

HOSTILE KINGDOM: SOUZA CARTEL



HOSTILE
DEVIL

— GIOVANNI & INDIA, DUET TWO —

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
AUTUMN ARCHER

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GIOVANNI & INDIA DUET 2

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AUTHOR NOTE



Hostile Kingdom is a Dark Romance world which includes the Jungle Oasis trilogy and the Souza cartel series.

Hostile Devil is the conclusion to Giovanni's story. It's a dark cartel mafia romance that includes scenarios and references which may act as a trigger to some readers.

Within in the steamy dark pages of Giovanni and India's forbidden love affair you'll find murder, gore, drug abuse plus physical assault.

Please read responsibly and know your own limits before diving in.

Welcome back to Blackwater Manor.

GIOVANNI



A few months earlier

“Is someone there?” India’s small voice breaks the silence.

I don’t answer. It’s not like I’m here for conversation.

Outside of this room, security guards are patrolling her apartment, and the entire condo is on lockdown.

My twin has enough to deal with, so me watching over the little girl he adores gives him one less thing to worry about. At least that’s how I’ve mentally justified being the only person allowed in her room.

It’s more or less pitch black in here, even though my wristwatch tells me it’s after midday.

When I first carried India into her bedroom and laid her on the pure white queen size bed, I’d pulled the heavy gold drapes and kept the lights off. Shutting out the world for as long as it would take her to come to terms with the brutal reality.

Since then, I’ve stayed in this dusky pink velvet armchair, content in the darkness around us.

Cotton sheets rustle and the ivory mushroom lamp on her nightstand clicks on. Soft light floods across her comforter, making her bed inviting. India sits upright, wearing her dead brother’s t-shirt and rubs big blue eyes with her fingertips.

“Giovanni... you’re still here.” She states, rather than a question.

Her silky blonde hair is messy on one side from hours spent crying into her pillow and her blemish free complexion lacks sunlight.

“Was it a nightmare?” She croaks wishfully, tired and dehydrated. “A bad dream?”

I rise from my seated position at the foot of her bed and walk to the dresser, pouring a glass full of tepid water.

“No, it’s very real.” I tell her. “Reno isn’t coming back.”

When I hold the glass out for her, she looks up at me and blinks quietly. Those piercing eyes of hers linger on mine. She’s dauntless in my presence. No sense of fear or even awe for the power I hold. Oddly, I notice a likeness to me within the depths of her stare.

“Where’s Dré?” Her gaze drifts to the shut door at the far end of her room. “And Letterman? Are they okay?”

“They’re fine.” When she accepts the drink, I move back to the armchair.

The same spot I’ve inhabited for seventy-two hours. Except for when I’d showered in her adjoining bathroom while she slept and redressed in the same black utility pants and shirt, my scruff growing thicker.

Silence shrouds the unlit corners and, after a few minutes, she reaches across and turns off the light again.

“How do you do it?” Her soft American accent sparks an unusual rush inside of me.

“Do what?” I reply, doing my best to push down the weird feeling in my chest.

“Survive loneliness.”

“I’m not lonely. The devil lives inside of me. He keeps me company,” I say, my shoulders bouncing lightly.

I hear her sigh and then nothing more than the steady rhythm of my own breathing.

“Maybe I should find a devil of my own.” Her husky words sound sharper, closer.

A slice of daylight streams in through the drapes when they're suddenly thrown open. India stands in front of the expansive window, a hand pressed to the glass and her face directed toward Miami's cityscape.

Blazing sunshine halos her elegant silhouette, brightens her long golden hair, and bursts through the slim gap between her slender bare legs.

Somehow the daylight kissing her flesh heightens my senses—my hunter's impulses. The awareness of it sets alight a flame in my groin, the sensation of it too good to explain. A cruel niggle of warmth nudges my heart from out of its cold grave.

An unheard-of sense of peace washes over me, her presence snaring my full attention. A sweet angel overcome by tragedy.

There's something about this graceful teen that fascinates me. She waits there, spine straight, without a care for the killer taking up residency in her private quarters.

"Be careful what you ask for, little girl. The devil destroys everything he touches," I reply when she glances over her shoulder to find me cloaked in shadows. "My brother will keep him away from your door."

The right corner of her mouth lifts ever so slightly before she turns away and yanks the drapes together again to snuff out the light.

"Well, it's too late for that now." The faint wisp of cotton sheets can be heard when she climbs back into bed again. "I'm going to find the men who did this and shoot them myself. I've already imagined the excruciating pain they should suffer... and dreamed how I'll point a nine-millimeter Beretta at their temples, pull the trigger, and graffiti the walls of their homes with my bloodstained hands."

I smile a little at her savage imagination and contemplate telling her she shouldn't worry about justice. The Souzas would balance the scales, because she belongs to the cartel,

whether she realizes it. Or maybe I should lie about the dark days becoming brighter, eventually. But I don't.

Rather, I let the hush swallow her grief and close my eyes, wondering why I haven't left her bedroom yet. And how I'd like to nurture that devil growing inside of her, to fan the flames.

GIOVANNI



Present Day

Darkness is the one place I know better than anywhere. I've used the lack of sunlight to my advantage for years. There's a certain peacefulness in the knowledge of knowing I'm undetected, that nothing can be seen, except for the whites of my victim's eyes when I'm in position.

Prowling in the shadows gave me the advantage. I was in control, always.

Until now.

I roll my jaw, aware of the stiffness in my face and tasting coppery blood. Beneath a warm, scratchy layer of cloth close to my face, I blink as if that would help me pinpoint the nothingness my kidnappers have thrown me into.

Hot breaths heat my skin and perspiration beads on my forehead.

Instinctively, I try to move my arms, feeling them secured at either side of me, my tense body forced upright in a seated position.

Broken memories hit me hard. The most powerful one making my insides burn—India's scream.

Where the fuck is she?

Beneath a churning wave of panic, I mentally pick at what pieces I can remember. Blinding headlights. The force of impact. Scrambling to reach her. Voices. Grabbing hands. My

fists flying. Pain splicing through my skull. And now this, a dark place—in more ways than one.

I swallow what little saliva I have left and close my eyes, even though I can't see shit. Controlling every inhale, I slow my mental state and try to focus on the sounds around me.

Heavy footsteps thud, getting closer. Possibly two sets, maybe more. Bracing, my fists clench in defense. They might have secured my forearms, but my legs appear to be free to kick like fuck if needed. At this point I'd easily switch to feral to find her.

“Take the bag off,” a male voice instructs.

At the same time as the fabric is yanked off, a metal chair is dragged over rough concrete and set before me. Anger charges through my veins as I watch a familiar man pinch the knees of his charcoal dress pants before sitting.

Powerful light burns my now sensitive retinas, brightness streaming over me from an interrogation lamp. I glance at one wrist, then the other, noting my black Tom Ford shirt. I'm not wearing my suit jacket anymore, which means this bastard confiscated my handgun and my cell phone.

“The legendary Giovanni Souza...” Salt and pepper hairs around my captor's mouth twitch a little when he smirks. He casually pushes black-framed glasses further up the bridge of his broad nose. “If you weren't right here, in front of me, I wouldn't believe it. It truly is a miracle.”

“Carlos,” I hiss his name. After my eyes adjust, I'm vigilant in my assessment of the cordoned off area I'm trapped in. Probably the corner of a warehouse or vacant distribution storehouse. There aren't any windows to climb out of on the two solid walls, or doors to kick through. Only strips of thick opaque plastic hang like manmade curtains, the bottom of them continuing to billow out a little. “Where's the girl?”

My father's rival and ex-best friend stares at me quietly, fixing the knitted roll neck snug to his throat. “She's here.”

Not liking the fact my heart is thumping too damn hard, I shake the arms of the chair I'm secured to and grind my teeth.

“Show me her. Now! Or I swear to fuck, old man, you won’t walk away from me alive.”

Carlos laughs at that and runs his fingers through the thinning strands of silver-gray hair on top of his head.

“Really?” A set of hands settle on my shoulders from behind. “Let’s not argue about who would survive this improvised business meeting of ours. From where I’m sitting, you’re not in any position to threaten me. I dragged you here for a reason. So, listen. It’s up to you whether you die tonight. I’d prefer not to cut your throat.” He leans closer. “After all, you are my godson.”

“*Was* your godson.” I correct him. “That was before you assassinated Uncle Angelo... and almost killed Tommy, who was with him. And if that wasn’t enough, you’ve waited all these years to finally eliminate the man whose success overtook your own. You had my father gunned down in an alleyway like a fucking stray dog, didn’t you?”

Carlos shakes his head back and forth, his eyebrows rising above his glasses. “The day you and André were baptized, I stood by your father’s side and promised to protect you both.” He laughs roughly. “Power and greed changed your Papá. Eventually, he let distrust and lies come between us. A wall of suspicion that *he* created... not me. Elias dreamed of building a global empire and tried everything he could to become invincible. I guess that’s what drove the man crazy in the end. And why you, his son, gave up your soul to become his loyal puppet.” He pauses, eyeing me as his head cocks to the side, trying to read my blank expression. “Except... you’re not quite the monster he wanted you to be, are you, Giovanni?”

My stomach knots, but I stay stoic, not giving anything away. As far as monsters go, he hasn’t seen anything yet. But if India has suffered in any way, I’d carve his insides out, sizzle his entrails in a skillet, and feed them to his family as their last meal before they die too—every single last one of them.

“You have quite the impressive reputation.” Carlos fingers the silvery goatee on his chin. “Turns out, Elias was far from

invincible no matter what lengths he went to. He wasn't the god he thought himself to be. He was simply a man, just like you and me. We all have an expiration date... much like your beautiful little friend."

I could flick up my Oxfords and kick this fucker in the throat. Strangle him with my thighs while my arms are still secured. Somehow, I swallow my violent tendencies and contain my temper. Losing my mind won't win this battle. Patience is the best tactic.

First, I need to figure out where he's keeping India. Once I'm certain she's safe, then I'd finish him. Zip ties won't contain me for long.

"Show me the girl." I eyeball the armed men next to me and strain to see beyond the thick polythene curtain.

"Well, well, did the great Elias fail to create an elite killing machine after all?" He rotates a chunky gold pinky ring. "Colombia thinks Giovanni Souza is ice cold. An undetectable *sicario*, whose only ties are his family... and a young girl with big blue eyes."

I don't tell him she's my family. *My familia*. "The girl has nothing to do with this bullshit. What do you want, Carlos?" I open and close my fingers. I'm on the verge of losing my shit, but rein it in for the end goal.

His brows snap together. "We are talking about the same blonde teen who lured David Castillo and his men in the parking lot at Elysian, right before a masked gunman slaughtered them, aren't we?"

"There are plenty of blondes in Colombia," I snarl. "You must be mistaken. And just so you know what to expect, whoever brought her here... whoever touched her... they won't last two minutes when I'm free of this chair."

Jets of air shoot down his nostrils. "You have cable ties around your wrists, boy. Admit it, the untraceable Souza has finally been cornered like one of his father's pet tigers." His mouth curls up at one side, smug from his statement. "And just so you and I are clear... and I'm rarely wrong. I believe the

masked man who orchestrated Castillo's murder was none other than you. It was only a matter of time before you screwed up."

"I was out of town." My heart is hammering in my chest. If he's certain India was involved, then what did he do to her after the crash? "What reason would the Souzas have to kill Castillo... unless you really are the man behind my father's assassination and your guilty conscience is fucking with *your* head?"

Carlos sits back in his seat and presses the tips of his fingers and thumbs together to form a diamond shape in the middle. "I had nothing to do with your Uncle Angelo's death. Or your Papá's." He gently rotates his wrist and glances at the gaudy Rolex wrapped around it. "Perhaps you should look closer to home for those answers."

My scowl burns into his swarthy face where deep lines crease the edges of obsidian eyes. "If this is a ploy to turn the Souza brothers against each other, it won't work. Your lies mean nothing to me."

"Think about it, boy. You're here, albeit restrained, but you're alive. My men had every opportunity to blow a hole in your face after they smashed your Rolls off the road. I suspected the chassis would be reinforced, and the glass toughened—standard for a criminal like you. We probably even use the same manufacturer."

His gaze dallies above my left eyebrow, on the oozing cut. "Perhaps they roughed you up some when you fought back. But they brought you here for an audience with me when I could have given the order to kill. These days it's extremely rare for me to roll up my sleeves and involve myself in..." Carlos nods to a man lingering by the partially open curtain, then takes a handkerchief out of his pocket and wipes his hands. "... matters of blatant disrespect. However, this situation is different. *You*, my boy, are different. And that is why you're still breathing."

My eyes shoot sideways to the man he communicated with. "Let me see the girl and then I'll listen to what you have

to say.”

Carlos runs his tongue under his top lip and then clicks his fingers in the air. “There’s a lesson in all of this, Giovanni Souza.”

“Oh yeah, and what’s that?”

An aluminum flatbed trolley is wheeled into view. My lungs stop working and my mouth goes dry. A grimy sheet veils an unmoving body, the face concealed too, except it doesn’t hide the handmade sandals I had commissioned for my girl—for the love of my godforsaken life.

“*Niñita!*” I half growl, the raspy tone of my old pet name for her betraying my desperation.

I won’t say her real name out loud or give this fucker any more ammunition than he already has.

Carlos’ sonorous voice whispers around the mayhem in my mind when she doesn’t reply. The callous edges of his words heighten the panic stabbing my chest, so it hurts like hell.

“I know what your weakness is, and now I have the means to take down the most powerful crime syndicate in Colombia. One Souza after the other, insignificant tiny dominoes... unless—”

The trolley comes to a standstill behind him, out of my reach. I hate the secrets in my head that no one could ever understand. How the girl lying beneath the flimsy sheet means more to me than my own life. And the fact Papá was right all this time makes me sick to my stomach.

In the seconds it takes me to inspect every inch of the covering, my brain malfunctions and my lungs cramp. I fall in and out of time. Struggling to see straight through the uncomfortable surge of fear eating me from the inside out. I don’t give a fuck about myself—these men have nothing on me. But India, she’s deathly still. Unresponsive.

I can’t breathe. My throat squeezes around every venomous word I should spit out. But I’m drowning in this horrendous scene before my eyes.

How can she breathe with that over her mouth and nose?

I'm desperately trying to conceal my torn-up emotions, to control the sharp rise and fall of my chest, or give away the ungodly pain behind my eyes. This is my fault. Penance for all the heinous deeds I've carried out in my lifetime.

"What have you done?" I snarl, my voice hoarse like I swallowed a thousand blades of woe. "Get that off her face."

My neck strains when I fling my torso forward, still impossibly restrained. "If she's dead, motherfucker, I'll make you wish my name never passed your lips... that we never met... that you never looked me in the eye... do you fucking understand me?"

Carlos just sits there chuckling, his arms folded. "Elias is dead. Tomás is the hybrid king who rules a new generation of the Souza cartel. Times have changed, Giovanni, and you, my boy, have something I want."

When distorted laughter cracks open my throat, it sounds deranged. "You're not getting shit from me," I growl. "Now take the sheet off, Blanco. Why the fuck have you covered her face like that?"

He sighs heavily. "That girl is the reason I had to pay out a million in cash to the mother of my top lieutenant... why she mourns the loss of her only son. The Castillos demand vengeance."

I can't hear him properly under the thrumming of blood surging to my aching heart, his voice an echo behind my panic. "You're a fucking dead man."

"Now, now, Giovanni. Be smart. Think about your options. Consider what could have really happened tonight if I wasn't offering you a wonderful opportunity. The girl *should* be dead. We all know that." He glances over his shoulder at her and my heart stops mid-beat. *Should be?* "Any other *puta* in her position would be first in line to meet the butcher. But..."

Carlos stares at me again. Perhaps he expects me to keep eye contact with him, but nothing he could say or do right now could strip my gaze from her.

“I want you to remember this chat. How Carlos Blanco knows exactly how to destroy you,” he gloats, freakishly reminding me of my father’s egoistical taunts. “Yet instead, I offered clemency because you and I have a future together. That’s what real men of power do. They take calculated risks to accumulate beneficial resources. Men like us always take. In *all* ways. Don’t make me regret my decision to keep you both alive. Otherwise, that little girl in her sexy prom dress will be at the mercy of the Castillos.” He stands. “We’re done here... for now.”

“You’re right, Blanco. This is far from done. Even after I’ve killed you, I’ll raise the fucking dead to hunt you down in the afterlife.”

“I’ll leave you alone for a bit to think things over.” Carlos goes to shake my hand and then smiles, retracting his hand. He knows I’m trapped and relishing it. “She should start to come around from the sedative in a few minutes. It made her very vulnerable in the hands of the wrong people.” As he speaks, he saunters towards the trolley, grabs the sheet at the top corner and pulls it away from her face.

My ribs tighten to create a bone cage that barely contains every wild beat of my heart. Before me, the vision of her pale complexion and elegantly poised profile steals my ability to exhale.

Ebony lashes rest on her lower set and perfect lips are parted ever so slightly. Soft golden strands spill onto the dull metal beneath her head. I focus on her chest, patiently waiting for it to rise. I need to confirm she’s alive. When I notice the slight elevation of her cleavage, everything inside of me goes haywire. Relief and revenge clash in my veins.

She’s stunning. A delicate little thing needing to be safeguarded for the rest of her life. And that task belongs to *me*.

“You should consider my amicable proposal, Giovanni.” Carlos inches away from her, a sick smile playing at the corners of his mouth. “Agree to do business with me.”

“Doing what exactly?”

He raises his brows, signaling to the armed guy to my right. He filters out with the bastard as he leaves. “Doing what you do best,” he calls out back over his shoulder.

Taking a beat to breathe in the silence, I bow my head for a second and growl out my intention. “While there’s still breath in my lungs, I won’t stop fighting to get you out of here.”

INDIA



Rattle. Squeak.

For a moment I think I'm in Blackwater when I blink my eyes open and see dark corners with hazy light.

An awareness of pain comes from inside my skull, but my arms won't respond to my brain when they try to investigate.

Next, I think about wiggling my toes... my fingers... nothing. Only faint pins and needles, all overshadowed by numbness.

What the hell happened?

Intermittent memories of prom make me smile inwardly, the warm sensation abruptly chilled by the flashback of wreckage, floating in and out of consciousness, and a sharp needle piercing the vein in my arm.

A high-pitched squeak continues to echo around me, the sound of it coming from my left. As much as I want to look, my eyes keep rolling into the back of my head.

Where am I?

Using as much strength as I can muster, my head rolls sideways—just a fraction—towards the noise. *Giovanni*. He's still wearing his formal attire and sitting in a creaky metal chair.

He rocks back and forth, straining his arms. They look like they're attached to the seat with zip ties. He elevates his hips at an angle where his stretched out fingers meet his designer belt buckle.

His beautiful face is etched with shadows, the ferocity of his expression terrifying as he concentrates.

I try to speak, to whisper even, but my jaw won't unlock. Words refuse to come out, only a dry murmur that goes unnoticed as he focuses.

Oh, my God, I'm paralyzed.

Internally screaming, I watch him skillfully unfasten the belt buckle and unthread the leather from the waist of his dress pants.

Panting, he flaps the belt a few times like a fisherman casting his bait. Eventually, the hole punched end lands in his opposite hand. From there, he patiently tucks it beneath his wrist and feeds the length in through the zip tie's loop.

Lying here, in awe of his quick thinking, it all comes flooding back to me. How our vehicle was hit from the side, and he had shot two men in the chest when they dragged me from the Rolls, kicking and biting.

I study the bloodied gash above his eyebrow and recall the exact moment he'd earned it. When more men appeared and the barrel of a Glock had clattered against my teeth—how he instantly stilled and shouted for them to stop—giving his own hooded attackers a chance to knock him out.

Giovanni could have saved himself or continued to fight for his own freedom. He could have even headed home to protect Leo from a potential threat at Blackwater.

But he didn't. He put me first.

And now we're being held in an unfamiliar dim space that stinks of death.

My pulse thumps in my skull. My fingertips begin to tingle as they barely move on the cold metal under me, sensation trickling back. Gio stays focused and persistent, working hard to secure both ends of the belt together again to form a circle that's linked to the zip tie.

