to memorize it.

“I’m starting to think you’re obsessed.”

Lyse jerked and looked at me. Her eyes were wary. “What do you want?”



Irritation flickered through me, but it was chased with a warm fondness that I refused to think about. What was it about this woman mouthing off to me? I was feared and respected...and yet, Lyse Rojas could speak to me in a way that no one had ever dared, bar Padre and Angel.

I held out my hand. "I want to show you something. Come with me."

She snorted and looked out at the horizon. "No."

"Do I need to carry you, *conejita*?"

Lyse practically yelped at the mention of me carrying her, and I had to bite back a wince. *Not the smartest thing to say given what happened*, I berated myself. She stood up and dusted the sand off her legs. My eyes dragged down the length of her, following the movement of her hands, and it took her clearing her throat for me to come back to attention. "Show me whatever you need to show me."

I beckoned her to follow me to the house, and the closer we got, the more tense she became. She relaxed a little bit when she realized that we were going into the house, but she went ramrod straight again when I started climbing the stairs.

"I'm not locking you up again," I said. "I promise." Lyse didn't believe me, I could tell, and I couldn't exactly blame her. "Just—" The words *trust me* nearly made their way out of my mouth. There was no way that she was going to trust me. "Just follow me," I said as I opened a door that hid the stairs to the attic space.

The attic was large and airy: my mother had windows installed on both sides that overlooked the island, filling the space with as much natural light as my mother could possibly make happen. Lyse gasped slightly when we stepped into the room. "This is—"

"The perfect place to paint?" She looked at me, and I gestured to the stack of boxes in the center of the room. "My mother wanted us to learn about art, but I told you about my Padre. He thought it was ridiculous...but she bought all these supplies anyway and they've been sitting up here."

“Supplies?” Lyse’s eyes widened. “Art supplies?”

I nodded. “I’m not sure what’s still good there, but you can have anything you want.” I gestured at the space. “While you’re here, you can use this space as much as you want.”

Lyse looked around, and then her eyes met mine. “Why would you do this for me?”

A hundred excuses came to mind, some of them sarcastic, some of them sincere, but I settled for shrugging my shoulders. “I don’t know,” I said. “You’re the first person who might...enjoy this place.”

She looked around again and blinked. “This is the most beautiful studio space I’ve ever seen,” she said, almost absently, like she couldn’t believe it. She turned to me, the sweetest smile curling at her lips, and my chest squeezed tightly. “Thank you so much.”

I wasn’t expecting her to thank me. “Um...you’re welco—”

She crossed the space, and standing up on her toes, Lyse pressed her lips to mine. It was whisper-soft and so fast that I thought I might have imagined it, but the bright red flush that stained her cheeks assured me that it was real.

I reached out and cupped her cheek in my hand before she could get away. “That must have been your first kiss.”

Her blush grew even darker. *Hermosa*, I thought. “What makes you say that?” Her voice was guarded, like she wasn’t sure if she was going to get in trouble for something.

“Considering your fiancé’s serious hard-on for your chastity,” I said, “I’m going to bet your father kept you under lock and key.”

The mention of Felix made her face drain of color. Where was the girl who had tried to seduce me? The one who was bold enough to drop a towel and reveal her naked body? Surely, she wasn’t one and the same with this scared bunny.

Before she could say anything, I leaned down and kissed her again. I kept things soft, but I took my time, slowly coaxing

her lips to open for me. Lyse gasped slightly when I licked into her mouth, brushing my tongue against hers.

It was the tenderest kiss I'd ever given someone, and it was making my head swim. This was not how this went; I wasn't the one who did soft and intimate...I wasn't sure a man like that existed in all of the Castillo family. *I need to get out of here.*

When I pulled back, her hands were fisted in the front of my shirt. "The space is yours," I said, intent on leaving her alone. "Enjoy it."

But when I tried to leave, her hands clenched in the fabric of my shirt, unwilling to let go. "Stay. Please."

## CHAPTER 16

## *Lyse*

My head felt like it was filled with cotton. That was the only explanation for why I was begging *Omar Castillo* to stay. To, maybe, kiss me again. My mouth tingled at the thought.

“I shouldn’t stay,” Omar said and broke out of my grasp. “If I do—”

“What?” I pressed. A part of me, probably a bigger part than I would like to admit, needed to hear him say how much he wanted me. Especially after he so callously threw me away before.

“I might kiss you again.” A dark look filtered across his face. “I might do more than kiss you.”

I crossed my arms over my chest, steeling my nerves. “Maybe you could finish what you started last time.”

Omar smirked, dangerous and amused. “Shameless,” he taunted. “You are absolutely shameless. What would your Apá say?”

It was like a bucket of cold water had been dumped over my head. “He wouldn’t say anything at all. He would just beat me to death.”

A frown marred Omar’s handsome face. “You sound like you know from experience.”

I spun away so that I could look out of the massive picture window, but I hummed in agreement. “My father told me that I was going to be engaged to Felix when I was fifteen. I hadn’t

even met him yet.” I wrapped my arms around myself, suddenly cold. I hadn’t told anyone this story; the only ones who knew about it were my father, mother, and me. “I didn’t want to be promised to someone so much older than me.”

I glanced back, and Omar had a complicated look on his face. Like he was picturing *his sister* in my place. “That’s... understandable.”

Arranged matches weren’t an unheard-of practice for families like ours. I knew that my marriage would most likely be an alliance made between my father and someone who had something he wanted. It was my role as a daughter.

“I begged to be allowed out of the marriage,” I said. “I asked them to send me to a convent; I had all of the paperwork printed out to show them.” I shook my head. “It took *weeks* for my bruises to fade after that.” I held up a piece of my hair and showed him a scar that traced the edge of my hairline and my temple. “It was only my mother’s begging and promising that I would comply that kept me alive.”

There was a long pause, and when I looked at Omar, his whole body seemed clenched with tension. Violence against women wasn’t absolutely *unheard* of, but I was the daughter of the man in charge. I should have enjoyed a certain level of security. “I’m surprised that you’re so...pious.”

A laugh bubbled out of my chest. “I’m not...but at fifteen, I thought it might be the only thing that would save me. I had a cousin who chose to become a nun, and my father *still* speaks about her like she’s a saint.” Annaliese had come to visit exactly once after taking the habit, and she was so horrified that she cut off all contact. Still...our family canonized her. She had a “noble” calling.

I was the ungrateful *puta* who wanted to shirk her duties.

Omar broke into my thoughts. “You didn’t consider what you’d be giving up by becoming a nun?”

Giving up? “My family? I was trying to *escape* them at the time.”

Omar smirked at me, and his eyes dragged down my body. I shivered: I could almost feel that look like a touch. “That’s not what I meant, *conejita*.” He stepped closer to me. Heat radiated off him in waves.

Understanding flashed through me, and I took a step away from him. “I wouldn’t have missed it,” I insisted. “Why would I miss something like *that*?”

Omar was grinning now, and I knew he was going to touch me moments before he actually did. He backed me up against the window so that my back was pressed against the sun-warmed glass. “You seemed to enjoy my hands on you before.”

I scoffed and tried not to struggle in his grip. It would probably just excite *La Bestia*, after all. “You left before I could enjoy it fully,” I spat back. “Should I hope that Felix has better luck at pleasuring me?”

Omar’s grin morphed into a snarl. “As if he could.” He reached up and ran his thumb over my bottom lip; it was a possessive gesture that made me gasp as heat shot through me. “Do you know why men his age go after virgins?” The question was rhetorical, and even if it wasn’t, I didn’t have an answer. “They want some inexperienced girl who won’t be able to tell if they’re shit-poor at what they’re doing.”

I should be quiet. I should get away from him as quickly as I possibly could...but I didn’t want to. He was dangling that dangerous, delicious pleasure that I’d only glimpsed before, and even though it could be another trick, a cruel prank to further break my spirit, I wanted it.

“Well, how am I supposed to know the difference?” It was a challenge, and I saw the recognition spark in his eyes.

Omar leaned into my space again; I could feel his breath against my skin, and I didn’t squirm away or try to push him. Instead, I tipped my head up so that I could meet *La Bestia*’s eyes. “Do you want me to show you, *conejita*?”

*Say no*, I commanded myself. It was a last-ditch effort from my brain to get my body to run, to be the girl that my father had trained me to be...but I wanted him. And if I was going to

go into a marriage with Felix or *die*, I wanted to have something for myself beforehand. I took a breath. “Yes.”

Omar eased forward slowly, almost cautiously, and then his lips were on mine again. The kiss was soft at first, but then his tongue brushed against my bottom lip before pressing into my mouth. I gasped at the intrusion, but let myself be kissed. And kissed. And kissed until my head was spinning.

“Put your arms around me, Lyse.” His voice was commanding but not threatening.

I shivered and wound my arms around his neck, pressing my body against his. He was so *big*. It would be so easy for him to hurt me — he *had* hurt me — but his hands were gentle now, as if I were some precious thing. The difference was maddening.

Omar picked me up, wrapping his hands around the backs of my thighs, and I gasped. “Your shoulder.”

“It’s fine,” he insisted, and while I tightened my grip on him, there was no fear of him dropping me, even with an injured shoulder.

He walked across the attic to the counter that extended along the only wall that didn’t have windows. There was a sink that was clearly there for cleaning brushes and palettes, and my heart sang at the idea of painting again...but that could come later.

Omar set me down on the counter and laughed. “Even when you’re boosted up, you’re small.”

I flushed. “Shut up.”

He shook his head. “I don’t think I will.”

Before I could argue with him, he leaned down and kissed me again, though he didn’t linger at my lips for long, instead choosing to pepper kisses down my throat. I trembled at the feel of his mouth on my skin. My fingers tracked into his hair and wove through the silky strands, holding him against me as he searched out all of the places that seemed to send sparks through my veins.



Omar's fingers curled around the edges of the too-big tee shirt that I wore, asking without asking if he could take it off. I pulled away and reached down so that I could pull the shirt off over my head. I could feel his eyes on the lace of my bra.

“Should I—?”

His eyes were dark, and he nodded. “Take it off.”

I reached behind me and unhooked the clasp of my bra, letting it go slack across my chest. Omar took it the rest of the way off. With my breasts bared, Omar bent and took one of my nipples into his mouth. I gasped as little zips of pleasure ran through me. I had no idea that I was sensitive there.

I felt the edge of his teeth and let out a little cry. “*Omar!*”

Omar made a pleased sound in the back of his throat. “You make the sweetest sounds for me, *conejita*,” he murmured against my skin. He reached for my shorts and I lifted my hips, allowing him to slide them and my panties down, leaving me bare before him. On instinct, I tried to clench my knees together, but Omar stepped between them. “I want to see.”

I shivered at the deep timbre of his voice, and I leaned against the wall at his behest, parting my thighs for him. He had touched me before, but this was...more. I wanted more of that fire that he'd stoked days before. “Touch me,” I breathed out. “Please, touch me.”

He raised an eyebrow in question. “You're sure?”

I was at the moment of betrayal again. I was spitting on my own family if I allowed this to happen...but if it didn't happen, if I walked away, I might shake out of my skin completely. I needed to be touched. I *needed* Omar to be the one to touch me. To make me feel alive in a way I never had before and probably never would again once I married Felix. It wasn't fair. Shouldn't I be allowed to have this moment with the man of my choosing? Why did Felix get to have that along with everything else? No. I was taking whatever pleasure Omar was willing to give me and I would enjoy every minute of it.

I looped my arms around his neck and pulled him close; my breath shuddered when his clothed form pressed against my naked one. I kissed him; it was an inelegant thing, but he made a soft sound against my mouth. “I want you,” I said against his mouth.

Omar’s knees hit the floor, and he pulled me forward so that I was balanced on the edge of the counter. For a split-second, his touch was less than gentle, and heat pooled in my belly. But then he was almost dainty in the way he positioned his shoulders between my knees.

“Don’t hold back,” I blurted out.

Omar looked up at me, and I saw his jaw clench. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

I studied him for a long moment, and it hit me that he was being serious. After all the hell he’d put me through, he truly didn’t want to hurt me, and for someone as big as him — I imagined that extended to the parts of him that I hadn’t seen — it would be easy to do. My already pounding heart sped up even more.

*You can’t fall for him*, I told myself, even as I ran my fingers through his hair. It would be every sort of wrong to have feelings for this man. The attraction was more than enough as it was. “You’re meant to be showing me what I would miss at the convent, right?” He nodded, cautious. “So, show me how *Omar Castillo* fucks a woman. Don’t treat me like some fragile maiden.”

He let out a sound that was almost a growl, and then his face was buried against me. The sensation of his mouth on me was enough to steal my breath. His lips wrapped around my clit, and he worried it with his tongue until I cried out. Every nerve was on fire, calling out for him.

When his finger slid inside me, my hips bucked into the touch, and I whimpered. That wonderful tension was building again, and for a moment, I was afraid. *What if he stops again?* Unconsciously, I began to struggle against him. “Omar, I—” His eyes rolled upward to meet mine, but he never stopped

moving his mouth, his finger curled and pressed into something that seemed to set me alight. “*Oh my God.*”

Omar smirked. “Feel good, *conejita?*”

Fear rose in my chest: this happened before, and he stopped. “Please,” I moaned. “Please, keep going. I need—”

“I know what you need.” He thrust over that spot again and again. “I’m going to give it to you.” He leaned forward and wrapped his lips around my clit again, and the sensation was overwhelming.

All that tension built and built and built until, with a harsh suck, I was thrown into an oblivion of sensation that racked through me. I heard someone keening and realized that it was me. Omar gentled his touch and slipped back. He looked positively smug, and I didn’t have it in me to admonish him for it. I lay against the counter, panting.

“You’re beautiful when you come.”

I would blush, but I was floating so far above the earth that I couldn’t be embarrassed right now. “Does it always feel like that?”

Omar smirked and stood. He pulled off his shirt and pushed his jeans off his hips, and he was naked before me. My mouth went dry. He was large *everywhere*, just like I imagined he’d be. “Do you want to try again and see?”

I nodded, but when he pressed the head of his cock against me, the air was sucked from my lungs. He felt even bigger than he looked. “Is this...going to hurt?”

Omar’s smile faded a little, but he ran his thumb over my clit again, softer than before, and I sighed. “Just let me make you feel good, okay? Trust me.”

Trust was a laughable concept between the two of us, and we both knew it, but I nodded because any good sense I had was washed away by the feeling of his hands on my body. Omar leaned over to kiss me while he pressed into me.

My breath caught in my throat, and I wriggled my hips, trying to find a new kind of balance as he fit himself inside of me. It

didn't hurt, per se, but I could feel how my body strained around him. I watched in utter fascination as Omar's face went through a kaleidoscope of emotions. I reached up and cupped his face, bringing his eyes to mine. "Don't hold back."

Omar's face split into a feral grin. His hands gripped my thighs, letting me feel the power in them, before he snapped his hips against mine. He set a pace that was just this side of too much, and all I could do was hang onto his shoulders and take it. "You were made for this, *conejita*." Omar's voice rumbled in my ear. "You feel so good around me. So. Very. Tight."

How did anyone *talk* during sex? I couldn't get enough air into my lungs to do more than whine pitifully and cling to him all the harder. "Please," I mumbled as everything started to go tight again. "*Pleasepleaseplease*."

Omar shushed me gently, which was a sharp contrast to the harsh way his hips canted into mine. He angled me slightly, and whatever he hit on his next thrust lit up my nerves like Christmas lights. "Come for me," he commanded, keeping that angle and dragging himself over and over that spot. He rained kisses across my shoulders, my collarbone, my neck, but when he nipped my ear that sharp spot of pain sent me careening over the edge again. My inner muscles convulsed around him, and I heard Omar grunt as he found his own end as well.

He held me close for a moment before slipping away and helping me to sit up a little. I winced at the sudden emptiness, and I was surprised when he wrapped his arms around me again, his big hands soothing up and down my spine.

"You're mine now, *conejita*," he said.

*He's crazy*, I thought, but I didn't argue with him. I didn't know how long any of this would last; I didn't know what the consequences of this would be. But, for now, I was all his.

## CHAPTER 17

## Omar

I *should have closed the damn blinds*. There was a slice of light right across my eyes, and it dragged me, unwilling, up from sleep. I nearly rolled over when I realized that one, I wasn't alone, and two, I wasn't in my bed.

I glanced down at Lyse, who was sleeping tucked against my side. She'd never more resembled a bunny than she did in that moment, curled up in a ball with her hair in disarray. She had the sheet pulled up around her, but her bare shoulder peeked through, and that little patch of skin made me salivate.

*I could wake her up*, I thought, already picturing taking her again. I couldn't get enough of the way she clung to me and begged me so softly and sweetly to make her feel good. *When was the last time anyone asked that of me?*

Before I could put action to my thoughts, however, I saw the time. I needed to call Lili and check in; if I waited too long, she would get anxious, and the last thing I wanted to do was heap more stress onto my sister. Slowly so that I wouldn't wake Lyse, I eased myself out of bed and left her there, in a puddle of sunshine.

I headed downstairs. "*Jefe?*" Helena called as I passed by the kitchen.

"Not now," I threw back over my shoulder.

"Should I start breakfast for you and—"

I stopped in my tracks and turned around; I came just inside the kitchen and crossed my arms over my chest. "And?"

Helena didn't look impressed in the slightest. "And Lyse," she said. "Did you want me to start breakfast for you both?"

"Why would you ask me about her?"

Her eyes dipped down at my chest, and I followed her gaze and sighed. Lyse had left a fairly large, very noticeable hickey on my pec. *When the hell did that happen?* My little bunny had fangs, apparently. "Breakfast would be good," I said, feeling like a teenager who had just gotten caught sneaking into the house after being out all night.

Helena nodded. "Don't hurt her, *jefe*."

I stood there, silent, for a moment. "I'm going to try not to. I can't make any promises," I said finally. "*Con permiso*. I have a phone call to make."

Going to the office, I closed the door behind me. I was down to my last few burners: I either needed to send Esteban for more, or Angel had to wake up.

I dialed Lili's number. "*Idiota!*"

I was *really* getting tired of that...but she didn't sound nearly as devastated as she had been. "What's the news?"

"Angel is awake." She sounded so happy that she could have been floating. "He's not totally out of the woods, but he's breathing on his own, and he's able to follow the doctor's directions, so it's looking good that he doesn't have any lasting brain damage."

It felt like my lungs could fully inflate for the first time in far too long. "*Alabanzas*," I breathed out, and Lili echoed me in a tearful but joyous voice.

"I didn't even tell you the best part yet!"

*What could possibly be better than Angel waking up?* "What's the best part?" I asked, choosing to humor her.

"The police came back to the compound and *apologized* to me personally for all the trouble. They're backing off. I don't know what you did, but it worked. You can come home!"

*Felix got it done*, I thought, *finally*. “Why didn’t you *lead* with that!?”

Lili laughed, and it was her evil little sister laugh again. The weight had almost entirely come off her shoulders. “I figured our brother being alive was a tad more important.”

She was right, of course, but I wouldn’t give her the pleasure of admitting it. “I’ll be home soon,” I promised. “Are you and Emma okay for a few more hours?”

She snorted. “Like Emma would even notice either of us right now.”

“She’s made a full recovery, has she?”

“Near enough,” Lili said. “The doctors are going to continue to monitor her because of her blood pressure, but her main stressor has largely resolved itself, so they’re pretty sure that will correct itself too.”

“I’d say get her back to the compound for some real sleep, but I doubt she’ll leave Angel’s side.”

“Correct, and Angel pretty much death-glared me when I suggested it anyway. He wants her where he can see her.”

I snorted. “Sounds like he’s going to be just fine, then.” It took Emma almost dying for my brother and his darling wife to admit that they were head over heels for each other. It had been both amusing and extremely frustrating to watch, but now that he had a firm grasp on her, he wasn’t going to let her go. Not even a near-death experience or two was going to pull them apart. Especially now that she was pregnant with their first child.

Thinking about them made me think of the woman upstairs. *Shit*. I had to figure out what to do with Lyse. If Felix really did come through on his end of the bargain...I had to give her back, right? If I didn’t, it would cause even more problems.

But the idea of returning her to those Rojas scum made my blood boil...and besides, I still wanted them to suffer for what they did to Angel. My desire to end Luis Rojas hadn’t ended just because I bedded his daughter. If anything, it had increased tenfold after hearing what he’d done to her.



“I’ll make arrangements and be home soon,” I promised again before we hung up.

The light was finally visible at the end of the tunnel, but there was a lot to do before I could actually head home. After a moment to think about it, I dialed Felix’s number: I had to get this over with. “Señor Suarez,” I greeted him when he picked up the call. “You delivered. My sister said the police personally apologized for all the trouble they’d given her. I have you to thank for that.”

“I don’t want your thanks. I want Lyse.”

The way he said her name set me on fire: he didn’t think of Lyse as his fiancée, let alone as a woman, but as a possession. Like he had any right to her at all. *Lyse belongs to me*, I thought savagely. It wasn’t a particularly...progressive thought, but I didn’t care. The image of Lyse lost in her own pleasure was seared into my retinas, and I would be damned if I had to share it with anyone.

“We’ll discuss Lyse tonight.”

“Tonight?”

“That won’t be a problem, will it? If I’m cleared, I should be able to come to Miami for an in-person discussion with you and Luis Rojas without worrying about the police breathing down my neck.”

Felix scoffed. “You want to bring *Luis* into this? Really?”

A snarl twisted my face. I could feel it. “He and I have much to discuss.”

There was a long pause on the other end of the phone; for a moment, I thought that the man had simply hung up. “There will be no violence,” he said. “If I arrange a meeting, it will be in a neutral location.”

I didn’t want to concede...but the man had a point. “No violence on *either* side,” I said. “If it’s a trap, you won’t have to worry about Lyse anymore.”

*Not that I’m giving her back to begin with.*

“Agreed,” Felix said.

“Send me the location to this number when you have it. We’ll meet wherever you choose at eight o’clock.”

I ended the call and pocketed the phone. I trusted Lili enough that I figured the FBI wouldn’t be swarming the island in order to arrest me.

There was a lot to arrange before I could leave, but when I stepped out of the office, I could smell the bacon that Helena was frying, and an idea came to mind. “Is breakfast nearly ready?” I asked as I came into the kitchen.

Helena was in the process of turning off the burners. “It’s done now,” she said. “Shall I—”

“I’ll dish it up,” I cut her off.

She raised her eyebrow. “Oh? Taking it upstairs, are you?”

A reprimand was on the tip of my tongue — I’d really let her get away with far too much — but I was in too good a mood. “Lyse hasn’t gotten up yet,” I said instead. “She might like hers in her room.”

Helena barked out a laugh, but she didn’t say anything else. Instead, she turned to start cleaning up the mess and allowed me to make two plates in peace. Before I could ask for a tray, she produced one and put it on the counter beside me.

I loaded up the plates and carried the tray upstairs. Lyse was where I left her, sleeping in a pool of sunshine. I set the tray on the dresser and climbed into the bed beside her. “*Conejita*, it’s time to wake up.” Lyse shifted in her sleep, but she didn’t open her eyes. I kissed her bare shoulder, like I had been so tempted to do when I woke up. “Lyse.”

She stirred again, and this time, her eyes fluttered open. I watched as the fog lifted from her eyes, and for a split-second, I wondered if I would see her regret what happened. Instead, Lyse focused on me, and a soft pink flush erupted across her cheeks. *No one has the right to be this adorable when they first wake up*, I thought. “*Buenos días*,” she said.

I kissed her shoulder again. “I brought breakfast.”

Lyse pushed herself up. “Did you...cook?”

I laughed. “Absolutely not. Helena made it for us; my contribution was putting it on the tray.” She looked the tiniest bit relieved, and I scoffed. “You think I can’t cook, *conejita*?”

She studied me for a moment. “I don’t think you’ve ever had to cook for yourself.” She cocked her head to the side. “Tell me I’m wrong.”

She wasn’t wrong in the slightest, but the fact that she was challenging me made my blood run hot. *Pin her down*, I told myself. *Remind her how strong you are*. But the intrusive thoughts didn’t get to win today. There was too much to do before I went to Miami. “You’re not wrong,” I said finally, leaning forward to peck her lips, quickly before either of us got too distracted. “But I don’t have to like it.”

Lyse chuckled. “Noted.”

I backed off the bed and went for the tray. “Let’s eat,” I said. “I’ve got a full day ahead of me.”

Her smile faded a little. “What do you need to do?”

“Eat,” I told her again and glared until she took her first bite of bacon. “I have to head back to Miami tonight. Angel woke up.”

She perked up. “Is he going to be okay?”

I nodded. “Seemingly so. I’m going to see for myself.”

“But what about—?”

I swallowed the food in my mouth. It was delicious, but the moment it hit my stomach, it curdled. “Felix came through. The police have been called off. In theory, I should be safe in Miami without worrying about being arrested, or worse.”

She looked surprised...and just a little disappointed. The sickening twist in my stomach eased. “Am I coming with you?”

“No.” The word was out of my mouth before I truly thought about it. I *had* been thinking of bringing Lyse with me. Felix had paid her ransom price. By all rights, he should get to see her, even if I had no plans to actually turn her over. “Not yet.”

“But...why? You’re not leaving me, are you?”

I gave her a hard look. *Is that what she’s so upset about? That I’ll abandon her?* By rights, Lyse should want to go home to her family; she should demand to be in the boat with me this afternoon. Instead, she looked more upset at the prospect of being left alone. “I get to decide if and when you go back to your family.” I took her chin between my thumb and forefinger, forcing her to look at me.

She jolted out of my grasp. “Are you going to tell my father that? Felix?”

The thought of Felix’s hands on her made the bacon in my stomach curdle. “You belong to me now, remember?”

“Then let me help you.”

“No,” I said. “Absolutely not. Paint something for me. I’ll be home before sunrise.”

Lyse let out an ugly sound that might have been a laugh. “You won’t make it out of a meeting with my father alive.”

I watched the hardened look on her face soften in concern. “Don’t worry about me. I’ll do whatever I have to do to come back to you.”

## CHAPTER 18

## Omar

“You look like you were hit by a truck, *hermano*,” I said, leaning against the doorframe of Angel’s hospital room.

Emma turned, though she didn’t let go of Angel’s hand, and a smile bloomed on her face. “Omar! You’re home!”

“How are you feeling?” I asked her.

She looked back at Angel, and her smile became blinding. “I’m fine,” she said. Her words were more for Angel than me, but I didn’t mind.

When my older brother first fell in love with Emma, it was comical to watch him, but uncomfortable too. Angel Castillo was not a romantic soul. He was violent and cold, and the only ones who ever saw his warmth were Lili, Manny, and me. My father had molded him into the perfect heir. Falling in love shouldn’t have been *possible*.

But here he was, staring at Emma like she hung the moon and stars in the sky. He would hand her the beating heart from his chest if she asked for it. I didn’t get it before. I couldn’t imagine allowing anyone to have that power over me.

Thinking about the possibility of Lyse ever smiling at me like that, though, made my heart flip-flop in my chest. I’d never thought myself capable of love before, and I wasn’t sure if that was what I was feeling now, but Lyse was mine. I wasn’t going to just give her up. Maybe that was how love started.

I sat down in the empty chair beside Emma, and my sister-in-law leaned into my shoulder for a moment in greeting. “You took on the entire Rojas family?” Angel asked. “By yourself?”

There was no point in lying about it. I wasn't ashamed. "I would do it again," I said. "Trust that."

Angel glared at me, but there was a smile hidden in the corner of his mouth. He might have to reprimand me for being brash, but my older brother wasn't upset that so many of the Rojas family were dead. "I know you would," he said, "but I need you to be smarter in the future. If something happens to me—"

Emma smacked his arm lightly, but the sound still echoed in the quiet room. "Don't talk like that," she reprimanded.

His expression softened. "*Lo siento, mi esposa.*" He brought her hand up to his lips and kissed her knuckles. "I do need to speak to Omar. Do you want to wait outside?"

She glared at him. "I would not." She laced their fingers together and settled back into her chair. "You both talk. I'll stay out of it." When they were first married, Angel would have insisted that she leave. He didn't trust her around their business, but now, she was truly the queen to his king.

"You can lecture me," I said, "but I'm not going to apologize."