Lifting his foot, he places it on the leather and thrusts his leg downward in a violent stomp.

The force of it snaps the stubborn plastic and his arm is miraculously free. It's easy for him to repeat the process on his opposite arm now with one hand released.

And the second he bounces out of the seat, rising to his mountainous stature, he looks right at me. He stands there, war-torn and imposing, his expensive clothes molding a muscular physique and his aura as black as hell.

"India..." Sweat glistens on his brow and his chest heaves. Determined strides carry him straight to me.

I want to throw myself at him and hug him close. To hear the sound of his heartbeat next to mine. Inhale the addictive scent of his skin, but I'm powerless. Still utterly immobilized.

"I'm here." He palms my cheeks, the expanse of his large hands siphoning heat through me. "You okay, baby? Talk to me."

I swallow the bile burning my throat, aware the tempo of my pulse is picking up now. "Leo?" I murmur, my question breathy.

"No one can get into Blackwater. He should be safe for now." Giovanni hurriedly pats himself down, hunkering out of sight and returning with a switchblade. "The fuckers took everything from me. But they didn't notice this. I had it hidden in my ankle sock. Once we get out of here, I'll make contact with Lola."

Taking my hand, he squeezes it and pins me with his intense green gaze. "You were sedated after the crash. Do you remember?"

"Sort of."

"You'll feel a bit off, but I need you to fight it. Sit up if you can."

My legs are heavy, and my mind is foggy. I let him haul me upright where he holds me next to his chest, the thrum of his heartbeat loud in my ear.

"My legs feel weird," I whisper.

I'm unbearably weak and helpless, something I'd only ever felt in the days following Reno's murder. This isn't me, and I hate it.

"The effects won't last for long." A crease furrows his brow as he runs his hands over my bare arms, down my spine, and then hitches my dress up to check my naked legs. His searching eyes inspect every inch of my prickled skin. "Did they do anything else to you?" I shake my head. "Good. You'll feel more like yourself in a few minutes. But we don't have time to wait around. When we reach the other side of that curtain, stay behind me until I see what we're up against."

He tucks a straggly lock of hair behind my ear and presses his lips to the crown of my head. "Focus on getting yourself out of here. Can you do that for me?"

I frown at him. "We're both getting out of here, Gio."

Giovanni immediately scoops me up in his powerful arms and sets me on my feet. My ankles tremble, the heels I'm wearing not helping my questionable balance.

"India." Snaking an arm around my lower back, he snares my jaw, the movement urgent, and tilts my head backwards. My heart comes alive, the rhythm of every chaotic beat full of love. "Whatever shit goes down; you need to get the fuck out of this building. There's only two of us and a crowd of them. If for some reason we split up, promise me you'll make a run for it. I can look after myself, so just stick to the plan and find a way home. *Comprendes?*"

"Gio," I fist his shirt, fear coiling in my gut. "I choose you... where you go... I go... I won't leave you behind."

"Christ." He shakes his head and I sway into him, my knees weak. "You're so fucking stubborn." Warm lips descend, their softness clinging to mine with such tenderness. Such a contrast to the wild look in his eyes and the sternness of his voice. Deepening the kiss, he controls my body and bends me back a little. "Do as you're told for once... *Niñita!*" he mutters into my mouth. "Please."

I'm panting when our tender moment is disrupted by a distant bang, making me jump. Instantly, he steels his spine and clenches his jaw. The transformation happens right before my eyes. Years of conditioning lock into place, so he's completely shut off—blank. When his head cocks to the side as he listens, the green circling his pupils turns dark and intimidating.

He unfastens his wristwatch, yanks my arm closer, and straps it onto me. "You'll need this later."

"Why would I need your watch?"

Ignoring the question, Giovanni hunkers before me and works at the straps twisting my shins like vines and quickly slips the sandals off, one at a time.

"There's a breeze hitting the other side of the plastic curtains, which means there's a way out close by. Do whatever it takes to reach the exit. Got it?"

"Got it," I insist.

The first step I take is like wading through water in a pair of concrete boots. However, I won't tell him that. And I certainly won't complain about how the muscles in my neck burn, stiff from whiplash, or how my poisoned veins are making me feel sick. Rather, I do my best to compete with his long strides and pretend the hand cuffing my wrist isn't the only thing keeping me upright.

The toughened polythene curtain brushes my bare shoulder when he swipes it out of our way to pass under it.

Together we move from the makeshift room into a cavernous warehouse where aisles of shrink-wrapped boxes sit on pallets ready for shipment and hefty wooden crates are dotted about on shelves. Large steel cages and an unused forklift sit to the right. Moving past them, a stomach-churning smell of ammonia hits me.

To our left, a mound of dead cows is swamped in a pit of syrupy blood, their flesh hacked and torn open between their four legs.

A while ago, I heard a story about drug traffickers using a sea vessel that was set for the Middle East and stopped near the Canary Islands. The cargo had consisted of emaciated livestock, and a few tons of cocaine disguised in their feed.

This cruelty towards defenseless animals had sparked a hatred within me. I made André promise to never mistreat cattle in that way for the benefit of business—ever. Luckily, he’s an animal lover too.

So, this—this is heinous.

“Hey!” a male voice booms over my shoulder. “Where the fuck do you think you’re going?”

Giovanni immediately rotates, spinning us around and putting himself between me and the gun pointed in our direction. I sway into him, dizzy from the quick movement.

“Where’s Blanco?” he barks. “I want to talk to him about his proposal.” The gunman narrows his eyes at him. “He wants something from me, and I want to discuss expectations.”

All the hairs on my scalp lift at the same time and a shiver rushes the length of my spine, the sensation of it hitting me tenfold as my nerve ends spike.

We’re here because of David Castillo. The Blanco cartel had found me after all, and now Giovanni was in danger, all because I fucked up.

“Follow me.”

The gunman backs up and pivots away. Big mistake. Giovanni lunges forward and drives his blade into the guy’s neck. Blood spatters across Giovanni’s handsome face, but he doesn’t stop stabbing him until his lifeless body collapses.

Without hesitating, he grabs the assault rifle next to the corpse and glances over at me. “Come here,” he orders, the tone of his deep voice notably switching to savage narco-terrorist.

My stomach quivers when he yanks me into his hip. So close I can make out the shape of a heart in the bloody mess

on his cheek like an inkblot test given by a psychologist. What the hell does that say about me?

More armed men appear, their military-style clothing making it hard to see them move in the shadows.

“Hands up!” One of them yells in a warning. “Stay where you are.”

Giovanni doesn't waste any time and starts shooting, shoving me behind a stack of crates as bodies begin to drop. At intervals, he peers around the edge of the box and discharges precisely fired bullets.

For each soldier he takes out, more arrive. Even though the odds are against us, he keeps calm and systematically fires when he locks onto a target.

I wedge my shoulders into the tower protecting us and stare at my shaky hands. It's obvious the sedative is still pumping through my veins. My head throbs and it feels like I'm underwater.

Giovanni turns into me, his eyes feral. His inky hair is tousled now, in the way it always looks countless times after he's lost himself inside of me.

“Stick to the crates. The exit is that way.” He points to the floodlight at the far end and grabs my wrist, roughly marching me towards the next box tower.

Lead whizzes past us. A large hand slams down on my head, forcing me to duck, my own survival instincts still dulled.

Lowering down beside a dead guy, he swaps rifles and checks the magazine is full.

“Take this.” He hands me his unfolded pocket knife. My heart is hammering now.

I repeatedly blink and zone in on the sticky blade, aware of my sluggish reactions. It's infuriating being this inadequate—this dizzy. My lungs are working hard by the time I'm scurrying behind another box tower and my mouth is

uncomfortably dry. I look about me, wishing I'd strapped my handgun to my thigh when I dressed for the evening.

Not that my aim would be worth shit. I can barely focus, never mind hit jack-in-the-box targets. But a gun would be easier to use than this knife.

“Stay low and keep moving. I'll cover you. Don't stop.” He doesn't look like the well-polished man who had escorted me to prom. No, Giovanni has morphed into an expressionless combat warrior. The stone-cold monster he was raised to be.

I stare at him, unsure, feeling helpless and nauseous. “Gio—”

“Listen to me, India! Stop hesitating. That shit will get you killed. I'm right behind you,” he growls, his eyes fully fixed on my face, hypervigilant and ready. “Go... hurry up. Move it.”

INDIA



The pulse in my throat thrums so hard it makes my voice shake. “Promise you’ll be right behind me, yeah?”

“Move!” he snaps, his sharpness stealing my breath.

“Okay.” I stay close to the ground and scramble on all fours, my throat closing around a stupid whimper.

Panic churns in my gut. I’d somehow found happiness in the midst of grief and accepted living in the light was a false sense of safety. I’m better off in the shadows, next to the man who rules them.

My world would crash down around me if I lost him too, making it even harder to push ahead without him next to me. But this situation is so much bigger than us. It’s life or death—*mine* and *his*. Neither of us know if Blackwater was breached and Leo’s in danger too.

Glancing over my shoulder, I lock eyes with Gio briefly before he turns away, takes aim, and fires a round into the warehouse. He’s become the controlled commander who barks orders. The capable sniper with the only rifle we have between us, and I’m helpless to defend myself properly, or anyone else. In this pathetic, drugged state, I’m more of a liability.

Failure doesn’t sit well with me, nevertheless I trust him to have my back and head to the exit.

I take a beat to exhale and scan the area before scurrying from crate to crate under the racket of explosive gunfire. Out of nowhere, harsh fingers dive into my hair and I’m manhandled to kneeling.

Instincts take over. I ram the blade into my attacker's thigh and twist. The snarl scraping from the guy's throat is nothing less than spine-chilling. Its intensity worsens when I pull the knife back out and then quickly plunge it into the shredded muscle all over again.

"Fucking, *puta*." My head is wrenched backward. Black eyes pierce me, and before I have the chance to inflict more pain, a merciless hand whips my cheek.

The brutal force of it jerks my head sideways and I unintentionally let go of the knife. My brain oscillates and everything goes blurry. At the moment, all I can see are black stars. Heat scorches the slap mark and tears spring to my eyes.

"I'll fucking kill you for that!" I latch onto the rifle slung over his shoulder and yank hard.

Together we wrestle for ownership, but he has the advantage of brute strength compared to my wobbly existence. On my knees, I'm shaken and doing my best to ignore the pain in my head.

He wedges a boot into my stomach and my grip on the rifle slips. A winded breath catches in my throat. I cough and heave, palming my belly, unable to suck in air.

I'm almost sick when cold steel prods my cheek in preparation for an execution. Except, a dark shadow moves by us and then the fucker who's ready to shoot me jerks violently.

Giovanni is behind him, his movements lightning fast and precise. Repeatedly, he throws powerful punches and hooks his opponent's throat, tightening the choke hold he has on him.

The guy's eyes bulge and he thrashes wildly at Giovanni's arm to tap out. Giovanni doesn't relent, only removing his arm when he's certain the guy is finally dead.

"You good?" Giovanni growls out the words.

Something passes over his face, a glimpse of concern bubbling beneath the surface of his no-nonsense persona.

I nod and force down the hard lump in my throat. "All good," I lie.

Content to have a response, he claims the fully loaded rifle on the ground, raises it and shoots behind me.

There's a veil of lawlessness over his eyes now, his mission clear. The creases lining his forehead deepen when he drags me by the arm to another crate and checks over the top of it.

“Keep moving... I'm with you.”

“You'd better be,” I warn him, locking eyes before I crouch low, bunch up my dress, and scramble once again towards the breeze.

I catch sight of the velvety night sky beyond an exit big enough to welcome a semi-truck, a cargo bay. The roller shutter is still high and there are a few vehicles parked outside in the distance.

My heart is thundering in my chest as cool air licks my bare arms and goosebumps shower me. In a moment of madness, I pause, certain I'm hidden, and angle around to search for him in the chaos. But he's not behind me like he promised.

I debate going back in. Only his instructions were crystal clear.

My lower lip quivers and a weight of dread sinks in my stomach. What if he doesn't make it out alive?

I wipe my nose with the back of my hand and curse myself for feeling nauseous. So what if Giovanni's trained for mortal combat? I still worry. Reno was an expert in security, yet that didn't save him from an incendiary device.

It doesn't matter how many fights Giovanni has won in the past and walked away from with his life intact, because professional hitmen die eventually.

Trust him.

I grind my teeth together, checking around me and then dart out of the exit, falling to my knees behind the chassis of a navy Chevy truck, its silver wheel wells rusted. I hunker next

to its mucky tire and peer over the dented hood, my body shaking with fear and exertion.

It's only now that I see him emerge from the warehouse brandishing an assault rifle. His inky hair hooks his brow and the fitted black shirt he wears is unbuttoned to mid-chest where a tattoo peeks out.

Giovanni.

I resist the urge to shout for him. He confidently rotates to face the men firing at him and lets off a round of bullets before chasing the shadows the yard light creates.

When he's that little bit closer to where I'm hiding, a van speeds up from behind, a cloud of dust whirling in its wake. Stopping abruptly, the back doors fling outward and more armed men pile out, each of them pointing their weapons right at him.

I contain a scream behind clenched teeth, my veins aflame.

"Bastards!" I grit out in a whisper, suddenly aware of the sharp pain my nails make from burrowing into my grubby palms.

"Put your weapon down, Souza." One of them shouts.

There's nothing I can do. I can't save him. My arms ache with the need to reach for him, but I force myself to stay hidden. The burn of hot tears spills over my cheeks when he lowers his rifle, surrendering—completely surrounded.

In that fleeting second, time grinds to a halt and our gazes momentarily tangle. His eyes narrow a fraction, his tight expression ferocious. He nods once. Instinctively, I know he's telling me to stay out of sight.

As quickly as the order passes between us, he pivots in his smart shoes and turns his back on me. Directed by prodding rifles, he starts walking back into the building, chaperoned by a crowd of men now holding him hostage.

No!

This can't be happening. They'll torture and then kill him. My shoulders shake when a tattered sob escapes me. Reno

would be exasperated with me for allowing my emotions to get the better of me in this situation. My brother taught me better than this. Somewhere in the depths of my mind, I hear him tell me to weigh up my options and think clearly—to remember I'm the hunter.

I fist my hair, sinking to the ground, mindlessly hugging my knees and rocking myself back and forth while my heart pounds.

Think, God dammit. Think!

I take a mindless minute to pull myself together and come up with a plan. Giovanni is the priority, then Leo. However, I can't help either of them if I'm dead. My lungs hurt when I inhale a deep breath and prepare to leave Giovanni behind.

Taking one last look over the hood, I fist the hem of my dress and use the shadows to scamper barefoot over the pavement, using parked vehicles as shields.

Maybe it would be a good idea to check for keys behind any of the visors and steal a truck. However, that would alert Blanco's men to my discreet getaway. Knowing these streets better than I do, they would give chase and likely catch me. And even if I managed to get past the wire fence, they could easily follow me all the way to Blackwater and risk everything Gio tried to protect. His secret lair would go up in flames.

I run under a huge metal sign printed with the business name *Blanco Cattle Feed and* bolt past the boundary fencing. Not caring about the stones digging into my soles or the fact I'm wearing an elegant evening dress paired with yellow diamonds, or that I have someone else's blood on my hands.

None of it matters. I focus on the streetlights ahead of me and the far-off traffic passing through the crossroads.

The further away I get from Giovanni, the louder the engines become and the faster adrenaline pumps through my veins. Without thinking, I stumble onto the road, flailing my arms in the air to catch the attention of an oncoming car. My sullied hands slam into the driver's side window when it rolls to a stop.

“I—I need a phone,” I pant, meeting the wide eyes of a young woman. “Please, help me... please.”

The woman behind the wheel scrambles for the inner handle and pushes the door open, forcing me to stagger back out of the way.

“Oh, my God. What happened to you? You’re bleeding... I’ll take you to the hospital.”

“No. I don’t need to go to the hospital. I need a cell phone. It’s an emergency.”

“Okay...” She nods and grabs her purse from the passenger side footwell. I pad closer and wait for her to fish it out. “Here.” Her brows snap together as she studies the state of me. “If someone is after you... you should probably get in my car?”

I don’t answer her. Instead, I type in one of the numbers my brother made me memorize and begin to pace while the ringing tone sings in my ear.

“Please pick up,” I whisper. “Come on.”

“*Hola?*” André’s raspy voice is music to my ears. “Who the fuck is this?”

“Dré... I don’t have time to explain... it’s me... India... Giovanni needs you.”

“If you’re about to tell me he’s knocked you up, I’ll fly to Colombia right now and shoot him in the fucking balls.”

“Dré! Listen to me, please. Your brother is in real trouble. The sort of trouble that means you could never see him again.”

“What the fuck is going on, Indy? Where are you?”

“Can your guys trace this call?”

“Sí... why, whose phone are you using?”

“Gio needs help, Dré.” I lose my breath. “He’s unarmed and... in a place called Blanco’s Cattle Feed. Please... help him. Ask Tomás to send an army before they kill him.”

“Jesus fuck. Carlos fucking Blanco has my brother?”

“Yes.” I palm my stomach. “It’s all my fault, Dré. They came for us when we left prom. Please... you have to send helicopters. A bunch of sicarios. A whole damn army. There’s no time to waste.”

“Okay. Okay. I’ll organize a hit squad and an extraction crew immediately. Stay where you are, Indy. Our men will get you.”

“No, Dré. I have something important to do.” I almost choke, the gravity of our predicament all too real.

“No fucking way. Do not go anywhere. Do you hear—?”

“If I need your help, I’ll call you back.” I cut him off. “Focus on saving Giovanni. There’s something he needs me to do, and I have to do it alone.”

“India!”

“Make sure he gets home to me,” I say quickly and set the phone down without hanging up.

The woman frowns. “Why did you set it on the sidewalk?”

Looking into her car, I see her name badge for a local convenience store and the car keys swinging from the ignition have a photo of a cute kid on the keychain.

“Luisa, I need you to listen to me very carefully.” My muscles brace for what I’m about to say to her. “I’m sure you’ve heard of the Souzas, right? The most powerful men in Colombia.”

She nods slowly. “Well, the man I just spoke to is part of that family and he’s organizing an army to take that warehouse over there any minute.” I look over my shoulder and then back to her. “I need your car. If you step out of the vehicle without a fight, I won’t tell the cartel where you work or where your kid lives.”

She swallows hard and slowly slides out of the driver’s seat. “I can’t afford to buy another car. How will I get to work and how do I know they won’t come for me?”

“Because you have my word.” I move around her. “And that phone is now cartel property. They’ve traced the exact

location of it and in any minute, this whole road will be closed. So please, do yourself a favor and walk away. Don't look back. Forget you ever saw me and hug your kid when you get home. Family is all that matters in this world."

Luisa palms her chest. "Okay." She shuffles back a few steps.

Before climbing in, I lock eyes with her. "You're free, Luisa. I have no reason to send them after you." Unfastening the precious yellow stone bracelet from my wrist, I offer it to her. "This will more than cover the cost of another car. Which makes us even."

She chews her bottom lip and stares at the jewels, her brain working overtime to evaluate it.

"This bracelet means a lot to me. You should get a few grand for it." I tell her.

Her head shakes. "I don't want it. Just take the car. The second I go to sell that thing; they'd be all over me."

Tossing it directly at her, her reflexes kick in and she snares it in one swipe. "It's yours, Luisa. No one will look for it. Buy a new car." Done with our negotiation, I climb inside, slam the door shut, and start the engine.

Without looking back, I press my foot hard on the gas pedal and gradually grind up the gears, not sure which road to take at the intersection. Swerving left, I follow the signs leading to the town center. I could stay on the pavement beside the phone and wait for Souza security to arrive, demand they give me a weapon, and try to rescue my man. But there's no way to contact Blackwater to find out if Leo and Lola are okay. They could be in danger too. And I'm all they have right now.

Aside from the ache in my stomach and my fuzzy head, I've no idea how to find Blackwater.

INDIA



Not knowing where the hell I am, I programmed Thornhill Academy into the GPS and made my way there first.