"I don't want an apology," Angel said. "I want you to use your head. We'll take care of the Rojas family in due time. They're all snakes; we'll have another opportunity. You know they turned on Padre, right? They killed him after I lost consciousness."

My muscles tensed. "The Rojas men turned on Padre?"

Angel's eyes met mine. "Someone put a pillow over his face," he said. "Who else would do that but the men who attacked me? If Padre and I were dead, and they could arrest you for your idiocy, then the Castillos would be no more."

"Gee, thanks." I turned to see Lili in the doorway. "You don't have any confidence that I could keep things together?"

Angel didn't look apologetic. "Temporarily? You did an amazing job, *Mija*," he said. "But in the long run?" He frowned. "How were the Tíos?"

"Pains in the ass," I answered before Lili could downplay their behavior or outright lie. "They wanted her to step aside and let

someone else take the lead.”

Angel’s jaw clenched, and Emma patted his arm. “They didn’t do anything, love,” she assured him. “They made a lot of noise until Lili threatened to shoot them. That’s all.”

“They need another lesson in manners,” he grumbled.

I chuckled. “You can’t keep killing our Tíos, *hermano*. There won’t be any left.”

Angel made a noise like he couldn’t care less about that, but before he could say anything, a nurse came in squawking about the end of visitors’ hours. Emma gave her a flat glare when she insisted that *everyone* in the room leave. “We can call security,” the nurse said and crossed her arms over her chest.

“Try it,” Emma snarled. Pregnancy and nearly losing Angel had made her savage. It wasn’t a bad look on her. *Lyse is like that*, my mind whispered to me, and I did my best to shove the thought away. Now wasn’t the time: Angel might not be able to read minds, but he was incredible at reading people.

“She stays, Margie,” Angel said. “She won’t sleep if she’s forced to go, and I need my girl strong.” His eyes shifted to Emma and dipped down to the swell of her belly.

The nurse threw up her hands. “Fine,” she declared, “but no one else, understand?”

Angel nodded. “Perfectly.” The nurse looked at him, suspicious, before she left the room. We had maybe five minutes before she returned to see if we were gone. “We’ll get our revenge on the Rojas,” he promised. “Just stay away from them for now. We don’t want to invite any more scrutiny, yes?”

I nodded, although I had no intention of staying away from Luis Rojas. If Angel found out about my meeting, I would face a punishment later, but I had taken many such punishments over the years from our father. Physical pain would be worth the trade-off for revenge; I was built and trained to withstand it, after all.

“Sleep well, *hermano*,” I said.



Lili repeated the sentiment. “I’ll take care of this *idiota*,” she promised and patted me on the shoulder. She kept a hold of me until we were out of the hospital completely, like she was afraid that I would disappear in front of her. “Coming home to sleep?” she asked.

Sleeping in my own room, in my own bed, sounded amazing...and it wasn’t like Lyse was going anywhere, right? I could cancel my meeting with Felix and Luis and wait like Angel thought we should.

But I had promised Lyse that I would be back before sunrise, and I didn’t relish breaking that promise. She had looked so hopeless at the idea of being left behind.

“I think I’m going to check on a few things,” I told her. “I haven’t done my rounds in almost two weeks.”

Lili rolled her eyes. “You can’t wait until tomorrow? I haven’t seen you in two weeks either.”

*Damnit, Lili.* “You need to rest, *Mija*,” I said. “You haven’t been sleeping well. Go home and get some rest. There will be plenty of time for us to hang out.”

She eyed me. “You’re going to meet a woman, aren’t you?”

“What? No!”

“You don’t have to be so touchy,” Lili teased. “If you want to go see one of your *zorras*, who am I to stop you?”

I held back the insult that had jumped to the front of my mouth. It wasn’t unusual for Lili to be derisive about the women that I had previously chosen to share my company with...but Lyse wasn’t like that. Lyse was somehow sweet and timid and fierce all at once; she was a brilliant artist. She was beautiful for so many reasons, and she didn’t deserve to be thought of as anything less. *She doesn’t know Lyse*, I reminded myself.

No one in my family could know Lyse...at least not until I figured out how to tell them in a way that wouldn’t get her killed.

“*Gracias, Mija*,” I said through my teeth.

She glowered at me, and we parted ways. As I left the hospital, I checked the location for my meeting with Felix and Luis Rojas again. It was in a downtown high-rise, probably Felix's office. Though it was well out of the way of either Rojas or Castillo territory, it still felt like a risk.

But, as it was nearly eight o'clock already, it would be difficult to demand a location change now. They would assume that I was planning an ambush, and as much as I wanted to put my fist through Luis Rojas's chest, Angel had been right. I needed to use my head.

I couldn't jump to violence, no matter how much I might want to.



I had seen Luis Rojas more than a few times over the years. As Padre's, and now Angel's, enforcer, I was expected to accompany them to most meetings. I wasn't expected to speak or even listen, really; I was there to be the muscle, and I was *very* good at my job.

The older man stared at me like I was the Devil, and it made me smile, sharp and ugly. I wanted this man to be afraid of me. I wanted him to know that I would be his demise for what he'd done to my brother...and for what he'd done to Lyse.

His son, Matteo, sat at his side. He was supposed to be Luis's enforcer, but he looked more like a little boy visiting his daddy at work. He needed to hit the gym, build up some muscle and work on his face: he was far too terrified to look intimidating. Felix Suarez, on Luis's other side, seemed to be the only calm one, which was surprising for a man whose fiancée was being held hostage.

"Señor Castillo," Luis greeted me with a snarl. "I hear that your brother is going to make a full recovery."

Someone at the hospital talked. *They'll be dealt with*, I promised as I tried to shake off the red haze that threatened to seep across my vision. "Angel is stronger than a couple of your Rojas lackeys."

Luis puffed up like a toad, but Felix reached out and put a hand on the man's shoulder. I watched in utter fascination when the man calmed. "You called me here, Castillo," he ground out, obviously biting back whatever he wanted to say. "What more could you possibly want? Felix has erased your crimes with the police. Your brother is alive, and the one responsible is dead from what I understand."

"I'm not satisfied."

"You're a free man after committing a public slaughter. I ask again: what more satisfaction could you want?"

I rolled my shoulders, making the nearly-healed injury pull slightly. "We want territory," I said. "I have plans to build another club, and I want it near Elíseo, but the location is within your borders."

"*Put a madre!*" Matteo shouted. "You want to exchange my sister for our most profitable piece of real estate!"

## CHAPTER 19

## *Felix*

“Or I can start sending her back to you piece by piece,” Omar Castillo said with a casual shrug. His dark eyes bored into Matteo, like he was imagining what it would be like to yank out his spine. “As a thank you for handling the police, of course,” he added, casting his gaze toward me.

Something about the way he said the words, or maybe just the look on his face, told me that he didn’t mean a word of what he said. My hands curled into fists, but I kept my face as close to neutral as I possibly could.

But Matteo, the little idiot, couldn’t see through the ruse. “If you touch *one hair* on her head, *pendejo*, I will gut you and show you your rotten insides!”

I flicked my eyes to Luis, who seemed to be in total agreement with his son. *Fucking useless, both of them*, I thought. “Luis, I think Matteo needs a break. Let the adults finish this discussion.”

The man dragged his eyes away from Omar Castillo to look at me. I raised my eyebrow, and he let out a huff. “Matteo, go.”

The younger man wheeled around, eyes wide. “Apá—”

“¡Dale!”

Matteo stormed out of the room, and I bit back a sigh. He wanted to be seen as an adult in his father’s eyes, but then he would react like that to a simple order. “You really need to do something about him, Luis.”

Omar snorted. “I agree.” We looked at the man they called *La Bestia*: he wore a smirk that sent venom through my veins. What right did he have to smile like that? “I’m just saying,” he said, raising his hands. “If he’s the head of your security, it’s a wonder that you haven’t died yet.”

*La Bestia* was more intuitive than I was led to believe. Luis seemed to think that he was a brute without an ounce of self-control, but the man in front of us was cool and collected. He was absorbing everything...probably to take back to his damned brother.

“He’s learning,” Luis said, impatient and irritated. His refusal to see what I was seeing made him weak. “It takes time.”

I clicked my tongue against my teeth. “You’re too soft on him.”

“He needs some time out of Apá’s shadow,” Omar said.

“Stay out of this,” Luis snarled at him. *Mierda*. This was turning into a mess. I nudged Luis as subtly as possible, trying to get him back on track. Luis took a deep breath and then said, “We can’t give you our territory in the club district, and I think you know that.”

The arrogant smirk on Omar’s face didn’t fade for a second. If anything, he looked *pleased* with Luis’s answer. “Then you know what will happen to Lyse.”

“What else do you want?”

His smirk grew into a sneer. “I want revenge for what you did. I would love nothing more than to put a bullet between your eyes, and then do the same to your weakling of a son...but I’ll settle for ruining your businesses one by one.”

Luis turned white with rage. “Your father—”

“Is dead.” Omar scoffed. “Tell me something, Luis. What sort of a man would so blindly follow the dictates of his rival? What price would possibly be high enough to sacrifice your dignity?” He looked down his nose at Luis, and instead of acting the leader that he certainly pretended to be, the man seemed to cower in his seat.

*Cabron*, I thought. Luis was becoming an insufferable liability. “Have you touched Lyse?” I asked flatly.

Omar’s gaze snapped to me. “She’s alive and well,” he said. “For now.”

He wanted his words to sound like a threat, but I knew what he meant. Omar had fucked Lyse, which meant she was absolutely useless to me. If she allowed herself to be *defiled* by this asshole, she wasn’t worth touching.

Luis, however, was turning a sickly green. “I won’t discuss territory trades with *you*. Not when Angel is awake.”

I cleared my throat. “I don’t think we need to be discussing territory at all, Luis.” He was just as surprised as Omar. “Lyse isn’t polling as well as I’d like her to be,” I said.

“What the fuck does that mean?”

I looked at Omar. “I’m running for office, Señor Castillo,” I explained. “Single men of my age do not fare well in the polls. If I want to continue to move up in my political career, I need a wife who will look good on my arm and who the people connect with. Happy wife, happy life, after all...but I miscalculated our ages. A man of my age with a woman of her age didn’t poll favorably; I fell by ten points after the announcement of our engagement.”

I had let the notion of having a pretty little virgin all to myself overshadow my common sense. It was an oversight that I couldn’t afford.

“You had to have known that she didn’t ‘poll’ well for a while. Why bother with everything that you did to clear my name if you didn’t care about getting her back?”

I watched Omar’s face, looking for anything that might key me in to what he was thinking. And there it was. That slight clenching of his jaw. He was getting worried. *Good*, I thought. *Let him.*

“Of course he cares,” Luis interrupted. “He’s known her for years.”

Omar stared at me for a long moment and then shook his head. “Rojas, if you think he’s that altruistic, you’re an even bigger fool than my father thought.”

*I should have fucked Lyse when I had the chance*, I lamented and put a hand on Luis’s chair. “I think we’re finished here, don’t you agree, Luis?”

The older man swallowed hard. “Of course,” he said. “Tell my daughter—” He stopped and glanced at me. I saw his jaw clench, and I raised my eyebrow at him, challenging him. *Say one word, Luis*, I thought. *See what happens*. “Go while you have the chance, Castillo. There won’t be another one.”

“*¿Sabes qué? Eres una mierda*,” Omar spat. We watched him saunter out of the room, and for a moment, I wished I had allowed Luis to bring his gun to the office. He could have buried a bullet in the behemoth’s back and ended all this here and now.

“*You* know what to do, Luis,” I said, eyes still on the spot where Omar had stood. “I want your mess cleaned up.”

“*Sí, jefe*.”



## CHAPTER 20

## Omar

I'd fucked up. Well and truly. I had gone into the meeting with Luis and Felix *certain* that I knew how it would go, but I hadn't counted on Luis being so far up Felix Suarez's ass that he'd turned over operations of the Rojas cartel to that man. When did that happen? Why would Luis give up power like that?

*Angel is going to kill me.* I tried to negotiate for territory in his stead, *and* I'd lost what little leverage I had over Luis Rojas. But I couldn't deal with that right now. The most pressing matter was Lyse and her safety.

I pulled out my phone, happy to have it back instead of a damn burner, and logged into the security system on the island. I checked all the cameras and found Lyse in the attic, painting. The tightness in my chest loosened. For whatever reason, both Lyse's father and fiancé gave her up for dead, and that could only mean that bad was coming our way. Again.

I opened my text messages and sent one to Lili: *Staying on the island tonight; I left some things behind. Be back soon.* She responded within seconds that I better be joking, but when I didn't reply, she tried to call me. I ignored it. *You're already in trouble,* I reminded myself. *Might as well go all in.*

I drove to the marina and had the attendants refill the tank on the boat. It was nearing eleven; I would be back with Lyse well before sunrise, as promised. The thought made me warm, despite all of the unknowns crowding in around me. Returning to Lyse was the most important thing for now. I would figure everything else out once I had my arms around her again.

Fifteen minutes later, I was navigating the boat out of the marina and heading in the direction of our island. My phone rang off and on until I was too far out of range, and my signal fell off. I would call Lili in the morning and make up some excuse as to why I had to leave. It wasn't like I wasn't coming back...I just needed a game plan first.

Luckily the weather was good, and the water was flat, and the nav put my arrival on the island a full thirty minutes earlier than normal. If I hurried things along, I might catch her before she went to sleep. Maybe—

*THWACK!*

Pain erupted in my head as I was struck from behind. I groaned and nearly collapsed, but I gathered my wits as best I could and turned around, swinging at whoever had attacked me. The man was obviously surprised that I could do so, and I was able to get my hands on him. I shook him, slamming him into the side of the cabin.

The man was scrawny, but he had an iron pry bar in his hand, and he swung it with precision, smashing it into my forearm, making my arm go numb. “*Cabrón,*” I snarled and rammed myself into him, knocking him off balance enough that he dropped the pry bar with a clanging *thud*.

The man struggled beneath me, slapping at me, but I pressed my numbed arm into his throat and pinned him down. His face turned a bright red, and I watched the panic bloom in his eyes as he realized that he couldn't breathe. He bucked, tried to bring his knee up, but despite all his training — if he had any to begin with — I didn't let up for a moment.

He lost consciousness, and I scrambled off of him to grab the pry bar. I brought it down on his head again and again until the bottom of the boat was slick with blood so dark that it looked black.

I sank down, breathing hard, as my vision swam. Little dots flickered across my eyes. Reaching up, I touched the back of my head; my fingers came away bloody. *Shit, I have a concussion.* I needed to get the boat pointed in the right

direction again; I was probably going to need stitches and for someone to watch over me so that I didn't die in my sleep.

It took far more effort than I wanted to admit to get to the steering wheel, and even longer to be able to read the nav system. My vision kept blurring, and my stomach swooped in a sickening way. I couldn't pass out on the boat. I *wouldn't* pass out on the boat.

I just needed the damn boat to go faster.



*Lyse*

“You should sleep, *mi amor*,” Helena said for the twentieth time. “*El jefe* will be back soon. He can wake you up, if that’s what you want.”

We were sitting on the front porch in a pair of rockers that didn't look like anyone had ever sat in them before. I had been painting for most of the day, but Helena declared that I'd inhaled enough fumes and hustled me outside to see the moon and breathe the fresh air.

“I'll wait a little while longer,” I said, “but you can go, if you're tired.”

Helena reached out and patted my arm. “I'll stay with you,” she said. “Besides, I like nights like this.”

“Quiet?” I asked.

Her face went tight. “Oh, *mi amor*, you just jinxed us.”

“Huh?”

“You can't say that it will be a quiet night when you're with the Castillos,” Helena said, absolutely serious. “That's all but a guarantee that it will end badly!”

*She's so cute.* “I don't believe in superstitions.”

The older woman gasped, dramatic to a fault. “Not superstitious? *Dios mío.*”

“I think you’re being—”

The roar of an engine reached us, and I looked out into the darkness, hoping to catch a glimpse of Omar as he brought the boat into the dock. But it quickly became apparent that the boat was going far too fast. I pushed myself to my feet. “What’s he doing?”

Helena stood up too. “He needs to slow down.”

It took me another second to realize that he wasn’t going to slow down, that something was *seriously* wrong, but then I was tearing toward the beach as fast as I possibly could. “Get Efrain and Pascal!” I called over my shoulder. I didn’t need to see Helena moving to know that she was doing what I asked.

The speedboat hit the dock going full tilt; the dock exploded into a pile of ruined, twisted wood, and something vaguely human-shaped was tossed from the wreckage. I forced myself to move even faster; my feet slogged through the sand. I barely felt the sting of stepping on chunks of broken seashells. I could worry about that later.

I hit wet sand and kept going; my eyes were on the person floating in the water, just beyond where the boat had flung him out. *You can’t swim*, I reminded myself, but the water only went up so far until the drop-off. Omar was close enough. I could do it. I *would* do it.

I heard splashing behind me and nearly let out a whoop of joy: help had arrived. I reached Omar first, and despite the tide threatening to suck me out into endless oblivion, I took hold of him and turned him so that his face wasn’t below the surface of the water.

Even in the water, Omar was solid and heavy, and with the tide, it was hard to hold onto him. Luckily, I only had seconds before Efrain was beside me, helping me. Together, we took him to shore and laid him in the sand.

Pascal was there with a flashlight, and we all swore when he saw how gray he’d become. Omar looked like he’d taken a beating. “This can’t all be from the crash,” I said and looked

toward the wreckage. “Pascal, can you get near that thing? See if anyone else was on board?”

I expected pushback, to be honest. If I ever ordered *any* of my father’s men to do such a thing, I would find myself in my room for at least a week and covered in bruises. But instead, the man nodded, handed the light to Efrain, and took off running. It was almost...bizarre for a man to respond in such a way.

I knelt beside Omar and unbuttoned his shirt with shaking hands. I didn’t see any major wounds. Mostly, he had bumps and bruises. But his forearm had an alarming bruise that was going purple and blue. I glanced at Efrain, whose eyebrows were cinched together in concern. “Do you think he—” I held up my hand as if to protect myself. “Like someone was trying to hit him with something?”

Efrain nodded. “That seems right.” He looked toward where Pascal had run; the man was picking his way across the broken pier as carefully as he could. “Someone snuck aboard and attacked him mid-trip. That’s the only thing that makes sense.”

“Why?”

Efrain looked at me. “If he’d been attacked in Miami, Omar would have had the whole of the Castillo family to back him up. Even if he were blitzed, one text would have brought the horde.”

My father had a handful of loyal men like that—the kind of men who would come running when called—but that number seemed to dwindle year by year. He didn’t inspire the kind of...awe that the Castillo men did. *Apá is fickle*, I thought. It didn’t motivate men to keep following him.

My fingers, in their gentle search, found a spot of wetness on the back of Omar’s head, and when I pulled back, bright red blood shone in the light. “*Mierda*,” Efrain swore. “I’ll carry him up to the house. He needs that to be cleaned out...and probably some stitches.”

Efrain did his best to pick up Omar, and I threw my arms around his middle and did what I could to help as well, but the

man was deadweight between us, and it was slow going. “Don’t you dare die,” I murmured to him. “You promised I’d see you at sunrise. I’m holding you to that.”

Omar groaned slightly, but he didn’t open his eyes. “Talk to him,” Efrain said. “See if he’ll come around for you.”

I tightened my grip on Omar. “My father did this to you,” I said. “I’m sure of it...but we’re going to get him back, all right? You’re going to open your eyes, and I’ll help you plot against him. You just need to open your eyes, dammit!”

## CHAPTER 21



## *Lyse*

“You’ll help me, *mi amor*,” Helena said as Omar was carried to his room.

I nodded. I’d done enough patch-up first aid for my father and brother over the years. It was something of a second nature... though I only knew the basics. If his head injury was worse than a simple suture would fix, I would be next to useless.

I had a feeling Helena was in the same boat, but she was pretending to be a lot calmer than I could manage.

“Fetch the first aid kit?” she asked. “There should be a large one in the pantry.”

I nodded and rushed to get her what she needed, and it only hit me when I came back through his door that I’d never been in his room before. Omar had been incredibly private about it. I couldn’t really see why. It was a bit more decorated than the room that I had been using upstairs, and its lock faced inward instead of outward, but really, it didn’t have anything in it that I didn’t have upstairs. It didn’t even look all that personal, more like a hotel room that only saw the occasional visitor.

I sat gingerly beside Omar as Helena pawed through the kit, taking out various things that we would need to tend to the wound on his head. “The bleeding has already slowed up,” I told her, gently shifting his hair out of the way so that I could look at the gash in his skull. “That’s a good thing, right?”

She nodded, going for encouragement, I’m sure, but her face was twisted in a painful expression. “So long as he doesn’t have any brain swelling, I think he’ll be just fine.”

“Brain swelling?! How do we test for that?”

Helena’s lips nearly disappeared as she pursed them into a line. “We don’t test for it,” she said. “We just wait.”

“For what?”

“Death, *conejita*.”

Omar’s ragged voice startled me as he groaned, and I caught his fluttering gaze, relief surging through me. I wanted to kiss every inch of his bruised and bloodied face. “You’re not dying today,” I told him and swept some of his hair off his forehead, as tenderly as I could.

“I’ve survived much worse,” he assured me, searching blindly for my hand. “Trust me.”

I fought off a shiver. That throaty *trust me* had been thrown at me in a very different context only the day before...and it had been on my mind all day. *He* had been on my mind all day. I stroked my thumb across his knuckles, and he cracked a soft smile. “Missed you,” he said.

I wanted to roll my eyes and play coy — that had been the plan after he’d left me alone for so long — but I couldn’t find it in myself to tease him. “I missed you too.”

Omar couldn’t have been any more surprised if I had actually struck him with something. “I didn’t expect to hear that from you,” he admitted.

“I hadn’t planned on saying it.” I shrugged. “I watched you fly off a boat after you hit the dock going full speed. My priorities changed a bit.”

That awed expression didn’t leave his face. “I’m a priority?”

*Of course not.* I demanded that my lips move to say the words, but they refused to cooperate. “You said I belonged to you.”

Hurt as he was, a dark look passed through his eyes, and he brought my hand up to his lips. “You do.”

Helena cleared her throat. “Can you sit up?” she asked Omar. “I need a better look at your head, and it’s hard when you’re lying down like that.” Omar struggled to push himself up. He

was too big for me to support from the side. I scrambled behind him so he could lean against me and remain upright. “Hold onto him,” Helena commanded.

“I won’t let him go,” I promised.

“Sweet talk later, *mi amor*,” she chastised, and I fell quiet. It was the first time she’d genuinely admonished me. Helena hummed and tutted as she fussed over the wound, which from my angle, didn’t look nearly as bad as I thought. The bleeding had nearly stopped, and he was talking and acting like himself. “Steri-Strips will hold this together,” she declared, “and he’ll need to be monitored for the next forty-eight hours or so for a concussion.”

“I can handle both,” I said. “Why don’t you go get some sleep, Helena? I’ll take over from here.”

She eyed me. “You’re sure you can do it?”

“I’ve used Steri-Strips a time or two before,” I said and tried *very hard* not to sound condescending. Helena might work for a cartel family, but I was born into one. Our lives were nowhere near the same in terms of experience. “I’ve got it covered.”

Helena frowned but handed me the kit so that I wouldn’t have to get up just yet. “No funny business, the pair of you,” she said. “He has to heal before any kind of *strenuous* activity.”

She left, and we burst into laughter, though it was cut short by his groan of pain. “I don’t think I’ve ever been lectured about sex before,” I giggled. “My parents were under the impression that if they didn’t talk about it, beyond the threat to *never* look at boys that my parents didn’t approve of, that I wouldn’t ever have it until I was married to Felix.”

Omar tensed up at the mention of Felix, but as I dug out what I’d need to close the gash, along with some antibacterial cleanser that would most definitely sting but would hopefully keep him from getting an infection, I did my best to ignore his awkwardness.

“I’ve been given that exact speech, actually,” he said after a minute, seemingly satisfied at my silence.

“How often do you get hurt?” I opened the cleanser and squirted it onto a gauze pad.

“*Put a madre,*” Omar swore when I touched it to his head. “That hurts!”

“I need to clean the wound. It’s full of sand and whatever godforsaken bacteria is in that water.”

“It’s fine.” He squirmed against me as I dabbed at the wound again. “Lyse, cut it out.”

I flicked his ear with a satisfying *thwack*, and he hissed, cupping the side of his head. It was one of the quickest ways to get Matteo’s attention. It was good to know that it worked on more than just my younger brother. “If you hold still, it’ll be over in a second. Quit being a big baby.”

He grumbled, but he let me clean the wound of sand and grit. Then I applied the Steri-Strips to hold the edges together. To be extra thorough, I wrapped his head in gauze tape so that it was covered. “You’ve done first aid before.”

I wriggled out from behind him and helped him to lie down. “Who hasn’t in our families?” I settled in beside him, and I was surprised when he dragged me down so that I was lying in his arms. We hadn’t really...cuddled after having sex. Instead, we’d passed out side by side in my bed, and I remembered rolling against him at some point. But actively cuddling like this? It was another new experience that I shared with Omar Castillo.

A thick silence settled between us, and I did my best not to fill it with chatter. It was easy not to talk to him when I hated him, but now that we were whatever we were, I wanted to talk and never stop. Maybe it was Stockholm Syndrome, maybe I was falling in love, but I wanted to soak up every bit of his presence.

Especially since he’d gone to Miami to negotiate my release.

I didn’t even want to consider what returning to Felix would be like. There was fear that he would look at me and know what Omar and I had done...but there was also a layer of disgust that had always been there, which was much more

prominent now. I couldn't go back to being that naïve girl that I was, and I couldn't pretend to like Felix's touch. Not after I'd gotten to touch and be touched by someone that I wanted so badly it made my body ache. There would never be that kind of fire between Felix and me, and the idea of spending my life pretending made my stomach twist into knots.

"How's Angel?" I asked when I could no longer stand the quiet.

"Alive," Omar said, and I thought that would be it. But then: "He doesn't have any permanent brain damage as far as we could tell. He'll need time to rest and recover, but I won't have to step up as the man in charge anytime soon."

It was an odd way of putting it. "Are you...upset by that?"

Omar let out a big belly laugh and immediately regretted it, hissing at the pain. I rubbed my hands up and down his chest, soothing him. He covered my hand with his own and pressed down, stopping my movements. "Don't get me excited."

I glanced up at him, incredulous. "*That* would have gotten you excited? That wouldn't have done a thing for me, and I'm brand new at this."

He gave me a look that was downright sinful. "I would like to remind you how much you begged and cried when I played with your nipples, *conejita*." I gasped and tried to smack him, but he held onto my hand, grinning now. "Stop being cute. That's what is exciting."

I dropped my head against his chest hard enough that he let out a little *oof*. "So, you're happy that your brother is going to make a full recovery?"

"Of course," Omar said. "I wouldn't want anything to happen to my brother, *conejita*."

I hummed softly. "I'm close to Matteo too. I understand."

"You're *close* to that moron?"

"Hey!" I did smack him this time. "Matteo is young, and he's doing everything he can to impress my father...Besides, my brother has a photographic memory. He doesn't even need to

get a *good* look at something to have it committed to memory. He's been really useful to Apá."

"That doesn't make him smart."

Anger was beginning to bubble in my belly. "Like you and Angel didn't grow up in your Padre's shadow?" I asked. "Waiting for him to give you a kind word? Isn't that the fate of men like you and my brother?"

I felt him deflate, and he ran his hands up and down the length of my spine. "I'm sorry," he said. "I don't want to fight. Please." He sighed. "I need to tell you something about the meeting I had with your father and Felix."

He sounded nervous, and it immediately stoked the fires of my own anxiety. *Please don't send me home*, I begged the universe. *Not now*.

## CHAPTER 22

## Omar

I wasn't sure what her reaction would be to the news that her father and fiancé left her for dead...but it wasn't this. Lyse sat beside me, staring at the bedspread beneath her fingers. "*Conejita?*" She barely stirred. "Lyse, talk to me."

"What do you want me to say, Omar?" she asked, and her voice sounded far away.

I wanted to sit up, to hold her, but whenever I tried, my head would swim, and she would press me back down. "Are you sad?" I asked. "Angry? It's okay to feel...whatever you're feeling right now."

She was quiet for a moment. "What are you going to do now that you've lost your leverage?"

*She's asking if I'm going to kill her,* I thought dumbly. "By rights, you know what I should do."

Her breath shuddered. "Are you going to?"

Gritting my teeth, I forced myself up, fighting my swimming vision.

She let out a little cry. "Lie down! What are you doing?"

I cupped her face, tracing the apple of her cheek with my thumb. "Who do you belong to, *conejita?*" Lyse's gaze met mine. Tears shimmered in her dark eyes. "Who. Do. You. Belong. To?"

"You," she said.



I pulled her in and kissed her. It wasn't chaste; it wasn't gentle. I forced her lips open with my tongue, and I claimed her until she whimpered and pressed into my touch. "You're mine, Lyse," I said against her mouth. "I don't break what's mine. Understand?"

Lyse sniffled. "You don't?"

"Never," I swore. "I protect what's mine."

She kissed me, soft but insistent, and we settled back together so that she was in my arms again. We were quiet for a long while. "I knew that my family saw me as a business transaction," she said. Her voice was muted. "That's normal for us, right? But..." She sniffled. "I thought they felt *something* for me." She looked up at me. "Families are supposed to have some kind of affection for each other, right?"

"I don't know," I admitted. I couldn't truly say that I loved anyone outside of my siblings. "Matteo sticks up for you, right?"

She shrugged. "He and I have a good relationship, but he would never go against Apá's wishes." Lyse swiped at her eyes. Tears were wetting my shirt. "He would never protect me from him."

"I will," I declared, feeling nearly savage. "I'll protect you from everything."

"From your family?" she asked.

"That won't happen."

She scoffed. "I'm a Rojas, even abandoned as I am," she said. "They'll never accept me."

I tightened my hold on her, until my muscles were screaming from the strain. "They will," I promised. "I'll make sure of it."

"But if they don't?"

"Then we'll figure something out." I pressed my lips against the top of her head. "I would do anything for you." It was a bold declaration, and I wasn't even sure why I said it...but I knew that I would. Was that love? I wasn't sure, but I had never felt this way before.

“Anything?” Lyse asked, and her voice was teasing now.

“Anything,” I said. “You want your father’s head on a platter? I’ll bring it to you personally.”

It might have been a step too far, but Lyse laughed and rubbed her face against my chest. The sound thrilled through me; I didn’t think that I would ever get tired of it. “I don’t think people who commit patricide live long in our circles,” she said lightly, but it felt like a bucket of ice water was dumped over my head.

“Sometimes it’s necessary,” I said. My head felt like it was full of cotton.

“What do you mean?”

I took a breath. If I told her this, it would truly lash us together. “My Padre is dead,” I said.

Lyse wasn’t surprised. “My father said he was sick. They had meetings at the hospice he was staying in.”

*Well...that’s interesting.* I filed that information away for later; it might not matter that Luis was close to Padre, but Angel might want to know just how close our fathers were. “I killed him.”

Lyse sat up, alarmed. “You did what?”

I wanted to pull her down into my arms, but I didn’t. I wouldn’t force her into my arms if she didn’t want to be there. “The night that I attacked your engagement dinner,” I said, heart beginning to thump against my chest, “Angel was rushed back into surgery because he was hemorrhaging. My sister-in-law was screaming; everything was chaotic...and I *needed* to make someone pay. I knew that Angel had gone to the nursing home to visit Padre the night that he was attacked. Angel never told us where he’d stashed him, but it wasn’t hard to find the location in his office. I didn’t know if he was dead or not, but I had to check. When I got there, he was still alive, and when he saw me, he started laughing and congratulating me on ‘winning’ over Angel finally, and I knew that Padre had planned everything.” I sneered. “As if I ever wanted to be in charge. As if I would *ever* want Angel dead.”

Lyse started rubbing my arm, and after a moment of hesitation, she lay back down in my arms and held me close. I tipped her head up and kissed her; I wanted to be as close to her as I possibly could. “He was a cruel man,” she murmured.

I nodded. “I nearly couldn’t do it.” Shame flooded through me. I wasn’t sure if I was embarrassed about what I had done, or the fact that I *couldn’t* put my hands directly on my father. “I put a pillow over his face. He was too weak to fight me off. It didn’t—” I took in a breath. “It didn’t take long.”

The flatlining machine had brought the nurses running while I managed to slip out undetected. I had killed so many men at this point, but this was the only one that I thought about. Had nightmares about.

But that didn’t mean that I regretted my decision. My Padre had to die, just like the Rojas had to die. It was the only thing that would make what happened okay. I could handle the nightmares. I could make Angel understand when I told him, I think. He would protect me as much as he could when word got out that I committed the greatest of sins. I was nearly sure of it.

Lyse lay against me for a long while. “I wish you would have gotten Apá too,” she admitted softly. “He deserves to die.”

“Tell me when,” I said, “and I’ll make it happen.”



*Lyse*

What I’d said was evil. To hope for my father’s death was *evil*, but the longer Omar looked at me, the more I shivered in a mix of horror and desire. “Omar,” I sighed. *Why do I want him?* He was injured; he had basically promised to murder my family...and yet I didn’t think I had ever wanted him more than I did right then.

He picked up on it immediately, and a smug smile stretched across his face. “What do you need, *conejita?*”

“You’re hurt.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

“Omar.” He took my hand, kissed my fingers, before placing them against the zipper on his dark jeans. I gasped: he was hard. *How?* “That’s a bad idea,” I told him. “We can’t—”

“What do you *need*, Lyse? You can have it.” He pressed our hands down against him. “I can give it to you.”

My lower belly clenched with want. “How would this work?”

“Ride me.”

*What?* “Like...me on top?”

He waggled his eyebrows. “Are you up for the challenge, *conejita?*”

Like I could ever back down from a challenge like that. “Tell me what to do,” I said, sitting up.

Omar reached down and unzipped his jeans, pulling himself out. If I thought about any of the last few hours too long, I would start laughing, and I wouldn’t stop until I cried. Omar lay there, dirty and damp and injured, but he was hard as steel. “Sling your leg over,” he said.

I stood up long enough to push my pants down my hips, and kicked them off before I straddled him as he indicated. I shivered as I pressed against him. “What now?” I asked, breathless.

“Lean down,” he said and dragged me so that we were chest-to-chest. He reached down and angled himself against where I was wet and waiting for him. With a gentle push, he was inside me, and I let out a breath in a long huff. “Now, sit up.”

I frowned. “That won’t hurt you?”

He shook his head, chuckling. “Just the opposite, *conejita.*”

Shaking, I pushed so that I was sitting on his lap. “Oh,” I gasped. I had never felt so full before. “I need to—” My hips hitched, and Omar groaned.

“That’s it, Lyse.” His hands grasped my hips and helped to guide me as I began to move against him. Grinding against him sent lightning up my spine, but if I used my knees to lift

myself up, Omar would let out a delicious sound from deep in his chest.

We found a rhythm that had me breathless, and I tipped my head up, losing myself to the pleasure that was coursing through me. I startled when I felt his thumb against my clit, and that gradual sensation was suddenly sharp and immediate and almost too much. Despite the burn in my thighs, I moved against him harder, and half of the sounds that he made were ones of pain, but I didn't care.

Neither did he.

"Taking me so well," Omar grunted, tightening his grip on my hips. "Made to take me like this, weren't you, *conejita*?"

I nodded, hardly hearing what he was saying but knowing that it was driving me closer and closer to that shining place. "I want you to come," I told him, leaning down so that I could kiss him. I needed to feel his mouth against mine.

Omar kissed me, long and deep, and he canted his hips against mine. I let out a yelp, and he hissed in pain, but he braced me against him and kept thrusting up until we were both breathless. "Come for me," he panted against my mouth.

I did. I wouldn't have been able to stop myself if I tried. I ground into him, chasing that pleasure, and I heard him groan as he let go as well. He settled back, drained of energy, and I lay against him, panting. "Are you okay?" I asked.

He chuckled. "I've never been better."

## CHAPTER 23

## *Lyse*

“**H**ermano, if you would just listen—”

Omar’s tight, raised whisper brought me back to the world, but I tried my best to keep my breathing even. He would probably be upset if he knew that I was pretending to sleep to listen to his phone call...but it was his own fault. Omar asked me to stay in his bed last night, *and* he’d woken me up.

“Angel, I am coming home. I just needed to settle a few things on the island first! I rushed back to the mainland to make sure you weren’t braindead, but I left some things in the air.”

I couldn’t hear Angel’s response, but his tone suggested that he was yelling. “Just give me two days, *hermano*, and I’ll explain everything, I swear.” More yelling, and Omar ended the call with a huff. We lay there for a moment, and then Omar let out a dark chuckle. “Hear anything particularly interesting, *conejita*?”

I froze for a moment, and then relaxed. There was no way to pretend that he hadn’t caught me, so why should I try? “Angel sounded mad,” I said instead, propping myself up on my elbow so that I could look at him.

Omar was looking a little worse for wear this morning. His bruises were purple and black, and his cheek was swollen, probably from a cut inside his mouth. He looked every bit the savage beast that people claimed he was...and I wanted him. Messy as we both were from a night of fitful sleep interrupted by my alarm going off every other hour, beaten to within an

inch of his life, and he was still the most handsome man I'd ever seen.

"I was supposed to be at home last night," he said, "but I came here instead. Angel wants to know why."

Understanding dawned. "But you can't tell him about me yet, right?"

Omar frowned. "I'm figuring it all out."

*Whatever that means*, I thought and moved to sit up. Maybe while Omar napped today, I could paint.

With a yelp, Omar shoved me onto my back so that he was pressed, naked as he was, against me. "Omar, your *head!* You were in an accident less than twelve hours ago."

The playfulness leached out of his expression. "It wasn't an accident. Your father sent someone after me, and had he been any more proficient at his job, I wouldn't be here."

A shiver ran down my spine. "You killed him, right? Before the crash?"

"I know that he was your *primo.*"

*Does he think I care about that?* Maybe I should care that yet another of my cousins was dead because of Omar...but I couldn't find it in myself to care. It was just the opposite, in fact. I was *glad* that Omar had gotten rid of him. I reached up and, gently, cupped his cheek. "He hurt you," I said.

Omar seemed to understand what I was asking, and he dipped his head and kissed me. "Yes, *conejita*, I killed him before I crashed the boat." The words were whispered against my mouth.

"Good." It sounded heartless, but my family had given me up for dead. As much as I wanted to distance myself from it, it still hurt beyond reason that my own father would just...let me go. Especially after the hell he put me through growing up in his household. He had done everything in his power to mold me into the perfect daughter, and now, because Felix didn't think we'd make a good match after all, he was willing to let Omar do whatever he wanted to me?



If the Rojas family could dispose of me that easily, then I had nothing more to feel guilty about. I wanted Omar...I might be falling in love with him. What was stopping me from giving in to that feeling?

"I'm glad that you came back to me," I admitted softly. "It's all I thought about while you were gone."

Omar looked like I'd sucker-punched him. "Did you, now?" He was trying to tease, but his voice was thick. He dipped down for a kiss.

"Helena said no strenuous activity," I reminded him, even as I spread my legs to bring him even closer to me. I'd thrown on one of his massive tee shirts the night before, but I'd forgone anything else.

Omar snorted. "I think we already tested that, *conejita*."

I felt the heat rush to my face. "You weren't doing much, though." He looked absolutely offended by that, and I had to giggle. "You know what I mean."

Omar buried his face against my throat, nipping and sucking until I was shivering against him. "Did you like being in charge, Lyse?" he murmured in my ear. "Taking your pleasure for yourself?"

I *had* enjoyed the feeling of Omar beneath me. There had been power in taking what I wanted from him. "Did you enjoy it?" I asked, and I hated how...weak I sounded asking that. Like I was begging for his approval or something.

Mirth sparkled in Omar's eyes, but he didn't tease. Instead, he reached down and wrapped a hand around my thigh and spread my legs even more so that he could rest directly against me. He was hard, wanting. "I'll never *not* enjoy being inside you."

I smacked his shoulder lightly. "That's such a *man* answer."

Omar considered me for a moment. Then, with a little adjusting, he pressed himself inside me, forcing a groan from my throat. "Didn't even touch you, and you're wet for me," he said. "It's the best fucking feeling in the world."

His hips canted against mine, slow but forceful, and I clutched at his shoulders, already overwhelmed between the feeling of him stretching me open and the words he was whispering in my ear.

“*Omar.*”

“Is that what you wanted to hear, *conejita*?” he grunted as he set a steady, thudding rhythm. “That you’re so sweet and tight around me that I feel like I’m going to lose my goddamn mind?” He nipped at my ear, and I gasped, spiraling into that hazy, pleasurable place that he alone seemed to be able to get me to. “Do you want me to tell you all the ways I want to teach you pleasure?”

I moaned. “Please.” I had no idea what exactly I was asking for, but Omar always seemed to know. Very gently, he pulled away, shushing me softly when I cried out, and turned me onto my stomach.

“Bring your knees up,” he said, helping to position me so that my chest was pressed against the mattress, and my ass was in the air. It was an undignified position, to say the least, but the moment I felt Omar brush against me, all the shame flew away.

He thrust inside me, and he felt even bigger like this. I cried out at the pleasure and pain that shot through me. “Oh my God,” I sobbed out, gripping the sheets hard in my hands.

“Feels good, *conejita*?” His body clapped against mine as he sped up.

“*Yes.*” Heat pooled in my groin, and all my muscles tensed in the face of the pleasure that was barreling down on me. “I’ve never—” I gasped when he reached around and found my clit with his fingers.

“Never what?”

I whimpered, unable to process the sensations building within me. “Never felt *so* good.”

Omar’s lips brushed my shoulders, the back of my neck, and I cried out when he set his teeth into my shoulder. Not so hard that it hurt, but enough that I crashed into my orgasm almost

violently. I heard a deep groan as his hips shuddered against me as he came.

Carefully, Omar slipped away from me and landed on his back. I leaned over him, dropping a kiss on his lips. “You’re going to hurt yourself if you keep doing that,” I said.

Omar grinned at me, and for a moment, I saw what he might have looked like as a boy, carefree and joyous, before his father had trained him to be a killing machine. “I never intend to stop, *conejita*,” he countered, looking so supremely smug that I could do nothing but kiss him again.

It was wrong to be enjoying this with him. There were so many things that we needed to discuss and figure out, but here, now, the world had narrowed to just the two of us. “It’s strange,” I mused.

“What?”

“I don’t think I’ve ever been so happy before,” I admitted, “and it should feel wrong. *You* should feel wrong.”

The easy smile on his face shifted into something much more serious. His eyes became even more intense. “Does it feel wrong?”

I shook my head, wanting nothing more than to bury my head in his chest, but I knew that I couldn’t. That this conversation was important. “No, it doesn’t feel wrong.”

He reached out and touched my arm. The pads of his fingers felt rough against my skin, and I shivered. “You sound upset.”

“I’m not,” I insisted. “I feel like I *should* be upset. I should be fuming that you haven’t taken me home yet, but I’m more afraid that you’ll be forced to, and this will all come to an end.”

Omar dragged me down into his arms, like he couldn’t stand that I was three inches away from him. “It won’t end.”

I shook my head. “You can’t promise that. Eventually—”

“Eventually, what?” he snapped. The first strains of anger entered his voice. “Your family has given you up for dead, remember? You can’t go back there.”

“Your family wants me dead, remember?” I parroted, pushing away so that I could sit up again. That perfect, shining bubble had popped, and I wished I hadn’t said anything at all...but I wasn’t wrong. Omar and I were dreaming if we thought we could maintain whatever this was for longer than the next few days. “You can’t take me to the Castillo compound and just expect them to accept me. What about this won’t end, exactly? *Tenemos que despertarnos.*”

Omar glared at me; his jaw was set into a stubborn sneer. I wanted to be in his arms, comfort him and let him comfort me, but my *Bestia* wasn’t the only one who could be stubborn. When I didn’t fold under the weight of his stare like he probably thought I would, Omar gripped my arms, just this side of too-tight, and reeled me in again. His mouth was on mine before I could say anything.

His lips and tongue were insistent, and my resolve to not kiss him back broke relatively quickly. I gave in with a sigh and met his tongue with my own, more confident about kissing now than I was a few days ago.

“We will figure this out,” Omar said with so much determination that it was hard not to believe him. “I’m not letting you go.”

“Because I belong to you?”

He smiled, brilliant. “Exactly.”

## CHAPTER 24

## Omar

“If you are not on a boat home in *twenty minutes*, I am going to send someone to collect you,” Angel snarled. “It will not end well for you.”

*Mierda*. I was completely out of excuses as to why I couldn’t come home. I told him about being attacked on my return to the island and the crash, leaving out anything to do with Lyse, but my bruises were already fading, and we both knew that there was another speedboat in the dry dock.

“Angel, trust me, *por favor*. I need more time.”

My brother let out a sound that could only be of frustration. “Explain why you aren’t here,” he said, “and I’ll consider it.”

But what was there to say? I have Luis Rojas’s daughter here, and I’m pretty sure that I’ve fallen in love with her? Pretty please don’t have her murdered? It was laughable at best, a death sentence for us both at worst.

I sighed. “I just need time, *hermano*. I promise I’ll explain as soon as I can.” I hung up before Angel could say anything else. It didn’t ring again. *The chances of him actually sending someone to get me are a good...eighty percent*, I thought. *What a fucking mess*.

When I stepped out of the office, I heard music coming from the kitchen. It wasn’t totally unusual for Helena to put on something that she could move around to, but today, something about the happy beat soured my mood even more.

I stormed into the kitchen and shut off the radio that she’d set on the counter. She and Lyse turned on me: it seemed I caught

them mid-cooking lesson. Helena was teaching Lyse to make cachitos. The dough for the pastry was resting, and they were currently shredding the cheese that would be baked into it.

“Omar?” Lyse asked, and I ground my teeth together. She looked beautiful, covered in flour, and it was *impossible* to be upset by the sight of her doing anything remotely domestic. It gave me too many ideas about the future. “Are you okay?”

“I have a headache,” I lied. “Could you two make breakfast *without* the concert going on?”

Helena’s frown told me that she didn’t believe me for a second, but it didn’t matter. I didn’t need her to believe me. I just needed her to keep the damn radio off until I didn’t want to punt it through the wall. “Do you need to go lie down?” Lyse asked. “I can bring you—”

“I’m not a *child*,” I snapped back and hated myself for it. She was being wonderful; she didn’t deserve to bear the brunt of my foul mood. “I don’t need you to coddle me, all right?”

Lyse blinked. “I’ll treat you however I like, *pendejo*,” she hissed, drawing herself up to her full height...which was still woefully short compared to me. “Helena and I were having a good time. If you have a problem with that, find your way out of the kitchen. If you’re not feeling good, go take a nap. But don’t come in here and snipe at us because you’re in need of attention or whatever.”

It was unfair how hot Lyse was when she was standing up for herself. It shouldn’t be possible to be pissed off *and* turned on at the same time by the same person, but I both wanted to shake her for her impertinence and carry her off to the bedroom for it.

I needed to *break* something. That always helped when I was in a mood like this. Whether that meant going to the gun range and obliterating targets or finding a woman who didn’t mind if I got rough with her, it didn’t really matter.

I ran my hands through my hair. “My apologies,” I said through my teeth. For Lyse, I wanted to be better. I wanted to be more than just the guy who needed to destroy things. So, in

the interest of not being that guy, I left them standing in the kitchen, wearing identical expressions of bewilderment.

As much as I didn't want to go back to my office, it was the only place that no one would bother me...except for Lili, who had called my phone no less than a dozen times. "*Put a madre,*" I muttered and returned her call. While it was never a good idea to keep Angel waiting, it was even worse with Lili. If she demanded that you call her back, you did it, or faced the consequences...and my sister could be *very* creative.

"Where. Are. You?" Lili answered the phone screaming, and I winced.

"On the island," I said, as if she didn't know. "I'll be home soon."

"Tonight," Lili said. "It has to be tonight."

My hand curled into a fist. If I put it through the wall, would that make me feel better or worse? "Why does it have to be tonight, *Mija?*"

"Angel is being released from the hospital. You have to be here when he gets home."

It should be a joyous thing that, after being in a coma for two weeks, Angel was able to come home to finish up his recovery. It *was* a good thing...and yet, a pit opened in my stomach. "I'll be home as soon as I can," I said.

Lili was quiet for a moment. "That wasn't you promising to be here, *idiota*. I know the difference."

*Damn her.* "I'll be home as soon as I can," I repeated.

"If Angel kills you, that's not on me." She meant it to be a joke, but it fell flat against my ear. Until this point, I never thought of my brother as someone I would have to seriously worry about...but if I brought Lyse to the compound, there was a good chance that that would change.

I was quickly coming to a fork in the metaphorical road — one that I never saw myself coming to. My family had always been the most important thing in the world to me...but the idea of



losing Lyse made me want to smash things apart with my bare hands.

“—mar? Omar! *Idiota*, what the hell are you doing?”

I startled out of my thoughts. “I’m here,” I assured her. “I didn’t hang up.”

She sighed. “What is going on with you? I know that everything went bad for a little while there, but the police have backed off, and Angel is going to be okay! Why are you being weird?”

*Because I killed my father and then went on a murderous rampage and kidnapped the woman who might be the love of my life.* But there was no way to say all that without sounding absolutely crazy. I was the Castillos’ enforcer. Death and violence came with the territory, and I was nothing if not loyal. One woman should not be testing me this way. “Do you ever get tired of it all?” I asked.

“What are you saying?”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. Maybe having Efrain set me up a range to practice at wouldn’t be the worst idea. “Nothing,” I said. “I think that concussion has scrambled my brain a little. I’ll make preparations to come home, okay? Stop worrying about it. I haven’t run away.”

*Except that you did,* my brain whispered to me. “Okay.” Lili didn’t sound entirely convinced...but I guess I couldn’t fault her for that. “We’ll see you soon, then.”

“Soon,” I promised.

I had to stop myself from throwing the phone at the wall after I hung up. It would have been satisfying to see it smash into tiny pieces, but it wouldn’t make a dent in the dark feeling that was eating me up from the inside out.

That red, hazy *rage* was building again, but this time, it had no target. I was furious with *myself*, and I’d never really been the type for self-destruction. Instead, I would take it out on someone who needed punishment, or on furniture, or on the range.

When my office door swung open, it was the very *last* thing that I needed. “The cachitos are finished!” Lyse announced, coming to the office holding a plate of the ham and cheese stuffed pastries up for me to see. “I wanted to—”

I looked at her, and the world around me faded. “You’re not allowed in here.” The words came out deadly calm, and Lyse jerked at the tone. “I’ve told you that countless times. Not in my office.”

Her mouth twisted into a frown. “You told me not to be in your bedroom either, but that’s where I slept last night.”

“I’m not fucking you in here. Get out.”

She put the plate down on my desk hard. The porcelain of the plate clattered against the hardwood, and the cachitos jumped. “If you keep speaking to me that way, you won’t be *fucking* me anywhere.”

It was the wrong thing to say. I snatched the plate off the desk and threw it past her so that it burst into an explosion of porcelain. Lyse yelped and shrank away, making herself smaller. “Get. Out.”

“Omar!”

“Get out!” The words came out in a scream, and when Lyse turned and fled, I went after her. “You don’t get to do whatever you want,” I pelted the words at her back. “You can’t just barge into my office, full of documents that are important to the Castillos, when I have *specifically* told you that it was off-limits. Do you want to die? If Angel found out that I let you near any of that, he would flay you alive! Do you understand?”

I chased her up the stairs and down the long corridor until she flung herself into her room and slammed the door in my face. It locked from the outside, of course, so she couldn’t *really* keep me out. But the sound of the door snapping shut forced some sense into my brain. The haze retreated.

*What have I done?*

Taking a breath, I gently knocked at the door. “Lyse? I’m so sorry.”

“What in Heaven’s name are you doing?” Helena came barreling down the hallway at me. Her sharp hands shoved at my shoulder, and I winced at the flare-up of pain. The bruises from the attack and accident were fading to a mottled yellow, but it didn’t mean that it didn’t hurt if a grown woman bulldozed into me. “Carrying on that way?” Her voice was shrill; it made my head hurt. “You’re acting like a child.”

“I’m—” I swallowed. “She—”

“She was bringing you breakfast, not trying to gather the business secrets of the Castillos, and you know that.”

I did. Lyse couldn’t have been clearer about how much she didn’t care about the business end of either family. “I’m sorry.”

Helena snorted. “It’s not me that you should be apologizing to.”

I gestured to the closed door. “What did you think I was doing when you came running into me?”

“Chasing her up here and changing your mind at the last second is not the time for a sincere apology.” She smacked me again. “Honestly! ¿*Que te crio?*”

“Helena.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Don’t try to intimidate me now, *jefe*. You know you’re in the wrong, so you’re getting defensive, but I won’t put up with that nonsense.” She pointed her finger in my face: a bold move, even for her. “You find a way to make it up to her, do you hear me?”

*I shouldn’t let her get away with how she talks to me.* But instead of saying anything, I just nodded. “I will.” She pushed me down the hall, away from her door. “What are you doing? How am I supposed to apologize?”

“*First*, you’re going to clean up the mess you made in your office,” she said. “That’ll give you time to think before you say or do anything else that stupid.” She *tsked* softly. “You’re better than this, Omar.” Helena sounded so disappointed that it actually hurt.

But I wasn't better than this. Big and violent was all I'd ever be.

## CHAPTER 25

## *Lyse*

**M**y lungs refused to pull in oxygen. I leaned against the door and tried to force myself to take in as deep a breath as I could, but my diaphragm was trapped under the weight of my panic. *We were past that*, I thought. *Right?*

Omar had promised me that he took care of what belonged to him...but the look that I saw in his eyes before I ran from his office hadn't been the man who'd shared his smiles and his bed with me. They couldn't be the same person.

Except that I knew they were. I'd known that all along: Omar wasn't called *La Bestia* out of some misunderstanding or exaggeration. He was capable of carnage, and he'd proven that true again and again.

I shivered and swiped at the tears running down my face. I'd heard Helena out in the hallway and their retreating footsteps. It was a good thing: I couldn't be trapped in this room again. I'd lose my mind first. Turning around, I grabbed the doorknob, and for a moment, I felt a real fear that he'd locked it without my noticing.

But the door opened without an issue, and I was able to step out into the empty hallway. I felt like I was right back where I started, scampering around half-afraid that Omar would jump out and grab me. Squaring my shoulders, I trekked downstairs and found Helena in the kitchen, eating one of the cachitos that we made. "Come sit," she called as soon as she saw me.

"Omar isn't here?"

“He’s been sent to clean his office, and then he’s to be outdoors until at least lunch.”

I let out a relieved sigh, and I accepted it when she handed me one of the pastries. It was flaky and smelled delicious; it was something that I might have made with Madre when I was very young, before my “duty” became my entire life.

“You don’t have to forgive him,” Helena said after the silence had stretched between us for way too long.

“But?”

The older woman gave me a tired smile. She reached over and patted my cheek, affectionate to a fault. *Why couldn’t you have been my mother?* Helena hadn’t told me if she was married or had children, but if she didn’t have any, it was a shame. “But that’s not who he is, you know? He’s always run a little hotter than most, yes, but he’s the most loyal person you’ll ever know.”

“Loyal to his family,” I pointed out. “Which I’m not.”

Helena shook her head. “No, you’re not family in the way that you’re related by blood, but you have to know that he cares for you.”

I shrugged. I *thought* that he might, but that cold, angry stare told me that I was still the enemy, and I knew what Omar did to his enemies. “I’ll never be a Castillo.”

Helena hummed softly. “That’s not a bad thing, *mi amor*,” she said. “Omar deserves to have something kind in his life, something that doesn’t demand he be a monster.” *But he is a monster.* I didn’t have to say it because Helena’s sad sigh told me that she already knew what I was thinking. “Did you know that Omar killed a man for the first time at thirteen?”

I couldn’t bite back my gasp. Even Apá had waited until Matteo was twenty before he ever held a gun on someone. “Why so young?”