Giovanni had driven me home from the school gates countless times, taking various different routes home each day. I'd paid attention. Eventually those scenic roads became familiar and the signs for the coast were easy to follow.

Pulling up near the ancient wrought-iron gates protecting his son, I yank up the handbrake, let the engine idle, and stare out at them. I'm unsure of how I'm meant to get inside this fortress.

Partially hidden turrets spear a lavender pink sky and an early morning sea mist hovers screening treetops.

My heart pinches. I'm home.

From this end of the driveway, it's not obvious if Leo and Lola are in the rear extension. I need to get inside. Maybe I could climb over the gates, although knowing Giovanni, I'd face electrocution. Or perhaps I could drive further up the coast, scale the cliff face, and find a way to reach the private beach. Neither are realistic options.

However, if I build up enough speed and hit them dead center, that could work to bust them apart. I think about it for a beat, then step on the gas and drive the car forward to inspect them.

The closer I get, a gentle vibration runs the length of my arm and Gio's watch face glows. It's signaling to the gates. They automatically judder and gradually open.

Of course, his watch is the key, an access control system. What else would I expect from him?

I almost laugh at his use of cool devices until it dawns on me why he'd given me the secret key—because he'd planned to hold back the enemy long enough for *me* to escape. He knew the stakes were high—almost impossible. And if he didn't make it out, I'd find my way home to take care of Leo.

My heart sinks. I should have done more. Fought alongside him. Searched the fallen for a rifle to use and joined the war. It was my duty to protect him as much as he did me.

I belong to the cartel.

This is the life I've chosen.

Guns and target practice are my hobbies. Technically, Reno had trained me to be a soldier too.

So being out-of-action wasn't an excuse. It's unforgivable.

I grip the steering wheel to stop my hands from trembling. Anger ripples through me, my body reacting to every raw emotion within me.

It feels like only a matter of seconds have passed when I find myself parking the car next to the solid stone mermaid fountain. I swallow the sickly feeling and climb out, hobbling over the stones in my bare feet to reach the front door that once terrified me.

I'm granted entry when my handprint turns green on the wall mounted pad and the heavy door automatically moves inwards. Inside, the smoky, stale air reminds me of our last night together in the library.

In suffocating silence, my heart thumps as the echo of those memories whisper around the high ceilings, forever contained in this old manor house.

Padding over the cold flooring, a shiver of loneliness creeps over me. So many times, I'd ambled through this primeval entrance hall, but this morning, it feels very different. My pace becomes faster, impatient.

Leo.

Drenched in shadows and dressed for a ball, I'm covered in blood, filth, and with black mascara tracking pale cheeks. I look like something from a harrowing nightmare instead. Apprehension slithers over me, even though I'm glad to have finally reached home.

A pin could drop, and I'd hear it land. It's that quiet. Eerie. Then again, these hallways always were peaceful.

I hurry through the still manor house, unlock the steel door in the kitchen, and make my way through the concrete passageway linking old to new.

Before I know it, I'm staring at framed photographs of Giovanni and his cute son. The homely smell I'd grown to love surrounds me like a warm hug. I press a hand to my aching heart and stoop over to inhale. There aren't any signs of a struggle and the control panel on the wall shows all the motion detectors are working.

I blow out a jet of air and close my eyes, taking a second to recover. As soon as a muted sob leaves me, I despise myself for being so goddamn feeble. This isn't the time for pathetic tears. But I'm overwhelmed, my chest in knots from failure and anger.

I did this.

Giovanni killed Castillo to protect *me*. Because of that, we'd pissed off the Blanco cartel and now they've taken him from me... maybe they've taken him forever.

I straighten, breathe heavily, and gulp down the painful lump in my throat. Everything hurts from my head to my heart. I stagger across the kitchen, needing a drink of water and a little more time to regroup.

When I reach inside the fridge, all I see in the light are my unclean fingernails, the edges encrusted in our enemy's blood. I exhale and stare down at my sweat laden cleavage and the bodice snug to my chest. It has lost its sparkle, looking faded from a layer of dust.

I'm a mess.

If Leo finds me like this, he'd know something's wrong and it would scare him. I have to believe the Souza army would find Giovanni alive, that he'd show up in a few hours.

I inch backward, unscrew the cap of a water bottle and take a long drink.

“Put your hands up!” Lola's stern voice makes me jump.

I do a fast one-eighty and feel my head spin from the movement. There she stands, a nine-millimeter handgun pointed right at me, and her hair wound up in rollers. She levels me with a fierce glare and continues to speak. “I wasn't expecting you home until tomorrow afternoon. Where's Giovanni?”

“Why are you pointing a gun at me, Lola?”

“Look at you... you're covered in blood, wearing his watch, and home ahead of schedule... without him. What did you do to Giovanni?” She hisses at me. “He trusted you with *everything*.”

I shake my head and hold my arms out wide. “It's not what you think.” My voice trembles. “Is Leo safe?”

“Leo is not your concern.”

Jesus. This woman is loyal to a fault.

I roll my lips between my teeth while I blink away the tears stinging my eyes. “We were ambushed. They sedated me. Took us both to a warehouse on the other side of town. He saved me, Lola... but there wasn't anything I could do to save him. I let him down... they had him surrounded. But I phoned my brother. I mean...” I hiccup. “I phoned Dré. He's sending an army in to get him. They have to get him, Lola, because I can't face losing him too.”

When I suck in a tattered sob, she lowers her weapon. “I found my way home without telling Dré where I was going. Gio isn't ready to open his world up to them. Not yet, but... they could protect Leo if they knew he existed. If he needed them. And now... now I don't know what to do.”

Lola sighs, the gun in her hand now pointing at the tiles underfoot. “You did the right thing. His brothers will do the rest.”

“What if they’re too late?”

Both of us fall silent. “He’ll do whatever it takes to come home, that I can promise you.”

I set the water bottle on the island and move to the glass fronted room where the golden sun rises on the horizon. It doesn’t matter that pretty sun rays sparkle over the flat ocean, it still looks dark and cold. And that’s exactly how I feel inside.

“There were seven of them and only one of him,” I mutter. “I know what men like that do to their enemies. We can’t tell Leo about this, not until we know for sure.” I twist my shaky hands around to study the blood on them, not feeling anything for the pain I’d inflicted. “Do you have a phone?”

“What for?” She challenges. “If you think you can invite his family here without his blessing, you can’t. I won’t let you. And they can’t trace the call either. It’s impossible to do that here.”

I like this woman.

Lowering my hands, I turn my eyes on Lola. “I know all that. Which is why I came here alone. However, I need to call Dré for an update on Giovanni and to let him know I’m safe.”

Lola reaches into her bathrobe pocket, pulls out a phone, and comes closer. “Are you hurt?” Her eyes roam over every inch of me, concern replacing distrust.

“No.” I lie straight to her face. “And Leo... is he okay?”

“He’s fast asleep. I checked on him before I confronted you. The boy sleeps well these days. Giovanni was adamant your dog was not allowed in Leo’s bedroom. But as it turns out, Leo was quite the secretive mastermind. Daenis and he are the best of friends.”

Taking the phone from her, I force my shoulders back. “Good. He’ll need the distraction for a while.” I smile tightly

at her and punch in the numbers, holding my breath as I hope for good news.

“Indy?” André answers.

“Yeah, it’s me. I’m safe. Have you got him?” I hear him breathing on the other end and sense something is very, very wrong. “Dré... is he safe?”

“I don’t know,” he says, the words distant. My throat tightens and my heart hammers against my ribs. “When the team went in, the place was empty. Gio wasn’t there. My brother’s gone. And we’ve no fucking clue where they’ve taken him.”

INDIA



I'd spent the last three days with Leo, pretending everything was fine. We told him Giovanni had gone away on business. Thankfully, he believed the lie, because I'm not ready to discuss the possibility of his father never coming home. In fact, I won't consider it at all.

Any day now, Gio's going to stalk through the front door and throw his arms around the both of us. He has to come home.

Once the little guy falls asleep, I find myself alone and wandering past closed doors in the dark hallways of Blackwater, drawn to my favorite room—library.

I've grown to love this house, maybe more than the modern extension. It has character.

Last night, Lola had taught me how to light the open fire. I'd wanted to learn how to do it myself for the evenings when the library gets chilly. Somehow, I climbed the ladder to pick a book on the highest shelf under the twenty-foot-high ceiling, just for a rush of adrenaline.

But it was a waste of time. I didn't feel a goddamn thing other than the discontent and bitter loneliness already inside of me.

Rather than return to his empty bed each night, I had chosen to stay on the leather couch by the fire where I could stoke the flames and keep them alive. I even set a lit pillar candle on the thick stone window ledge, stupidly hoping he'd see it. He wouldn't. Beyond the restored window arch a

cobbled courtyard and forest of wind-bent trees conceal the west side of the manor house. No one can see in.

I haven't lost hope. Not when I feel him around me. Sense him close. On my skin, next to me in the shadows, under the soft knit blanket.

He fights to reach me from the depths of my nightmares and when I close my eyes during the day, he's there too. All six-foot of his inked stature, godly in his haunting presence.

He's alive. I know it in every cell within my body. So, why hasn't he come home?

Today is the fourth day and I still can't eat, because I've zero appetite and my stomach physically aches.

"You must have heard something, Dré?" I insist, moving out of earshot.

"Look... he's a soldier. Tactical. We know he's not dead, because Blanco would be gloating all over Colombia. He'd want everyone to know about it."

"Right." I pause in the doorway and watch Leo slurp his hot chocolate, completely clueless. "It doesn't make sense. He wouldn't just disappear."

André sighs. "You don't know him, India. This is another reason you two don't fit together. He's not like the rest of us. Gio was programmed to delete emotions and push aside the people in his life who matter to him. Don't waste your love on him."

"He has too much to lose if he doesn't come home." I argue when Leo drops off his seat, gathers his mug, and plops down on the floor beside Daenis.

"Christ, kid. This isn't a fluffy fucking fairytale." The sound of a lighter sparking proceeds his grunt. "I love my brother, but he's not the right one for you. Reno would try to kill me for this bullshit. Either you tell me where you are, or I'll hunt you out myself."

"Dré! Focus on finding your brother. Don't worry about me."

“We’re doing that.” His voice turns stern, almost glacial. “You’re my priority too, India. This isn’t just about the promise I made to Reno. Even if he was alive, I’d still do everything to keep you safe.” He exhales and mutters something inaudible. “You’re completely alone, using a phone that has a CyberGhost VPN to block us from tracking your coordinates, and that puts you at risk. If someone came for you, how the fuck would we reach you? Anyway... we’re coming to Colombia.”

My breath catches. “You’re leaving Sicily?”

“Yeah. Me, Sin, and Mat are boarding a jet in the morning. My brother is missing and you’re all alone. There’s no way I’d stay out here. People are going to die for this.”

I swallow the lump in my throat. I’d forgotten how much I miss my honorary brothers. “Is Letterman coming too?”

“Not this time. He’s going to keep everything ticking over here while we’re gone. I expect to see you when I land. Text me the address and I’ll come straight to you.”

“There isn’t an address.”

“Bullshit, Indy.”

“Okaaaay,” I stretch the word out, panicked. “I’ll come to you... if you promise to bring me with you when you get a lead on Gio. I want to help...I have to.”

André laughs. “No. Fucking. Way.”

“This is my fault... I should have stayed behind to help him. I should’ve done more.”

“No, India. This is all Blanco. That fucker thinks he has the balls to mess with us. You called me and that’s the best thing you could have done. I know Gio and bet he’s one step ahead of everyone.”

“Is that Yanni?” Leo takes my free hand and drops something featherlight onto the palm. “Let me speak to him.”

“Who the hell is that?” André barks.

“Eh... it’s the TV... I have to go. Have a safe flight. I love you so much, Dré!” I hang up, lower to my haunches, and brush a wayward curl out of Leo’s big brown eyes. “That was André. He’s checking up on me.” I roll my eyes dramatically. “He thinks I can’t look after myself. But I’ve got you, right?” I look into my cupped hand. “Who else leaves me four marshmallow pieces?”

He frowns. “Does André not share his mallows?”

I shake my head, thinking about all the gifts André had given me over the years. The most important one being his attention when other females had tried and failed—until Sinéad, that is.

I’m not jealous of their beautiful connection. He deserved to find a woman who could match his spirit. And Sinéad was able to achieve the unbelievable. She’d claimed his whole heart and he let her have it.

My heart sinks when I remember what André had said to me, how Giovanni pushes aside his emotions and puts work first. I start to wonder if he’s reverted back to the life of a cartel hitman and doesn’t need a woman to anchor him.

“Dré shares loads with me,” I reply honestly. “He’s extravagantly generous and a lot of fun. Hopefully, you’ll meet him one day.”

Leo shrugs. “When is Yanni coming home?”

“Soon.” I force a sunny smile and clear my throat. “Does he go away a lot?”

Soft curls bounce when he nods. “He always sends messages. But not this time.”

“Would you like me to read you a story tonight instead of Lola?”

Leo grins at that, and then a big yawn takes a hold of him. “I can read you a story too. I’ll look after you while Yanni is working. *Souza swear.*”

My heart explodes when he does a playful salute gesture and then slots his tiny hand in mine.

We're so alike, this little boy and me. Both of us were lost in the world and claimed by a beautiful monster.

“And I promise to look after you too, little guy. No matter what happens.” I stare into his chocolate rich eyes and feel my stomach ache.

A ripple of anxiety moves through me. Something isn't right. Giovanni wouldn't leave his son behind...or me.

INDIA



I blink my eyes open to an electronic beep. Disoriented, I sit upright, clutch the blanket to my chest, and gaze into the shadowy corners. Not seeing any movement, I look down and notice a compact satellite phone with a short antenna sitting on the coffee table.

My pulse was already racing, but now it's galloping in my throat. Friendly embers glow in the dying fire and the bookshelves loom over me as if they're gawking at the device too.

A silvery haze spills in through the windows, casting moonlight across the rug, confirming it's still nightfall.

"Gio?" I call into the silence, hopeful for a response. "Are you here?"

Nothing.

I'm still alone. It's just me and a military grade phone that wasn't here when I'd fallen asleep. Tentatively, I reach out for it and stare at the screen.

One unread message sent a few seconds ago.

I hold my breath and glance over my shoulder. Goosebumps scatter my skin. Opening the notification, my heart bursts when the words jump out at me.

Unknown number: *Hey, baby... miss me?*

Giovanni.

Tears sting my eyes and instead of replying with a text message, impatience gets the better of me. I tap the phone icon, jump to my bare feet and pace.

When it rings off, I growl into Blackwater's hush and glare at the device, inwardly pleading for an incoming call to light it up.

My heart is pounding so goddamn hard, I almost faint from the force of it. Frustrated, I try again, holding the phone to my ear with a shaky hand.

"Please... please... pick up," I plead, my other hand pressed to my belly as I walk around the room.

When he doesn't answer, I throw the phone onto the couch and cover my tear-stained face with my hands, sinking down beside it. "Why won't you answer me!?" I call out, taking in a ragged gulp of air.

Somehow, I'd held it together for days. Focused on Leo's contentment, never once letting him sense my heartache and loneliness. Until now.

Now, my head is swimming, and my emotions are all over the place. I'm desperate to seek comfort in Giovanni's voice. To let his Spanish accent wash over me and his words soothe my fear.

I wipe my nose with the back of my hand and grab the phone again, ready to send a message.

Suddenly, the black screen illuminates and it rings. An incoming call from an unknown number.

"Hello..." I say breathlessly, my mouth dry.

"Texting is safer," Giovanni replies, his voice low and husky. My heart rate accelerates "And no names. Got it?"

"Uh-huh." I swallow a silly sob. "You're alive."

"Yeah. *Te extraño tanto*, baby." His thick accent rumbles down the phone line as he tells me he misses me.

"I miss you too," I whisper.

“I’m sorry for not getting in touch sooner. Things are complicated. I need you to listen to me very carefully, okay?”

“Yes...” I swallow the lump in my throat and shuffle back onto the couch. My little heart, so happy to finally hear from him.

“There’s a business thing I need to sort out before I can come home. Okay? You need to stay where you are for a while.”

I nod my response and wipe the corner of my eye. “Can I see you?”

“Not yet. It’s too risky at the moment. And don’t tell anyone about the phone. It’s our secret...” His sigh tingles over my scalp. “I need you to understand you’re not alone. And neither is he. I’ll reach out to everyone when I have things figured out.”

“How long will it take for us to see you?” I fix the blanket over my legs and let my head fall back, closing my eyes to visualize his handsome face.

“I don’t know yet,” he says thoughtfully. “A few weeks, maybe.”

My eyes ping open and my scalp prickles, panic racing through me. “Are you hurt? Is that why you can’t come home? Because they messed you up? I don’t care if your face is busted or you’ve lost teeth, let me be there for you.”

He chuckles at that, and my heart flutters. “You are there for me. This, right now... you being you. And text messages are better than nothing at all, right? If I was all busted up and ugly, would you be my slutty little nurse and give me a sponge bath while dressed in a short white dress and pantyhose?”

“Stop it.” I scold, heat rushing through my veins. “I’m serious. Did they hurt you?”

“Only a few cuts and scrapes, however, I definitely require the attention of a cute blonde with ocean blue eyes and satin pajamas.”

I exhale, aware of the phone in my hand and how it had gotten into the library. “You were right here and didn’t wake me... are you still in the house... hiding in one of the rooms?”

“I’m long gone.” His edgy tone amplifies as it rumbles through the phone line, straight into my ear. The sexy pitch drives my senses wild. “I won’t return until I’m certain the situation is under my control. In the meantime...” He pauses. “Lie back on the couch.”

I do as he orders, slowly reclining, and use the blanket to cover myself at the same time. My pulse thrums. “Please tell me where you are.”

“Colombia.”

I roll my eyes. “Are you safe?” He hums his response and my core clenches. “Are you alone?”

“Yeah, but there’s a *bella chica* on the screen before me. She’s caught my full attention.”

I laugh lightly. “You’re watching a movie?”

“I’m watching you, baby.” His throatiness is nothing short of carnal. “Stop hiding behind that blanket and pull down your shorts.”

“You’ve been watching us all this time?” I gasp.

“Not the whole time. But I am now, so do as you’re told, little whore, and take off your shorts.”

I kick off the blanket, lift my hips and shimmy the satin to my ankles. “Please be hiding in the shadows, ready to touch me when I’m begging for it.”

His grunt sends a shiver through me. “I wish I was.”

“But I’m so wet. You can have me now. All of me. I’m ready for you.”

“Show me what a dirty little whore does when you’re alone. Slide your fingers into your pussy. If I was there, I’d take off all your clothes and bury my face between your legs.”

“Yes.” My fingers roam through the dampness he’s created, but the absence of his bare chest and domineering

control makes it difficult to enjoy.

“It’s not the same without you.” I bite my lip and stare up at the books, focusing on the sound of his breathing. “Tell your little whore a dirty bedtime story about the bad man who lived in a creepy clifftop mansion all by himself and the lonely girl who wandered in.”

Giovanni chuckles darkly. “You’re a horny little bitch, baby. I fucking love it. Anything for you.” He clears his throat. “There once was a dangerous man who—”

“How dangerous?” I cut in, my question breathy.

“Oh, he’s bad. He’d eat your heart out.”

“He’s good looking, isn’t he? With steely muscles, a scar on his cheek, and pouty lips?”

“Pouty lips? Is that even a thing?” I can tell he’s smiling a little.

“It’s my thing.” I suck a finger into my mouth, pretending it’s his dick and hum. His breathing deepens. “I go for bad guys with dark hair, tattoos, and perfectly shaped lips.”

“Okay, let’s start again,” he muses. “The very dangerous guy was good looking and had decent lips—”

“I have a crush on him already.” I feel my heart pound harder. “Sounds like a man I know.”

“Well, this guy hated strangers.” He continues. “And wanted to live alone. Until one day, a naughty schoolgirl found her way into his lair. He locked all the doors, so she couldn’t escape.”

“What a bad man.” My belly quivers when my fingertips glide from my bellybutton to my inner thigh. “Did he want to touch the girl?” I ask, shivering a little.