“Gustavo wanted his sons to be tough,” Helena said. “Angel was his heir: he had to be ruthless, yes, but smart and charming too. Omar, on the other hand, had to be terrifying. What’s more terrifying than a cold-blooded killer?” Her

expression became even more sad. “When the opportunity arose, Gustavo put the gun in Omar’s hand and told him to shoot, and because he didn’t want to disappoint his father, he did.” She shrugged, and it was a movement that could have meant anything. “He’s been that way ever since.”

My mind tried to wrap itself around the idea of a pre-pubescent Omar executing someone on his father’s orders, and the concept was so wholly awful that I couldn’t picture it. What father did that to his own son? Apá might be training Matteo to do the same thing — and despite his lingering immaturity, Matteo could be terrifying in his own right — but at least he’d waited until Matteo was a man before starting that training.

“Do you think...” I swallowed hard. “Do you think someone who grew up that way could ever truly love someone else? Or are they irreparably broken?”

Helena was quiet for a long while. She took a bite of her pastry and chewed it slowly: I appreciated that she was thinking about my question. I appreciated that the older woman didn’t pull punches, nor did she placate. She meant what she said. “I think whoever manages to win Omar’s heart will be truly blessed. That person will never have to worry about betrayal: Omar would rather cut off one of his own limbs than hurt the ones he loves.”

But he *had* hurt me, and he scared me, and I never knew who I was going to end up with day to day, and I didn’t think that I could handle that. “It can’t work between us.”

“Anything can work if you want it to.” That didn’t ring true at all. “Just...give him a little time, and I’ll bet he’ll come looking for you.”

I shivered at that thought. “What if I don’t want him to find me?”

Helena stared at me for a long while. “Then that’s for you to figure out.”

After helping Helena with the dishes, I thought of going up to my studio, but I couldn’t make myself climb the stairs.



Instead, I wandered out the front door and down onto the beach. I hadn't spent much time out here since Omar's boat crashed into the dock.

Efrain and Pascal had mostly rebuilt it: it wasn't nearly as pretty, but it was functional, and there was another boat that had been placed in the water. Ready and waiting for whenever Omar decided to return to Miami.

My chest throbbed at the thought of him leaving, and I sank down into the sand, my mind a jumble of thoughts. I didn't want him to find me. I didn't particularly want to look at him. At the same time, I couldn't bear the thought of him leaving me here.

For the first time since leaving that locked room, I felt trapped. The island was just big enough to fool me into thinking that I had freedom. There was no one watching my every move, it was true, but then again, there was nowhere for me to go. The house had a window that looked out at every bit of the island, and even if it was a two mile walk all the way around, it was still small. With a vast sea on every side that made it impossible for someone who couldn't swim to leave.

I felt like laughing and crying all at once: I'd gotten the freedom from my family that I'd always wanted, only to be trapped with a beast who might or might not turn on me one day. It was insane. What was I going to do?

"Lyse!"

I cringed. *Helena said he'd come looking for me*, I thought. But when I turned my head to look for Omar, I saw a small, rubber dinghy being pulled up on the island by my cousin, Jesus. I blinked. It had to be a mirage. What in the world was he doing here?

He started running toward me. "Lyse! *Prima*, it is good to see you!"

I stood, and he swept me into a hug that was just this side of too-tight. Jesus and I weren't particularly close; I couldn't remember off the top of my head what the last conversation we had was about. But I hugged him back; he was the first

family member that I'd seen in weeks. "How did you get here?" I asked. "How are Matteo and Apá?"

Jesus smiled. I'd always liked his smiles: his mouth split wide, and he looked so genuinely happy. "They're fine," he said. "They're working on a plan to wipe out the Castillos once and for all."

My heart stuttered. "Wipe them out? Isn't that what got us in this mess in the first place?"

Jesus took hold of my wrist and began to tug me down the beach, toward the boat. I dug my heels in a little to slow us down. *I don't want to go with him.* "La Bestia took out too many of us. Your Apá can't ignore it; he'll lose face!" He looked at me, and his smile was hysterical now, his eyes wide and wild. "You don't want your father to look cowardly, do you?"

"Well, no, of course not." I dug my heels in a little more. "How did you find me? Exactly?" Omar telling me that my father had left me for dead came to mind. That, coupled with Jesus's weird, manic smile, sent ice through my veins.

"Javier never checked in like he was supposed to," Jesus said, "so we checked for his last location. It was fairly easy to spot the island after that...and here you were, already on the beach, ready to be rescued." He cocked an eyebrow. "How are you just...outside like this?"

"Where else was I going to go?" I countered.

Jesus nodded. "Well, you've made it extremely easy for me, so thank you." He started tugging me again. "Let's go, Lyse. Your father wants to see you, and so does Matteo."

"Apá told Omar to do what he wanted with me," I argued, fighting back. Was I absolutely crazy? This was my cousin; the man had literally no reason to hurt me, but the closer I got to the rubber dinghy, the more I dug in my feet and leaned my weight on my heels.

Jesus stopped and turned. His face was cold now, like a light had gone off, and all the emotion had leached from his

expression. “Stupid *puta*,” he snarled and backhanded me. I hit the sand with a *thud*.

Pain erupted in my cheek, and my hand automatically reached for my face. It was wet: he’d broken skin. *If Omar sees this, he’ll die*. The thought was an oddly calming one. “Apá sent you after me? To kill me?”

Jesus sneered. “I’m cleaning up the mess,” he said. Reaching behind him, he pulled a handgun out of a holster in the small of his back. He held it up and showed it to me, taunting me by waving it around. “I was supposed to take you back to Miami and dump you somewhere in their territory that was just public enough that it would be easy to find you. Felix would help pin it on the Castillos, and that *cabrón* Angel would be carted off for good.”

I wanted to scream, to wave in the direction of the house, but if I did that, I was as good as dead. I could only hope that someone could see what was going on. “My father is going to start a war. The police aren’t going to cart Angel Castillo off over one dead girl, not when his brother got away with killing twenty. Apá isn’t *thinking*...why do any of you listen to him?”

“You don’t know what the hell you’re talking about.” He clicked the safety off the gun. “But it doesn’t matter. Killing you here shouldn’t derail anything too badly if I bloody you up enough once I get back.”

He pointed the gun at my forehead. My chest went tight as fear bled through me, but instead of begging for my life, only one thought came to mind:

*I didn’t get to tell Omar that I loved him.*

## CHAPTER 26

## Omar

**T** *HWACK!*

The wooden siding of the dry dock exploded into splinters, and I hit the ground, falling back inside the door. Whoever was shooting at me had missed and blown their cover. *Too bad for them*, I thought, and a cruel smile worked its way onto my face.

This was just the sort of thing I needed today. Someone to tear apart with my bare fucking hands.

I reached inside the dry dock and grabbed a large steel wrench that was on the workbench, wishing I had time to open one of those crates stacked to the side. When I peeked out the door, I saw two men. One had a gun plain in his hand, the other did not. *Pendejo*. They weren't my brother's men. Angel had yet to see to his promise to send men after me, though I doubted he would be sending anyone to *shoot* me. So that meant they were sent by Luis Rojas.

Using the doorframe as cover, I aimed at the gun-wielding lackey first and let the wrench fly. It struck him in the forehead and he sprawled on the ground. Before the other had time to react, I burst through the door and tackled him to the ground. I grabbed the wrench from where it had fallen and brought it down again and again until the man's face was unrecognizable, and my face and chest were spattered with blood and other viscera.

I picked up the dropped handgun. If there were these two, there would likely be more. I stood, and on the beach, farther

away than I would like, was a man who had a gun trained on Lyse. I raised the gun in my hand, aiming, and while I could hit a target at this distance, I couldn't risk hitting Lyse.

Instead, I bellowed and started running. The man jerked at the sound, and Lyse sprang immediately, tackling him around the middle, knocking him off his feet. *My girl is so damn clever*, I thought. My chest swelled with pride.

I hit the sand, and it slowed me down. *Goddamn it*. Lyse grappled with the man for his gun, but he rolled them, getting the upper hand. He attempted to hit her with the butt of the gun. He didn't get a chance before I was on him.

"You think you can touch her, fucker?" I spat, dragging him back and throwing him down. He tried to raise the gun against me, but I put my knee into his forearm and rained my fists down on him. "Did Luis send you?" I demanded, and all I received as a response was gurgles.

He went limp, and with the amount of damage to his face, I assumed he was dead. I looked at Lyse, who was lying on the sand, panting. I looked down at the body I was kneeling on. He didn't stir; his face looked concave. I got off of him and went to her, helping her to her feet. There was a small cut on her cheek. It was enough to make me want to kick the bastard again. "Your cousin?" I asked.

She nodded, looking at him. "Jesus."

I sighed. "I keep killing your cousins, *conejita*." I wondered if I should start apologizing.

"He was going to kill me and blame it on your brother," she said. "He deserved what he—" Lyse let out a scream and pushed me as hard as she could at the same time as I heard the booming explosion of a gun going off. I hit the sand with Lyse on top of me.

Jesus wasn't quite as dead as I thought...but he was a shit-poor shot. Jesus tried to aim the gun again, but he collapsed back onto the sand. Lyse was trembling on top of me. "It's okay, *conejita*."

She shook her head and pointed. I followed the direction of her arm and froze. Helena was standing farther up on the beach, clutching her shoulder. Bright red was gushing down her arm and dripping into the sand. “*Mierda!*” I scrambled to get up, and I pulled Lyse with me. I needed to deal with Jesus...but I couldn’t abandon Helena.

I looked down at the bloody mess of the man and took his gun. I popped the clip and emptied it before tucking the gun into my pocket. “Helena,” I called to the woman, practically dragging Lyse up the beach.

“Is he dead, *jefe?*” Her teeth were chattering together. She was going into shock. *Shit.*

“Dead,” I said, “or mangled beyond all recognition. His own family won’t know him.” We reached Helena, and I saw immediately that the bullet had ripped a hole in her shoulder, but at the very least, she had both an entry and an exit wound. No exploratory surgery in the kitchen this time.

“Come on,” I said. “I’ll show you how—”

“Omar!”

Lyse was pointing. Somehow, Jesus had gotten into his boat and was currently taking it out into the deep water. *Mierda.* “Go after him,” Helena panted as she clutched her arm. “I’m fine.”

“You’re *not* fine,” Lyse said. Her voice bordered on shrill. At this rate, both women were going to go into shock.

“She’s right,” I said. “We need to take care of you. I’ll take care of him later. He’s not likely to get far in the condition he’s in...he may even die before he gets back to whatever boat he launched the dinghy from.” It was a vow to them both.

“Do you think there’s more of them?” Lyse sounded horrified.

“I took care of two others already by the dry dock.” I didn’t want to imagine what would happen if the Rojas knew we had all those guns here. I picked Helena up in a bridal carry, and we started for the house. “If there’s any more, they won’t come here until they’ve regrouped and replanned.” I glanced

at Lyse. “Your father’s men are vastly underprepared. Who trains them?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “Matteo has a private tutor who takes him to the range, but I’m not sure if the others are given the same opportunity.”

“I’m going to say no.” *Typical shitty leader*, I thought. Padre, at the very least, insisted that the men be trained. When I hit a certain number of kills — though I wasn’t sure what that magic number was — Padre had made it my responsibility to make sure the men were in fighting shape.

If Matteo was still being trained himself, it meant he wasn’t in a position to teach anyone else yet. So, what, Luis was just hoping that his men trained enough on their own without any support?

“The first aid kit is back in the pantry,” I told Lyse. “Grab it for us.”

She looked almost relieved to have something to do, and she ran to fetch the kit. Helena was pale, but her eyes were bright and clear. She smiled at me. “This is the first time that we’ll be doing this in reverse,” she said.

I hummed. “It better be the last time.”

She raised her eyebrow at me. “I think I’ve said something like that to you before, *mijo*. It never quite seems to work that way.”

“Yes,” I said, “but it’s my job. It’s yours to stay in the house when bad things are happening. Safe, away from the danger.”

“I saw that man point his gun at Lyse. I couldn’t let him hurt her.”

“And what, pray tell, could you do about a man with a gun?”

She brought a knife from her pocket. It still had the guard on it. “I was going to sneak up behind him if I could.”

I wanted to hug the woman, but I didn’t dare for fear of hurting her shoulder. “You’re very brave.”



She rolled her eyes. “Yeah, yeah. Just bandage me and get me one of your good pills. I want to sleep for the next decade.”

Lyse returned, and I had her help me gently lift the sleeve of Helena’s blouse out of the way so that we could get a look at the wound. Like I’d suspected outside, it was a through and through, but the flesh was red and torn. “If I stitch this, it’s going to be ugly.” I sighed. “I should have Efrain take you to a hospital.”

Helena shook her head. “Just close it,” she said. “I’m fine.”

“It could get infected,” Lyse argued.

For once, Helena gave her a look that wasn’t entirely friendly. “I don’t want to argue with either of you. Get it closed and let me go to bed.”

“Okay,” I gave in.

Lyse opened the kit. “Let me,” she said. “I’m good with traditional stitches.” She looked at the wound with distaste. “This is too much for liquid stitches or Steri-Strips.”

I was hoping to avoid that, but she was right. I distracted Helena while Lyse worked the medical-grade thread through her skin with the hooked needle. For her part, Helena took the pain like a champ: she gritted her teeth through most of it.

“Done,” Lyse said, and her voice sounded faraway, like she was barely holding on to reality.

I took the gauze from her. “I’ll do the rest,” I said and wrapped Helena’s shoulder as quickly as I could without jostling her. Lyse was going to have a breakdown here soon, and I couldn’t handle the both of them at once.

When Helena was bandaged, I dug an unlabeled, orange prescription bottle out of the cupboard near the sink and produced two white pills. “What is this?”

“You asked for the good stuff,” I said. “These are the best I have.”

She eyed them, as if they were going to jump up and bite her somehow. “I’ll sleep?”

I let out a laugh. It was creaky and full of rust, but it was a laugh all the same. “We’ll wake you up for dinner tomorrow.” She tossed both pills into her mouth and swallowed them dry.

“*Ay!*” I couldn’t help but be impressed. I wouldn’t have been able to do that.

“I want to go to bed,” she said. “The faster they get in my system, the faster I’ll sleep.”

“Do you need help to get to your room?” I let her hold onto me as she climbed off the counter, and I kept holding onto her while she steadied her feet under her.

“No.” She glanced at Lyse, who was staring at nothing, and her hands were shaking the tiniest bit. It would get worse. “Help her. She seems worse off than me.”

“I’m fine,” Lyse argued, but her voice was small and distant.

“I’ll take good care of her. I promise.”

Helena snorted. “Considering all the work I put in so that she wouldn’t leave your stupid ass, you better.”

I kissed her cheek. It was a surprisingly soft gesture between us, and she blinked at me, owlish. “Thank you for convincing her that I wasn’t a total loss.”

Lyse huffed, indignant. “I’ll be the judge of whether or not her little pep talk worked, won’t I?”

## CHAPTER 27

## *Lyse*

I couldn't stop shaking. My skin didn't feel right, like it was simultaneously too big and too tight at the same time. The red stain in the sand where my cousin had been, which I could still see from the window, was obscene. How the man had escaped with that much blood loss was astounding. *He'll probably bleed out before he gets back to Miami*, I thought. *Good.*

My face was tacky with blood, but when I reached a shaking hand up to touch it, Omar gently stopped me. "You don't want to do that," he advised.

"Right." The shaking was getting worse. "Jesus tried to kill me."

Omar nodded. He was keeping his distance. Why wasn't he touching me? I *needed* him to touch me. None of this would be real until he did. I would just be stuck in this awful limbo. "He did, but he didn't succeed. You're alive." Omar said the last part just as much for himself as he did for me.

"I'm alive."

"Yes." His voice was barely a whisper.

I was still trembling, and my skin was getting itchy. "You aren't touching me."

He clenched his hands into fists. "Do you want me to?"

I nodded, almost snapping my neck violently. "I need—"

Omar swept me up into his arms before I could finish the sentence. His mouth found mine, and we kissed, deep and

searching. It tasted like blood and sand, but I didn't care. I looped my arms around his neck and jumped. He caught me easily and wrapped an arm around my waist, keeping me pinned against him.

Without pausing in the way he was devouring my mouth, he climbed the stairs, and I never once worried that he would drop me. "I need to turn the shower on, *conejita*," he said softly against my mouth.

"No."

He smiled, and it was an ugly thing with the amount of blood on his face, but my body burned with desire. It was macabre, but I didn't care. This wasn't about a simple want anymore; I needed him. "We have to take a shower, Lyse." He cupped my face, unafraid of the mess sticking to it. "I won't leave you alone for a second," he promised, "but we have to get clean."

I glared at him as he set me on my feet. "You better not leave."

He shook his head. "Never."

True to his word, as he shuffled around the bathroom, he didn't leave me alone. He didn't take his hand off of me. In the cavernous space, I was never more than a few inches from him. His hand stayed on my shoulder or pressed against my lower back, or his fingers stayed threaded through mine.

When the shower was steaming, Omar stripped us both with mechanical precision. "I'll just...burn these," he muttered, mostly to himself, tossing our clothes into a pile on the floor. Then he moved us into the shower. I groaned under the perfectly hot water.

"Do you want me to wash your hair?" he asked, and it reminded me so much of the time he bathed me after throwing me off the dock that my chest felt tight. Was this going to be our pattern? Violence and then sweetness?

I wasn't sure if I could handle it.

"Sure," I said, despite my racing thoughts.

His shampoo was a little masculine for me, but as he worked it into my hair, I moaned softly. It felt so good. "Tip your head

back,” he said, and then helped me rinse out my hair. “I don’t have any conditioner in here. I don’t really use it. I could get you some?” I lamented the knots my hair would work itself into, but I shook my head.

“You said you wouldn’t leave.”

“I did,” he agreed. He cupped my chin, making it so that I had to look him in the face. “What do you need tonight, Lyse?”

It took me a long while to figure out what he was asking. Because wasn’t I being obvious enough? “I need you to touch —”

“Touch you, yes,” he said, tightening his grip on my chin just a little, jostling my head back and forth playfully. “But how? We could get dry and climb into my bed, and I could hold you, if that’s what you wanted.”

It sounded nice. It had been a rare occurrence so far; I’d gotten the impression that Omar wasn’t used to holding anyone. But it wasn’t what I needed. “Make me feel good,” I begged him. “Make me forget.” Omar didn’t crack a smile or a joke. Instead, he kissed me again before he dropped to his knees. “What are you—?”

Omar’s eyes dragged up my body; I could feel it as surely as I would have felt his hands, and I shivered again, but this time from want. “You asked me to make you feel good,” he said. “You didn’t specify *how*.”

He slung one of my thighs over his shoulder and buried his face against me. I cried out as he licked me with the wide flat of his tongue, almost working me into overstimulation, but then he backed off a little and used the tip of his tongue against my clit. I trembled and whimpered.

There was nothing to hold onto, and my knees were already weak from before. “Omar, I can’t stay standing.”

He pulled back to look up at me. “Don’t lock your knees, *conejita*, you’ll pass out.” Then his tongue returned to torturing me lightly, sending zips up my spine. Pleasure was building in my lower belly, and my hands scrambled across the tiles, trying to find somewhere to grab onto.

Omar grabbed one of my hands and put it into his hair. “Grip it as tight as you want. We aren’t moving until you come on my tongue.”

I tightened my grip, gasping as he circled where I was wet and ready for him with his tongue before dipping it inside, tasting me. His thumb slipped lower, brushing against the untouched furl of my back entrance. He didn’t press inside, just kept a pressure there that sent a confused pleasure through me.

I was barreling toward an orgasm that somehow felt bigger than any that I’d had so far. I was nearly tearing at his hair, nearly screaming, and he was panting against me as if I was doing something other than taking whatever he had to give me.

“I—” A wail ripped from my throat as my body exploded into sensation. I nearly lost my balance, but Omar pushed himself to his feet, keeping me steady. I stared at him, eyes wide, as I turned off the shower taps without looking. “Take me to bed,” I demanded and dragged him in for a kiss. I gasped a little when I realized that I could taste myself on his mouth and tongue. It shouldn’t have been shocking, but it was heady to the extreme. “Now, Omar.”

“Of course.”

We didn’t even bother with towels. He pulled me out of the shower and, kissing me, walked me straight to his bed.

I lay on my back and spread my legs for him, needing him to be inside me, but he seemed content to sit there, pumping his fingers into me lazily. It felt good, great even, but I needed him stretching me to my limits like only he could. “*Omar.*”

He smirked. “That sounds like a complaint,” he said, slipping in a third finger, and I bit back a whine. “After the way you shook apart in the shower, are you still so needy?”

I was, and I wasn’t ashamed of it. “I need to be close to you.”

A look broke through his teasing. Something incredibly soft and fond...and maybe a little afraid. “Okay, *conejita*,” he said, but then he helped to turn me on my side, facing away from him.

“I want to see you,” I protested, even as he lay down with his chest to my back.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “You won’t feel far away when we’re like this.” He lifted up one of my legs and snuggled in close. I did like it: we were twined around each other like string. Then, as he seated himself inside me, it got even better.

I let out a gasp as he filled me. Like when he took me on my knees, he felt even bigger this way. “This is good,” I moaned, throwing my arm up so that I could loop it around his neck. When he began to move, it stole my breath. “Omar, oh *God*.” The sound of us moving together was heavy and primal, flesh hitting flesh. “I’m so wet.” I reached down between my thighs and played my finger over my clit.

“Fuck, Lyse,” Omar moaned. He hooked his chin over my shoulder and stared down the length of my body. “Touch yourself for me. Make yourself feel good.”

Shame bubbled in my chest for a moment, but then he moaned again, soft and tempting, in my ear, and I couldn’t make myself care anymore. I circled that little bundle of nerves, shivering at the combination of the feather-light touch and the heaviness of his hips as he carved a place for himself deep inside me.

His lips tickled at my shoulder and the back of my neck, and it felt sweet...but it wasn’t what I needed. “Bite me,” I commanded him.

Omar snorted. “*What?*”

I wriggled in his grip, and he tightened his hold on me until I squeaked. His hips, if anything, were going faster, as if to punish me for interrupting his rhythm. “Give me marks,” I demanded. “Give me something to remember you by.”

Omar growled against me. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“You can’t promise — oh *shit*, keep doing that, *please* — can’t promise that forever.”

He reached between my thighs and took over for me by touching my clit. He mouthed at my neck now. It wasn’t teeth



yet, but it was getting there. “I can make any promise I want,” he said. “I’ve kept promises for *years*.”

“Bite me,” I pleaded. “I want to be yours.”

His hips slowed, and I almost wailed. He shushed me and petted my thigh. “I’m going to get you there,” he said. “I just needed a second.” That made me giggle, which in turn made him hiss when my inner muscles tightened around him. “You’re not helping.”

“I don’t want to help,” I complained, rocking backward against him. “I want to come.”

He growled and *finally* set his teeth in my shoulder, over the exact spot that he had lightly bitten the other day. He was less afraid to hurt me now, and the sudden pain was eclipsed in the face of the pleasure that broke over me and ran through the length of my body. I shook and cried out, and somewhere in that, I heard him moan out his own climax.

He rested his head between my shoulders, panting, and I did the same with my face pressed into his pillows. When Omar flipped me around so that I was tucked against his chest, I could hear his heartbeat against my ear as I lay there.

We lay like that for a long time. The sky was turning a pink-golden color, and it was getting harder and harder to stay awake. As my eyelids fluttered closed, Omar’s whispered words washed over me.

“Go to sleep, *conejita*. I’ll be here when you wake up.” He sighed, stroking his hand across my cheek. “And then we have to talk about Miami...”

## CHAPTER 28

## Omar

“They’re going to kill me.”

I reached for Lyse’s hand, threading our fingers together even as I stiffened in the front seat of the SUV. I’d never feared the Castillo compound before, but today was a first. “They won’t.”

Lyse wasn’t listening. She was terrified, trying to sink down and disappear into the seat. “You can’t promise that.” It was a repeat of the words she’d said last night.

I brought her hand up to my mouth, brushing a kiss against her knuckles. “I can promise whatever I want, remember?”

“Sure,” she said, eyes never leaving the glaring men beyond the windshield. “But it doesn’t mean *they* have to listen.”

Lyse wasn’t entirely wrong about that. If Angel ordered them to shoot her on sight, they would, regardless of what I said, but I wasn’t going to tell her that. “It’s going to be okay. Let’s go talk to Angel.”

When I’d told her this morning that we would be returning to Miami, she’d agreed but then clung to me in the shower, shaking the entire time. She’d climbed onto the boat and held on for dear life as I sped us to the mainland: her fear of being abandoned outweighed her fear of the water *and* my brother. *I’ll protect you*, I’d promised her, and I would show her how much I meant it.

I got out of the SUV and went around to open her door. Lyse stepped out, and I immediately tucked her behind me. “Just stay with me, *conejita*,” I said and smiled at the guards.

“*Hola, primo,*” I greeted, but both men stared at me as if they’d never seen me before. This was not good. I half-expected them to stop us from going inside, but they stood still as stone as we skirted past.

As we walked into the foyer, Lyse looked around. “Doesn’t look too different from home,” she said. “Similar decorator?”

I smiled and put my arm around her: I appreciated her attempt at humor. “I’m sure there’s only so many that cater to families like ours,” I agreed. “But this house hasn’t changed much since my *madre* died.”

“My mother isn’t dead, but ours still looks like this. Chic, but somewhat trapped in the ’90s.” She motioned to the white marble floors that had a sandy vein running through them.

“I have ...never thought of that before.” The beach house was all white and bright, very timeless, but the compound had been decorated to my mother’s tastes...which had been in the ’90s. No one had thought to change anything since then.

“Maybe your brother’s wife would like to update.”

I swung her into the kitchen, where Emma was elbow deep in a mixing bowl. She looked frazzled. “Speaking of my sister-in-law,” I said, getting her attention. “Lyse, this is Emma.”

Emma looked at me and then at Lyse. “Have you seriously been with a woman this whole time?” she asked. “Because I had to talk Angel out of dragging you home by himself.”

I cleared my throat a little. “Let me do this again. Emma, this is Lyse *Rojas*.”

Her eyes went round. “Are you absolutely out of your mind?”

Lyse actually laughed at that, and Emma cut her piercing blue eyes to her. “Sorry,” Lyse said, sobering.

“No, I’d like to know what’s so funny.”

Lyse was scared again. “I’ve wondered probably a couple dozen times in the last few weeks if Omar is completely crazy,” she said. “I’m glad that I’m not the only one.”

Emma stared at her for a moment, and then the corner of her mouth curled upward. When she glanced at me, her expression had returned to fondness. I grinned. “You know you can’t stay mad at me.”

“I might not be able to.” She jerked her head in the vague direction of the office. “But you know Angel’s not so soft on you. She can stay with me; you go talk to your brother.”

Lyse looked up at me, panicked. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

I cupped her cheek. “You’re safe here,” I said. “Emma’s the least scary out of all of us.”

She had gone back to her mixing bowl. “Only because I’m the newest,” she said. “You’re lucky that it’s me here and not Lili. She’d tear you both into chunks before you ever got to Angel.”

I pressed a kiss into the space between Lyse’s eyebrows. “I won’t be gone long, *conejita*.” I looked at Emma, who was trying not to study us with too much interest. “Look after my girl for a second?”

Emma let out a breath. “*El cielo te ayude*.” She motioned for Lyse to join her. “Do you know how to make golfeados?”

Lyse shook her head. “I like to eat them, though.”

Emma smiled. “Come shred the cheese for me, and I’ll make sure you get the first one out of the oven.”

I watched them for a moment, enjoying the picture of the two of them together, before I headed for the office. There was no use putting this off anymore...and as much as I trusted Emma, I didn’t want to leave Lyse on her own for too long.

Angel was behind the desk when I walked into his office, and for a split-second, it was like Padre was still there. Their expressions, when pissed off, were the same. He wasn’t looking at me; whatever was on his desk was far too important. So I stood and waited. Padre once kept me waiting for four hours, and I’m sure Angel was remembering that now.

“Who the fuck do you think you are?” Angel finally asked, still not looking at me.