He grunts, deep and dirty. “All he could think about was how good her juicy tits hiding under her blouse would feel and how her nipples would taste.” I start panting. “And he thought about pushing her face first onto the couch, lifting up her school uniform’s skirt, and tongue fucking her ass.”

My heartbeat stutters and I hold my breath. “Just looking at the beautiful girl made him so fucking hard. But he knew he wouldn’t stop at just touching. He’d drive his dick into her tight little pussy too.” My skin catches fire. “So, every night while she slept, he crept into her bedroom, stripped back her blanket, and hitched up her nightdress. He’d stand in the shadows and stare at her bare pussy while he jerked off.”

My fingers move beneath my top, fondling my breast as he speaks. “She didn’t know he was spying on her?”

“No... he would spit on his hand and rub it all over his hard dick.” I hear him eject a wad of spit and imagine him doing the same thing with his hand. My temperature soars.

“He’d grip himself, tight and fast. Until one night,” he says quietly. “He leaned over her perfect, untouched cunt and spat on it too.”

This is what I needed—his dirty mind and his erotic, deep voice. “Did she wake up?” I groan, squeezing my nipple and curling my toes.

“He pumped at his dick, fast and brutal, while her lashes fluttered open, and their eyes met.” My chest rises and falls faster the more turned on I get. “At first, she was scared. But then she realized her pussy was wet and her clit was throbbing. She slid her fingers through the spittle and watched him come all over her thigh.”

“Are you touching yourself too?” I whisper, my knees falling outwards.

“Uh-huh,” Giovanni hums from the back of his throat. “I’m choking my dick. It’s not the story getting me off. It’s the sight of you laid out on your back with your legs wide open. Fuck!” He groans, his tone hoarse.

I close my eyes and think about the secretive man in the old house and the lonely girl who couldn’t resist him. Us. Giovanni and India.

“He wanted her...” I gasp, my fingers working faster and my breathing quickening. “From the very beginning?”

“Yeah, he wanted her alright, so much it hurt. And now he’s jerking himself off as his sexy little whore plays with herself.” His breath hitches. “Can you feel his eyes all over you?”

“Yes.” I pant, hotter than the flames of Hell. “And I wish he would let me be his little cum slut too.”

“Jesus fuck,” he hisses.

“I feel it.” I continue to pant, my release building. “I feel you all over me. You’re everywhere.”

“That’s it,” he grits out. “Put on a show for this man who’ll never let you escape him.”

My jaw goes lax and my legs shoot out straight as an orgasm takes over.

A surge of endorphins burst through me. It starts off as trillions of tingles and explodes within an uncontrollable moan. Although it’s satisfying, nothing compares to the sensation of his body on mine. The heat of his skin and the look in his jade eyes moments after he pumps his cum inside of me. I miss every bit of him.

I swallow the urge to groan out his name, listening to his hypnotic, heavy breathing.

“Fuck!” he hisses. “You’re a bad girl, baby. You’ve made me come all over myself and you’re not here to clean it up with your tongue. When I finally get my hands on you... none of it will go to waste a second time.”

“Then you’d better hurry up and come back to me.”

“I’m working on it. *Dulces sueños*,” he wishes me sweet dreams in a hoarse voice and my heart melts. “I won’t always be in a position to answer your call. Text messages are better. Don’t go anywhere. *Comprendes Niñita?*”

“Okay.” The second I agree, the line goes dead, and silence swallows me whole.

Clutching the phone to my chest, I cover myself up with the blanket. Except it can’t hide the weight of dread in my stomach.

André will land in Colombia in the next twenty-four hours, and he wants to see me—and I *need* to see him.

INDIA



The wind picks up and foamy white waves fizz on the shore. Clouds block the late afternoon sun, making it colder.

Earlier, we'd played on the beach under a sunny blue sky with a picnic in the fresh coastal air.

Leo sits next to me on the sand, his head on my knee, tiredness making him yawn. While Daenis is sniffing the now empty backpack on the hunt for more mini cheese blocks.

Lola checks her watch. "It'll be dinnertime soon. I've got lots to prepare, and you, young man, need a shower before bed or you'll have a mattress full of sand."

I stroke Leo's soft curls and watch his long lashes blink slowly as he thinks. "Time to go home, little guy. Could you give Dae-Dae something to eat for me?"

Slowly, he lifts his head and frowns. "Aren't you coming with us?"

I look over at Lola to find her eyebrows raised too. "You didn't eat much earlier, India." She reminds me, being the ever-vigilant mother figure in this dynamic.

"I ate loads!" My smile doesn't portray how I'm really feeling inside—coiled tight and frustrated.

When Leo rises to his bare feet, I help him slide his sandy toes into a pair of green Crocs. "That spicy rice you packed for the picnic was the best I've ever had, Lola. I ate a mountain of it." In reality, it was four spoonfuls and then my stomach

cramped. “Save me some dinner and I’ll heat it up when I get in.”

She narrows her eyes at me. “You shouldn’t be out here alone when it gets dark.”

“Don’t worry about me. This entire shoreline is out of bounds to the public, and I’ve no doubt the boundary is protected by landmines.” A slight smile twitches her lips, and she nods in agreement. She knows the score even if I’m half-joking about the explosives. “Besides, it’s just me and a bunch of rowdy seagulls.”

I stuff my feet into a pair of ankle socks, shove my sneakers back on, and knot the laces. Standing, I dust off my leggings, scrape my hair into a ponytail, and pull one of Giovanni’s plain black hoodies over my head, instantly feeling him around me.

“I want to go for a jog along the beach. I’ll be home soon.”

Truth is, I need a change of scenery. Since Giovanni had given me the satellite phone, I’m constantly waiting for him to message me. It’s like I’ve lost touch with reality and all I do is sit around waiting for him.

Despite my restlessness, I’d wait for him forever. In the meantime, I’ve resisted sending him multiple messages, but my soul needs something more than Blackwater Manor.

“Can I come too?” Leo stares up at me, his pleading brown eyes giving away how tired he is.

“How about you come with me next time?” I wink, bend into him, and kiss his swarthy forehead. “I need you to look after Daenis for me while Lola gets dinner ready. Oh, and make sure she gets lots of fresh water, too.”

“O-okay.” He swallows and fidgets with his hoodie zipper. “You’ll come home, won’t you?”

My heart pinches. “Of course, I will.” I ruffle his hair. “Save me some marshmallows, buddy?”

He throws his small arms around my hips, and I hug him back, ten times tighter. Reluctantly, he takes Lola’s hand a

minute later. Glancing over his shoulder as they plow through the sand together, heading back along the beach towards Blackwater with Daenis bounding after them.

I stand like a statue, waiting for their bodies to turn into tiny dots as they move further away from me, feeling my lungs squeeze.

Taking a deep breath to settle myself, I trudge to the water's edge. I gaze out at the sea swell, aware of a light salty spray spritzing my face. I take another look at the distant turrets nestled in the trees, to the only place that feels like home these days. Where Leo would be waiting for me to read him a story under the duvet.

I've never had anyone depend on me the way he does. Lola feeds him, washes his clothes, and arranges his daily activities, but he comes to me for emotional comfort. As if I could fill a bit of the void that Giovanni had left behind. Little does Leo realize—he's been my motivation to stay positive in his father's absence too.

The weight of the phone in my hoodie pocket bumps into my belly when I break into a jog. Only freedom doesn't feel as good as it should, and the loneliness I've suffered creeps through me like an ever-present shadow.

My light jog quickly turns into a punishing sprint. I'm driven to feel something other than helplessness. Whatever Giovanni is up to, he thinks he's better off doing it alone. That I'm too fragile, or perhaps I'm simply a distraction he doesn't need to invest too much time in.

Despite my upset, I was raised as a rose among an army of thorns and taught to be a courageous female who could handle a lethal weapon. I might appear to the world as a sweet girlie girl, but I'm just as much a part of the Souza cartel despite being a woman.

Deep down, I'm a warrior too and want the chance to prove it.

So, the fact I was useless at Blanco's warehouse sticks in my throat, even days after. It's embarrassing. I had the chance

to make Reno proud of me—and Giovanni, too. To show him I had become a woman he'd consider an equal, not just a teenager.

The wind howls past my ears and my breathing becomes strained the harder I push myself.

Focusing on the shoreline ahead, I run farther than I've ever gone before. I'm sandwiched between the chaotic sea surf and a sky-scraping rock face. A measureless stretch of ocean. It makes me feel shipwrecked. The expansive crag so elevated, I'd need climbing gear, ropes, and a day to reach the top of it.

My lungs are tight, the exertion taking its toll on me, because I haven't done intensive exercise in so long. Gradually, my pace slows until every step is an effort and I'm sucking in damp air.

Sweat has gathered in my hairline and trickles from my nape, right between my shoulder blades. I pull off the hoodie to cool down, leaving me in a plum racerback yoga bra, and shiver when the breeze prickles my hot skin.

Angling my head towards the base of the cliff, something catches my eye. A towering slit in the rock like a devastating crack caused by an earthquake. Wait, did I see a flicker of light coming from inside? I pause and hold my breath, narrowing my eyes to focus on the dark hole, making sure my mind isn't playing tricks on me. The change of light so slight I could easily have missed it had I not stopped.

Giovanni?

I tie the hoodie sleeves around my waist and stare over at the cave-like entrance in all its glory. Large water droplets plop on my head, starting sporadically and quickly turning into a heavy rain shower.

It would make sense to turn around and leave, but my gut has other ideas. It's telling me Giovanni is hiding in there and I'd miss the chance to see his face—kiss his lips—hold him next to me and never let go.

Weighing my options, I remind myself he's the only one with full access to the miles of private land around his

compound. Which makes this cave the ideal hiding place.

My heart flutters at the thought of Giovanni being within touching distance. I wouldn't tell a soul if I found him or reveal his location. But he knows that. After all, we've already shared so many secrets during our time together. One more would only crystalize my loyalty.

Adrenaline spurs me on, and the fact I'm starving. Not for food or nourishment—for him.

Hurrying from compacted wet sand to dusty grains, my senses are heightened. Roosting gulls chatter from sharp ledges and waves crash off boulders.

I gawk at the rock formation, a natural entrance fit for a titan king. Taking shelter from the downpour, I move from dying daylight to dancing shadows.

The hairs on my scalp lift. Whispers carry in the immense hollow, swirling above a sturdy, man-made wooden staircase dropping into the belly of a huge cavity.

He's not alone?

Using the dim light from behind to guide my footing, I count forty-three steps on the way down. A gusty draft pushes me along, the scent of briny water all around. My heart is thumping by the time I reach the bottom, the soles of my sneakers landing on smooth stone.

Voices continue to mutter, the collective murmur growing louder since I've ventured farther inside. I quickly check over my shoulder and continue to follow the irregular shaped wall, staying close to the rock.

Rounding a gentle bend, the enclosed feeling disintegrates when I look up at the soaring cavern. Thin jagged columns hang down from above, making it look like a gothic styled pipe organ created for the devil to play.

I slap a hand over my mouth to catch the gasp, my gaze settling on military dressed soldiers lined up in rows.

Who the hell are these people?

After a quick mental count, there are twenty-two identical figures. Their side profiles are lit up like demons lurking in shadows under the lit candles they each hold out before them.

Why are they here, and most importantly, where do the tunnels behind them lead?

Panic races through my veins, and the sweat on my back turns ice cold. I search the darkness beyond them, but I can't see anything—not even Giovanni. I can't even tell if he's one of the twenty-two.

Returning my gaze to the figures, I study the dark face coverings hiding their features from eyes to throat. I continue to look for him, but he could never stand in a crowd as a sheep.

What if these people are planning an attack on Blackwater?

Knots tighten in my stomach. I recognize the tactical night vision goggles in place on their foreheads, ready for action at a moment's notice. Reno and I had used similar style goggles when we'd play gun wars with spring air rifles.

The temperature dropped inside the cave, making me shiver and realize my yoga bra is soaked through. Untying the hoodie sleeves, I quickly pull it over my head and drag up the hood to help me blend into the shadows better.

Only then I freeze. A familiar Spanish timber catches the attention of the entire group, its gritty texture my undoing. All the soldiers immediately stand to attention and the following hush gives me goosebumps.

Peering around the rock, I see him. Giovanni Souza, fully kitted out in obsidian utility pants and a black long-sleeved t-shirt, standing on a raised boulder, high above his minions like the sovereign of this underworld.

Inky hair drapes his brow and fresh wounds on his gorgeous face are illuminated by the wobbling flame under his chin.

My heartbeat thunders in my ears and my legs jerk to run to him. Though I don't, because the strangers staring up at

Giovanni are waiting for him to speak. Besides, I'm curious too. Why are they here—in his territory?

My eyes slip over his self-assured demeanor and the emotionless expression he wears. There's no hint of weakness in his authoritative stance or exposed soft flesh for his enemies to find.

"Listen up," he addresses them, and my heart rate goes berserk. "Some of you are here because we crossed paths in the past, others recommended, and some have... connections." I frown at the displeasure in his tone and inch a little closer.

"Regardless of the reason, you've all sworn your allegiance to me... to The Covenant and to each other. Disloyalty results in automatic death. This trial is about skill and aptitude. Earn your place. Fight for it. Fucking bleed for it."

He pulls a black balaclava down over his face, so only his eyes are visible and the outline of something stitched into the fabric. He's too far away for me to see it clearly, though.

"The first soldier to find me wins. Do whatever it takes. No weapons allowed." When he blows out his candle, they all snuff theirs, too. "Let the hunt... begin." His voice is swallowed by the shadows hiding him.

Giovanni's been here all along—with these people? Creating some sort of secret Covenant thing rather than spending time with Leo—and *me*. My blood boils. If ever there's an opportunity to prove he's underestimated me, it's now.

I tighten the cord threaded through my hood, so it closes in on my face and covers my nose and mouth.

"I'll hunt you, Giovanni Souza," I mutter, waiting for the others to disperse into the tunnels, and then I dart into the darkness after them. "If you want to play in the darkness, I'll play too."

GIOVANNI



Five days earlier

“Your Papá would lose his shit over a Souza putting his life before a woman.” Blanco chuckles, sits back in his seat, and observes me through his glasses.

He’d removed his designer blazer, sitting opposite me. The bastard’s impeccably spotless compared to my sullied state. I would enjoy watching his blood seep into the pale pink shirt he’s wearing. Yeah, that would me fucking smile. “You left quite a trail of bodies back there. Not that it surprised me.” He adds.

My wrists are bound with rope this time and I’m sitting in a chair again with the threat of a few semi-automatic rifles aimed in my direction. Only this time our surroundings and the assholes pointing weapons at me are different, replacements for the guys I had easily slaughtered.

First, I’d let Blanco’s guys capture me, purely to take their eyes away from India’s escape. They led me into the rear of an unmarked van and drove off to another location.

Fuck knows where I am now. Carlos seems to like huge concrete buildings and hefty roller shutters—must be an ego thing.

“Elias would have used Teresa as his personal bulletproof vest.” Blanco smiles. “Whereas you made sure the girl got away. That was a risk—and confirms how important she is to you. However, it was very honorable of you.”

Jets of air shoot down my nostrils. “Don’t mock me, old man. Your bullshit means nothing to me.”

“I know.” He folds his arms and shrugs. “I’ve watched Elias’ boys grow into men and applauded your achievements from the sidelines. The only bad blood between us was fabricated in that man’s head.”

“You’re boring me, Blanco,” I say in a monotone voice, my eyes drilling into his. “This fake godfather nonsense is worse than a bullet to the brain. Tell me what you want and stop wasting my fucking time.”

He unfolds his arms, leans forward, and props his elbows on his knees. “You’re different. Elias had a lot of success, but you became his biggest asset. His enemies knew you’d appear out of nowhere if they betrayed him. They heard rumors of what you could do and how imaginative their deaths could be. You’re a legend, Giovanni, and I want to tap into your network and know-how.”

“Aren’t you past all of that now, Carlos? It’s a little too late to teach an old bastard new tricks.”

He laughs darkly. “Oh, you won’t be teaching me. You’re going to train a handpicked group to become the elite, best at stealth combat—and the rest, of course.”

I shake my head. My own lessons were learned through years of conditioning and fucked-up mind games. That’s not something I would choose to replicate, ever. My way of life is just that—mine.

“Why the fuck would I share my knowledge with you?”

Carlos teases the wiry hair on his chin in a moment of quiet contemplation. “I saw your heart tonight, Giovanni. Do you really think your sweet prom princess should give up her right to a teenage life? That she won’t want to travel? Visit family and friends. Go shopping or even finish her education.”

“So, you think threatening me will work?” I cock my brows, not giving away the heat of my temper. “Because if you are, and you try to take her away from me, or if anyone remotely associated with you steps in her path... I’ll slaughter

every motherfucker in your family and hang their corpses from the branches of a tree outside my bedroom window. And every morning, I'll see the Blanco family tree and feel satisfied that I wiped out your entire bloodline. Your threats mean nothing to me."

Carlos continues to stare at me. He's pretending to be unfazed by my threat, but we both know I'm fully capable of exacting revenge.

"Yet here we are—together. I'm not the one covered in blood, unarmed, and at the mercy of another man's patience." He looks down to study his clipped nails and straighten the cuffs of his annoyingly pristine pink shirt. "While you're still dressed in smart pants and a designer shirt, your princess' big night with her gangster boyfriend appears to have gone to shit."

My veins catch fire.

"I'm not her boyfriend." I lie without my voice changing. "I'm her babysitter. That's all."

I grind my back teeth when Carlos takes his cell phone out of his pocket and taps the screen. "Even with masks on, it looks like the babysitter was taking advantage of his ward."

He rotates the phone and shows me an intimate photograph of us on the dance floor only a few hours ago. There's no visual evidence that I'm finger fucking her at that moment, but there's no denying how close we were or how the Souza ring, on my other hand, catches the strobing light.

"Isn't she Reno Hardy's teenage sister? May he rest in peace knowing you're ruining her life. Unless you let another man borrow your family signet ring, then I assume that dark-haired man in the suit is you. Oh, wait." He grins. "It was you... since we took you off the road right after you'd left the hotel. Men like you don't get a happily ever after. There's always someone waiting in the shadows to take them down."

"I'll rip out your fucking throat, Blanco," I growl, unable to curb the volcano of seething anger inside me. "Do you hear me?" My stomach knots, my body primed for a fresh fight.

Carlos slides his phone back into his pocket. “I’d rather we didn’t talk about what should happen to the girl. Let’s discuss what *should* happen next. It doesn’t always have to be hostility and bloodshed. Your Papá is six feet under Giovanni. You’re free to make up your own mind without his paranoia interfering with your life decisions. The man stole your childhood... why not make the future your own?”

My ferocious gaze could melt the skin off his face as I quietly mull his words over in my head. I took a risk exposing myself tonight and escorting India to prom—a rite of passage for a school leaver and the biggest social event of her year. But it’s what she had wanted, and I’d give her a galaxy of stars if she asked for it. I don’t regret it for a second. What I do regret is this man knowing she exists.

No matter what truths he rattles off about my father, I don’t trust this fucker. Never will either. Carlos isn’t selfless, loyal, or a devoted godfather. He’s none of those things.

The North Colombian traitor runs a much lesser cartel. Now that my sociopathic, control freak father is out of the picture, the bastard wants to slither into his Armani shoes—over my dead body.

“My father’s death is convenient for you, isn’t it?” I hitch my chin at him. “Makes you feel like you could take on the world with no one to stop you?”

“It’s only convenient if you take up my offer.” Carlos narrows his eyes. “This would benefit *us*. I’d have access to a squad of specialist mercenaries, and you’d have their full respect. You’re a legendary sicario in your own right—so why not build a bigger legacy? And as a bonus, the girl would be safe. I’d call off my dogs.”

I bare my teeth at him. “Even if you don’t call off your guys, I’d happily kill every fucker who came for her until you ran out of men willing to put their lives on the line for nothing.”

His brows pinch together. “And in the meantime, what kind of life would she have?”

“Fuck you!” I spit out the force of the truth winding me. “Do you think I’m stupid, old man? That I’d train an army for you to send after Tommy.”

“I don’t want the rest of Colombia, Giovanni.” He deadpans. “I want Europe. André has moved into new territory out there, hasn’t he? I’m just expanding my own empire. And like I said, you’d head up the team.”

“So, I’d have complete control over them?”

“We both would. They’d be loyal to you...” He points at me and returns his finger to indicate himself. “... *and* me. Which means neither of us would have reason to wage war on the other. I’ll hand pick a few of my best sicarios. Men who are mediocre compared to you, of course. But are on my payroll.” He laughs at that and smiles. “And you would choose your own.”

I breathe in and out, my head thumping and throat dry. “But I work alone.”

“You’ve got to move with the times, or you’ll end up alone and paranoid. Sound familiar?” He smirks. “Our joint venture would create a team of lethal disciples who’d follow your every command.”

“I can recruit soldiers without your help, Carlos.”

He shrugs. “Yeah, you could. But that little princess of yours deserves to live a long and happy life. I have contacts too, Giovanni. Powerful people who’d love to know an important Souza secret. Wherever you take her, there will always be a price on her head. Unless...”

GIOVANNI



Present

I jog along a dark tunnel, pass through a cross section, and swiftly move into a concealed control room where a montage of screens displays an underground matrix.

A few years ago, our Souza construction team had spent eighteen months drilling into the rock, paid handsomely to extend the main cave and turn it into a hideout for a nameless, eccentric billionaire.

No one knew that guy was me.

It's far enough away from Blackwater so the two would never be associated with each other. Yet close enough to use as a safehouse if ever we came under attack.

That's the ease of having drug money at our fingertips. We can more or less buy whatever the fuck we want. My twin purchases custom mega yachts to anchor off the sunshine coast. Whereas I create unsuspecting private residences to ensure my son's safety, my *familia*—and now that includes her—the one woman I can't stop thinking about.

I drop into a high-back chair in front of the monitors and peel off the balaclava, tossing it on the desk. My emblem faces upwards—a red dragon is embroidered directly where a mouth hole should be. That's how The Covenant identifies me when we're disguised and in training. How they know who'd end their life in a heartbeat.

My trainees expect me to be out there too, roaming the passages like they are. It almost makes me laugh that they

actually think I'd scurry around in an elaborate game of hide and seek. I'd rather observe the competition from here and study their form before slipping back into the shadows when they are completely bamboozled.

Taking the satellite phone out of my thigh pocket, I stare at it and resist the impulsive urge to call India. She'd suffered enough grief over her brother's death, and me disappearing only added to her heartbreak.

I couldn't let her mourn me too or have Leo sense her constant worry. He's used to me being away from home for a few days, and Lola always keeps him occupied.

So, I had to do something for her. Yet another risk. But it was worth it just to see the smile on her face while I sat in this seat and watched her on the big screen.

And when she'd kicked the blanket off, I zoomed in on her bare pussy while she played with herself—fuck, even now it gets me hard.

Tomorrow I'll speak to Leo and reassure him I'm coming home soon. It won't always be like this. Our lives are going to change for the better.

Communication, even over the phone, is better than thinking I've abandoned them or met my match.

For the time being, I'm in charge of The Covenant, twenty-four fucking seven.

They all know who I am. Each trainee received a classified invitation to be part of a covert operation and met with me on a clifftop as their answer.

No aspiring hitman would turn down an opportunity like this. With limitless funds and cartel backing, it's a unique opportunity.

Luckily for them, they'd all agreed to serve—leave their lives behind and train beside soldiers who have no names other than the markings on their face coverings. The only other option was meeting the rocks after a steep drop into the ocean.

There's no turning back, not from this.

The Covenant belongs to *me*. But with one minor complication—Carlos and his people. And that makes it even harder to slip away.

It's too much of a risk to go home. I don't trust the criminals fighting each other on the screens before me. Not until they've proven themselves trustworthy. I won't leave breadcrumbs leading to Blackwater's front door, or hint at how close my family is to the caves.

This way, I'm only a short drive away when Blanco reveals his true intentions.

This setup isn't ideal. Especially since they're residing in my safehouse when I'd rather be at home with my family.

If Papá had taught me anything, it's that patience is its own reward. When I'm finished training The Covenant, there won't be any doubt who their true leader is.

I drag a hand down my face and glance at the Souza ring on my finger. There's no getting away from it. My brothers and I are *his* legacy. We were his monsters—until we grew into men who befriended our own demons.

Nevertheless, I don't wear the Souza bloodstone because I earned it or because I'd felt a sliver of his pride when he'd gifted it to me. I leave it on to stand beside my brothers. The men I respect and the family I'd die for.

We're the next generation of Souzas. And my father's dreams are not mine. They're buried in his tomb with him for an eternity of unfulfilment.

I drop the phone and tell myself I'll message India tonight when I'm alone in my private quarters. Only once I have time to focus on her and nothing else.

Studying the night vision footage, I watch a couple of competitive skirmishes and make a note of who comes out on top.

On the middle right screen, a fight is dominated by two soldiers, while another holds back to assess the battle. I lean closer, frowning at the scrappy fighter, who appears to be dressed in civilian clothes. There's no stitched pseudonym on

a face scarf, or even a pair of goggles. Only a hood pulled up over their head and a motherfucking lit up phone screen in their fist.

I bolt upright, the backs of my knees shoving the chair behind me and tap on the keyboard to bring up the footage on a bigger screen. There's something familiar about those nimble leg attacks and energetic scissor sweeps. How the interloper fearlessly grapples and wrestles their opponent.

My scalp prickles and my pulse thrums. After a few seconds of martial combat, the soldier with a spider on his balaclava gets the advantage, pins his opposition to the ground, and yanks at the hood.

Instantly, I zoom in on the image and freeze.

Jesus fuck, he's fighting India.

INDIA



The satellite phone hits the ground and pale light arcs around us, highlighting the outline of a vicious spider motif looming over me.

“Get the fuck off me!” I buck my hips and lash out at the soldier bearing down on my pelvis, his knees at either side of my hips.

“What the hell is going on?” He stalls my punch with his large palm and twists my arm before yanking at the hood. “Where’s your pseudonym?”

While I continue to wrestle with him, the second soldier who had paused on the sidelines moves in and yanks him off me. I’m on my feet in a flash, hurriedly sweeping away loose strands of hair caught in my mouth and dragging the hood up again.

Spider spins around and lunges at me. I dip backward so he misses, but when I try to balance, his knuckles clip my chin. Molten pain spreads through my jaw and I taste blood in my mouth.

I’ve endured combat injuries many times. This is foreplay compared to the high-level competitions I used to take part in during jiu jitsu tournaments.

It’s a buzz, yet somehow a switch inside of me clicks and all the pent-up frustration, anger, and grief I’ve harbored for the past few months are unleashed—and this asshole, he’s the target. My moves become feral and the knee to his groin makes him buckle over. I can’t stop and it feels liberating.

“I was planted as a distraction, you dumb fuck!” I pant out the lie, my tone mocking. “While you’re wasting time, the rest of them are one step closer to winning.”

“Fuck!” he snarls. “Maybe you’re the key to finding him?”

He raises his fist to take one last swipe at me, but the soldier behind him marked with an evil-looking buffalo emblem snatches his wrist, swings his body around, rips off his night vision goggles, and headbutts him square in the nose.

Spider’s legs give out and he falls to one knee, somehow still managing to retaliate. “Back the fuck off, Buffalo,” he snarls.

But Buffalo doesn’t hold back and throws a jab into the side of his skull. Once. Then twice. On the third strike, Spider hits the dirt and a pair of goggles land at my feet.

“Put them on.” A raspy female voice carries through the hush. “Hurry the fuck up. He doesn’t know you’re here, does he?”

I sink to my haunches to grab them, then throw back my hood and pull the elastic straps over my head.

“You’re a woman?” My stiff jaw aches as the words rush out from the adrenaline pumping through my veins.

“So are you,” she counters.

“He called you Buffalo. Why are you all named after animals?”

“I prefer Buffy and you’re asking questions you have no right to ask, India. Does he know—”

I freeze. “How do you know my name?”

Thundering footsteps echo through the tunnel, the pace of them accelerated. My stomach flips when a figure marches into the space between us, oozing villainous authority, his stature imposing.

Instinctively, I know it’s Giovanni. Every cell in my body is on high alert and my heart is racing. The flutters in my chest

go wild as I stand here, pretending I'm cool about finally being next to him again.

When he rips off his goggles and flicks on a flashlight. I'm shoved against the rock and my own goggles roughly removed. I blink at him, our gazes tangling—awestruck blue to striking green.

A featherlight fingertip swipes the blood I know glosses my lower lip.

“Christ... you're bleeding.” Giovanni's rumbling voice cracks with concern, but the tone betrays a raging storm within him.

The sensation causes my nipples to harden, and an audible sigh escapes me. When he softly thumbs my cheek, I go weak at the knees. My skin reacts to his warm breath, a flurry of goosebumps showering every part of me.

His features tighten and he swivels on the spot, taking a step away. It's only then I exhale and realize I'm shaking.

He shines the light directly onto Buffy's covered face. In a beat, he confidently reaches behind his back, draws his gun and aims at her chest.

“Wait!” I bustle into his side. “What are you doing?”

“Did you bring her here?” Giovanni growls.

“No, sir,” Buffy replies, straightening her spine. “They were fighting. I intercepted as soon as I figured out she wasn't one of The Covenant.” She glances at the unconscious guy across from us.

Giovanni's aim jumps to the right, pointing low at Spider's body, and then he pulls the trigger. No hesitation. The bullet barely makes a sound with the silencer attachment on his handgun. I still jump, though.

Nerves ripple under my skin, not sure what his next move would be. I've seen him angry before, but the vibrations bouncing off him are homicidal.

I swallow hard the second he returns his aim to the woman. “If you even breathe near her again, it will be the last

breath you take. *Comprendes?*”

My hand settles on his taut abdomen and the muscles flinch, his subtle intake of air only noticeable to me.

“Sí, Dragon.” When he turns to me, his beautiful face etched with rage, she speaks again. “However, I found you first. So, I win.”

Without looking at her, his gaze burns into my face, and he taps a wireless earpiece. “The winner is Buffalo,” he bites out. “Challenge over. Everyone return to base immediately.”

I stay quiet, my teeth clenching so hard they ache.

“Thank you, Dragon.” The woman nods respectfully.

Before she has the chance to say anything else, he repositions my goggles first, then his, grabs my wrist, and turns off the flashlight.

“I’m watching you,” he snarls, brushing past her. “Burn the body and pour the ashes in the sea.”

“You didn’t need to kill him. The girl thought on her feet. Said she’d been planted to distract us,” Buffy calls after him. “He understood she was part of the challenge.”

Giovanni looks over his shoulder at her. “I gave you an order,” he snaps back, the tone of his voice cold, his temperament at subzero.

Dragging me deeper into a warren of tunnels, I do my best to keep up with his pace while using the night vision to see the greenish surroundings.

The fingers around my arm lock tight and he doesn’t say a word. Not even when I whisper his name.

It doesn’t take long before he manhandles me into a vaulted room where a wall of television screens survey the movements of the masked soldiers.

The door automatically shuts behind us. He lets go when it does, as if touching me pains him and marches across the stone floor to the opposite side, using distance as punishment.

With his back to me, he removes the goggles, checks his clip before setting his gun down, and combs his fingers through his thick hair, muttering under his breath.

I take off my goggles too and drop them on the desk by the door. “I didn’t know all those people would be—”

“For fuck’s sake, India.” He cuts in. Giovanni does a sharp one-eighty on the spot and runs a hand down his face. “What the hell are you doing here, huh? I told you to stay in Blackwater. What part of that didn’t you understand? It was a simple fucking instruction.”

The way he looks at me breaks my heart and makes me tingle all over. I stomp farther into the room.

“Don’t you dare talk to me like I’m a child, Giovanni. I needed to clear my head... to put some distance between me and that prison for a few hours. I went for a run on the beach. The same stretch of coastline that you told me belonged to you. I thought it was safe.”

He stalks toward me, his presence driving me backwards without our bodies touching and slams both fists into the wall beside my head when there’s no space left to retreat to.

Electric green eyes pin me in place. “Why the fuck do you think I didn’t go home?” he growls, sliding his fingers into my hair. “Don’t you think I’d have you next to me if it was safe?”

I keep my chin high in defiance and suck the stinging cut on the edge of my lip. “Stop treating me like a kid you’ve been told to babysit.” I fist his chest, but he doesn’t budge. “I thought they were going to torture you... that you’d suffer... die a gruesome death. And then... last night... you gave me the phone... and hope. I’ve missed you so much, Gio. Is it such a bad thing to want to see you? How was I supposed to know they’d be here too?”

“Your disobedience drives me fucking crazy, India.”

In a tornado movement, he seizes my throat and drops his mouth close to mine. The combination of coarse hairs tickling my cheek and his throaty timbre has me shivering all over.

“We aren’t living together because I have to deal with this shit before I can come home. I thought I’d made that clear to you,” he says behind gritted teeth, the tips of our noses brushing. “I gave you a goddamn phone, so we could keep in contact. But this place...” His chest heaves. “It’s not safe for you.”

My jaw clamps shut, and I hiss at him between clenched teeth. “Oh, really?”

I elevate to my tiptoes and roll back my shoulders. “So, it’s okay for you to keep your distance while you’re playing games in a cave with random women. What does she get for winning your challenge? Dinner with you? A few drinks to celebrate and a quick fuck while I’m out of sight.”

He bares his teeth at me, a dark shadow of anger passing over his face. “Don’t—”

“Don’t what?” I shunt into him. “Don’t point out the reality of it? Or don’t dwell on the fact she gets to spend time with you when I’m stuck in the library, haunted by memories of us and desperately waiting for the phone to beep.”

My nostrils flare when the grip around my throat becomes tighter and his groin presses hard into my hip.

“*Don’t*...” He overemphasizes the word. “... ever doubt my loyalty to you, India.” His gaze narrows on my lips as his deep voice sends chills right through me.

“And don’t ever underestimate the lengths I would go to protect you. Don’t ever think I’m not desperate to hear your voice... bury my face in your neck... stroke your tits when you’re next to me in our bed... and *don’t* ever wander into a fucking cave on your own.”

“I didn’t realize you’d have company,” I whisper, staring into his eyes. “And after you set the challenge, I wanted to prove to you that I could take care of myself. That I’m much stronger than you think I am. After leaving you behind at the warehouse, it’s important for me to earn your respect. I’ll never leave you behind again.”

His pupils flare and the intensity of his hold on my neck lessens. “We had a plan, and you carried it out like a true Souza. You were drugged, penniless, barefoot, and had no phone. Yet you still made it home to Leo. And I know you told Dré to send men in after me, because I heard one of Blanco’s guys report an attack on the warehouse. Our guys blew it up when they found out I wasn’t there. Reno would be proud of you, India.”

My heart pumps harder. “And what about you?”

I suck in a ragged breath when his forehead settles on mine. “You have nothing to prove to me. I’m always in awe of you,” he says thickly, refusing to unite our lips. Despite that, his eyes turn wolf-like. “But this time you’ve gone too far.” He licks his lips with dark intent and my belly flips.

INDIA



“*I’ve* gone too far?” I say incredulously and thump his chest. “You’re the one who’s gone too goddamn far, Gio.”

His eyes drill into mine. “Are you kidding me right now? You’re angry with me, little miss fucking danger hunter.”

“Yes, I’m angry with you.” I fist his top. “You were a few miles away all this time and didn’t trust me with your secrets. But I know what the real truth is.”

His nostrils flare and he drops all contact.

“You’ll always have secrets and I’ll never know what you’re hiding. We’ll never be close like André and Sinéad, because you don’t trust anyone—including me. Those two are tight. I envy the relationship they have, but you’ll never see me as an equal. I’m more of a stray pet you took in out of duty and gave a bed to.” I swallow the lump in my throat and gaze past him. “I have to get back to Leo. Please get out of my way.”

He steps back, folds his arms and eyes me quietly.

“Don’t worry, I’ll continue to play the game. Leo is oblivious to the truth.” I skirt around him and head for the door, not finding a handle or any normal method of unlocking it. Typical Gio. “Let me out.”

“No,” he replies, his voice husky.

“You don’t want me here—you never did. Let me out. I need fresh air.”

“No.” He repeats, gently rubbing his thumb across his bottom lip as he stares at me from under the messy hair hanging over his brow.

My insides clench at the texture of his baritone and the way he’s just standing there, his gaze wandering all over me.

Any normal woman trapped in a cave with a dangerous gangster would search for a weapon and scream at the top of her lungs. But this syrupy, hot lust spreading through my body is making it impossible to think of doing anything else other than unbuttoning his pants.

I love Giovanni Souza, but his secrets are tearing us apart.

“India.” He folds his arms and widens his feet. “I’m training those people out there to be more like me. I made a mutually beneficial pact with Carlos to create a squad of soldiers that both families would have access to. That doesn’t mean we’re partners, or even allies. He’s a traitor who’ll get what’s coming to him, eventually. Whereas you—you’re my family. I trust you, and I would never risk your safety.”

He takes a step closer. I’m drunk on how his words make me feel lightheaded and how his powerful presence sends my pulse racing.

“Perhaps I should have told you about this place and what I’m doing,” he continues. “But the less you knew, the less you’d worry. Do you understand that?”

I nod, appreciating his honesty and try to play it cool when he takes another stride forward bringing us toe to toe.

“Who is Buffy?” I whisper, shocked at how breathy I’ve become. “She knew who I was.”

“She’s a nameless soldier who I’m certain will knife me in the back one of these days. Unless I find a reason to shoot her first. The woman is one of Blanco’s soldiers. He probably told her all about us.” Giovanni yanks me into him. “By the way, there’s no way out of this room unless I’m in the mood to open the door. And I’m definitely not in the mood to open it.”

“What are you in the mood for?”

“You, baby.” There’s an edge to his tone that excites me.

I inhale and exhale in tiny puffs, my veins pumping faster. “That man thought he was part of a trial and you killed him for no reason.”

“I had a solid reason.” His lips quirk into a faint, rare smile. “If your blood spills, people die. It’s that simple. Get used to it, because that’s never going to change. Not even if you hate me for it.”

He dips into me and runs the tip of his tongue across my bottom lip, tasting the blood that’s still there.

Under the truth of his admission, I decide I’m ready to shake off the light he holds me in and harness the darkness living within him by putting my cards on the table. “Train me to be like you... please. Let me join your team.”

In the soft glow projected from the screens, he appears dangerously handsome, the scruff on his jaw so much darker. His brows pinch together and jade eyes lock onto mine.

Giovanni’s face holds an expression I’ve never seen on him before. An alarmed stare, impossible to read. It whispers through me in the silence until clenched white teeth peek out from behind his lips.

“I don’t want you to be anything like me. Why the fuck would I want that? Jesus Christ, India. I’m a killer and you’re the light that keeps my heart beating.”

My pulse skips, torn between love and pride. “You don’t think I’m good enough, do you? It doesn’t matter that I was the best damn jiu jitsu student in Miami. Or that Reno taught me his own style of cutthroat self-defense. It’s what he’d want for me. Why can’t you see that?”

The snarl coming from the back of his throat sends chills down my spine. “Keeping you safe was your brother’s primary goal. That is what he wanted for you.”

“Giovanni...” I say his name on a sigh. My mind choosing to argue while my body is primed for his filthy corruption. “She didn’t win. That woman—Buffy—she didn’t win your challenge.” I strengthen my footing and elevate my chin. “I

hunted you. *I* fought for a place. *I* bled for it, and from where I stood, you came straight to me. Not her. Therefore, I—” I prod my chest. “I found you first. *I* won.”

Staring up at him, my cheeks blaze and a fast pulse thrums in my neck when his brows tug together in thought. “I found *you*, not the other way around.”

“Maybe we found each other.” I suggest, furious at how he’s both sexy and frustrating.

I cross my arms as a barrier from his chest. “You’re allowed to do whatever the hell you want, and I have no say in it. But when I want to do something that’s important to me, I need your permission. How’s that fair, Gio?”