*This man is not my older brother*, I told myself. If we were just Angel and Omar, I would be sarcastic. I would shoot my mouth off...but this was Angel the Head of the Castillo Family, and I couldn't rely on humor now. “I'm your enforcer, *hermano*.”

Angel looked at me, and a chill shot down my spine. If anyone else looked at me like that, I would have already put a hole through their skull. But it was Angel, and even if my hands twitched, I didn't reach for the gun at the small of my back. He noticed the movement, of course, and he sneered. “Are you?” he demanded.

My jaw clenched. “I have always been loyal to *you*, Angel,” I said, and my wording was deliberate. Toward the end of my father's reign as head of our family, I had sided with Angel when our Padre sent the Rojas thugs after Emma. I chose my brother and stood beside him as he took over.

“Have you?” He threw a file at my feet, and I picked it up. It was security footage from the night of Lyse's engagement party. I flicked through the images: full-color images of me bringing down some of the deadliest men in the Rojas family. The final image was of Lyse standing between the Rojas boys and me.

“You knew that I went there,” I said, looking through the images. “I wasn't hiding that from you.”

“I wouldn't have cared if you killed a thousand of those bastards,” Angel said. “But *why* are there pictures, Omar?”

I bowed my head. “I forgot the optics,” I admitted. “I didn't even look for cameras.”

Angel threw another folder at me. “You forgot the cameras in another place too, *cabron*.” I didn't want to pick up the folder; I knew what would be in it. “Pick it up,” Angel ordered through his teeth. My hands shook as I bent to pick up the folder. “Look at it,” he added when I simply held the folder for too long.

I opened the folder and saw myself holding a pillow over my father's face. I closed the folder again. "What do you want me to say?" I asked when Angel didn't speak. "He set you up and put you in a coma. He nearly got Emma killed."

Angel held up his hand. "I'm not angry that he's dead," he said. "I wanted him dead. I *sent* him to that place to die alone." He shook his head, as if he couldn't believe just how stupid I was. "Do you have any idea what would happen to you if these pictures got out? There would be no protecting you!"

"You don't think I know that?" Anger exploded in my gut. "I killed our father," I hissed, lowering my voice just enough. "I did that. There's no going back from it." I motioned for him to keep talking, completely forgetting my own pep talk about not being sarcastic. It was too hard to remain polite when I was shaking with this much anger. "Come on, *hermano*, read me the rest of my sins. I know you want to."

Angel wasn't amused. "Read your sins? That's what you want? Okay, I told you to come home; you ignored me for days. I told you to leave the Rojas family alone, and you tried *negotiating* with Luis for territory. *Kidnapping* Luis Rojas's daughter, and then bringing her here." My stomach dropped, but I kept my face neutral. "Does that about cover it, Omar?"

I nodded. "Yes," I said. "That covers it."

"How could you bring her here? After everything her family has done?"

"Lyse isn't—"

"Isn't a part of her family? Is she a victim of her father's?" Angel scoffed. "When has that *ever* mattered? She's a Rojas, and she'll bear the weight of their crimes as much as any other member of her family."

It was the same mindset I'd had not too long ago. "Lyse is so much more than that," I insisted. I looked down at my hands, unable to stand the intensity of my brother's stare. "She matters to me."

Angel laughed; it was a cruel sound. "She *matters* to you? ¿*Qué demonios significa eso?*" When I couldn't answer, he

demanded, “Do you *love* her?”

“I’m sorry, *hermano*.” It didn’t answer his question. I wasn’t sure myself what the answer would be, but it was the best I could do. “I’ve made this mess, and I will do whatever you want me to do in order to fix it. My loyalty has always been with you.”

“Shut up, *pendejo*.” My jaw clicked as it closed. “Go get the woman.”

“What?”

“The Rojas woman,” Angel said. “The one you left alone in the kitchen with my pregnant wife.” The words came out as a growl. “Go. Get. Her.”

“Angel.”

He blinked, and it struck me again how much he looked like Padre. “Are you defying me, Omar?”

I shivered. It was the exact kind of question that Padre would ask that would end in a beating. “No,” I said. “No, of course not.”

I left the office as straight-backed as I could; I didn’t want Angel to think that I was running from him. I snaked my way through the house to the kitchen, and for a moment, my heart warmed again. Emma was showing Lyse how to roll the *golfeados* so that the person eating it could see the layers. I paused for a moment, watching them.

“You know, Omar’s never brought a woman around like this,” Emma said lightly, her eyes on her work, though I could almost feel her curiosity burning a hole through the counter.

Lyse snorted. “I find that hard to believe.”

Emma chuckled. “Let’s not pretend he’s a saint. But I’ve certainly never been introduced to any of them.”

A wry smile caught Lyse’s mouth. “Why am I not surprised that Omar would keep that part of his life separate? That sounds exactly like something he would do.”



Emma hummed. “That’s why this is so different.” She caught Lyse’s eye. “You’re different.”

A blush stained Lyse’s cheeks and I wanted nothing more than to run my thumbs along the color and pull her in for a kiss. “Because I’m the only daughter of the enemy cartel?” she muttered.

Emma stopped fiddling with the golfeados. “Well, yes. There’s certainly that. But Omar seems to think you’re worth the risk.”

“You think he’s an idiot,” Lyse said quietly, “for being with me?”

“I often think Omar is an idiot,” Emma said. The fact that she said it with such fondness made me smile. “But I think there is a different measure of tolerance where the heart is concerned. We don’t pick the people we fall for. It just sort of happens.”

I knew she was talking about Angel as much as she was referring to me and Lyse.

“You being here says a lot,” Emma noted.

“I don’t think Omar really had much choice in the matter. We couldn’t hide away forever.”

“If Omar didn’t want you to be here, meeting his family, then you wouldn’t be,” Emma said, laying her hand on her baby bump. “Never doubt how much that means.”

My blood ran cold. Emma was right. I’d wanted my family to meet Lyse. I’d wanted them to see what I saw. To feel the way I did about her. But Angel was proving that might not be possible. “*Conejita*,” I called softly.

Lyse looked up, and a smile stretched her face, like she could think of nothing better than seeing me. “That didn’t take nearly as long as I thought it would,” she said.

Emma’s smile, however, vanished. “How did it go?” Her tone was wary.

“Angel wants to see you,” I said, eyes only on Lyse.

Her dark eyes clouded with fear, and mine probably weren’t much better. I had no way to comfort her. She and I both knew

that this was not going to be good. She turned and looked at Emma, offering her a watery smile. “Thank you for teaching me about golfeados. I really wanted to taste one.”

Emma shook her head. “I’ll have one on a plate for you when you’re done,” she promised and, impulsively, tugged her in for a hug.

“Come on,” I said and held out my hand. “We can’t keep him waiting.”

## CHAPTER 29

## *Lyse*

“Am I going to die, Omar?” I wanted — no, *needed* — him to tell me before it happened. I didn’t want to walk into anything blind.

“I’m not going to let that happen,” he said as we moved through the hallways of his home.

He’d been so sure that he could get Angel to understand, but it didn’t sound like there’d been much understanding. “Stay behind me,” Omar said, low and only for me to hear.

My throat tightened, and my eyes started to burn, but I was determined not to cry. Instead, I held onto the back of Omar’s tee shirt and followed after him, hoping that I was putting my trust in the right place.

When Omar opened the door to his brother’s office, I couldn’t see the other man at first — the only thing I could see was Omar’s back — but I peeked out around his massive shoulder to get a good look at the leader of the Castillo family.

Angel wasn’t as big as Omar, obviously, but he was still tall and broad and deadly. His injuries should make him look weaker, but if anything, he looked that much more menacing. The moment his black eyes locked on me, he stood and pointed a gun in my direction. I yelped and ducked behind Omar.

“What the hell are you doing?” Omar demanded.

I couldn’t see Angel anymore, but I could hear the snarl in his voice. “What you should have done *days* ago if you weren’t

going to return her to her father.” I heard the gun’s safety click off. “Move out of the way, Omar.”

For a horrifying second, I imagined Omar doing what his brother said, moving out of the way and leaving me exposed. But then... “No.”

“*Perdona?*”

“No, *hermano*. I’m not moving.”

Angel scoffed. “So much for your loyalty always lies with me,” he said.

I felt Omar take a breath, and I ached for him. His siblings were his life; he would do anything for them...how was it possible that he would chance losing them now? For me? “I would die for you and our family, *hermano*,” he said. “I would follow you to the ends of the earth.”

“But you won’t move.”

“I can’t.” I couldn’t help but hold my breath as they stood there, staring each other down. Neither was willing to back down. “Angel, hear me out,” Omar tried.

“She *has* to die,” Angel insisted. “You should know that better than anyone! At this point, she’s a liability. You don’t hold onto a hostage for *weeks*. You don’t *fuck* them!”

I cringed. “You told him?”

Omar didn’t take his eyes off his brother. “I didn’t have to.” He didn’t elaborate, and I didn’t really want to know. Not while Angel was waving a gun at me. At us.

“Luis Rojas contacted me,” Angel said. “He wants your head for taking his precious daughter. He’s promised to end the feud between our families, but only if I give him you.” I risked a look around Omar’s large body again. Angel’s fierce expression was now marred by sadness. When his eyes landed on me, he aimed again, and only Omar pushing me back kept him from pulling the trigger. *He’d be willing to risk probably hitting Omar too*. The man was terrifying. “I figured we could dump Lyse in his territory somewhere. A message to leave the Castillos alone for good.”

Omar tensed again. I pressed my face between his shoulder blades, wanting so badly to comfort him, but this wasn't the time or the place for it. "They don't want me back," I called from behind Omar.

"What?"

"My father told Omar to do whatever he wanted with me," I said. "Why would he demand your brother's head if he wrote me off for dead?" I poked my head out from behind Omar, and after a moment, took a step out of my hiding place. The gun was aimed at me instantly, but I refused to hide again. Instead, I put my hand in Omar's and threaded our fingers together. "He wants you to kill me, so that he has a reason to go to war with you." I glanced up at Omar. "Jesus told me as much on the island."

"Who is Jesus, and why was he on my island?" Angel demanded. *So, he doesn't know everything*, I thought.

"Jesus is my cousin," I said. "He tracked me to the island, and when I resisted returning with him, he let slip that he was supposed to kill me and dump me somewhere that they could blame you. If you kill me now, you'll be doing *exactly* what my father wants."

I glanced up at Omar, who had a fiercely proud look on his face. It almost made me forget about the gun being pointed at my head. "My girl is smart, *hermano*," he said. "She'd make a good Castillo."

Angel's eyes bulged. "You're telling me that you want to marry this girl?"

Well...that was news to me. I looked up at Omar again, looking for any sign that he was trying to rile Angel up, but his expression was serious. My heart leaped into my throat. "Lyse is mine," Omar said.

The older man's eyes narrowed. "Do you intend to *marry* her?"

Marriage meant protection. If Omar married me, then Angel would be obligated to protect me...unless Angel did away with both of us right now. "If I said yes?"

Angel's finger moved to the trigger. "I can't let that happen, Omar. I won't be responsible for one of the Rojas, not after everything." He was growing frustrated with us, I could tell, but he was still hesitating. I couldn't figure out why. "She's been all over our island. Her family *tracked* her there. Can't you see what a liability it is to keep her around?"

"They tracked the man that *I* killed after he stowed away on the boat. I didn't think about him wearing anything when he was trying to beat me to death."

Angel pinched the bridge of his nose, like we were giving him a headache. "Do you ever think anything all the way through?"

"I'm sorry, *hermano*. Should I have searched him while I was trying not to die?"

I squeezed Omar's hand. "Enough."

Angel's eyes snapped to me. "Are you telling my brother what to do, *puta*?"

Omar pushed me behind him, again. "You don't get to talk to her like that," he said. "You can call me whatever name you like, and I'll likely deserve it, but not her."

For a moment, Angel looked impressed, like he was seeing his brother for the very first time, and then the gun wavered for a second before he pointed it squarely at Omar's chest. "No!" I tried to move so that I was in front of him, but Omar kept me at his back.

"You're choosing her over us." Angel sounded devastated, but his aim was true. If he pulled the trigger, it would blast a hole in Omar's chest. It would likely be fatal. Two weeks ago, if I had gotten news that *La Bestia* had died, I probably wouldn't have thought about it more than *good riddance*. Now, it would wrench a hole in my chest.

"Don't do this," I whispered, pressing myself against Omar's back. "Don't let him do this."

"Listen to her," Angel said. "Your pet Rojas is actually making sense."

But Omar wouldn't be swayed: he didn't move even as Angel threatened him, but he didn't draw a weapon either. He wouldn't hurt his brother, even now to protect us both. "If you're going to kill her, you'll have to kill us both, *hermano*."

The seconds stretched on for centuries, but finally Angel let out a yell, and I heard the click of him putting the safety back on. "You're no longer a Castillo," he said. "Do you understand me? You are *done* with this family."

Omar's body went rigid against me. "Angel."

"Take her and go," Angel talked over him. "Get out of Miami, start over somewhere where I never have to see or hear from you again. If I *ever* see your faces again, there won't even be big enough parts of you to dump in the Everglades." He motioned for us to go. "Twenty-four hours, Omar. I mean it."

*You don't have to tell me twice*, I thought and grabbed hold of Omar's arm. "Let's go," I urged him. "Now."

Omar was reluctant to turn his back on Angel, but with a heavy breath, he did and hustled me out of the office. "I'm not a Castillo anymore," he said, sounding shell-shocked.

I reached up to cup his face in my hand. "You belong to me now," I said, repeating the words he'd said to me. "We'll just be Omar and Lyse from now on."

He stared at me, lost, for a moment before my words registered. "Omar and Lyse," he agreed, leaning down to kiss me. "We need to go."

On our way out, we passed the kitchen, and Emma startled when she saw us. "You're...still here." *Still alive*, I corrected her in my head. Obviously, she had not expected the meeting to go well.

Omar's eyes dropped to her belly bump, and he frowned. "I'm sorry that I won't be around to become Tío Omar."

"What happened? Where are you going?"

*We don't have time for this*. "Angel's letting us live," I told her, "but we have to leave Miami."



Emma's eyes became wet with tears. "He can't do this," she said. "I won't let him do this."

Omar shook his head. "It's all right," he said. "I made my choice." He put his hand on my shoulder, and Emma's mouth flattened into a line. "Look after Angel for me, okay?"

She nodded. "You best go. I imagine he'll come looking for me soon."

Omar hugged her, hard. "*Adios, Mija.*"

When he let her go, he took my hand, and we hurried from the house. His SUV was where he left it. The guards were gone. Now that we were leaving, I suppose Angel didn't feel the need to posture anymore.

Omar opened my door for me, and a little thrill rose in my belly. Were we actually...free? "Just Omar and Lyse, right?" he asked.

I nodded. "Just us."

We kissed again, a little rough and a lot desperate, and then I was climbing into the passenger side. Omar waited until I was seated to shut my door, but before he got around to the driver's side, the front door of the house flew open.

"Where the hell are you going?"

## CHAPTER 30

## Omar

I knew we'd left the house way too easily. Lili stood in the doorway; she looked angrier than I had ever seen her. "I didn't know that you were home," I said.

Lili let out a bitter laugh and then launched herself at me. She socked me in the gut, igniting all of my other bruises so that my whole body throbbed. Vaguely I heard the car door open, and then Lili was being wrenched away from me. "Get off!" Lyse cried, putting herself between me and my sister. Lili looked ready to slap her, but Lyse held her ground. "You don't get to hit him," she said firmly, calm now that she wasn't actively trying to fight off a raging Lili.

"You can't go," Lili said, ignoring Lyse. "Angel is recovering; he needs you now more than ever!"

"Angel gave us twenty-four hours to clear out."

She shook her head, clearly shocked. "No, that can't be right. Why would he want you to leave? He needs protection! He needs—" She looked at Lyse again. "Who are you? Why are you here?"

"Lyse Rojas," she introduced herself. "I think you know my brother Matteo."

There was something flat in her tone that made my stomach drop. I stared at Lili. "*Mija?*"

Lili blinked rapidly, shaking her head almost violently. "I don't know a thing about Matteo."

Lyse lifted her shoulder. "I guess that was my mistake."

*What in the hell was that?* “Does someone want to tell me what’s going on?”

Lyse studied my sister for a long moment and then shook her head. “It’s nothing.” She nudged me toward the car. “We need to go.”

Lili watched us for a second before she seemed to remember that she was trying to stop me. “Wait! You can’t!”

“Angel doesn’t want us here,” I told her. “I’m not going to wait around and test if he’s going to actually shoot me or not.”

“If you go, you’re leaving him vulnerable. The Tíos were already trying to make moves. And what about Luis Rojas? If Angel looks weak, they’ll all move in on him.” Tears gathered along her lash line.

While she wasn’t wrong, Angel had a fleet of security guards who were loyal to him. They would move Heaven and Hell if he ordered them to do so. “He’s going to be fine,” I said. “He came out of a two-week coma, and he’s back at the helm like nothing happened.”

“But it’s *not* like nothing’s happened,” Lili insisted. “You haven’t been here; you haven’t heard the way the guards talk.”

*It’s not my business anymore*, I thought, even as I started compiling a list of the guards that needed to be interrogated and weeded out. I sighed and put my hand on Lili’s shoulder. “Get rid of the ones that you’re worried about,” I said. “Look after Angel even if he tells you that he doesn’t need you to.”

Her eyes were round. “Are you asking me to be his enforcer?”

I shrugged. “I’m asking you to do what I can’t.” I gestured for Lyse to get back in the SUV, and she did, eyes never leaving Lili. “I’ll try and call you soon to let you know where we are.”

The light seemed to switch off in her eyes. “You won’t,” she insisted. “If you leave, I’ll never hear from you again.”

I hugged her. “You will,” I insisted. “I promise that you will.”

Then I let her go and climbed behind the wheel of the SUV. This time she didn’t interrupt as I turned the car on and made a beeline for the security gate. I made the mistake of looking

back as we went through the gate: Lili was crumpled on her knees, obviously crying. The image would forever be burned into my brain.

Once we were on the road, Lyse looked at me. “Where are we going? Your brother said to get out of Miami, but what does that mean? Are we returning to the island?”

“No, we can’t. Angel owns that island; he did even before he took over for my father.” I drummed my hands on the wheel, racking my brain for an idea of where I could take her. “When you were little, where did you always want to go but never got to for one reason or another?”

Lyse thought about it for a minute. “New York City,” she said finally.

*New York.* We had connections in the city, and they weren’t close enough that they’d tell Angel where I was. “Why there?”

“When I was younger, I wanted to go see the Statue of Liberty, you know? Do touristy things with my family, but Apá didn’t like traveling with us. When I got older, I wanted to go because of the museums and the theater district. I thought I might go to school for something artistic.”

*She can do that now.* I took her hand. “Let’s do it,” I said.

Lyse smiled at me, beaming and beautiful. It was the kind of smile that a man would do anything for. “Look at flights to New York,” I said, handing her my phone. “If there isn’t one that leaves soon that we can get tickets for, look at Amtrak.”

She nodded and spent the next few minutes scanning on my phone. “There aren’t any flights until tomorrow,” she said, “but we could leave on the train in an hour.”

I started mapping our way to the Amtrak station and turned down the next street: we were headed in the wrong direction. It took thirty minutes to reach the station. We were cutting it close.

“I can’t believe this is happening,” Lyse said as we wove our way through the crowd to stand in the line at the ticketing office. “Are we really doing this? Starting over?”

I nodded, and a part of me was just as stunned and excited as she was. Lyse wasn't the only one who had thought about what it would be like away from the cartels. I had plenty of good memories of my life, but there were four times as many memories that were filled with violence and pain. My father had made sure of that.

But what if Lili was right? Angel *was* more vulnerable right now. It would take months for him to recover, and who knew what would happen in that time? No one would stand against him if I was there at his back...but without me, who would Angel turn to? Who was most loyal? Manny?

The thought of my fifteen-year-old cousin becoming Angel's enforcer was as nauseating as it was laughable. Lili would be a better choice...not that Angel would ever allow that to happen. He, like Padre, wanted Lili to train and be able to protect herself in an emergency, but he'd never actually allow her to put herself in danger.

Lyse was rocking on her heels at my side, trying to calm herself down, and I rested my hand at the small of her back, letting her lean against me. It felt good to be with her like this, like we were a regular couple on a regular vacation. It was how life should have been for us...how it would be once we were in New York.

My stomach cramped at the idea. *Life with Lyse will be good*, I told myself. We could get to know one another for real and not worry about anyone trying to kill us. I could get a regular job: a bouncer, maybe. I had experience with that.

The longer we stood in the line, however, the more time I had to consider Lili's words. When the people in front of us finally moved, I walked to the counter, ready to ask for two tickets... but I couldn't make myself say the word "two." Instead, with a glance at Lyse, I said, "One one-way ticket to New York City, please."

"Omar?" Lyse said, squeezing my forearm.

The woman keyed in the request, and I paid for it with a swipe of my credit card. Angel could track the card if he wanted, but I didn't think he'd want to.

Lyse blinked down at the single ticket, dragging me out of earshot of the other passengers. “What’s going on?”

It was hard to look at her. “I can’t go with you.”

“But...Angel threw you out! You can’t stay here. He’ll kill you!”

I shook my head. “I don’t think he will.”

Lyse was pissed; I didn’t blame her. She shoved at me, little jabs with her fingers that actually hurt...not that I would ever admit that out loud. “You’re leaving me in the *hope* that your brother doesn’t spread your limbs all over the damn Everglades? *¿Estás hablando en serio?*”

“Look, Lili was right. If Angel is left vulnerable, there’s a good chance that he’s going to be taken down. If not by one of my Tíos, then another cartel in a push for our territory. I can’t let that happen. Not after he’s worked so damn hard and survived a two-week coma.”

She looked like she wanted to swing at me again. “He kicked you out; he said you weren’t a Castillo anymore. You picked *me*. Why would you turn back now?”

I cupped her face in my hands, and even as mad as she was, Lyse didn’t pull away. She grabbed my arms. “If I leave my brother alone, I’m not the man that I thought I was,” I said. “I wouldn’t be the kind of man who deserves you.”

Tears trickled from her eyes, wetting my fingers. “What’s the point of deserving me if you’re not going to be with me?”

“Because I plan to be with you,” I said. “Angel won’t need me forever. He’s going to recover.”

“That’ll take months. Years, maybe, until he’s returned to full strength.” The silent *if he ever is* lay between us. “If I get on that train, I’m never going to see you again.”

I pressed my mouth against hers, trying to bury myself in the softness of her lips so that the twisting and tugging as my heart wrenched in my chest didn’t overwhelm me. “I will see you again one day,” I said and pressed the ticket and credit card into her hand. “Until then, enjoy your freedom. Go to art

school. See the museums.” I let her go, rubbing absently at my chest; it ached, but I knew it wasn’t the kind of pain that I could take medicine for. “I have contacts in New York. By the time you get there, I will have someone waiting for you at the platform. They’ll help you get situated, keep an eye on you for me.”

Lyse looped her arms around my neck, keeping me close. “If you get yourself killed, I am going to kick your ass.”

“My *conejita* has claws,” I murmured against her hair. Checking the time, I reluctantly drew back. “You need to go, or you’ll miss your train.”

Lyse glared at me, resentful, but she did what I asked: she headed for the terminal with her shoulders straight and her head held high. *God, but I love her*, I thought. I would find a way back to her when the time was right. Until then, I would do whatever I had to do to earn Angel’s trust again. I would do anything to keep my brother safe.

They had a viewing window in the station, and I watched Lyse cross the platform and board the train. It hurt watching her go, but it would keep her safe. That was what mattered. A few minutes later, the train pulled out, and Lyse was on her way to New York City.

I pulled out my phone and called Lili. “What?” She sounded absolutely miserable.

“I just put Lyse on a train,” I said. “I’m headed home.”

“Really? You’re not going to leave?”

I sighed and started for the parking lot. “Where else am I going, *Mija*? I’m a Castillo, through and through, even if our older brother is *cabezón*.”

She laughed wetly. “I think that’s a family trait.”

“You’re probably right.” I gave it a breath. “Want to tell me about Matteo Rojas?”

“Not for all the money in the world, *idiota*.”



## CHAPTER 31

## *Lyse*

I swiped at the stray tears on my face as I settled into my train seat, and cursed Omar Castillo. *You make me love you, and you send me away*, I thought. Out of all the times to be noble, he had to pick now?

“Whoever he is, he’s not worth it, sweetheart.” I looked across the aisle: an elderly man was digging a novel out of a laptop case. He smiled at me softly. “Whoever made you cry like that,” he said, pointing at my face. “He’s not worth all that sadness.”

I wiped at my cheeks again, self-conscious. “How do you know these aren’t tears of joy?” I asked. “I could be thrilled beyond words.”

He tutted at me. “Your eyes are very expressive,” he said. “They say everything that your words don’t. Whoever you left behind, he’s broken your heart.”

I huffed. “It wasn’t just *one* guy,” I said, and when the old man’s eyebrows went up in surprise, I waved my hand with a laugh. “I mean, there is a guy, yes, but our families are the bigger issue.”

“They don’t want you together?”

I shook my head. “It’s more complicated than that.”

The man tutted and again opened his book. “Love is never that complicated.”

*If you knew the world that we lived in*, I thought. “I’m glad it was easy for you, then.”

He glanced at me; his face was unreadable. “I wouldn’t call it easy,” he said. “The love part was easy: I knew my wife was the one for me after a handful of dates. But life has a way of beating people down, and even the strongest loves become brittle with age. The years that you don’t particularly *like* the person that you love? Those aren’t easy. The year that your partner is diagnosed with terminal cancer? That isn’t easy.”

I ducked my head. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“It’s one of the inevitabilities of life, unfortunately,” he said. “I wished I had gone first...but I wouldn’t want her to experience this kind of pain either. You.” He pointed at me. “You’re too young to experience loss like mine...especially if your sweetheart is still around.”

His advice was sweet, if a little bit sappy, but it stoked the anger that was growing in my belly. Not only had Omar walked away from me, put me on a train to a brand-new city with nothing but a credit card, but he made the choice for me. He didn’t give me the option to stay and fight with him.

*Fuck this.* I didn’t have to go to New York by myself just because Omar told me to. I could do whatever I wanted. “Thank you,” I said to the man.

“For what?”

I smiled at him. “For clarity.”

Standing up, I wove through the crowd of people still trying to get on the train and stepped down onto the platform that was farthest from where I got on. If Omar saw me leave the train, he’d make me get back on. He might even take me to New York himself, but he wouldn’t stay, so getting caught wasn’t an option.

I had to come up with a plan before I saw him again. I needed him to know that I was going to stand by his side, no matter what our families might throw at us...I just needed a way to do that.

I also needed answers.

I waited in the station shop, flipping through magazines, until the train pulled out, and I knew that Omar was gone. I grabbed

a phone card from the wall of gift cards and prepaid Visas and paid for it. It was a risky move. If Omar saw the charges before I had things straightened out, he would come after me, but I had been left without a cellphone.

I found a bank of payphones and used the card to place a call to Matteo, praying he would answer an unknown number. Luckily, the call connected after the third ring “Hello?”

“Matteo!”

There was silence on the other end of the line for a moment. “Lyse?” Matteo’s voice broke over my name. “Lyse, is that really you?”

“Of course, it’s me,” I said, trying not to snap at him. “Why do you sound so surprised?”

“Where are you?” he asked instead of answering my question. “I’ll come get you!”

It was on the tip of my tongue to agree and tell him where I was, but the image of Jesus with such a hateful expression on his face came to mind. “No,” I said. “I don’t want to be picked up. Can you meet me? I have questions.”

“What? Lyse, let me pick you up. I’ll bring you home.”

“No,” I insisted. “I’m not ever going back there. Do you hear me?” The very thought made my blood boil in my veins. “Can you meet me or not?”

Matteo was quiet for a moment. “You sound like you don’t trust me.”

I blinked at the burning in my eyes again. *You’re not crying again*, I told myself. I’d already done that enough for today. “I don’t trust you,” I said.

“Lyse.”

“If I can trust you, meet me at the Amtrak station in half an hour. Come *alone*. If I see anyone with you, I’ll get on a train, and you’ll never see me again.”

“Okay, okay,” Matteo said. “I’ll be there.”