He tugs at my folded arms, takes my hand and interlocks our fingers. Lust sizzles under my skin. “Their lives don’t mean a thing to me. If one of them dies, I’d recruit a replacement an hour later. But you...” He frowns, his nostrils flaring as if he’s angry. “I’ve lost my mind over you.”

My heart pounds with awe and attraction, the rhythm of it matching the pulsating vein in his thick neck. His gaze settles on my gaping mouth and then his lips land on mine—hard, forceful, and hungry.

For some reason, the sting from my cut and dull aching bruise on my jawline adds to the thrill. Adrenaline and muted pain pump through me. He’s turned me into a masochist.

When our tongues collide, his deep grunt excites me more than anything. I’m tingling all over, pinned to the rock behind me, and needing to feel more of him. My heart buzzes from the electricity sparking between us.

“I’ve missed you so much,” I mumble into his hot mouth and stuff my fingers into his hair to match the intensity of his kiss.

After a beat, our lips abruptly part, and a large hand jumps to the hem of my hoodie. Working together, my arms lift, and he drags it up and over my head, letting it fall to our feet.

“You want to play at being a killer?” he bites out, his handsome face cast in the shadows, so he appears unholy.

He plucks at the strap of my damp bra top close to my collarbone and runs his fingers down the material, stopping at my hard nipple. In one rough tug, he yanks the neckline lower, drops his mouth to my bare breast and sucks.

“Could you hack open a man’s throat and watch him choke on his own blood?” he mutters. His otherworldly eyes find me under tousled hair teasing his lashes while slippery saliva covers my nipple. “Or put a precisely aimed bullet in someone’s skull?” His teeth clamp and release, the sharp sensation making me groan.

He drags his flattened tongue from my breast, up the length of my throat and across my jaw until his mouth settles at my ear. “Could you fill your pockets with stolen souls and let the weight of them bury your humanity?” His tone drops to a growl, the rumble of it burning me up inside.

“I don’t want to become a sicario. That’s not it,” I pant, scrabbling at his shirt to touch his warm skin. “It’s having the confidence to know I’d have a fighting chance if someone like that came for me. I’m not scared of your world, Gio. I’m in it up to my eyes. But I would be scared if I wasn’t skilled enough to defend myself and the people I care about. Whether you let me train with you or not, I’d fight to the death for you and Leo if it came to it. I accept that I have a lot more to learn. I’d rather be prepared—don’t you want that for me too?”

His hand lightly swathes my throat, and his troubled gaze burns right into my soul. “It’s official. You’re so screwed,” he whispers.

I frown at him. “Wh-what do you mean?”

INDIA



My heart slams into my chest, struggling to crack through my ribs to reach him. He suddenly lets go of me and takes a measured step away, teasing the coarse hairs on his unshaven chin as he considers me.

Without saying anything, he systematically peels off his shirt, unbuttons his pants, and drags them past his hips with his boxer briefs caught up inside. I can't help my hungry gaze roaming all over him, momentarily pausing at a sheathed knife strapped to his shin.

He stands before me, impossibly irresistible and god-like. Smooth inked skin is carved by muscles earned from religious training and discipline. They tense when the satiny crown of his dick hits his abdomen.

A shiver runs through me, fierce and powerful. This man's appearance matches his persona—lethal.

I've seen him naked before, but this evening, in his secret lair, he looks different. His expression is tortured, and his towering physique predatory.

We stare at each other for too many heartbeats. Both of us lost in this intoxicating lust.

I exhale slowly, not sure why I'm so nervous. "Tell me, Gio... what's going on in that head of yours? Let me in."

His eyes flick upward to the arched ceiling at the same time as he shakes his head. "You really are my weakness, India."

Before I get the chance to absorb the meaning woven through that one statement, he lunges at me and captures my face in his large palms.

Quick breaths caress my cheeks and our eyes lock, thrilling me to the bone. The awareness of each other jumps from him to me, his rough touch setting me on fire.

“My father would have killed you for it,” he snarls, almost demonic. “And our enemies will make you a target because of it.”

His mouth covers my startled whimper, the ferocity of his attack leaving me completely disarmed.

I’m panting hard when he slides down my body. His fingers hook the waistband of my leggings, dragging them lower and roughly wrenching off each sneaker, one by one.

When he rises to his full height, he’s holding a small pocket knife. Carefully, the cold blade glides under each strap of my yoga bra, quickly snipping them so it’s next to come off. I inhale a sharp breath, my veins charged with adrenaline and my heart pounding. The knife falls and then he’s on me again. Biting my neck and shoving me against the stone wall.

Again, harsh lips claim my mouth, punishing in their force. Our frantic kiss tastes of blood and saltiness.

His entire physique crowds me, consuming the whole space, so all I see is him. This monster of a man who never loses control is devouring me.

He nibbles and sucks, grunts into my open mouth, and gropes my breasts like I’m the first woman he’s ever been with.

It’s scorching fire—manic and hot. The underground air is thick, so full of heat that I feel my skin blazing.

“I’ll train you. My way. And you’ll obey every command even when it gets difficult.” His voice is hoarse, almost tattered with the growl biting at my ear. “You asked for this... you understand my way of life... you made me see you... made me crave you. So, *this* is us. Fighting and fucking. Comprendes, soldier?”

“Yes, sir.” I run my nails down his chest and watch the color of his eyes darken. “When do I start?”

“Soon,” he hisses, the echo of his baritone surrounding us.

I suck in sharply when he plants his lips over mine and fucks my mouth with his tongue like he’d been assigned to a mission in the desert and kissing me quenches his thirst. Breaking for air, he squeezes my breast and nips his bottom lip, humming low and dirty.

“Soldiers are punished if they don’t follow through on a direct order. You wandered too far from Blackwater, which means...” He slaps my left breast, quick and sharp. “... you deserve everything you get, baby.”

Another slap lands on the opposite breast, but the force he uses isn’t cruel or vindictive. The sensation is warm and tingly.

“You entered the training base without permission.” Giovanni sinks to his knees before me and roughly parts my thighs. His fingers explore my wet folds on my next ragged breath. “How should a naughty little trespasser trapped in a cave with a man like me be dealt with?”

Anticipation shoots through me in electrical volts, uncontrollably prickling my skin when feathery hot breaths warm my navel. The mounting awareness of his ownership seeps into my bones, a perversion so dark it’s dangerous.

“Look at me, little whore,” he demands. “What should I do with you?”

“Touch... me,” I beg. “Please. I’ve waited too long already.”

“Spread your legs. Wide.” He instructs, his eyes never leaving mine. “You want me to fuck you?”

“Yes,” I whimper.

“Just how you like it?” His foreign accent is drenched in dark lust.

“Uh-huh,” I gasp.

“It’s only fair I make you wait for a release. Then maybe you’ll understand how difficult it’s been for me to stay away from this pussy—from you. How I’ve had to watch you on those screens and stop myself from doing this...”

His mouth is on my swollen clit, his teeth latching onto it before he sucks. My body convulses and my hands fly out to his shoulders for balance.

“Gio—” I’m trembling when a finger slips inside me, followed by a second. “Oh, God.”

He knows exactly how to work my body, his vigilant eyes pinned to me from his kneeling position as he continues to finger fuck me. Sensing the heights I’m about to fall from, he quickly retreats, sucking his fingers into his mouth as he rises.

I reach for him, flushed and urgent. “Don’t stop... please... punish me in a different way... just don’t hold back... not now.”

Giovanni lightly thumbs my cheek, his touch manipulating my skin. “You’re such a needy little thing. Aren’t you?” he asks, not requiring a response.

He holds me in an unsettling stare, his head cocked to the side and his eyes fixed on my face as he’s imagining something dark and freakish.

His fingers swipe hair away from my face. “You’re impossibly perfect,” he whispers, his hot breath on my lips.

I nibble the edge of my lip to hide the grin his praise creates. His hand glides to my collarbone, gently stroking it before he nips a few strands of my hair, letting them slip through his fingertips. It’s a puzzling moment of tenderness, one where my heart grows and thumps for him. As much as I crave his dominance, I desire his affection, too.

“I don’t care how angry you are about it,” I blurt out. “I’m happy I found the caves and even happier you told me the truth.”

I swallow loudly, suddenly aware of his smoky aura settling over me. Any sign of softness in his eyes disappears. In one assertive step, he bumps into me. Our chests collide and

his hands are all over me again. His tongue drives into my mouth and we kiss harder, deeper, and hungrier. Both of us urgent in this attraction, the desire to fuck each other painful.

He roughly grabs my leg, hitches it high, my knee in the air. His nostrils flare as he positions his dick at my entrance, and without warning, he enters me. Fully. Forcefully. Deeply. I cry out; the sound harmonizing with his guttural groan.

“I *am* angry about it.” His violent thrust shoves my shoulders into carved rock, my inner walls stretching to fit around his girth. “But I’m also so goddamn fucking relieved to see you.” He grunts. “And to be balls deep inside of you again.”

Our eyes settle on one another while he continues to pound into me. The savagery in his gaze is so sexual, so primitive.

I inhale through the extraordinary feeling of him moving inside my body. I could never grow bored of this—of him. It’s worrying how well we fit together so perfectly. How I’m a fool for this man and only see a future with him in it.

I’m only eighteen and already my whole heart belongs to a complex gangster.

His pelvis rolls to deepen the angle, and my heart races. I know he won’t allow my release, but I can’t help it. Without permission, it sparks in my core, sets fire under my skin, the hold it has on me impossible to contain.

I’m struck by his energy, how it charges through me, from the two of us fucking in this way. It initiates a climax, so intense I shake from the inside out.

“I’m... sorry... it... feels... so... good.” My eyes roll back, the words barely audible through my moans.

“Fuck,” he hisses. His strong arm snakes around my waist as he continues to ram in and out. “I’m coming too... fuck... baby... oh, fuck!”

His spine stiffens and his forehead drops to the crook of my neck. His thick grunt turns me on all over again.

Skin to skin, we inhale and exhale in the aftermath, him still inside of me and my mind racing. Carefully peeling himself off me, he pulls out, rakes his fingers through his hair, and brushes past me. He stalks across the room, saying nothing.

“Gio.” I frown when he positions himself in front of the screens and folds his arms over his bare chest. “You let me finish when you said I’d have to wait.”

He angles his head around to face me, his forehead creased and his eyes sad. “It’ll feel like punishment when I take you home and leave you there. I thought I wanted to make you wait... but in the end, I needed you to fall apart for me more than I desired to punish you.”

I pad forward and witness his posture change, rolling his shoulders back. Invisible shutters slam down behind his eyes. “I’ll take you home now. Get dressed.”

My hackles rise. “But you agreed to train me, Giovanni!”

He nods. “And this is your first lesson. Obedience. Now put your clothes on.”

In the back of my mind, I remember my promise to Leo and how I told him I’d return after my jog on the beach. I can’t stay here. At least not tonight, anyway. I never want the little guy to suffer or feel alone, even if I would struggle to leave this man.

“Okay—fine,” I say, my voice uncertain. “I want to read Leo his bedtime story tonight, and then tomorrow morning I’ll rejoin you, right?”

Something passes behind his eyes. Perhaps it’s a shadow of appreciation or a glint of regret. Nevertheless, it vanishes in a heartbeat.

He shakes his head. “No.”

“No?” I repeat slowly.

“We do this my way. I need a few days to figure out who I’m working with out there.” His head jerks sideways, indicating the live footage of a dorm style room, where rows

of bunk beds are occupied. “Return to Blackwater and be patient. You will do that, India. I know you can.”

My stomach knots. “Fine, but you should know Dré and Matheus are flying to Colombia. Your enemies aren’t the only ones hunting me. Your brother is coming for me too, Gio, and he won’t take no for an answer.”

GIOVANNI



A few years ago

“Where the fuck were you, Gio?” André marches down the hallway and shoves me into the wall, my shoulder clipping Mama’s wall art. “Jesus Christ. I called you like fifty million fucking times.”

I shove him off me. My eyes narrow and I stretch my neck from side to side, hearing it crack twice. “Papá sent me on a job, and I had to lie low afterwards. You know how it works.”

The last hit didn’t end the same way as the others. This time, I did something that would royally piss off our father—something he could never learn about. Not while there’s still a breath in my body. Or in his.

André clenches his fists, his muscles flexed and his nostrils flaring. Over the years Papá manipulated the bond I have with my twin. Using it to bribe me and instill a fear of losing Dré. Ultimately, that threat is how he ensures my loyalty and keeps me on his leash.

My brother is wild. He’s the son Papá tries to control, but never quite has a hold of. And because of that, he tells me my twin’s life is on a rapidly decreasing timer. He considers him to be less important than the rest of us. Or maybe he knows deep down that André resembles him in many ways, and that makes him powerful in his own right.

Papá never openly threatens to take his life. Those whispers are for my ears only. The more my brother pushes his boundaries, the more our father talks about clipping his wings.

So, it's my responsibility to prevent that from happening, even if it means icing André out at times.

"I thought you were fucking dead," he spits out. "Even Papá nearly popped a fucking blood vessel, all because he thought you'd failed him and were buried in concrete."

"He doubted me?" I smirk. "I'm offended. The bastard should know I'm good at what I do."

"Six weeks, Giovanni." André scowls. "You've been missing for that long. I had Reno kicking up dirt everywhere looking for you."

I take a deep breath and exhale slowly. "You know I can't visit family straight away."

"Yeah, I know the risks, *cabron*. Two fucking words would have put my mind at ease. *I'm ooooookay*," he says the words slowly like I'm stupid. "That's all it would've taken, Gio."

I glance behind him to check Mama isn't in the kitchen having her traditional English afternoon tea. "Look, I'm sorry, Dré. I had something important to take care of."

"What was it this time?"

"It doesn't matter. I can't talk about it." André grunts at that. "I had to keep a low profile. That's all you need to know."

"Right, and that means shutting yourself off from us—from *me*?"

It's on the tip of my tongue to tell him what had really happened. That I rescued a kid from a bunch of narco nobodies. Then I had to find a doctor who could run a thorough health check on the boy. All while organizing a construction team to extend Blackwater at the rear, so he'd have a safe haven to grow up in. Somewhere Papá could never reach if by chance he finds out where I live.

I want to offload it all and confide in my brother, I really do. But secrets serve sinners. It's better for everyone this way, safer.

I shrug. “I’m here now, aren’t I? I flew out to Mag Mell when I heard you were with Mama.”

“She was going out of her mind with worry, Gio. We all were. Tommy was about to choke Papá the other day until Shane stepped in and advised him against it. Why didn’t you call me?”

“Forget about it.” My sighs only irritate him.

“Are you fucking serious? You think I can forget about my twin falling off the face of the earth? You used to tell me everything.”

“Life was simpler when we were teens. We were too young to realize our world is just a black fucking hole.”

It is a bottomless hole. One where we’d grown up filthy rich and paid the price with our souls.

At school, the teachers smiled and gave us grades we didn’t deserve, so they didn’t suffer a visit from men with machine guns. Everything we ever did was monitored by our father. Every step we took was accounted for. Every second of our free time taken up with his kingdom.

All of us, we wore blinkers that kept us from seeing the world outside of our father’s aspirations.

André frowns at me. “Yeah, but back then, we were in the hole together. Me, you, Tommy, and Mat. Fuck—even Mama, too.”

“And then we grew up and the hole got bigger.” I point out. “No one else lives like us. We learned to murder men and traffic cocaine before we were even adults.”

André lights a blunt and inhales deeply. “Move to Miami,” he suggests on a smoky exhale. “It doesn’t always have to be like this. I miss you, brother. Tommy could persuade Papá to train up more guys.”

I start to walk away from him. “Papá doesn’t trust anyone else. I’ve had that conversation with him already. I’ve built a reputation and he knows it gives him power.”

Papá's pride in my achievements is the one thing that sets him aside from being completely inhuman. Beneath all the cruelty and greed, a glimmer of respect shines in his gray eyes.

André is behind me in a flash. "At what cost?"

"Wrong question, Dré." I turn to him, staring into the face of a man who has been at my side since I was born. "You should ask yourself what I'd lose if I turned my back on his demands."

"Fuck Papá!" he growls under his breath. "Tommy is getting ready to step in and claim his crown. Papá's too fucking paranoid to wipe his own ass without thinking the paper is laced with cyanide. When the time comes, he'll be forced to take a back seat and shut the fuck up."

I stuff my hands into my pockets. "That's a few years away. And even when it happens, I still won't be free of this shit. There will always be some fucker waiting in the shadows to make a move on the people close to me."

"And that's why we employ security." André challenges. "All of us had guns and hundred-dollar bills shoved in our hands at a young age. We know how to take care of the people around us. It's the Souza way, Gio. We're familia. We protect each other. You're not on your own in this. I'm here."

I reach over, pinch the blunt hanging from his lips and take a draw. The hot smoke fills my lungs and I hold it there. "You're probably my favorite brother, Dré," I smirk, blowing it out in a cloud. "I'd pretty much do anything for you."

"Fuck you, cabron." He flips me the bird. "Disappear like that again and I'll fucking shoot you myself."

I chuckle, letting the blunt hang from my lips as I cover my eyes with a pair of dark aviators. "Your aim is shit. I'd likely lose the top of an ear at most."

"It would get the message across, right?" He takes the blunt back.

My brows jerk up. "What? That I'm your favorite brother too?"

He takes his time to blow out a cloud of marijuana. “We’re in this together, Giovanni. Me and you. We don’t have to live by his rules, not when we’re the guys with the real power. What’s the point of having all this money if we can’t enjoy ourselves before we die? Stop hiding away and move in with me.”

I love living in Blackwater Manor. Its seclusion and history make it my perfect bachelor pad, and with the added annex, it will become a family home.

“So, the plan is to fuck pretty girls, get coked off our heads, and blow shit up together for the rest of our lives?” I ask.

He jabs my bicep playfully and dishes out a rogue grin. “Now you’re talking.”

I slap on a smile to keep up the pretense. Though it’s too late for me, I’m defective. The life my brother wants for me is far out of reach. Elias Souza had seen to that long ago.

André and I might share a birthday, have matching DNA, and suffer under the rule of the same tyrannical father, but our lives are polar opposites.

Especially when I have a kid at home now. Maybe one day the two of them will meet, but until that day, my brother will have to share me with the shadows.

GIOVANNI



Present

“I’m okay, Dré,” I say into the phone.

I’ve returned to the control room after sneaking India out of the caves, driving her to Blackwater, and racing back, unnoticed this time. I’m good at staying under the radar when I have to, but it would only take one more trainee to spot her, then the risk level would be too high.

Leaving her there and forcing myself to turn away was the ultimate endurance test. Her voodoo spell pulls me in every goddamn time. The way I feel about the girl is unhealthy.

When she told me about Dré flying to Colombia, I knew it was time to call him. I might not be ready to introduce my brothers to The Covenant, but they need to know what’s going on.

“Good to know,” Dré replies, his voice husky like I’ve woken him. “Are you in one piece?”

“Yeah.” I throw my boots up on the desk and cross my ankles. “I’m fine, but there’s something important we need to talk about.”

“You bet there is. You won’t be in one piece for long, motherfucker.” There’s the thing about my brother, he always says it like it is.

“Right. The video of me and India. I know where this is going, Dré. Can we focus on business first, then you can throw a temper tantrum over India?”

“You fucked her, Giovanni.” André bites out. “You fucked Indy and now she thinks she’s in love with you. What the hell did you play with the kid for? I trusted you to look after her... not take her virginity and screw her heart.”

“Wake up, Dré. She’s an adult.” My temper sparks. “India is all woman and knows exactly what she wants.”

“Don’t... don’t even make me think of her like that. She used to sit on my lap, for fuck’s sake.”

My lungs tighten, the curved walls next to me closing in. “Are you jealous that she sits on my lap now and fucking loves it? Is that what this is?” My blood is seething, but I let out a self-satisfied grin he can’t see.

“I’m going to knock your teeth out of your smug face, Gio. She actually thinks you care about her.”

“I do care about her.” I counter. “It’s not like I planned for it to happen. Something changed. I like having her around.”