“Promise that you’ll come alone. Don’t tell Apá.”

“I won’t tell him,” he said, though it sounded like it pained him to say those words. “Wait for me.”

## CHAPTER 32

## Omar

“You shouldn’t be here, Omar. *Jefe* gave you a time limit to be gone.” One of the guards, a third or fourth cousin whose name I couldn’t be bothered to remember, tried to put his hand on my chest to stop me from getting inside.

I grabbed his hand and bent it backward, on the edge of snapping his wrist. “It hasn’t been twenty-four hours yet, *primo*,” I snarled at him and put more pressure on his wrist until the man whimpered to be let go. “Who trained you?” I spat. “Tell me that I didn’t. I wouldn’t put anyone in a security detail who had this little spine.”

He didn’t answer. He was looking a little gray, and when he made a gagging sound, I let him go and stepped back so that when he threw up, it didn’t get on my shoes. *Fucking pathetic*. While he was busy emptying his stomach over a little bit of pain, I stepped past him and entered the house. I’d only just left, but it felt different now, like it wasn’t my home anymore. I pushed past that feeling and forced myself to walk to Angel’s office.

My older brother was in the same spot that I left him, bent over papers at his desk, but this time, he didn’t make me wait for him to say something. “What the hell are you doing here? Why would you come back?”

“I’ve been your second our whole lives.”

Angel scoffed. “Things change.”

I shook my head. “Not this. I have always been loyal to you.”

Anger flashed across his face. “Until today, I would have said the same, but you chose that woman over your family.”

“If Emma had been in her place?”

Angel made an ugly, almost animal sound. “Don’t bring my wife into this.”

The urge to smash my fist into something was great; I clenched my hands into fists, digging my nails into my palms. “Padre went after Emma, and you staged a fucking coup, *hermano*,” I reminded him. “I stood by you through that.”

“Emma wasn’t the enemy.”

I scoffed. “Name one thing that *Lyse* has done to you.”

“The Rojas.”

“I’m not talking about her family,” I interrupted, emboldened by my rising anger. “I’m talking about *her*. What has she done to you or anyone else in our family?”

“You can’t separate her from her family.”

It was a repeat of the conversation that we had before. “Then you can’t separate us either, right? Your crimes are my crimes, and vice versa.” Angel’s face twisted with an emotion that I could almost call guilt if it wasn’t for the anger in his eyes. “My crimes are my own,” I said after letting him marinate in the thought. “I’ve slaughtered dozens of people. I killed my own father. I did that, and it shouldn’t reflect on you.”

“Okay, you’ve made your point...but it doesn’t change anything. You’ve defied me again and again, and I can’t let it slide. Not now.”

“I know,” I said. “That’s why I came back. If the Tíos knew that you’d let me walk away after everything I’ve done, they would turn on you.”

Angel’s anger broke then, and he looked unbearably tired. “What do you want me to do, Omar?” he asked. “I can’t kill you. We both know that.”

It was the first time he’d said it out loud, and I felt my shoulders relax. I *hadn’t* known that he wouldn’t kill me. I’d



hoped. “Punish me,” I told him. “Make a show of it like Padre would have.”

“You want me to hit you?” He shook his head, and I stared, a little in wonder, as he blushed for the first time ever in my presence. He was actually embarrassed. “I’m too weak. It would be more humiliating for me than for you.”

“So, call someone in,” I said. “Everyone knows that you’re recovering. It would make sense that you would bring someone else in to do what you can’t at the moment.” *There would also be no way of pulling the punches*, I thought. No one would be able to accuse Angel of going easy on me. “You have to do this. If you don’t, you’ll look weak.”

“I don’t understand why you would bother coming back,” Angel repeated his sentiment from before. “You knew this would happen.”

I nodded. “It has to happen.”

“This doesn’t *fix* everything,” Angel said after staring at me for a long while.

I knew that too. My brother had never been the easiest when it came to forgiveness, and my transgressions would have gotten me killed if I mattered less in his eyes. “It’s a start,” I said.

He nodded once, and then with a few taps on his phone, called in one of the guards, a big man named Mauricio. He wasn’t a cousin of ours, but we’d grown up together. Our fathers were close, and Padre had offered Mauricio a place on our security team when he turned eighteen. I’d trained him.

He was looking at me now with such an intense hatred that it was almost unnerving. “My brother has come seeking my forgiveness, Mauricio,” Angel said.

“He doesn’t deserve it, *jefe*.” The words came out in a tight wheeze, as if he were having difficulty holding himself back.

“I’ll decide that,” Angel snapped at him. He was all detached coolness now: he was the head of the Castillo family, not my brother. I’d seen this a handful of times since Padre had been displaced, and it never ceased to terrify me how easily my brother turned into a man who was so nearly identical. Angel

shifted his gaze to me, and a chill ran through me. “I think there might be some redemption here...but it won’t come cheap.”

Mauricio grinned, obviously thrilled, and it was then that I remembered I had recently suffered a blow to the head. My body was still aching from the sneak attack. *Fuck*. “Want me to leave his face?” he asked my brother. “Or can I crush it?”

Angel hummed softly, as if debating. “You don’t have to spare him,” he said, “but nothing permanent. My enforcer still needs to be functional.”

Mauricio looked offended. “He shouldn’t get to be your enforcer after what he’s done, *jefe*.”

I chuckled before I could stop myself, and when Angel glared at me, I held my hands up in supplication. “Sorry,” I said. “I didn’t mean to laugh. I just find it funny that he seems to think he can replace me.” I looked at Mauricio. “Know that the only reason you’re going to be able to beat me is because I’m allowing it to happen. This is my penance, and I am accepting it.”

I didn’t have a mirror, so I wasn’t sure what my expression looked like, but Mauricio suddenly looked less confident than he did previously. “Shut up, Omar.”

I looked at my brother, serious once more. “*Si, jefe*.”

“Do you need someone to hold your arms?” Angel asked.

I shook my head. “I won’t fight.”

Angel considered me for a moment before he nodded. “Mauricio.” It was only his name, but it was the go-ahead that the man needed.

I didn’t have time to brace myself for the first punch. It landed on my jaw with a force that rocked me on my feet, but I bit back a groan. Showing any sign of pain would only make him hit me harder. The coppery taste of blood filled my mouth, and I spat it out, spewing bright red across the tiled floor.

Mauricio reared back and hit me again, this time in the gut. I doubled over; the air was knocked from my lungs. Before I

could catch my breath, he began raining blows down on me. He largely stayed away from my face after getting that first crack in, but nowhere else was safe. His fists landed with meaty thuds. *It sounds like drumming.* My mind started drifting in the way that it would when Padre would do this; it was a way to escape the pain and endure for as long as necessary.

A vicious blow to my side cracked a rib, and I hit my knees, unable to keep my feet. I felt Mauricio shift, as if he were going to kick me, and I braced for it. “Stop,” Angel said. I could tell that he didn’t want to, but Mauricio obediently stepped back. “Get up.”

I wasn’t sure if I could: everything was hazy. I tried to take a deep breath, to use it to push myself up, but my right side felt like it was bursting into flames. Gritting my teeth, I forced myself to my feet, nearly toppling over as my head swam, but I managed to keep my balance.

Angel stared at me with total disinterest. *Maybe he goes somewhere in his head too.* “Return to the island,” he said. “Stay there until I call you. If you leave, make sure you go somewhere far enough away that I won’t find you.”

It was a test: I foresaw a lot of those in my future. “*Sí.*” I turned away from him, hissing slightly.

“Have Lili help clean you up before you go,” Angel said to my back. “Then someone will drive you to the marina. And whatever you do, don’t let anything happen to those fucking guns.”

It was a kindness masked with indifference, but it gave me enough strength to walk from the room without toppling over. I didn’t know if I’d be able to find our sister, but Angel must have called her in anticipation of this because she was standing outside the office. “Come on,” she said, putting an arm around my shoulders.

Lili helped me limp to the nearest bathroom where, with much argument, she helped to patch me up enough so I could return safely to the island. While I was rinsing my mouth out — Mauricio had split my cheek on the inside with that first punch

— she texted on her phone. “Someone important?” I asked, spitting out water pinked with blood.

She looked at me. “I do have friends, you know.”

“Like Matteo Rojas?”

Her hand shot out, slapping my shoulder on instinct, and when I groaned in real pain, she winced. “Sorry.”

“I’m fine,” I lied.

“Stop talking about Matteo, okay? I don’t know Matteo Rojas.”

She was lying, and we both knew it. Lili had always been terrible at keeping secrets. But the genuine pain and panic on her face made me not want to push. Whatever happened between her and the Rojas heir was significant...but she would never tell me if I tried to pry it out of her. “Okay,” I said. “*Lo siento.*”

She waved me off. “Just...drop it, okay? That’s enough.” Her phone buzzed again, and she snorted when she read the message. “Our brother is asking if you’re going to live or not.” I tried to grab her phone, moving too quickly, and I nearly doubled over as my ribs felt like they were splintering into my organs. “Would you stop it?” Lili snapped, easing me down so that I was seated on the closed toilet lid. “Mauricio did a number on you.”

“It wasn’t all him.”

She pinched the bridge of her nose. “How many fights have you gotten into recently, *idiota?*”

“Fuck off.”

Lili crossed her arms over her chest. “Tell me again why I should be nice to you?”

“I never said you had to, *cabrona.*” Oddly enough, it felt good to be sniping with her again. If my relationship with Angel was forever changed, it was good to know that Lili and I would be the same as ever. Another buzzing text from Angel came through, and she frowned. “Time for me to go?”

She nodded. “He’s really not going to let this go, is he?”

“He can’t,” I said, slowly getting to my feet. “Like you said, if he appears weak right now, he’s a sitting duck.”

“But he’s still sending you away.”

“Only to the island. I’m close enough that I’ll be here if he needs me.”

“But—”

“It’s the best-case scenario,” I said. “I can survive exile. It won’t be forever.”

She nodded and quickly shoved the bandages and gauze tape into the med kit that belonged under the sink. “What about Lyse?” she asked. “What will you do about her?”

My heart squeezed in my chest. “She’s safe,” I said. “That’s all that matters.”

“Where is she? Why didn’t she come back with you?”

I put my hand on her shoulder. “I’m not going to tell you that,” I said. “It’s better for all of us if we forget about Lyse Rojas, okay?”

Except...how could I ever forget her? The pain in my body had nothing on what it was like to put her on that train. She’d taken something vital from me with her.

Lili frowned, and I could tell that she wanted to ask, but she and I both understood mutually assured destruction. If she asked about Lyse, I’d press about Matteo. “Come on, *idiota*.” She held up her phone. “I’m your ride to the marina.”

## CHAPTER 33

## *Lyse*

Matteo stared at me like he was seeing a ghost, and a part of me felt the same way about him. My brother was handsome, almost pretty in a way, but there was a hard look in his eyes now. The aura around him was different.

He looked like a man. That was it: he no longer resembled the little boy that I thought of when I pictured my brother. How had it only been two weeks since I'd last seen him? What was happening at home that made my little brother grow up so quickly?

"Apá told me you were dead," Matteo said. We had met at the Starbucks just inside the Amtrak station, and he'd been staring at me for the past three minutes, barely blinking, like I would disappear if he looked away. "He said Omar Castillo raped you, killed you, and dumped you."

The words made me flinch. Omar might be a lot of things — big and almost unforgivably violent, for sure — but he would never harm a woman like that. Of that I was abundantly sure. "Do you believe everything Apá tells you?"

"Why wouldn't I?" Matteo countered, and I scoffed.

"Because I'm sitting right here in front of you," I said. I wanted to reach out and touch him. In the past I wouldn't have hesitated, but I held back. I didn't want to believe that Matteo knew about Jesus coming for me, that Apá had been the instigator, but I couldn't be sure. He could just be a really convincing actor.

*But why would he agree to come without backup?* I thought. It wasn't as if Matteo could kill me himself. Like Omar, I believed to my core that my brother was incapable of actually harming me. I might not be able to trust him entirely anymore, but I did trust that.

“Apá has no reason to lie,” Matteo insisted, but even he didn't sound like he believed him. “He doesn't gain anything from it.”

“He sent Jesus after me,” I told him. “He tracked me to the island that Omar was keeping me on, and instead of rescuing me, he tried to kill me.”

“No.” Matteo shook his head hard enough that he could have snapped his own neck. “He wouldn't do that. He came back with his face crushed...he's the one that found—” He stopped and swallowed hard, like he was trying to stop himself from throwing up. “He said he found you.” His voice came out softer, more questioning, and I wanted to draw him in for a hug. It would be what I normally did when we were little and he was upset.

“Well, he's obviously lying about that,” I said, gesturing to myself. “When I didn't go with him right away, he got mad, and you know how Jesus is.”

Matteo dipped his head. “He gets mouthy.”

I nodded. “He told me that he was sent to kill me and leave my body somewhere a Castillo could be blamed for it. He wants to start a war because they killed the head of the Rojas family's precious daughter...except Apá's the one who told Omar to do whatever he wanted to with me.”

My brother went still. His hands clenched into fists on the top of the graffitied table. “What are you talking about?”

“The night that Angel woke up, Omar tried to negotiate with Apá and Felix.”

Matteo nodded. “I was there.” His cheeks flushed. “Apá sent me out after I told *La Bestia* that I would gut him for touching you.”



I laughed; I couldn't help it. "*Mijo*," I breathed. "You don't have to protect me."

"You're my sister. *Of course*, I have to protect you."

"Older sister," I pointed out. "Protecting you has been my job since the day you were born...please don't *ever* threaten Omar again, okay? The man could snap you in half if he wanted." *If I didn't have him wrapped around my finger*, I thought smugly. There was something utterly empowering about a man like Omar Castillo belonging to me.

*He put you on a train alone*, I couldn't help but remind myself. *Exactly how does he belong to you?*

"Omar Castillo is an idiot for even trying to act like his brother. He doesn't have the brains for planning."

"He was trained to be the muscle for most of his life," I said. "His father obviously educated his sons differently. It doesn't make Omar stupid."

Matteo looked shocked. "You're actually *defending* him to me! He kept you captive for two weeks!"

"He wanted to trade me for our territory in the nightclub district," I said, touched by Matteo's fierceness but certain Omar would flatten my brother in a second.

"We couldn't afford to lose that spot, Lyse. It's an easy front, and we'd be risking more than a failed nightclub."

"Apá obviously felt the same way," I said. My voice went cold. "After you were sent out, he told Omar to 'do what he had to do,' in regard to me. Felix said the same, apparently."

"They...they wouldn't."

"They gave me up for dead," I said forcefully. "If Omar and I hadn't already—"

Matteo caught on quickly. "If you hadn't what?"

"Nothing. Never mind."

He looked horrified. "Did you actually let that man *touch* you? After what he did to our family?"

“You mean, his response to what Apá did to *his* family? Should any of us be surprised that Omar chose my engagement party to exact vengeance?”

Matteo stared at me. “You love him.”

It was a statement, not a question, but I answered anyway. “Yes.” Matteo looked like he’d argue. Tell me I was wrong to have those feelings. “On a tiny, very isolated island, Omar gave me more freedom in a week than I’ve ever had in my entire life living under Apá’s rule,” I said. Despite the anger that I felt, I smiled; it was easy to do when I thought of Omar. “He gave me a studio to paint in and supplies...and that was because he saw me drawing with a stick in the sand.”

“What about Felix?” Matteo asked.

“What about him? When he figured out I’d been with Omar, his *infatuation* with me disappeared. I wish I’d had the courage to fuck someone years ago. Then I wouldn’t have had to go through that farce of an engagement.”

“Lyse!” Matteo looked scandalized. “Where has my sweet sister gone?”

I gave him a hard look. “She’s dead,” I told him. “That you can be damn sure of.” He stared at me for a long while. “Omar allows me to be myself,” I said. “He doesn’t make me live in fear of what may come out of my mouth; he doesn’t care if I’m perfectly pleasant. Hell, I think he *likes* it when I’m a little mean to him.”

Matteo shook his head, and I suspected he was trying to erase the images he now had in there. He surprised me when he asked, “He’s good to you, then?”

I nodded. “He is.”

“And he...loves you too?”

I shrugged. I wanted to say unequivocally yes, but...could I say that when he’d left me here? “I think he does,” I said after a moment.

“So, why did you call me?” Matteo asked.

“I want to know what’s going on at home. Why is Apá obsessed with this war with the Castillos?”

Matteo’s face went hard. “I shouldn’t be telling you anything if you’re in love with a Castillo,” he said, guarded, but then he softened. “Shit’s gone pear-shaped, but Apá’s going to work it out. Don’t worry about us.”

*Us*, I thought, but I wasn’t a part of the *us* anymore. It was clear in the way that he was talking. “I won’t,” I assured him. “I think...this is where we part ways, *mijo*. I need to figure out what the hell to do next.”

He gave me a stricken look. “I might be able to...point you in the right direction.” He swallowed hard. “Apá sent Jesus back out to collect *La Bestia*’s head. He’s not supposed to come home until he succeeds or dies trying.”

My chest seized. Omar wouldn’t be expecting another attack. “I don’t have a way to warn him. I don’t have a way to *contact* him.” My throat felt tight, like I couldn’t get a full breath.

*Stop hyperventilating*, I commanded, but it was nearly impossible now that I’d started. Matteo reached across the table and grabbed my hands. “I can help,” he said, gripping me.

“What?”

He dug into his pocket, pulled out his phone and tapped on it for a second. Then he turned it around: Lili Castillo was in his contacts. “You still have her number?” I asked. “After all this time?” Not that he needed to save her number, given his memory, but the fact that he did spoke volumes, even if he wouldn’t.

Matteo’s face shuttered. “We aren’t talking about her,” he said. “Not now.”

*Not ever, more like*, I thought. Lili didn’t even want to acknowledge that she *knew* my brother, let alone that they were...whatever they were in high school. Neither of them would ever admit to the full extent of it, I was sure. “I don’t have my phone.”

Matteo pulled a pen out of his pocket and wrote the number down on a napkin. "Here." He pushed it into my hand. "That's as far as I can go without betraying the Rojas, understand?"

I nodded. He meant that we were done here. "Thank you."

"Will I see you again?"

I didn't want to lie to him. "Do you think you could be around Omar and Angel without trying to kill them?"

His expression soured. "Probably not."

"That's your answer, then." We stood together, and Matteo hugged me hard. "You're going to be fine, *mijo*. Just keep being the apple of Apá's eye."

"It's not Apá that I'm worried about," he muttered, but he refused to explain what he meant. "*Te quiero*."

"*Te quiero mucho*."

Then my brother was gone, and my chest ached, even as I hunted down the bank of payphones again. I used the phone card and dialed Lili Castillo's number, praying that she hadn't changed it.

"*Hola?*"

"Lili."

"Who is this?"

"It's Lyse." There was a flurry of movement on the other end of the line. "Wait! Omar is in trouble! Please, don't hang up!"

Lili sighed in my ear. "You have ten seconds."

"My father sent someone after him; he's supposed to bring proof that he's dead. I don't have any way to warn him. Please, I need you to do something."

"*Mierda!*"

*My sentiments exactly*, I thought. "You have to tell Omar. Warn him."

Lili made a wounded sound deep in her throat. "I can try...but Angel sent Omar back to the island as a test of his loyalty. He can't fail."

I was *really* over all of this stupid family nonsense. “So, Angel won’t help him when he’s in danger? How is my family coming after him a failure?”

“He told us to trust *you*,” Lili said. “And now the Rojas are coming for him. Angel is going to see this as just one more thing that Omar failed to prevent from happening in the first place.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose to stave off the headache that was building behind my eyes. “Can you call the island? Give him a heads up?”

“I’ll call,” she promised, and for a moment, my shoulders relaxed. Omar was fully capable of taking care of himself. With a little warning, he would be fine. “I just wish –” Lili cut herself off.

“What? You wish what?”

She sighed. I could almost picture her chewing on her nail. “Before he left, Angel had Omar beaten as punishment. Mauricio was...thorough.”

Dread pooled in my belly. Omar’s body had been through the ringer. How much more could he possibly withstand? Even with prior warning? The need to see him screamed through me: I needed to see him whole and safe. “I need to get out there.”

“To the island? Are you crazy?”

“Can you make it happen? Please?”

She was quiet for a long moment, and I worried that she hung up on me. Finally, she asked, “Can you get to the marina?”

I would have to call for a rideshare, but Omar did leave his credit card. “Yeah, I should be able to.”

“Head that way,” Lili said. “I’ll have a boat waiting for you.” I snorted, briefly imagining myself trying to figure out how to drive a speedboat without killing myself. “That’s great...I can’t drive one.”

“I can get you a ride,” she said snippily. “He’s one of Omar’s favorite cousins, so he’ll do just about anything for him...but

he hates your family more than anything else on the planet.”

*Fantastic.* “It’ll be fine,” I said. “Thank you.”

“Just...prove Angel wrong, okay? Prove to all of us that you are worth all of this.”

“I will,” I promised. And I meant it. I would do whatever it took to be with Omar, come Hell, high water, or both of our cartels.

## CHAPTER 34

## Omar

Sitting at the kitchen island, my phone rang for the dozenth time. It was Lili: I knew that I should answer it, she'd been calling for over an hour, but I didn't have it in me right now. Honestly, *nothing* sounded appealing right now. "*Jefe*, if you're going to ignore your sister, at least eat something." I snorted and shook my head, and Helena made a noise like a growl. "If you don't eat something soon, I'm going to tell the boys to run a tube down your throat. I can put all of your meals through the blender."

I gave Helena a look that said *try it* and pushed the plate of tres leches cake that she'd set in front of me away. "I'm not hungry," I grunted for the thousandth time. She'd been making me food for hours, trying to get me to eat, but nothing was going to fill the gaping void that had opened up in my gut.

She pushed the plate of cake toward me again. "It's your favorite," she said. When I didn't react, she pouted. "It'll hurt my feelings if you don't take a bite."

I sighed and pinched the bridge of my nose. "Did you honestly think that would work?" But even as I said it, I dug my fork into the soft, white cake and scooped up a bite. It was delicious, just like she said. *Damn her*. I glowered at her as I ate the whole piece in about four bites. I huffed. "I guess I was hungrier than I thought."

Helena hummed. "I'm not surprised, *jefe*. You've suffered a lot since you left, and I'm sure you didn't eat anything."



She wasn't *wrong*, but I didn't want to admit that. "It's not that big of a deal." I had told Helena about putting Lyse on a train while she reassessed the first aid that Lili had given me at the house. She hadn't been thrilled with me, but she could see the logic in letting her go. She might have whacked me in the arm about a dozen times, but she called me "sweet" too.

I had never been scolded and praised at the same time. It was a strange position to be in.

Helena cut me another slice of cake. I gave her a look, and she flapped her hand dismissively. "You can have as much as you'd like, *jefe*. I can always make more."

*BOOM!*

The house practically shook, and I jumped from the stool, all thoughts of tres leches cake slipping from my mind completely. I moved the blinds. "*Carajo*," I swore. The dry dock was on fire, and it was already spreading across the roof. Efrain and Pascal would have heard. They'd already be running to put out the fire.

*Fuck me, the weapons are still in there!*

It was a trap. I touched my back and swore again: I didn't have a weapon. There was a gun safe in the office, but I couldn't leave Helena without any protection. "Go help them," I told her.

She stared at me, incredulous. "You want me to...help with the fire?"

"Yes. The Syndicate's guns are out there, and if they can be saved, they need to be. Go now. I'll be along as soon as I can."

Helena's eyes narrowed. "You want me outside," she said. "Why? What's going on?"

*Don't throttle her; she's just trying to understand.* "Helena, go, *por favor*," I said. "The guns are important to Angel." When she still wasn't convinced, I added, "It will be safer for you."  
.

"To be out by a fire?"

The front door exploded inward. Helena's body jerked, and she fixed me with wide, terrified eyes. "Go," I said, pointing toward the back exit. "Get to Efrain and Pascal. They'll keep you safe."

"*Jefe—*"

I shook my head. "I can handle it here. I'll be with you soon."

Finally, Helena nodded, and she started moving toward the back exit of the house. I turned toward the intruder. There was no time to go for a weapon now, not without the intruder following me, and if we were going to fight, I didn't want to be stuck in a small space like the office. I wanted room to move.

Luckily, I knew the layout of this house better than anyone. It was easy to use the other hallway to get around to the front of the house, and I did so now, listening for sounds of the intruder. I came around through the side hallway and saw the damage to the front door. *Angel's going to shit himself when he hears how much I'm going to have to replace*, I thought. *What a pain in my ass.*

I followed after the intruder, silent, like a predator stalking its prey. I found him in the living room, staring at the photos on the wall as if our family portraits were something perverse. "You're looking a little worse for wear, Jesus."

He barely moved, barely acknowledged that he heard me; his eyes didn't leave the wall of portraits. "My nose needs surgery," he said, "and you crushed my eye socket."

I whistled softly. "Must hurt."

He shrugged. "It's not the worst thing that has ever happened to me." He finally looked my way. "Losing most of my family at that farce of an engagement party was much worse."

"I would apologize, but I don't really care," I said. "Your family put my brother into a coma and nearly stressed my sister-in-law into a miscarriage. The lot of you could fall off the face of the planet, and the world would be all the better for it."

Jesus sneered at me, and it was even uglier now that his face was a mess. “Would you say that to my cousin, *La Bestia*?”

I had to laugh. “I offered her Luis Rojas’s head on a platter, if she wanted it...I got laid after, so you can take that however you want.”

“But where is she now?” he demanded.

“Why would I tell *you* that?”

His sneer became a cruel smirk; it was made monstrous by the sharp bend of his nose. “She’s gone, isn’t she? She realized that she was with a monster, and she left you.”

I had to return to the compound for Angel; it was my duty to my family and to my brother. But it didn’t mean that there wasn’t a burning in my chest. I’d sent her away for her own good, so that she could have her freedom, but every part of me had wanted to just say *fuck it* and go with her.

Jesus seemed to smell my weakness. “I’m here to bring back the head of *La Bestia*,” he declared, like some sort of villain in a drama. “The head of the Rojas family wants it for his wall.”

“Luis can come collect it himself.”

Jesus shook his head. “Our leader doesn’t need to lower himself to the likes of *you*. That’s what he has loyal men for.”

I scoffed. “Proud of that, are you? To be some lackey that gets sent out on suicide missions.”

“It’s *not* suicide, *pendejo*. First, I’m going to take you on, and then I’m going after your bitch. We have unfinished business with her.”

I wasn’t sure what he meant by “we.” Luis sent Jesus to kill her and blame it on my brother, but even he wouldn’t be stupid enough to try that again. Would he? There was no point in it: I’d told Angel everything. The Castillos were on the alert now; they wouldn’t allow themselves to be caught off guard.

More likely, it was Jesus who had a score to settle with Lyse because he failed in his mission. If Luis was anything like

Gustavo — and I had reason to believe he was — I doubted that the man tolerated failure well. If I hadn't broken his face, Luis might have killed Jesus over it.

"You want my head for your precious boss?" I asked, tired of the whole thing. "Come and get it."

Jesus pulled a 9mm from a holster on his shoulder, and I had just enough time to duck behind the wall before he shot at me. *You don't have a gun*, I reminded myself. I had to get the gun away from him if I hoped to have a chance. Jesus wasn't as good with his fists as I was, that was for damn sure, but it wouldn't matter if he could put a bullet in my forehead from twenty feet away.

"Don't run scared now, *La Bestia*," Jesus taunted, but he did exactly what I wanted and followed me. *Idiota*. He could have shot at me from a distance, but I figured he'd want to be able to gloat over his prey.

He wasn't truly watching as he came down the hall, and he wasn't prepared for me to strike from an alcove. I didn't get as good a jump on him as I wanted, but I *was* able to knock the gun from his hand and kick it toward the door.

Jesus let out a bellow of anger, and instead of going for his gun, which would have been the smarter choice, he turned on me. He threw his weight at me, and we tussled back down the hallway, raining blows on each other. He tried to grab for my throat, but I was able to get my arm between us.

I blocked strike after strike, evaded his grip, but I wasn't making progress either. I wasn't inflicting damage like I knew I could. It should be easy for me to get a hand on him, break his bones or snap his neck, but he was able to work out of my grasp just as often as I could.