His grunt of disapproval shoots my hackles up. “Don’t give me that bullshit, brother. You’re dead inside where women are concerned. All you like is having a young pussy to play with.”

“Well... it is the best pussy I’ve ever had,” I taunt. “*She’s* the best I’ve ever had. And don’t ever underestimate what I’d do for the woman.”

She’s mine now, brother.

“Don’t, Giovanni.” He warns me.

“It’s those skimpy little shorts she wore to bed. The ones that rose high enough to see the smooth seam of her tight ass and led my eyes to her sweet cunt when I pulled back the sheets.” I feel myself growing full and hard. “The girl knows how to tease.”

“I’ll fucking kill you,” he fires back. “Don’t think I won’t.”

“Just like Papá, huh?” I grit through my teeth and choke the phone in my hand. “I think you’re angry because you wanted her too, and even thought about sharing her around

like all your other toys you had. But that sweet cunt of hers is drenched only for *me*. India chose *my* dick to worship. She willingly drops to her knees for me and me alone. I claimed her and I'll always be her first. This time, I won't toss her across the mattress for you to take your turn."

My stomach churns, and I swallow back my anger. I'm only goading him, so he backs the fuck off what's mine.

We had our fun over the years. Even fucked the same women at the same time. Lined up greedy girls next to each other in bed. Him watching me pound into horny bitches who begged for it and me smirking at his imaginative positions.

That was us—twins who'd fuck together and die for each other. And then Papá gradually built a wedge between us.

I'd fought it as much as I could and showed up in Miami to be with him whenever the opportunity came around. Then Leo came along, and something had to give.

"What the fuck?" André growls, becoming more and more irate.

"You're a hypocrite, Dré." I ball my fist. "We're brothers. I'm a fucking Souza. Yet I'm not good enough for her?"

"Oh, this has nothing to do with being a Souza." André laughs darkly. "If it were Mat? Yeah, I'd pop open the champagne," he sneers. "Do you know she fancies him? I used to laugh when he spoke to her and her pretty little cheeks would burn. I bet she got all hot in places she never knew could tingle."

Stop. Don't say another word.

"I even overheard her talking to her girlfriends about how much she wanted him to be her first. That he was her dream guy. You know how popular Mat is with girls. He only had to walk into the room, smile at her, and the kid would stop breathing. Whereas you—when you walked in, she'd didn't—"

"That doesn't matter anymore." I cut him off, my muscles braced. If André was with me right now, I'd have him in a chokehold. "India belongs to me now."

I don't think I've ever known jealousy or felt it twist my gut like this. Back on Sin Island, she'd mentioned Matheus and called him hot—the fun one. I'd brushed it off and ignored the odd pang in my chest. But now my chest aches and my mind is out of control.

“You have nothing to offer India, other than lonely nights and lost days in a house you're never in. All you care about is getting the job done, even now, with Papá gone. Does she even know you're alive?”

“Of course she does. I reached out to her before anyone else.”

“How noble of you.” He mocks. “Are you with her now?”

“No.” I grab the remote control and flick through the surveillance cameras located throughout Blackwater to find her. “She's at my home. It's the safest place for her.”

“And where are you?”

“Somewhere else, temporarily.”

As I had hoped, India enters Leo's bedroom. I keep my eyes on her as she gets into bed beside him and takes his Kindle out of the nightstand drawer. Those two are all I need.

“I rest my case. India lost her brother and now she's all alone waiting for a man who can't even commit to his own family. You'll bring her to me when I land.”

“It's not safe for her to leave my compound.”

“Christ, Gio. You're the one who's just like him, you know that? I have a security team around me twenty-four seven. I'm not going to hide like a rat in the drain. Especially not in my homeland. The Souzas rule Colombia and we make our presence known. Anyway, you never cared about her safety before. I want to look her in the eye and make sure she's okay. I know her better than anyone... even you, lover boy.”

“Dré...” I warn, my teeth clenched. “She *is* okay. And I'm trying to make sure she stays that way.”

“She's family, Giovanni. You don't need to protect her from the man who helped Reno raise her... while you were off

killing fuckers and hiding from me. So, don't piss me the fuck off. India is my responsibility. Not yours, brother."

I throw my feet down, push out of my seat and stand tall.
"You're wrong, Dré. So, fucking wrong."

"Oh yeah? What makes you think you can offer her a good life when you can't even enjoy your own?"

"Fuck you, Dré."

"No, fuck you, Gio."

GIOVANNI



I stare, watching over her.

The rain outside thunders against the thin window panes and a charred log smoldering in the fire leaves a burned smell.

She looks so peaceful—almost angelic. There was a time when I would have said she was privileged to walk the empty corridors of my private domain. Now, observing her like this, I'm the one who's fucking lucky.

Long lashes flutter a little as if she senses me even in sleep. Loose golden hair fans the cushion under her head and a cashmere blanket hides her womanly curves, which is probably for the best. Tonight, I'm not here to satisfy my hunger.

Warmth spreads through me, seeping into my rigid muscles. The desire to play with her is strong. I suck in a deep, steadying breath, aware of my pulse thrumming and my urges warring for control.

India wants to take the training she'd done with her brother up a notch. And what better way to do that than to face Giovanni Souza, in my own territory?

I roll down a black balaclava and pull up my hood, forcing myself to take a few steps away from her and slip into the shadows.

If she fails to win this round, then she's not ready to leave Blackwater or spend a few hours with my brother. End of story.

Pulling out the satellite phone, I type a message to throw her off. Just because I care about India, doesn't mean I'll go easy on her.

Unknown number: *You're not alone.*

From across the room, her phone beeps, the sound of it shrill, reaching the high ceilings and making her jerk awake. India props up onto her elbow, snatches the device quicker than a viper attacks, and taps open the message.

Her brows tug together as she reads and instantly types a reply. Except I've switched my phone off and tucked it away.

Sitting upright, she pulls the blanket to her throat and waits for me to send another text message. So distracted, detached from the prospect of danger a few strides away.

My heart thumps harder when her eyes flick up. She does a quick scan of her surroundings, not noticing me yet. I close my eyes and listen to her quick intake of air, savoring the way her instincts kick in.

"Giovanni..." she calls out, but I don't answer. "Is that you?" A wisp of fear distorts her voice ever so slightly, the sound of it echoing in my ears and whispering through me. "If you're here, please come out," she says with more urgency than confidence. "Just let me see you."

I stay rooted in position, hunkered by the ancient mahogany desk that offers a cover of darkness. She glances right, then left, her chest rising and falling as adrenaline charges through her stiff posture.

The blanket doesn't make a sound when it puddles around her on the couch before she stands, the awareness of not being alone finally sinking in.

I bite my lip, my eyes drinking in the sight of her satin pajamas and long, tanned legs. The whites of her eyes look so much brighter in the dancing candlelight—vivid and alert.

Little does she realize that just glancing at her slays me. Nevertheless, I start to rise as her voice whispers between us.

“I know you’re here. I can feel you watching me, Gio,” she murmurs, as if doubting her intuition.

I could play dirty and continue to hide myself, make her think she’s alone and then go in for the win when she settles back down for the night.

In reality, she wouldn’t stand a chance if I cornered her, pinned her body to the floor, and took her hard in front of the fireplace.

But that’s not why I’m here. Slowly, I take a step towards her, remaining completely quiet when my shoulders graze the light. Our eyes lock—mine shaded and hers wide.

“Gio?” she asks, confusion scrunching up her pretty face as she studies the plain black face covering.

The longer I say nothing, the more she fidgets with the buttons on her short-sleeved blouse. Her throat bobs as she swallows and cautiously backs into the stone hearth behind her.

But she’s smart and knows this tech pimped manor house is her safe place. Except life doesn’t always go to plan. The second she opens her mouth to challenge me, I flip the script.

Flicking out my arm, I unwind the chain on my wrist and wrap it around both of my hands, holding it taut in a straight line. If used correctly, it would strangle someone in a matter of seconds or restrain them, depending on my mood.

I won’t hurt her, that’s not my intention, but I am prepared to scare her. I want to see how she reacts under pressure, especially when she’s not half-sedated.

The mental replay of her lying on that trolley in the slaughterhouse still haunts me. How the gut-wrenching pain had felt a million times more crushing than I would have ever thought possible.

Her eyes cut to the only exit. The rush of power I get when she finally considers me a threat is, well, it’s surprisingly

addictive for a man whose only vice is murder. Or maybe it's knowing I could easily catch her, that no one would hear her screams, and she'd be wetter than the rainstorm outside when I subdue her.

She starts to breathe harder, and so do I. Clutching the phone to her chest, she jumps onto the coffee table, drops off the other side, and makes a run for it.

Good girl.

I know her well enough to predict she'd use the darkness to hide in and hurry along the hallway toward the kitchen, where she'd take sanctuary behind the steel doors with Leo.

Except, her handprint no longer works on the digital pad, and I've already locked all the exits. There's no way out—and no way in.

Giving her a little time, I casually prowl through the unlit corridor after her, aware of the blood in my veins growing hotter. I stall in the doorway to watch her repeatedly palm the wall mounted screen.

Access denied.

Blonde hair spills down her spine, flowing like a waterfall to her ass, where my gaze is helplessly drawn. I could tell her I've temporarily disabled it and let her know she's stuck in here with me. But killers don't reveal their tactics. They simply hunt.

“What the hell is this?” she hisses, reluctantly giving up on the door.

Her blue eyes run wild all over me as she keeps her back to the window. Skirting the cabinetry, she moves closer to the butcher's knife block on the counter. “Is this your idea of training?”

You have to start somewhere, baby.

I take a step, then another, urging her to move quicker and grab the biggest blade she can get her hands on. Waving it in the air, she stands her ground. Her muscles are braced and the

uncertain look on her pretty face betrays the confidence she's desperately trying to portray.

Pausing before her, I take a second to watch the vein in her neck thrum and absorb the energy of her fear. My stomach shouldn't flip at the sight of her vulnerability, and my dick shouldn't ache for the chance to push her to the limit. But fuck, I'm buzzed.

What should be a routine lesson in self-defense becomes something far more challenging—for me.

India licks her lips and sips air, pressing a hand to her belly as she returns my gaze.

"I know it's you! Why aren't you saying anything?" The blade slices the air. "Speak to me or I'll... I'll..." she stammers. "I'll end up hurting you."

She shuffles backwards, a little wary of my next move. Delicate shoulders roll, ready to react and come at me at any second.

In a lightning movement, I barge into her. I use the chain to loop the blade and rip it from her hand. It flies across the room and skids along the tiles, out of reach.

I nearly laugh when she curls her tiny fists and slams them into my chest. "Dammit! Say something!"

If she wants me to speak, then I'll give her one word. "Run."

Her eyes dart to the knife, to the doorway, and then back to me. And then she fucking pauses, even when she knows to *never* hesitate. Christ, it should have been the first thing Reno taught her.

I'm too far gone in the thrill of the chase and craving the victory of tearing her clothes off to stop now.

My heart is pumping, and my breathing is all over the place. Partly furious at her, but mostly turned on.

"No." India steels her spine as if she's accepted a different challenge, uncertainty leaving her eyes.

Staring at me for a beat, she runs the pad of her middle finger over her bottom lip and sucks it into her mouth. I almost groan, feeling the blood in my head rush straight to my dick.

Her lithe body vibrates with the same hunger I've sensed from her countless times. So much so that her nipples harden to points against the fabric of her blouse and her chest rises in bursts.

She's getting off on this.

This isn't a game, India.

Her gaze sweeps down my body, and for the briefest moment, it halts at my groin. There's no mistaking my arousal. She can see it and I sure as fuck can feel it.

After an audible exhale, she scoots sideways, ducking low for the knife.

Silly girl.

She should have known I'd be too quick for her. And I am too. Lightning fast, I kill the space separating us. My arms clamp around hers, trapping them against her sides and holding her body next to mine. My nose drops to her hair, where a sunny floral scent, noticeable through the fabric hiding my identity, makes my skin tingle.

But it's the sensation of her ass grinding into my boner that really gets my heart beating.

I tighten my hold on her when she tries to spin around. Excitement fizzes through me, her closeness making me falter.

"You should have run," I growl into her neck. "I expected you to put up a fight."

"You hoped?" She twists and wriggles. "Maybe I haven't stopped fighting yet."

I squeeze tighter. The horniness I'm feeling from her struggle is like a riptide pulling me out of my strict combat zone. "In the real world, I would have gutted you already and left your body on display for your family to find."

She goes quiet, her muscles becoming tense. “You scared me at first. But then—” I loosen my grip and let her spin around, so her serene gaze snares mine. “It was all in your eyes. The bad man didn’t want to hurt me. He wanted this—”

India covers my hand with hers and controls the movement, sliding our linked fingers under the waistband of her pajama shorts. She places it over her bare pussy, the wetness ready for me.

“Didn’t he?” She licks her lips.

A whimper escapes her when my fingers move to feel her. “Bad men can fuck first and kill after.” I remind her.

“But not you. If you’d wanted to kill me, you wouldn’t have woken me up first. You wanted the same thing as me. The chase. The adrenaline. The end goal.”

I nip her clit and savor her gasp. “Oh yeah? What’s the end goal?”

“For the bad man to catch me.” She lifts to her tiptoes and pulls back my hood. “Because...” Fingering the base of my balaclava, she tugs it up to my forehead, smiling shyly when she sees my whole face. “... we both want this.”

Keeping eye contact, India removes my hand from between her legs and draws my fingers into her hot little mouth. Once she’s swirled her tongue around them a few times and let go, she peers up at me from under her lashes and bites the left corner of her bottom lip.

“And this.” She gradually lowers, unbuttons my fly and slips her hand inside my pants.

Fuck.

Kneeling before me, she frees my dick and runs her tongue up the shaft like it’s a lollipop.

“I knew it was you,” she announces between licks. “Instead of scaring me... it made my belly ache with need and my skin hot. Like this—”

I clench my back teeth and hiss when her lips fully encircle the crown.

“You failed the test,” I bite out, trying so damn hard to keep it together. “Looks like Dré won’t see you during his visit to Colombia. You’re not ready to leave Blackwater.”

Cupping my balls, she sucks one into her mouth. I can’t help the shiver it gives me, or the raspy groan scraping out of my throat. My balls tighten with fire, the ache to bury myself inside of her so deeply ingrained in my psyche that no one, not even my brothers could stop me.

The excruciating need to have her eats me up until I’m choking on the lust she’s feeding me.

“What if I win?” she asks between sucks. “Would you let me go to him?”

I close my eyes and try to breathe. “Next time. *If* you win...”

Her skin brushes mine and her hums vibrate through me. While I’m a slave to her mouth, she suddenly unhands me, jumps to her feet, and in the same pulsating heartbeat, a long blade digs into my jugular.

“In the real world, Giovanni Souza, your throat would be sliced from ear to ear, and I’d leave you on the floor for your family to find.”

Standing here with my dick out and a knife to my throat, neither of us expecting my next move.

INDIA



My hand trembles, making the blade next to his corded throat quiver. Being this close to him and holding a degree of power over him gives me chills.

I swallow hard and tighten my grip on the handle. Adrenaline courses through my veins, making my lungs work harder.

A large hand snakes between us and suddenly I'm aware of a deep, gravelly rumble that moves through my soul like a thunderstorm.

Giovanni Souza is laughing.

While I'm lost in disbelief, he skillfully takes control of my hand, squeezes the bones, and the knife drops away. I hear it clatter to the tiles underfoot.

In a blur, his arm hooks my shoulders, and he lowers me backward. Both of us quickly sink. Meeting the floor, I wince from the coldness, my arms visibly reacting with goosebumps.

He stares into my eyes, and I completely forget he's a stone-cold assassin.

"Jesus, baby." Tingles rush over my scalp. "I think I'm in love with you."

I suck in sharply, shock making the blood swoosh in my skull. Lying under him, I blink wildly. All of my words have deserted my brain.

Last night, when he'd told me I was his weakness, I knew that applied to anything a man like him had to protect from his

enemies. His son—his family.

We're chess pieces on a black and white board, and he's securing all the key players. But falling in love? André had said it wouldn't be possible even if I'd wished for it to be true.

"Say that again," I whisper, my emotions bursting out of my chest.

He fixes me with a molten look and secures my arms above my head, binding my wrists together with the chain and fastening it to the brass foot rail attached to the island. The weight of his body bearing down on my pelvis feels like home.

"What should I say?" Giovanni teases. "Nowhere is safe." He picks up the knife and pricks the forefinger on his opposite hand with the point. "You should be more alert and not hesitate." The blade slides beneath the buttons on my pajama top, each one of them popping off as he moves from bellybutton to breasts. "Or you can't fuck your way out of danger?"

Satin slips sideways, gliding off my tingling skin like torn wrapping paper. His chest heaves when I arch my spine to push up my breasts.

"Physical fights aren't always the best way to win a battle. I studied my opponent," I tell him. "I saw what he couldn't hide and used it to my advantage. I rolled the dice and chose a different plan of attack. Next time, though, it will be different."

"You fought dirty, baby," he tells me with a low growl, taking a full sweep of my prone position. "So, fucking dirty."

It makes me shiver with satisfaction and longing. My eyes catch his. The solid bond between us undeniably strong. Inky pupils spear me, his gaze revealing a truth that whispers right through me too.

Call it lust, love, or simply obsession, it really doesn't matter. Whatever it is unequivocally connects us.

Placing a hand to my solar plexus, he skates his fingertips over each breast before leisurely moving to my shorts, where

he pierces a hole in the satin using the blade and rips them apart.

I tug at my hands, aching to touch him, only to hear the clank of metal hitting.

He smiles down at me. “Bad girls need to be restrained. I couldn’t let you cut me open while we’re fucking... even though I’d happily bleed for you.”

“And I’d bleed for you,” I say honestly.

Flat on my back, he moves between my legs, tips over my pelvis, and spits where my pubic bone is. I’m already wet, but the glint in his eyes tells me he’s living out our shared fantasy.

I drop my chin to my chest and lift myself off the floor a fraction to see better. His middle finger glides through the spittle and makes a shape.

“Did you just draw a heart on me?” I ask, unable to hide my girly grin.

“It’s for target practice.” He returns my smile with a devastatingly sexy smirk. “I’ll fill inside of the lines with my cum... make it pretty.”

With his eyes on mine, he dips a finger inside of me and traps his bottom lip between his teeth, appearing to blend with the shadows in his black attire. It’s quickly followed by another, the squelching sound of the movement competing with my heaving breathing.

“You’re so beautiful and greedy for my dick.” His irises darken. “That’s what you want, isn’t it? To be taken on the kitchen floor as my little whore.”

“Yes,” I groan. “Take off your shirt. Let me see all of you.”

He doesn’t delay, taking back his hand and hauling his t-shirt up and over his head. The energetic way he removes it messes up his hair. All I see are tattooed muscles moving in the moonlight and his pants coming off next.

“You’ll let me go to him, won’t you?” I ask when he parts my legs at the knees and scoops his hand under my ass.

“Fuck... India,” he growls. “You’re thinking about my brother again.”

He bares his teeth at me and thrusts in hard. I cry out from relief, but the fullness is almost painful.

“Not like that.” I moan. “I don’t think of Dré in that—”

Giovanni is over the top of me in a heartbeat, his hand on my mouth, stopping me mid-speech. “Say my brother’s name when my dick is filling you and you’ll never see him again.”

I nod, my lips still held under his hand, and raise my legs to wrap his hips, doing my best to hold him in whatever way I can. His eyes blaze, each dominant thrust becoming harder than the last. Every time he slams back in, my chest echoes from my muffled groans.

His weight pins me down, and the chain prevents me from going anywhere. There’s no way I could escape him, even if I had wanted to.

Pleasure builds in my core as the hand smothering my mouth jumps to the floor near my head for balance. Whiskered lips crash onto mine and his tongue slides inside.

“I guess this means you’ve won,” he mumbles into my mouth, his voice the catalyst for a monstrous climax charging through me.

He’s a trained killer. A notorious sicario for the most powerful cartel in the world. His brother is like my brother. Yet somehow, none of that matters when I’m with him.

I’ve seen the cold-hearted savagery that lives within him and equally experienced his compassion.