Jesus bashed my head against the wall, and dazed, I almost didn't catch sight of the knife that he took from his back pocket. He sliced at me and got my arm instead of my face. The pain was immediate and sharp, but I ignored it.

I was in survival mode; I wasn't fighting for bloodlust or revenge, and it was making me slow. *Get your shit together*, I

urged myself, but it was like fighting through syrup. Jesus made to stab me again, and I caught his arm and pushed him away.

We fought our way down the hall and spilled into the living room. I was on the defensive, throwing furniture in his way, but I didn't strike back. "Come on!" Jesus urged. "Where is the man who nearly beat me to death on the beach, huh? Where's the man who slaughtered my family?" My back hit the wall as he struck at me, and I caught the blade before he could sink it into my stomach. "I want to fight *La Bestia*," he spat in my face. "I want the monster."

The tip of the blade dragged up the length of my torso as he jerked upward. It sliced my shirt and bit into my skin, and I could feel my shirt soak with blood. Jesus looked down at it, and his face went ashen, like he was shocked with himself. "Your training *sucks*. You barely nicked me. I thought you wanted my head! Are you going to throw up if you're actually able to do it?"

"Fuck you!"

I couldn't hold back a laugh. "You're nothing but a scared little boy doing whatever your uncle says."

"The head of the Rojas family is going to take us to greater heights than even the Castillos can imagine."

I scoffed. "Luis Rojas couldn't handle killing a scared, untrained woman on his own. He sent a shit-poor excuse for an assassin and lost his only chance to get in good with my father while he was still in power because he botched the job so entirely. He's not leading anyone anywhere."

Jesus jerked, and I felt the blade against my throat. My muscles froze up, and I held perfectly still. If I moved now, I'd end up slicing my own carotid.

## CHAPTER 35

## *Lyse*

**D**on't throw up. Whatever you do, don't throw up, I told myself for the millionth time since leaving the Miami marina. My knuckles were white and bloodless as I held onto one of the metal tie-offs: I wasn't going to let this thing go for anything.

"We'll be arriving in fifteen minutes," a voice called out from the wheelhouse, and I nodded but didn't actually look back.

Every time I did, Omar's cousin glared at me like he wanted nothing more than to dump me in the Caribbean and run me over with the boat to make sure that I actually drowned. The hatred floated around him like a haze.

Looking in the direction of the island, I saw smoke in the distance. "What's that?" I asked, pointing with the hand that wasn't death-gripping the tie-off.

"Probably a fire." The answer was curt.

"I got that," I said, chancing a glance behind me. "What's on fire? Is there anything else out here besides the island?"

The murderously annoyed look vanished from his face. "*Mierda*," he muttered, and I felt the boat jerk as he forced it to go even faster. I whimpered but didn't tell him to slow down.

Within moments, the island came into view, and we both swore again. The dry dock was on fire, and the whole thing had gone up like kindling. "Did one of those *pendejos* set off —" The man behind the wheel cut off whatever he was about to say, as if I honestly cared what the Castillos kept in the

storage building. I just wanted to see Omar and make sure that he was okay.

The boat pulled up alongside the dock, and I scrambled off. My feet pounded on the newly finished dock. I could hear the water splashing against the pilings, but where that might have made me freeze before, I didn't stop now. Nothing else mattered but getting to Omar. I spared a glance toward the dry dock — Pascal, Efrain, and Helena were doing what they could to control the blaze — but I turned in the direction of the house.

Something was wrong. If Omar wasn't trying to put out the fire, he was in the house, and he wouldn't be unless there was something keeping him in the house. It was a clear diversion. "Go help them," I threw over my shoulder at Omar's cousin.

He said something in return, but his words were carried off by the wind. Not that whatever he was saying would have stopped me or changed my course. I knew I was right: Omar was in trouble. Again. If we got through this, I was going to put him in a damn bubble and not let him out.

The front door stood open, but that could have been from Helena running outside. Do not panic, I told myself. Panicking will only make things worse. My foot snagged on something, nearly sending me toppling to the tile floor.

Looking down, I saw a 9mm handgun on the ground. Fuck. I bent and picked it up. Apá and Matteo hadn't bothered to take me shooting, but I did know some of the basic safety rules, and I knew how to click the safety off.

I kept my finger off the trigger and crept farther into the house: if I was lucky, I could catch whoever it was unaware so that I could be useful. I rounded a corner and heard the sounds of the fight before I saw the two men.

"I can't believe this is *La Bestia!*" It was Jesus. I knew that Omar should have gone after him...but if Matteo was to be believed, my father would stop at nothing to wipe out the Castillos, even if that meant openly declaring war against them. "Come on now! You're making it too easy."



I peeked around the corner, and my heart seized in my chest. The furniture had been destroyed: not a single piece had survived. On the far side of the room, Jesus had Omar pinned to a wall; they were fighting over a knife that looked like its sole purpose was to slit throats. Jesus was a mess; his face was nearly unrecognizable, but a lot of that damage had been done the last time he'd come to the island. Omar was bruised nearly as badly, though his face didn't have that crushed-in look, thankfully.

What scared me most about the scene wasn't the knife, or the obvious damage to both of their bodies, it was the look on Omar's face. His eyes were...empty. He was fighting, yes, and he was able to hold Jesus off, but he shouldn't be struggling this much. He was either far more hurt than I could see, which was a possibility, or he wasn't fighting back with the ability I knew that he was capable of.

Why was he letting my cousin win? Why would he give up like that?

"Were you in love with my *prima*?" Jesus mocked him, pushing the knife inward until it just nicked Omar's neck. A spot of blood welled up, and my breath caught in my throat. "Did you think she would want to stay with you after everything you've done?" Jesus tried to keep pushing inward, but Omar held him back. He had enough sense of self-preservation not to allow his throat to be cut. "You don't deserve her."

Omar's lips drew into a mocking smile. "You think I don't know that, *pendejo*?" he asked, shoving Jesus back. "You think calling me a monster is new for me?" His smile became cruel, and it sent a shiver of horror and desire down my spine. This was *La Bestia*, not my Omar, and while a part of me would always be repulsed by how easily he transitioned into the killer that his father molded him into, there was an even bigger part of me that loved him for everything he was. This included.

Jesus puffed up his chest. "You think you're a big man? Forcing yourself on a woman like that? Forcing her into thinking that she liked it?"

*Well, that's enough.* I stepped around the corner and aimed the gun at Jesus, squeezing the trigger. A hole exploded in the hall just over their heads, and the gun kicked back, nearly hitting me in the face. My ears seemed to be stuffed with cotton. *You weren't wearing ear protection,* I reminded myself. *Keep your eyes on Jesus.*

He wheeled around, obviously expecting one of the men, and his eyes went wide when he saw me. "Lyse? What are you doing?"

I aimed again. "Step away from him," I said. "Now."

Jesus didn't budge, and Omar looked too shocked to move. "*Prima,* you're confused. This animal has turned you against your own family."

"My family turned against me," I said. "The moment that I was no longer useful, Apá decided I wasn't worth keeping around. He found me a new purpose, yes? Help him start a war?" I squeezed down on the trigger, and the floorboards in front of their feet exploded in splinters. My eyes met Omar's, and there was a spark of something there, like he was waking up. "Omar only wants me for me," I said, though I wasn't sure if either of them heard me. "He's protected me and encouraged me. He's been more of a family to me in the last two weeks than you all have been my whole life."

"You've lost your mind," Jesus sneered at me. "His family will never accept you. Not ever."

I shrugged. "I'll work on it."

Jesus spat at me, but he was just distracted enough that he didn't notice that Omar had slipped out of his grip. Not until he grabbed the knife out of his hand and had him in a headlock. "I'll take good care of her," he said to Jesus, but his eyes were on me.

Jesus struggled uselessly, but Omar spun the knife in his grip, showing off, before he sank it into my cousin's throat. Blood sprayed from the wound, drenching everything in bright red as Jesus's speeding heart pumped it out through his open carotid.

I watched the light fade from his eyes. He was dead within seconds. I expected to feel loss or fear...something that would indicate that a member of my family died in front of me. But the only thing I felt was intense relief.

Omar dropped the corpse in his arms. It hit the ground with a heavy thud. I stared at it for a long moment, and then slowly, I lifted my eyes to meet Omar's.

## CHAPTER 36

## Omar

“What the *hell* are you doing here?” I demanded.

Lyse clicked the safety back on the gun and dropped it on the ground. Then she sprinted across the room and flung herself into my arms. I squeezed her so hard that I worried she would shatter.

Then I set her down on her feet, dumbfounded as I grabbed her by the shoulders, intending to shake the life out of her for daring to come back here. But the more that I touched her, the more I needed to hold her. I pulled her against my chest again, groaning softly when her arms immediately wrapped around me, holding me just as tightly in return. I buried my face in her sweet-smelling hair. “What are you doing here, *conejita*?”

“Saving your ass, apparently,” Lyse griped, but her words were muffled against my neck. I could feel the wetness of her tears soaking into my shirt. “You were letting him win.”

It wasn’t a question, and I cringed. “I didn’t, though,” I said, not trying to defend myself. “He’s gone now, and we’re here, together.”

She cried harder. “Don’t ever leave me again, all right? That was shitty.”

“If you’re with me, you’re in danger,” I said, tipping her chin up so that she was looking at me. “I love you too much for you to be in that close proximity to violence all the time.”

“You...you love me?” she asked.

“Was that ever in question?”

Lyse let out a shuddery breath, and more tears fell from her eyes. “You left me,” she said softly. “You put me on a train.”

“*Because* I love you. Because I wanted to give you freedom and keep you safe, *conejita*,” I said. “You deserve to live the life that you’ve always wanted.”

She shook her head, and when I cupped her cheek, she leaned into it. “I can’t do that without you,” she said. “I had the ability to run and do everything that I have ever wanted to do...and I got off the train after less than ten minutes because of you.”

I tried to frown, but there was a warm fondness spreading through my chest. “Masochist,” I accused.

“No,” she said. “I’m just a woman in love.”

My breath caught. “In love?”

Lyse nodded. “I love you, too, Omar. Don’t send me away again.”

“I won’t,” I promised. I kissed her, hissing a little when she slid her arms across my torso.

Lyse pulled back, frowning. “Could you, maybe, stop getting the absolute shit beat out of you? I don’t think I’ve ever seen you without bruises all over your face.” Her fingers brushed against a sore spot on my cheek, and I did my best not to pull away.

“I’ll work on that,” I said, but the aches and pains were already fading from the forefront of my mind. I wanted...no, I *needed* her. I always wanted her; it was a given that there was always a thrum of desire simmering in my gut whenever I looked at her. But this need to have her, despite my injuries, was a force too powerful to resist. It didn’t matter if I ached afterward, so long as I got her underneath me, making those beautifully soft, pleading sounds. “Come with me.”

Her eyes strayed to Jesus’s body. “Seriously? We’re just going to...leave him there?”

“Efrain will come for him. Helena can handle the clean-up.”

“What about the fire?”

I let her go long enough to peek out the window. Everything was destroyed: there was a very good chance that the Rojas family would get what they wanted after all. Once the Syndicate knew that we'd destroyed their property, whether it was our fault or not, they'd turn on Angel. It was not going to be good. *Fucking hell*. I should call Angel and tell him...but that *need* still boiled in my gut. It was hard to even contemplate how much shit we were going to be in when all I wanted was to be in Lyse's arms. "They've got it nearly out," I told her. I would call and tell Angel later when I was of clearer mind.

"It's all just managing at this point. They don't need us right now."

"That doesn't sound very fair."

"It's their job, *conejita*." I took her hand and led her away from the bloody mess. "I need to get clean, anyway."

She smirked at me. "Did you need help with that?"

I shook my head. "Just be ready when I'm done."

"For what?"

I drew her close. "I think you can figure it out, *conejita*." I kissed her. "Be ready for me, yeah?"

Lyse let out a little breath and nodded. "Yeah."

I left her standing in my — *our* — room while I hurried through a shower. While I normally wasn't a fan of scalding myself, today I turned the water up as hot as it would go and let it run over my body. The tension between my shoulders relaxed, and the aches that came with the bruises eased enough.

Lyse wasn't wrong that I needed to stop getting hit, at least for a while; I definitely needed time to heal. It had been a long time since I had taken this much damage in such a short amount of time. I scrubbed myself clean.

Once the water ran clear instead of pink, I turned off the shower and reached for a towel. All of my movements were perfunctory; my mind was on the woman who, I hoped, was

waiting for me in my bed. When I was dry enough, I wrapped the towel around my waist and re-entered the bedroom.

Lyse was curled up on the bed, but instead of the sexy sight I was hoping to see, she was curled beneath the covers, wrapped around one of my pillows. She was fast asleep. If Lyse were any other woman, it would have been disappointing to see, but all I felt was warmth.

When I climbed into the bed beside her, she barely stirred as I shifted her so that she was in my arms. I pressed a kiss to her temple, enjoying the feeling of her body against mine. It was all too easy to fall asleep like this.



*Lyse*

I was warm, almost *too* warm, and I couldn't move. I wriggled for a moment, panicking a little against whatever was holding me, but then I felt lips against my shoulder. "Sleep, *conejita*," Omar whispered, kissing my shoulder again.

The little touch set my nerves on fire. I looked over my shoulder at him. "I think I've slept enough."

The haze cleared from his eyes as he woke all the way up. "You think so?" he asked. "Are you hungry? Helena came up to check on us, so she's probably up for—" I pressed my mouth to his, stealing a kiss. I felt Omar smile against my lips.

"Are you okay?" I asked, barely pulling away from him. "You're not hurting too badly?"

Omar's lips traced a path from my lips, across my jaw, and down my neck. "I'm never hurting too much for this, *conejita*."

I hummed softly, tilting my head to let him continue with this gentle assault. "That's not really an answer about whether you're in pain or not."

He nipped at the juncture of my neck and shoulder, and I let out a little gasp. My back arched, pressing my ass against him.



It wasn't a surprise to feel that he was already hard. "You can feel *exactly* where I'm hurting, *conejita*." I chuckled and rubbed against him, delighting in the groan that worked its way out of his throat. One of his hands snuck up my body and cupped one of my breasts; I shivered at the feel of my bare skin against his rough palm.

Whenever we'd been like this, so far, it had been overwhelming and passionate, but there hadn't been a lot of time for this kind of soft exploration. It felt like I couldn't pull in a proper breath as he gently rolled my nipple between his fingers. I threw my head back against his shoulder, moaning softly. "Omar."

He shushed me. "If you start making demands about me going faster, I'm going to listen, but I don't want to right now. I want it like this." I wouldn't exactly *mind* if he sped things up: I wasn't the best at being patient at times like these...but if Omar was content to do this, then who was I to rush him along? Omar's teeth snagged my shoulder again: my head was getting fuzzy with pleasure. There was a gentle ache between my thighs that only seemed to get worse when I squeezed my legs together.

His hand crept downward, and my legs spread for him without much prompting. Omar groaned when his fingers found me already wet for him. "I've barely touched you," he muttered, circling my clit and making me moan.

"It's all you," I said, panting. My hips rocked into his touch, needing more of it.

Omar groaned again. "You're saying you get this wet from me barely doing anything?"

I nodded, eyes rolling closed. "I want you. I *always* want you."

He shifted us so that I was on my back, staring up at him, while he was cradled between my thighs. "I always want you, Lyse."

I shook my head. "Not Lyse," I said, cupping his face. "Not right now."

Omar smiled and kissed me. "*Conejita*."

I hummed softly. “That’s better.” I reached between us and wrapped my hand around him. Omar breathed out an *oh fuck* as I positioned him so that he was pressed against my wet entrance. Almost on instinct, Omar rocked forward and seated himself inside me. I moaned. “That’s the best.”

He chuckled and canted his hips again. “I’ll never get tired of the way you feel,” he murmured. He kept his movements steady, but much gentler than we were used to being. It stoked the tension in my belly, little by little, and I shook as I held in the demand for him to go faster.

I bucked against him, whining. “Take me.”

Omar nuzzled into my neck. “I am,” he said, hooking his arm under my knee to spread me farther for him. His body slapped against mine, and I held him tight as I spiraled closer and closer to my orgasm. “Just let it happen, *conejita*. We don’t need to rush.”

Omar flipped us so that I sat astride him: I yelped at the change of position and how he stretched me. I stared down at him, shell-shocked, for a moment, and then my brain and body seemed to come back online at the same time. “Make us feel good, *conejita*.” His hands found my hips, and he guided my movement as I ground down on him.

With his help, I found that steady, if somewhat slow, rhythm that he’d begun. It was even headier from this angle, and I whimpered as he helped me to bounce in his lap. The tension was building again in the pit of my stomach, in the burn of my thighs, but every time I tried to speed up, Omar would tighten his grip and slow me down again.

“Why?” I whined, feeling tears prick at the corners of my eyes.

Omar smiled up at me, and for once, he wasn’t trying to tease. “Just enjoy it,” he said, holding me steady and forcing me to keep to this slower pace. “Enjoy me.”

*God, but I love him.* I leaned forward, kissing him, as I started to rock once more. His hands were everywhere at once, feather light, and I trembled under his touch. “I’m so close.” My head

fell back as I rode him, losing myself to the pleasure that was spreading throughout my body.

Omar's thumb found my clit, and I cried out as he circled it. "Come, *conejita*," he murmured. "I want to see the passion on your face and feel your muscles squeeze my cock."

It was his words more than his touch that sent me over the edge. I collapsed against his chest even as Omar bucked up against me, seeking his own release. This time, I kept my eyes on his face when he came: his brows furrowed, and his mouth dropped open into a silent groan.

I dropped kisses on his chest and collarbones, anywhere that I could reach without moving too far. "So good," I mumbled against his chest. "You always make me feel so good."

I felt more than heard Omar when he rumbled with contentment. "Same, *conejita*," he said, sounding like he was a moment from sleep all over again.

"Same?" I echoed, smacking his chest lightly. "How romantic."

He tipped my head back to look at him. "That felt pretty romantic to me," he said, and I couldn't help the smile that spread across my face.

"It was," I said. I propped my chin on his chest so that I could look at him. "I never took you for the...slow sex type."

Omar's expression didn't change, but he was suddenly much more somber than he had been only moments before. "Until you, I wasn't," he said. "I've never done...any of this before. I had women that I saw casually, but never anyone that it would pain me to lose." His thumb brushed the apple of my cheek. "No one like you."

I turned my head and nipped at that finger. "Well, you don't have to worry about losing me," I said. "I'm not going anywhere. You can't make me."

Omar's expression was fond and proud. "Good. Stay with me."

"Always."

## CHAPTER 37

## *Felix*

The sound of weeping women would never fail to annoy me.

Especially now over this *pendejo*. Jesus was a moron, thinking that he could take on Omar Castillo on his own *after* the man disfigured him. When the Castillos shipped Jesus's body back, the Rojas family had erupted into tears and promises of retribution. It was like none of them had imagined that this would be the result of sending him to that damned island in the first place.

"They'll pay for this," Luis told his wife, rubbing her back. "They'll pay for Lyse, and they'll pay for Jesus. They'll pay for everyone that they've taken from us."

*He's delusional*, I thought and glanced at my watch. I showed up to this farce of a funeral and acted the part of the devoted, grieving former fiancé, but my patience was running thin.

"Apá, now's not the time," Matteo said. His voice was flat and tight, and for the first time, he didn't remind me of a little boy. There was a hardness to his face that hadn't been there before. Maybe it was time to start molding him to take over for his father.

"Excuse me, *mijo*?"

Matteo looked at his father. "This kind of talk can wait until *after* the funeral, Apá," he said, "when we aren't around all the women."

The older man's eyes narrowed as he looked at his son. "Are you telling me what to do, Matteo?"

"*Cariño*, please."

Luis practically shoved his wife away; Matteo caught his mother before her stumble could turn into a true fall. “Go sit with Tía Claudia,” he told her.

His mother toddled away, and I watched father and son go toe to toe. *Definitely interesting*, I thought. “You have something to say, *mijo*, so say it,” Luis snapped.

For a moment, I thought Matteo might disappoint me and throw the kind of tantrum he had been wont to do from the moment that I’d met the little runt. However, he took a breath and very calmly said, “You lied about Lyse.”

“That *Bastardo* killed her.”

“I saw her at the train station two weeks ago. She called me.”

Luis’s eyes went wide with rage. “You spoke with your sister...in person?”

“You told me she was *dead*,” Matteo spat, matching his father’s anger. “Madre *still* believes that she’s dead, but she can’t hold a funeral because *you* told her that the Castillos weren’t done desecrating her body. What the fuck is wrong with you?”

This was getting dodgy; they were going to start drawing attention to themselves, and I could *not* afford to be a part of that. Working with Luis, allowing him to convince me that his sweet, virginal daughter was worth my loyalty, had been useful once upon a time, but now that she’d been defiled by someone other than me, we were down to the contingency plan.

“Watch yourself, Matteo.”

“No.” The word was a growl. It was a little like watching a puppy get his adult teeth; it was easy to see the man that Matteo would become with a little...shaping. “Why did you *lie*? Why would you send Jesus to *kill* Lyse?”

Luis sneered, and I had to actively stop myself from doing the same. Lyse was a *traitor*. She let that beast touch her. “Your sister made her choice,” Luis said.

“Only *after* you gave her no other option!”

“Matteo.” I had to step in before this turned into a yelling match. “Your sister betrayed us long before Jesus went to the island. She chose *La Bestia* over me, over all of you.”

Matteo gave me an unfriendly look. “Stay out of this.”

My fists clenched, but I bit back the rebuke that was on the tip of my tongue. “You’re not being objective,” I said. “I know it hurts that your sister betrayed your family, but the fact of the matter is, she did, and now we all have to deal with the aftermath.”

“Who is *we*, Señor Suarez?” Matteo demanded. “You’re not a Rojas, and you’re obviously not marrying my sister, so what the fuck are you still doing here?”

He wasn’t entirely...wrong. This was all starting to look like a sinking ship that I refused to drown on, but Luis Rojas and I knew far too much about each other now to let the other walk away. I’d have to put a bullet between his eyes before that could happen.

But...maybe the boy needed a demonstration of who was in charge here.

“Luis, you’ve protected your son for far too long. It’s time that he grew up, don’t you think?”

The older man looked like I’d socked him in the stomach. I might as well have. “We’re at my nephew’s funeral.”

His attempts to appeal to my kinder nature left me cold. “All the better. Let him see what happens if he continues to act like a willful pup.”

“Apá.”

Luis cuffed his son, splitting his lip with the family crest on his finger. Matteo spat blood onto the floor. “Keep quiet if you know what’s good for you,” Luis intoned.

“See, Matteo,” I said, putting an arm around his shoulders. He tensed, looking deeply confused. “Your father realized a long time ago that he was a little fish. Didn’t you, Luis? Especially compared to the Castillos.”

Luis gnashed his teeth. “The Castillos are only in power because Gustavo was a cold sonofabitch who would sell out his own children to get what he wanted.”

“So, you’re trying to be Gustavo Castillo now, Apá?”

I tightened my hold on him, effectively blocking his airway with my forearm. Matteo was stronger than me, and with very little effort, he was able to push me away, but I got to see the fear in his eyes first. It was just a glimpse, but for a split-second, he’d panicked. *Sweet*. “Respect your father, boy.”

Matteo snarled, but he didn’t fly off the handle. “He disrespected our family when he wrote my sister off for dead. If she *allowed* Omar Castillo to touch her, it was because you waited too long to get her. I won’t forgive that.”

“Are you threatening me?” I asked.

He shook his head. “No, I’m not threatening you.” He glanced at his father. “I’m trying to understand why my father, who has always been a man who walked tall, is suddenly cowering at your feet like a lap dog.”

“I was getting to that before I was interrupted.” I looked at Luis, who was having a hard time controlling his expression. “Your father and I have had a business arrangement for a long time.”

“I know: my sister for your loyalty.”

I hummed in agreement. “But did you know the fine print?”

Matteo’s brow wrinkled in confusion; he stared at his father. “What did you do?”

He was definitely going to be useful to me. His father’s obsession with being the top dog was going to drag him under, but the son still had potential. He was sharper than I thought, and his memory was top-notch. In two or three years, he could be truly formidable. “Luis agreed that if Lyse didn’t hold up her end of our bargain, the Rojas business operations would pass to me.”

If I had hit Matteo with a two-by-four, he couldn’t have been more surprised. “Why would you *ever* agree to those terms?”



I couldn't contain my chuckle. "I didn't exactly give your father much choice," I said. "Your father wanted my connections, and now, he has them. And he understands full well that with a few phone calls, I could have all of you rounded up like the rats that you are and put in Federal prison."

Luis bared his teeth, rage clear on his face. "Your sister will pay for letting me down. The Castillos will pay for what they've done."

I clicked my tongue against my teeth. "You're still thinking like a little fish, Luis," I taunted. "We've done things your way for years, and you've made no progress out of the small pond." The older man's eyes were full of fire and hatred, but they steadily dropped to staring at the ground, submissive. "I think it's time that we do things my way," I said. "I'll help you get rid of the Castillos for good, clean up all of the mess that you've made. I won't even make you tell your pathetic family that someone else is pulling your strings. But all of the decisions from here on in are mine. "¿Entiendes?"

Luis nodded, and I heard a strangled sound leave Matteo's throat. "*Entiendo, jefe.*"

## CHAPTER 38

## *Lyse*

### **F**our Months Later

Two pink lines: there were two *pink* lines. I checked the box for the hundredth time, and the meaning of those two pink lines didn't change. "I'm pregnant." Saying the words aloud made it real. "I'm pregnant with Omar's baby."

A flutter of joy went off in my belly at the same time a heaviness settled on my shoulders. "Are you okay, *mi amor*?"

Helena was standing in the doorway of the bathroom. She had gone to the mainland for our biweekly grocery order, and I'd asked her to get the test for me. It was only right that she got to know the results. I handed her the stick. Helena's eyes grew shiny, and her mouth stretched into the widest smile I'd ever seen.

"Are you ready to be an *abuela*?" I asked. "Because I can't think of anyone else who I'd want for that role."

She laughed and swooped me into a hug. "My darling girl!"

"Do you think Omar will be happy?" I asked. "We haven't really talked about children before, you know, and it wasn't like we were trying."

Helena shushed me gently. "I think Omar will surprise you, *mi amor*."

She was right, but there was still that bubble of trepidation in my belly. "Could we make his favorite dinner tonight?" I asked. "Make breaking the news a little easier."

Helena didn't think it was necessary, but she agreed to help put the meal together. We stood, side-by-side, as we prepped the vegetables. I sank the blade of my knife into a white onion, and the moment the smell hit my nose, my stomach twisted. Bile rose in my throat, and I stepped away from the counter.

*“Mi amor? Are you okay?”*

I wanted to speak, but opening my mouth was a legitimately bad idea. “I think I need to—” My stomach turned, and I had to run to the downstairs powder room. Throwing up was never pleasant, but now my head swam sickeningly, making the nausea even worse.

Someone knocked on the door as I gagged. *“Conejita? Are you okay?”*

“I'm fine,” I called out, but I sounded pathetic.

Omar swung the door open. His face softened as he stared at me. “Are you sick?”

I shook my head minutely, careful not to move too quickly so that I wasn't at risk of upsetting my tummy again. “Not... quite.”

*“Do you need some help?”*

“I'm fine.” I pushed myself to my feet and turned to rinse my mouth out in the sink. Omar didn't exactly hover, but he didn't leave either.

*“Did you eat something that didn't agree with you?”*

*“No. It was more of a smell that made me sick.”*

Omar scoffed. “A smell?”

“Well, strong smells can set off morning sickness pretty easily, and I was cutting onions for—” Omar scooped me up, and I scrambled to lock my legs around his waist for stability. “What are you doing?”

“Repeat what you just said,” he said.

“What? I was cutting onions, and the smell gave me — Oh.”

“You had morning sickness,” he said. “Does that mean you’re pregnant?”

This was not how I wanted to do this...but there was no going back now. “I am.”

Omar’s mouth split into a wide, joyous grin. “Really?”

I chuckled. “Do you want to see the test I took today?” I asked. “The results were pretty concrete.” Omar cupped the back of my neck and pulled me in for a kiss.

“You’re amazing,” he murmured against my lips. “Thank you.” A laugh bubbled up with a sob, and both sounds came out at once. Omar lovingly wiped my cheeks with the tips of his fingers. “These are happy tears, right, *conejita*?”

I nodded, kissing him again. “Of course,” I told him. “It wasn’t exactly how I thought this would go, but of course I’m happy.”

Omar’s smile dimmed for a moment, and I cursed opening my big mouth. We’d been talking about getting married, mostly just whispering to one another before going to sleep, but our life was on pause, waiting for Angel to call Omar home. The brothers hadn’t spoken in months, not since Omar called to tell Angel about the fire that destroyed the guns that they were storing: instead, they left it to Lili to run messages back and forth between them.

I cupped his face. “I am happy,” I said. “I wouldn’t want to be anywhere other than where you are.” His expression was unreadable, but then he swung me around and started walking in the direction of the stairs. “Wait! Helena and I were working on *chupe andino*.”

Omar grunted. “It’ll keep until I’m done with you.”

A shiver ran down my spine, and my fingers carded into his hair. It was getting long, and while Helena had been offering to cut it, I liked that I could grab onto it a little. “You have plans for me?”

He hummed. “Several. Most involve you being a lot more naked than this.”



My fingers were just turning into prunes when I heard the bathroom door swing open. “Decided to join me after all?” I looked through the glass shower wall at him, and my body seemed to freeze. “Omar, what’s the matter?”

He stared at me, unseeing, for a long moment, and then he roughly tugged off the clothes that he’d thrown on so that he could step out to answer the call that had interrupted us. Omar slid the door back and stepped into the shower, hissing as the water hit him. “Are you trying to cook yourself, *conejita*?” He reached around me to the shower knobs and turned the heat down.

I looped my arms around his neck, trembling slightly as his body pressed against mine. “Who was on the phone?”

I knew the answer, and I nodded when he said, “Angel.”

“He wants you to go back.”

“Us,” Omar corrected, burying his face in my neck. “He wants us to come to the compound. Emma went into labor last night.”

“I know.”

He pulled back a fraction. “How do you know when I just found out?”

“Lili texted me.”

Omar’s expression was perplexed. “Since when are you texting my sister?”

I shrugged, not really sure when it happened, only that it had. Maybe working together to save Omar’s life had bonded us more than I thought. Maybe the fact that I had saved his life, when she hadn’t been able to, had eclipsed the fact that I was a Rojas in her eyes.

“Letting you two have unchaperoned texting privileges feels dangerous.”

I laughed, pressing a kiss to his chest. “The baby should be coming any time now.”

“They’ll probably be sent home from the hospital tomorrow, and Angel wants us there when they arrive.”

I knew that I would eventually have to return to the Castillo compound, but it was still surprising that Angel had issued me an invitation...or an order, rather. “Are you nervous?”

Omar was quiet for a long stretch. He busied himself with kissing my neck and shoulders. “I am nervous,” he said finally. “If it were just me, I don’t think I would be.”

I curled my fingers through his hair. “If it were just you, you’d probably never be in this situation to begin with.”

He pulled back so that I could see his eyes. “You know that I wouldn’t change any of this, right? I would stay here on this island with you for the rest of our lives if I had to.”

I shushed him softly. “I know,” I said, drawing him down for a kiss. “It wasn’t the most...conventional way to get here, but I’m glad too.”

The water was going to start getting cold soon. Omar reached for the shampoo and rubbed some into my hair: whenever we ended up in the shower together, this was one of his favorite things to do. He told me once that it helped to relax him, but it also reminded him that he had the ability to be gentle and soft when he wanted to be.

“Marry me,” he said as he finished rinsing out the shampoo. He was grabbing the conditioner, barely looking at me, but I couldn’t have been more floored. Sure, we’d talked about marriage...but he’d never actually asked the question.

“What?”

He started massaging the conditioner into my hair. “When we return to the mainland,” he said, “let’s go to the courthouse and get married.”

“Okay,” I agreed. “Let’s do it. Let’s get married.”

The rest of the afternoon was spent packing. Helena was absolutely beside herself that we were actually leaving, but

Omar said that she was welcome at the compound any time. She could work there full-time if she wanted, or simply come to visit. We didn't have to wait until we came back to the island to see one another.

Helena wrapped me in a hug as the men loaded the boat with our luggage. "Let me know when your first ultrasound is," she said. "I want to know everything."

"Of course," I said.

One crushing hug later, Omar and I were skipping over the waves. It still wasn't a pleasant experience for me, but at the very least, I was getting used to it. Plus, now I had a custom-fitted life jacket that was strapped around me. "Are you all right, *conejita*?" Omar called to me over the waves.

"I'm okay. Just get us there in one piece."

He laughed, but it was carried away by the whipping of the wind. The ride was, by far, the most pleasant we'd had so far, and it was almost surprising when we neared the marina. Omar navigated the speedboat into its boat slip.

He disembarked first, and then held out his hand to help me step onto the dock. He kept his hand on the small of my back the entire way from the slip to the parking lot where a car was waiting for us. "Are you going to hover like this for my whole pregnancy?"

"Probably," he said. "Is that going to bother you?" He wasn't looking at me. Instead, his eyes swept the area around us, like he was expecting someone to jump out at us. It probably wasn't far from the truth: Omar wasn't needlessly paranoid. He'd been jumped enough in the last year to last a lifetime.

"I think I'll survive," I said, leaning into him. If it made him feel better to hover a little, who was I to tell him he couldn't?

His shoulders relaxed. "*Gracias, conejita.*"

Omar opened my car door and waited until I was seated and buckled before closing it and going around to his own side. Once he was behind the wheel, he held out his hand, and I slid mine into it, clasping our fingers together. "Ready to be my wife?" he asked.



The word *wife* sent a tingle through me. “I would like nothing more than for you to be my husband.”

Omar looked like he’d been sucker-punched, and then he looked predatory. He cupped the back of my neck, nearly hauling me over the center console so that our faces were only a breath apart. “Call me that again,” he demanded.

“Husband.” His eyes watched my mouth shape the word. “You’re going to be my husband.”

His eyes were dark with want. “If we didn’t have to go to the compound right after we finish at the courthouse, you would be in so much trouble.”

I felt my mouth draw up in a smirk. “Is it still trouble if I’m asking for it?”

His lips were against mine, demanding and greedy, and I gasped against him. I wanted to climb into his lap. Ever since we’d settled into our exiled life, it was like we couldn’t go more than a few hours without each other. I’d been waiting for that burning want to fade, but if anything, it was only getting worse. The honeymoon period was sure to end, right? “Behave, *conejita*,” Omar warned, drawing away from me, as if I had been the one to attack his mouth first. “We have to get through this afternoon before I can have you all to myself again.”

I sat back in my seat. “I’ll behave if you will.”

He let out a groan. “Can’t you just say, ‘yes,’ and we could move on with our day? Why do you have an attitude and make me want to find a place where I could adjust it for you?”

“Is that what we’re calling it?” I sniped at him. “Attitude adjustments?”

He laughed, and it was a warm, pleased sound. “I can’t wait to do this forever with you, *conejita*.”

I took his hand again. “Then, let’s get a move on.”

## CHAPTER 39

## *Omar*

“Don’t let go of my hand, okay?” Lyse asked, squeezing my fingers with hers.

I lifted her hand to my mouth and kissed her knuckles, dropping an extra kiss on the new gold band on her ring finger. “I won’t,” I promised. I wanted to tell her that this had nothing to do with us — we were just here to welcome home the new baby — but I didn’t. Angel and I hadn’t shared more than a handful of words with each other in months. Lili and Emma had been the ones who relayed messages back and forth. I knew that Angel was coming around to welcoming Lyse into the family, but it was a slow process.

We found our family gathered in the dining room, waiting for Angel and Emma’s arrival home. Lili put her arms around me. “I’ve missed you.”

I snorted but returned her hug. “You could always get on a boat,” I pointed out. “Take a weekend vacation.” I motioned at Lyse. “You two could go swimming.”

Lili looked at Lyse. “You’re learning?”

She shrugged. “I figured it was time.”

Lyse never told me what, exactly, happened to shift her and Lili’s relationship, but apparently the two were texting buddies now. The thought warmed something in my chest. It still wasn’t perfect, but it was a start toward accepting the woman I’d decided I couldn’t live without. And with a family like mine, that was about all I could ask for. Lili’s eyes landed on

the ring on Lyse's hand, and she grinned. "You made it official?"

I shrugged. "This was the first time we've been back to the mainland; I wanted to make it count."

She looked at Lyse. "Tell me it was more romantic than that, I beg of you."

I wrapped an arm around my wife. "It was perfectly romantic, *thank you*."

Lili grabbed Lyse's hand. "Blink once if you need help."

"Ha ha," I said, dropping the smile from my face. "Let her go now."

Lili rolled her eyes. "You're such a freak."

Before I could come up with a response, we heard the front door open, and everyone seemed to tense in anticipation. Angel came in, arm wrapped around Emma, who was carrying a tiny bundle in her arms.

Babies had always been a way of life for our family, but I'd never really paid attention before, not until my numerous cousins reached an age where they might be put on the security detail, and I had to deal with them personally. But seeing Emma holding my niece *knowing* that in a few months, Lyse and I would be in the same boat, it hit me square in the chest.

Emma looked around at our gathered family and smiled. "This is Miri," she said, turning the baby a little so that we could all get a look at her. She was squishy and red and just a little ugly in that way that brand-new babies usually are, and she was absolutely perfect.

"You named her after Madre?" The question was out of my mouth before I could stop myself, and Angel looked at me for the first time in five months. His expression, which had been soft with adoration, cooled considerably.

"Is that a problem?" he asked.

I shook my head. "No, of course not."

“Stop being an a-s-s-h-o-l-e,” Lili sniped at him, putting her arm through mine.

I looked down at her. “You know the baby can’t spell, right? And she can’t understand what you’re saying.”

Lyse smacked me on the arm. “Just because you couldn’t spell your way out of a paper bag...”

The room went quiet and distinctly hostile. I threw my arm around Lyse’s waist and drew her close to my side. “My *conejita* has fangs,” I said proudly, leaning down to brush my lips against her forehead.

The tension in the room didn’t ease, but everyone’s attention shifted back to the guest of honor when Emma put the baby into Manny’s arms. The teenager stared down at little Miri with something akin to awe on his face. “She’s so tiny,” he said. “How much does she weigh?”

Angel snorted. “A whopping nine pounds. Almost ten.”

Tía Angela, who was half-corked as it was, hooted. “Fat babies mean healthy babies! I want to hold her next!”

Emma looked at Angel, and the very clear *not on her fucking life* that was shared between them nearly made me laugh. “Are we like that?” I asked, looking down at Lyse.

She was watching my brother and his wife too, considering. “I don’t think I’m that easy to read,” she said and almost sounded sad.

Lili hummed from beside her. “Emma didn’t grow up like we did,” she said. “She didn’t have to learn to hide what she was thinking or feeling.” She bumped into us. “Doesn’t mean that we don’t feel as deeply.”

Lili was a lot like me: she used humor and sharpness to throw off anyone who might get too close, but every once in a while, she allowed someone to see her soft underbelly. I was glad that she’d found Lyse trustworthy. It helped to know that one of my siblings saw what I did.

After Manny cooed over Miri for a few minutes, he carefully handed the baby back to Emma. “That’s about as much as I

trust myself with something that small,” he said, making everyone laugh.

Emma came over to us, and while I fully expected that she would hand the baby to Lili, she held her out for Lyse. “Say hi to your Tía Lyse.”

Lyse blinked, surprised, but she took the baby into her arms with a soft, pleased sound. “Aren’t you a beauty?” she cooed. Her body began to rock-bounce to a gentle rhythm, and the baby’s eyes drifted shut.

“Where did you learn that?” Emma asked, impressed.

Lyse smiled, eyes never leaving the sleeping girl. “I am the oldest of all of the children in my family,” she said. “I’ve been soothing babies since I was old enough to hold them on my own.”

Angel reached over and gently plucked the bundle out of her arms. She kept her face neutral, but I could tell that she was disappointed. But before I could say or do anything, Angel handed Miri over to me. For all the hubbub about her being a big newborn, she weighed next to nothing; she was incredibly tiny in my arms. My muscles locked up, and the women around me laughed.

“Big, bad Omar afraid of a baby,” Emma teased.

“Hey,” I said, barely glancing in her direction, “I don’t want to drop your kid before she’s big enough to bounce, all right?”

Lili scooped her from me then. “That’s enough of that,” she said, practically dancing away from us. “You just come with Tía Lili,” she said, ignoring Emma’s panicked *Lili!*

“Go with them,” Angel said, looking at Lyse.

She leaned into me. “Uhm.”

I patted her hip. “Go,” I said. “Soak up all the baby cuddles.” I looked at Angel. “I need to talk to my brother.”

Once Lyse had trailed after Emma and Lili — and she was welcomed into their group with an arm casually slung across her shoulder — I was able to let go of the breath I was holding.

“You married her.”

I nodded, not bothering to deny it. “We’ve been talking about it for a few months,” I said. “I didn’t want to lose the opportunity.”

I hated the tension between us. Even when we had fought growing up, Angel had always been the person I could go to when everything became too loud or too overwhelming. He was the first person who knew how to talk me out of those red moods that could end in so much carnage. Now, he felt like a stranger: I wasn’t entirely comfortable standing next to him.

“I’m not going to send you away again,” he said, clearing his throat. “Emma wants you home now that the baby is here. She would feel safer with you here with us.”

Affection for my sister-in-law welled in my chest. “Lyse would be welcome too?”

He grimaced, but he nodded. “She’s not a Rojas anymore,” he said. I expected him to walk away after that. “But we have a bigger problem.”

I winced, knowing what he was about to say. “The Corazón Syndicate. I’m surprised this hasn’t come up sooner.” Fucking Jesus. I wished I could kill him all over again.

Angel looked at me, his expression hard. “It has. I offered to reimburse them for the lost *merchandise*.”

I whistled under my breath. This was my fault. If I hadn’t kidnapped Lyse and dragged her back to the island, the weapons might still be there and we wouldn’t find ourselves beholden to Venezuela’s version of *el Coco*, or the boogeyman.

“What did Ademir say?” Since we were having this conversation, I knew that he didn’t accept Angel’s offer. “Should I turn myself in to the Syndicate?”

At that moment, I caught sight of Lyse, standing next to Emma. She was all smiles and my heart ached knowing what it would do to her if I gave myself to the Syndicate to save my family.

“No. I’ll deal with the Syndicate and Ademir. You stay out of it.”

I knew what he wanted to hear from me. “*Sí, jefe.*” Then he turned his back on me, and I didn’t seek him out further.

I stood on the periphery, watching everyone talking and laughing, the voices blending together into white noise. I didn’t see Lili, but knowing her, she was making sure all the food was perfect. Lara pushed through the door carrying a tray with steam coming off the top, and I thought I saw my sister standing in the kitchen.

When Lyse joined me, I wrapped her in my arms and pulled her close. “Enjoying yourself?”

Her smile was tentative, but genuine. “Everyone here is so loud, but lovely. Much different from the parties my mother would have.”

I tipped her chin up and pressed a kiss to her lips. “Angel wants us back in the compound,” I told her. “For good.”

Her chin wobbled slightly. “Me too?”

“Of course, *conejita.*” I brought her left hand up so that the gold band glinted in the light. “We’re a package deal now, and he knows it.”

She shook her head. “I never thought I’d see the day when a Rojas would be invited into the Castillo compound.”

I pulled her against me, wishing that we were alone. “You’re not a Rojas anymore,” I reminded her.

“No, I suppose I’m not.”

“Lyse Castillo,” I said. “Say it.”

“I’m Lyse Castillo now,” she indulged me. The dip in her voice, low and sultry, shivered down my spine. I wanted to sweep her into my arms and carry her off to my bedroom. It would be perfectly ready for us, I was sure of it...but I held back. It would be rude to rush out of Miri’s welcome-home party, and I didn’t want to piss Angel off any more than I already had.



“After the party, I’ll show you around,” I promised. “Our suite is on the other side of the house.”

She smirked. “Is it, now? How convenient for a newly married couple. What could a previously single man need with all that space?”

I chuckled and cupped her face. “You’re not jealous, are you, *conejita*?”

Lyse shook off my touch. “Absolutely not.” She took my hand and laid it across her still-flat belly. “No one else will be able to give you what I am going to.”

“No one has ever given me the peace that you give me,” I said. “No one has given me the love that you give me...and no one has ever made me want to make that love into something even better.” I splayed my hand across her belly, possessive. My heart pounded at the thought that if anything happened to me, Lyse would have to raise our child on her own. I wondered if Angel would kick her out. Send her back to her father, where he would—I couldn’t finish that thought and needed to distract myself.

“Should we tell them?” I looked around the room at all the happy faces. There was a new life in this house and everyone was celebrating.

Lyse immediately shook her head. “I wouldn’t steal Miri’s spotlight for the world.” She put her hand atop mine. “Besides, it’s bad luck to mention anything before the end of the first trimester. You never—” She took a steadying breath. “You never know what will happen so early like that.”

“We’ll make you an appointment,” I assured her. “We’ll get a doctor to tell us just how perfect our son is.”

She slapped my arm. “It’s not anything right now. You have no reason to believe that it will be a boy.”

I shook my head. “We’re having a son,” I said. “I know it.”

“Will you be disappointed if you’re wrong?”

“Never,” I vowed. “But I’m not wrong. You’ll see.” I leaned down and kissed her again. “I love you.”

Her lips brushed the corner of my mouth. “*Te amo*,” she said. “*Te amo* a thousand times.”

Lara began handing out cake to everyone and I was surprised not to see Manny already begging our housekeeper for a second slice. Where was he? My eyes swept the room. Emma was nestled against Angel, baby Miri tucked against her chest. Those soldiers who weren't on duty were scattered around the room along with various family members. Except Manny wasn't the only one missing.

Grabbing Lyse's hand, we walked over to my brother. It could be nothing. Judging from the scowl Angel gave us, he wasn't interested in further conversation, but that didn't matter. Without apologizing, I asked them both, “Where's Lili?”

*End of Brutal Enforcer*

## CASTILLO CARTEL BOOK 2

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## *About Bella*

Bella Ash is a dark mafia romance author. She loves writing dark, alpha heroes who find themselves obsessed with their strong, sassy heroines.

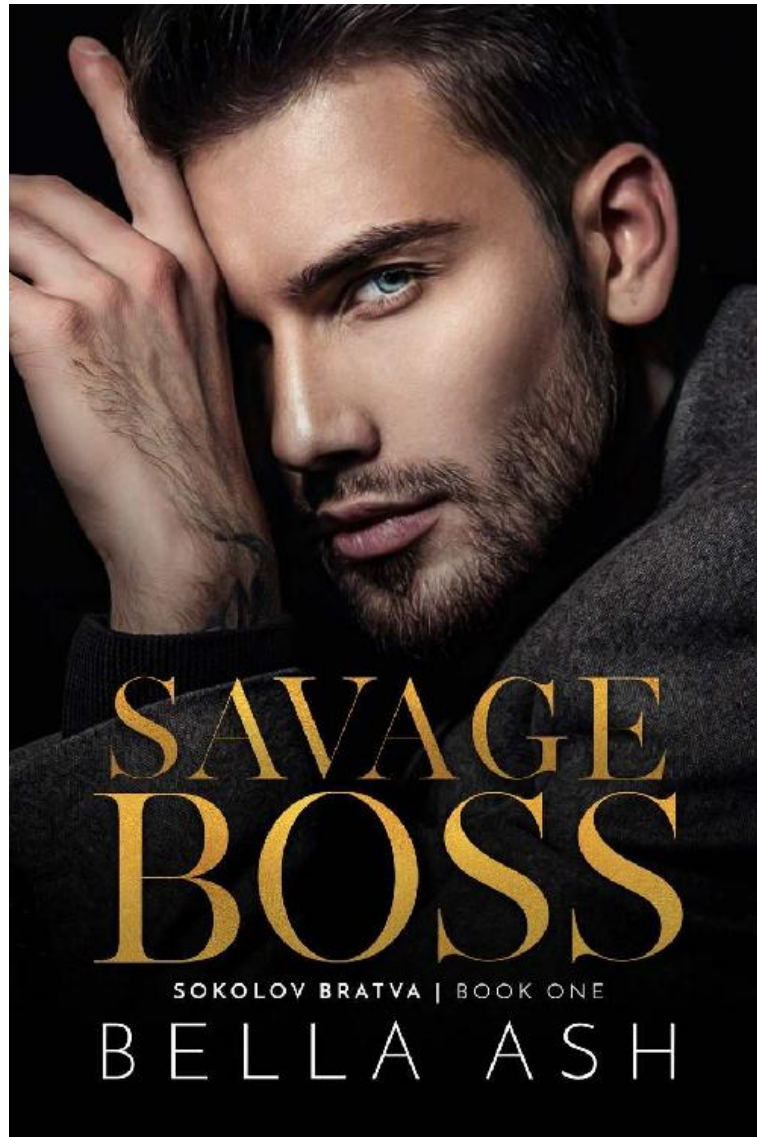
Her stories are filled with action, suspense, steam—plus sexy anti-heroes and the woman who can't help but learn to love them.

To you, dear reader, she promises intense emotion, edge-of-your-seat action, and always and forever an HEA that will leave you satisfied and smiling.

Bella lives with her family in Chicago and loves to go on old Mafia tours to find as many little tidbits to use for her books as possible. When she's not writing, she loves to spend time with her handsome hubby, go to Broadway shows, or drink way too much dark coffee.

You can find her hanging out on:





## BLURB

### *A marriage forged in blood...*

Ever since she was a child, Alexandra Volkin was raised to be a mafia Queen. But when her husband-to-be is murdered—on their wedding day—her fiancé’s oldest son, Viktor, claims her as his own. Not because he wants her. But because he wants to break her.

He suspects Alexandra’s father of the murder and he’s going to rip the truth from her lips.

One brooding look from Viktor is enough to make Alexandra’s heart race, but he also possesses a dark side that terrifies her. She has to prove her father’s innocence. And if that means seducing her ruthless new husband, so be it...



The marriage was supposed to be a ruse, but Viktor can't help but admire his beautiful, stubborn wife. He needs to keep her close—very close—so he can uncover the truth and avenge his father. The problem is, she's tearing down his walls. And in Viktor's world, emotion is weakness. Fear is power.

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## EXCERPT

Chapter One:

Alexandra

“Are you almost done? I feel like it’s taken two hours to pin that thing.” The excited smile on Alexandra’s face carried over to her voice, and she struggled to keep from fidgeting.

“You are beautiful.” Her mother, Darya, finished fastening the bridal veil in Alexandra’s golden hair and smiled at her. “Look.”

Turning to face the familiar ornate mirror that had decorated her bedroom wall since she’d been old enough to walk, Alexandra let out a whoosh of air and stared at her reflection.

The wedding gown was impossibly white, almost silver, and its shimmery fabric clung to her curves in all the right ways. The neckline plunged to reveal only a little cleavage, and led to glimmering lace around her shoulders and down her arms. She thought of her gown as elegant, and loved it as it was, though her friend Elena had said it needed more bling.

*As if*, Alexandra thought. The twenty-two-year-old woman staring back at her from the mirror was a flawless picture of beauty. At least, that’s what her stylist told her as she arranged her hair and makeup. Meanwhile, Alexandra was doing her

best not to pick out her flaws. Today was her day and she was going to enjoy every moment of it.

*But what if he doesn't like something?* It was too late to change anything now. Would he call off the wedding if she didn't look radiant enough?

“Do you think he'll like it, Momma? Do you think he'll like *me*?” She smoothed the front of her dress. Darya's smile widened.

“He'll love it, and he'll love you.” Her mother's voice was heavy, with a strong Russian accent. Her parents had moved here to Boston from Russia when Alexandra was a baby. And even though she herself spoke perfect American English without an accent, Alexandra loved how her parents spoke.

“You're not just saying that because you're my mother, right?” Alexandra peeked at her mother in the mirror and caught her rolling her eyes as she made a tsking noise.

Her mother then wrapped her arms around her and gave her a tight hug and a wide smile. “You are the most beautiful bride I've ever beheld. If Boris doesn't see that, then we'll know that he needs glasses.”

She stole another look in the mirror and then returned her mother's smile. “Mrs. Boris Sokolov. Has a nice ring to it.” She faced her mother, raising an eyebrow. “Hopefully as nice as the ring on my finger will be,” she added, allowing out a playful laugh. Her mother grinned back at her.

“So silly for such a serious day,” Darya said.

“Not silly—excited! How many years have I waited for this? I'm getting married! I'm finally getting married, and to a rich, powerful Russian mafia boss, too. My own happily ever after.” Alexandra nearly squirmed inside her gown with growing anticipation. “After Boris and I get to know each other as husband and wife, I'm sure we'll be just as happy as you and Papa are.”

“Marriage takes work,” Darya reminded her, casting a look over her daughter before fussing with the lace on her dress.

“I know, I know, and I’m prepared for that. Spending the rest of my life with someone like Boris is going to make things interesting, but I’m so happy I’m finally starting my own adventure.”

And it was true. She was going to fulfill her dream at last. No more having to live her life according to her father’s dictates. The strict curfews, restrictions on activities and who she was allowed to have as friends. No more waiting and wondering who her father might choose for her to marry.

When her father had first set up the agreement with Mr. Sokolov, her mother had been upset and her parents had argued. Boris was the same age as Papa and her mother had tried to get him to reconsider, but Papa had been adamant that the union take place, *for the good of the family*. Momma had quieted down at that. Alexandra had been surprised at the age difference—forty years—but her father’s decision was final, always. To complain about something like that wouldn’t go over well. And she didn’t want to upset him, not when he seemed so pleased at the union. Boris Sokolov might be significantly older than her, but he was also the most powerful person they knew and that was what was most important. As his wife, she would have wealth, status, security. Alexandra was finally moving out of her father’s home and she would finally have a life of her own. She couldn’t wait.

A knock at the door interrupted her thoughts, and Darya quickly primped her veil.

“The limo’s here. Let’s go.”

Alexandra leaned into the mirror one last time, tilted her head to inspect her makeup, and then followed her mother. The anticipation that had previously been a dull buzz grew into a delightful Christmas morning feeling. This was *her* day—it was finally here!

Her mother escorted them out the front door, down a path across a perfectly manicured lawn, and into the limo. The ride was quiet. Peaceful, even, if not for the butterflies in her stomach.

Alexandra stared at the passing scenery until they arrived. The familiar white Russian Orthodox church with its gold onion domes glistened in bright sunlight as they pulled up. Alexandra straightened and fussed with her gown until it was back to perfection, and then leaned delicately out of the limo, taking the driver's offered hand and climbing to her feet.

Her heels clicked against the pavement, then the polished wooden floor as she entered the church. A low murmur of conversation met her ears, and she followed the sound toward the chapel as her mother stopped to chat with friends.

Just inside the gorgeous doorway of the chapel, Alexandra stopped and her eyes scanned the crowd, then the altar, for her groom.

But Boris was nowhere to be seen. She hoped he wasn't running late to his own wedding.

The murmurs around her from the guests stuttered to a stop and she looked up, expecting to see the groom. Instead, coming down the aisle was a younger man. Alexandra's heart fluttered for a moment. Tall and powerful, he had Boris's steely gray-blue eyes—the kind that looked *through* you instead of at you—and his suit struggled to contain his muscular physique.

Alexandra did her best to hide her surprise and instead smiled at this new man. He was handsome, much more handsome than Boris, and she felt heat rising in her cheeks.

“Where's Boris?” she asked as he reached her. She traced the fabric of her dress with her fingers nervously. Up close, she noticed a deep scar across the man's right eyebrow.

*Unique*, Alexandra thought. Somehow, it added to his attractiveness.

The man offered no warmth, not even a smile. Though clean-shaven and well-groomed for the wedding, there was an innate toughness to him that lent him a stern edge.

They locked eyes in silence for a passing moment. Alexandra was preparing to ask him another question when he spoke.

“Boris is dead.”

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