When my heart-stopping orgasm finally eases, he withdraws, pumps his dick, and messily comes all over the saliva smeared heart.

“My cum looks good on you, baby,” he stares at me from under heavy eyelids and shifts back a bit.

Lowering his face, he flattens his tongue and collects his splattered cum on the tip of it. I’m breathless when he looms

over my face and sticks his tongue into my mouth. The salty taste of it mingles from him to me.

“We taste fucking good together too.” He winks and I stupidly blush from the way it affects me.

I wiggle my fingers to get the feeling back in my hands, happy for him to unravel the chain. Scooping me into his arms, he carries me out of the kitchen with my temple pressed to his shoulder and the back of my knees draped over his forearm.

This house isn't my safe place. Gio is. Right here, next to his strong heartbeat.

“Tomorrow morning, my pilot will fly you to the hotel where Dré is staying,” he announces. “You'll spend a few hours there and come straight home—alone.”

“Thank you.” I run my fingers over the dark hairs on his jawline. “Maybe now he's here, you could introduce him to his nephew.” I feel him tense. “It's only a thought.”

“In time,” he replies. His response is so very distant compared to the closeness we just shared. “Things are too complicated at the moment. Once I'm confident I have The Covenant under my full command, then I'll think about it.”

Back in the library, he lays me down on the couch and moves to the fireplace, where he sets about lighting a new fire.

“Stay with me tonight?” I ask hopefully.

He shakes his head and rises as roaring flames fend off the chilly air. “I'll come back tomorrow evening when you're back with me where you belong.”

Stalking toward me, he stoops over, pinches my chin and guides my gaze to his. “Keep your phone with you. There will be armed guards at the hotel. You'll be safe with Dré, otherwise I wouldn't let you leave.” And then he kisses me, his lips softly clinging to mine. “Do you still have a crush on Matheus?”

I frown. “Where did that come from?”

“Just answer the question.”

I used to. What girl my age wouldn't, or any woman for that matter? Matheus Souza is tall, dark, and dangerous. And a social media sensation who's powerful in his own right. "I did. When I was younger."

His brows drift up. "As in past tense?"

"Yeah, and the way I feel about you is very much in the present and future tense." I draw in my lips to hide my smile. "There's no comparison."

"Good." He narrows his eyes at me.

"Earlier, when you said you think you're in love with me, did you mean you're undecided?"

His brows nip together in thought. "I've had a shit ton of women ever since I was old enough to use my dick properly. There were no girlfriends, or anything remotely like a female relationship. Mama is the only woman I care about. I know I love Leo—and my brothers. But this is different." He shrugs. "I'm not used to having so many damn emotions."

"What do they feel like?" I ask, every inch of me electrified.

"It's like you've shot me in the heart, and I can't recover from it. It feels like hell... and happiness." The edge to his tone sends chills up my spine. "One of those I know really well and the other... not so much." He sighs and straightens.

"Do you think of me as your girlfriend now?"

Giovanni rakes his fingers through his messy hair and stares at me for a beat. The pause is like an eternity. "No."

"Oh." My brows fly up and my heart hovers in my chest.

He shrugs and starts to blend into the shadows as he stalks away from me. "I haven't decided what you are to me yet. Every little thing you do catches my attention and keeps it locked down, India. Being called a girlfriend seems so basic."

Stopping for a second, he glances over his shoulder, his otherworldly eyes gleaming in the flickering light. "Behave yourself tomorrow. Remember who you belong to. *Me*. Not my brother. This is your home, baby."

When he vanishes into the darkness, I cover myself with the blanket and fall back onto the cushions. It's so frustrating to be left alone again. Yet I'm buzzed to see André after so long.

But what really makes me smile is knowing I belong to Giovanni on a level higher than a girlfriend. Except as that thought tingles through me, dread creeps into my stomach. How would André react to the news?

INDIA



The sun is high, bright, and powerful as the sleek black helicopter cuts through the Colombian sky. From up here, the landscape below could be Miami, the city I had once called home.

Since then, I've learned it is not the place that offers home. Rather, it's a feeling you get from the people around you—your family. My love for Reno had meant I could have lived anywhere with him. Now my heart has settled in an unconventional relationship with a hitman and his son.

The pilot tells me the hotel is straight ahead. I lower the aviation microphone on my headset and press my nose to the window as we descend. Finally, we're hovering over a landing platform on the roof of a high-rise tower.

My belly churns. Oddly, I'm a little apprehensive to be so far from Blackwater, yet excited for André's company again.

For the entire journey, my mind had clung to the events of the past few weeks, and how content I've become. Even though I'd thought a happy life after Reno would never be possible. I'm a different person these days.

Once we land, the engine noise cuts out, and the spinning blades start to reduce in speed.

"I'll see you back here later this afternoon," the pilot confirms.

"Okay. Thanks." I drag the headset off my ears and take a deep breath.

When I unclip my harness and turn in my seat, I see him. André Souza is standing there, surrounded by armed guards. He hasn't changed a bit, even though his life isn't the same as it once was.

As he's stalking towards the aircraft to greet me, my heart beats faster. I don't recognize any of the security guys flanking him. None of them stand close, not where Reno and Letterman usually would stand.

My stomach aches, aware of how my brother is missing from both of our lives.

André wears his usual fitted black denim jeans and a snug t-shirt outlining his muscles. His dark hair is disheveled like he's recently fucked a waitress. But I know better. These days, he's all about his wife.

He's at the door in seconds, yanking it open, and offering me his ringed hand. We both know I can manage unaided, yet I still set mine in his and let him help me.

Sure, he's wild, unpredictable, and trigger-happy, but the André I love would always put his hand out for me—and I'd never refuse it.

My heart flutters. There's an undeniable similarity between the two most important men in my life. But that's all it is, a sibling resemblance and nothing more. Aside from that, they're nothing alike.

André's accent is rougher and his eyes dark. His build is slightly broader, more muscular, and his energy attaches itself to fun childhood antics.

I jump onto the concrete and squeal when he lifts me into the air, spinning me around. Finally lowering my bare legs to the solid roof, I steady myself as a dominant arm clamps my shoulders, and a large hand holds my head tight to his chest.

Trapped in his embrace, I fist his t-shirt and inhale. The familiar musk of cigarettes, liquor, and his signature cologne envelops me, and all the memories flood back. It's a bittersweet moment of love and loss.

I breathe him into my lungs, fully aware my heart is ecstatic and understanding my body isn't primed for deviance. He's not Giovanni.

With my ear next to his pec, I focus on his powerful heartbeat. The rhythm of it stays constant and strong, not thumping hard like Giovanni's does when I'm on top of him.

"I've missed your face." His deep voice rumbles in my skull.

"I missed yours more." I laugh, pulling away to side-eye the men behind him. "I see you have new goons."

André's lips quirk and he lets out a heavy sigh. "They aren't him, that's for sure. But they will be following you around. So be nice," he chuckles, low and raspy.

"Really? We're back to bodyguards?" I roll my eyes playfully. "I bet you a hundred bucks I've got better aim than those guys."

"You learned from the best. Of course, you do." He yanks me to his side and starts to walk us across the helipad. "You're a bad ass bitch, Indy. But those guys will have eyes on every door, so you can relax. Today is a special day."

I angle my head and look up at him, my sandals clipping as I match his quick pace.

I'm not blind. I know André is gorgeous. The older my friends and I became, the more their teenage eyes rated him as a god. They were infatuated with the three guys who hovered around me.

I never saw André in the same light as they did, though. He's the guy who watched a YouTube video on how to fix long hair into a bun when I had to put mine up for jiu jitsu competitions.

It had taken him a few attempts, a shitload of bobby pins, and a bottle of Jack, but he mastered it eventually.

He could have easily paid a hairdresser to visit the apartment. Instead, he'd told me he liked a challenge. It was those simple things he did for me that made my heart whole.

“What’s so special about it?” I ask.

“You’ll see.”

He escorts me through a set of sliding doors and into the top floor elevator.

“Oh, come on, Dré! Tell me. Is it a gender reveal party or something?”

The steel doors close, all seven of us inside, packed in the small space like matchsticks. “You really brought the heavies to Colombia with you.” I laugh, squished next to him and feeling happy to be by his side. “Reno and Letterman were more than enough hired muscle.”

He frowns. “What the fuck is a gender reveal party? You know I’m a hot-blooded male, right? There’s nothing to reveal. I mean, you’ve seen my twin’s dick, haven’t you?”

“Dré!” My cheeks blaze. “Stop it.”

“It’s true, isn’t it?” He turns his head, his eyes drilling into my embarrassment. “Gio was supposed to look after you, not take advantage. I love the fucker, but he crossed a line.”

“I dragged him over the line, Dré. Do you seriously think he’s the big bad wolf and I was a defenseless lamb?” I fold my arms and look away from his dark, assessing gaze. “I’m a woman now, in case you haven’t noticed.”

And I was ready to be treated like one.

The floor numbers reduce rapidly before my eyes. I pull back my shoulders and raise my chin, feeling him watch me.

He scratches the coarse hairs on his jaw. “Well, I guess that’s what today is all about, then.”

When the doors slide open, two guards move out first, check the area, and nod to the others. André’s hand settles on my lower back, and he ushers me into the hotel foyer.

Daylight bounces off the polished floor and a trio of sparkly chandeliers dangles over sectional sofas. Together we move past the sleek reception desk, along a freshly carpeted

corridor, and reach a dead end. Looking to the right, my lungs expand, filled by a sudden inhale.

Through a set of glass doors, there's a small function room. The ceiling's crammed full of pearl colored helium balloons with pale pink ribbons.

"You're having a girl!" I squeeze his arm.

Dré frowns. "Uh, this isn't for them."

"Them?"

"Yeah, we're having twins. A girl and a boy." He winks at me. "I have super sperm."

"Shit... why did I not see that coming?" Staring at him, I giggle behind my fingers.

"I thought we'd make a day of it since our family is all in one place again." The sentiment to his wording isn't missed. "This is for you, Indy. It's my way of making up for not being around on your big birthday. Sinéad did most of the organizing, though. Apparently, petting zoos are for kids, not eighteen-year-old women." He smirks.

I blow out my cheeks and let the air whoosh past my lips, still in shock. "Twins... holy shit!" I mutter, the news sinking in.

A pang of jealousy trickles through my veins. I can't help it. I'm older now and his focus would be elsewhere.

"Yeah." He nods slowly, his eyes suddenly darkening to pitch black. "If I have champion swimmers, Gio will have them, too. If he's knocked you up—"

"Oh my God, stop!" My hands fly to my face, covering my eyes. "Are we really doing this, Dré?"

"Were you really doing it with my brother?" he counters.

Slowly, I peek out at him through my fingers and sigh. "Yes. I had sex with Giovanni multiple times, and no, I'm not pregnant. I had a contraceptive shot, okay?" I uncover my face and set my hands on his chest. "Gio and I are good together."

André narrows his eyes. “You don’t know him like I do, India.”

“I know all the important stuff.” I blink up at Dré, missing hungry green eyes, healing facial wounds, and a mouth so addictive I feel like I’ve had to go cold turkey without it. “I know Reno would be pissed—”

“He’s not the only one.” He cuts in. “Letterman isn’t happy about it either.”

“Look, I get it. But Reno isn’t here anymore and I’m an adult, Dré. Not to mention the guy is your brother. I mean, my standards were set kinda high from the beginning. So, who better to hook up with than your twin?” I giggle, but André doesn’t crack a smile.

“You know it was just a hookup? Nothing more,” he states. “Because that’s all he’ll ever give you.”

I let out a sigh, frustrated he doesn’t understand how deep my feelings run. “It’s more than that.”

André shakes his head. “Women can’t help themselves around a guy like him. It’s the danger that gets them all horny and wet. I’ve seen it play out hundreds of times. He would walk into a club and ignore every single sweet-assed female in the place. It drove them fucking wild. They wanted to crack the code and spread their legs for Gio even though he genuinely scares the shit out of everyone. Men are terrified of the guy and women want to act out their dark fantasies with him.”

I take a step back and stop myself from covering my ears. “André, if you’re trying to—”

“I’m just telling you like it is,” his voice drops. “When Giovanni fucks, it’s simply an interlude to business. A natural instinct he needs to satisfy. Nothing more. He doesn’t add feelings into the equation. If he’s given you the impression you mean something to him, then he’s fucking with your head to make sure he can control you.”

No, that’s not true.

I can tell André who his brother really is, and unravel a web of secrets. Instead, I bite my tongue and keep it all inside.

“You’ve already suffered enough for one lifetime. I won’t let you get hurt again. Not by him or anyone. He’ll never ask you to marry him, India. Are you prepared to be his mistress?”

I’m done with this conversation even though I’m finding it hard not to have Dré’s approval. I mean, how can he judge his own brother? The Souzas all slept around. André himself was a serial sex addict until Sinéad showed up and somehow snared his dick with a choker chain.

I remember all the naked women with fallen smiles and their failed attempts at winning him over after a typical all-nighter. André had no problem ordering them to leave his bachelor pad the next day.

Sometimes, when they thought they could squeeze a few more hours out of him, his security would have them escorted out of the building.

And now look at him. He’s happily married, and his wife is expecting twins. People change.

Anyway, I don’t see a fairytale white wedding in my future, because they’re a pantomime for people with too much money.

“You really did this for me?” I switch the subject and bury my face in his chest. “Thanks, Dré.”

He strokes my hair and kisses the crown of my head. “At least you’re back where you belong now. Come on. I’m fucking starving.”

My scalp prickles when he takes my hand and leads me through the doors. He knows this is only a visit, doesn’t he?

Inside the room, a bar lines the back wall and smartly dressed servers skirt the central oval table, tending to the Souza gathering.

Tomás, dressed in a crisp white shirt, has a possessive arm around the back of Carina’s chair, both of them engaging in an intense conversation. When a smile dances across his mouth,

she chews the corner of her glossy red lip and reaches for his hand.

Her returning gaze melts my insides. Not because their desire for each other is hot, but because I've felt that way. I've burned for someone too.

The youngest brother, Matheus, knocks back a shot, the movement in tandem with a good-looking guy seated next to him. To their left, Sinéad slowly rises from her chair to greet me.

Her cheeks are freckled from sunshine and a dreamy white dress disguises a slight baby bump. With her loose raven hair, she exudes effortless beauty.

They all stare when we approach the table, and it suddenly hits me. The Souza men are all in this room, except for Giovanni. My stomach twists. He should be here too.

I grip the purse strap hooked on my shoulder and smile, a little embarrassed by the attention.

"Happy belated birthday!" Carina offers a heartfelt smile and Tomás tips his whiskey tumbler in my direction.

"Well, well, if it isn't our brother's cute little plaything." Matheus raises another full shot glass. "Come and sit between me and Luke." He waves two fingers at the waitress, motioning for more liquor. "I want to know all my big brother's dirty secrets."

INDIA



“Let the girl eat,” Sinéad tsks and throws her arms around me. “Here, sit beside me. I’ve got some photographs to show you.”

I pull out the chair next to her and sit, hearing André’s request for bottles of Cristal, an alcohol-free cosmopolitan for his wife, and some decent music.

“I heard the good news.” I set my hand on top of hers, covering her tattooed wedding ring. “You’re having twins!”

Lion by Black Math plays through the speakers and Sinéad subconsciously glances over at André, the same way she always does.

It’s the first thing I’d noticed about her when we met in his apartment. She had an ingrained reluctance to admit she fancied the guy, but the woman couldn’t keep her eyes off him. I knew there was more to it, and truth be told, I envied their bond even then.

“One baby was a shock... but two. I should have known Dré would go big or go home.” She palms her belly and laughs. “At least we get one of each first time round, and then I’ll make Dré get the snip.”

“Like that would ever happen,” I laugh with her and lean back when a waiter sets a plate of food in front of me. “How’s Sicily?”

“It’s beautiful India. You’ll love it.” A plate lands before her too. But rather than lift her knife and fork, she reaches for her cell phone. “Look... I have pictures of your room after the

decorators finished. The view from the terrace is breathtaking.”

My heart starts to race when I glance at the images and swipe, pretending to be as enthused as she is about the palatial setting.

From the bold blue sky and far off sparkling ocean, beyond a grand balcony fit for a princess, it’s everything a girl like me could wish for. At least what I would have wished for prior to Blackwater sucking me in. Before him.

“Wow!” I pick up a fork and stab a strip of chicken. “It looks like paradise. The perfect place to raise your babies.”

“André misses Miami,” she tells me, putting her phone away. “He told me he’d be happy wherever I am, but I know he misses it.”

“Or maybe he misses something else.” My lips form a straight line when I smile. “The three of them were inseparable. Miami was their playground. But things change. You can find happiness in other places—in other people.”

“Is that how you feel now?” she lowers her voice and tucks a few strands of hair behind her ears. “About Gio?”

“Well... I can’t explain it, but...” I eye the ruthless men around the table while I think. “Yeah. There’s something about him. He’s not the man André thinks he is.”

“What do you mean?”

I shrug lightly. “I’ve seen his heart, Sinéad, and it’s big... and beautiful, and it’s where I belong.”

“Oh.” Her expression tightens. “So, you’re set on going back to his place?”

My blood pumps faster, and suddenly, I’m too warm. Why is she even asking that question?

“Yeah. His pilot is coming back for me later. We have plans this evening.”

André lands in the seat next to her and pours a tall, stemmed flute full of champagne, not caring when the bubbles

overflow.

“Let’s make a toast to new beginnings and family.” He hands it to me. “We have something for you.”

He nods to Sinéad, who slips her hand into her purse and takes out a navy velvet box.

“Happy birthday, India!” She sets it beside my plate.

André drums the table as he waits for me to crack open the lid and peer inside. Nestled in satin, sits a golden locket with the letter ‘S’ in blood red stones and a fine chain. I carefully lift it out and hold it in my palm, taking a breath before opening it.

And there we are, all four of us. Reno, André, Letterman, and me. The photograph was taken about four years ago.

My family.

I blink on repeat to fight back the tears and swallow the growing lump in my throat.

“Here...” Sinéad leans in and takes it from me. “Let me help you put it on.”

“It’s perfect. Thank you.” I whisper, catching his eye. “I love it... so much.”

And I do. I stare into André’s inky gaze, finding his expression solemn. “Just because you’re an adult now doesn’t mean you don’t need us anymore. We’re family. You’re a Souza.” I watch him pull out a shiny gold case from his jeans’ pocket, pop it open, and extract another paper rolled blunt. “And I need a fucking smoke.”

Before standing, he slides his hand behind Sinéad’s head, tugs her face close so their noses squish, and covers her open mouth with his for a quick, dirty tongue fuck.

I swallow and shift in my seat. My eyes lock on their hungry kiss. He adores her. Obsessed even. I hate how my heart hammers against my ribs and heat pools between my thighs.

I'm not thinking of them, rather I'm remembering Giovanni. *Us*. All the filthy encounters we've had—and how I had wanted all of it.

Being in this room with his brothers only highlights it. I can't escape those powerful emotions. They've become stronger in his absence. Deeper.

I miss him.

“Back in a second. I need to use the toilet.” I push out of my seat and touch the locket around my neck, padding the gemstones like braille.

Souza.

Family.

I'm suddenly aware of a vibration behind me. The ever-present moving shadows that were part of my normal life when I lived in Miami.

Guards had circled me in big crowds. Watched me from their vehicles while I sat on the beach with my friends. Strolled along the boardwalk a few feet in the distance. Even followed us on the journey to school.

I was never free.

Thankfully, when I dive into the washroom at the far end of the room, I'm finally alone. Moving to the basin, cool water splashes my hands and helps to dull the heat of my veins.

My pulse is unsteady and all I can think of is a release. I stare at my reflection, not wanting to go there. That's for later when his lips are on mine and his tongue is... fuck. My stomach coils with need and I grab onto the glitzy vanity top, breathing through it.

When I first arrived at Blackwater, it reminded me of a prison. Everything about it was gothic, vast, and shut off from society. As time passed, isolation transformed into a peaceful, safe haven.

I found freedom there and a new start.

Drying my hands on a paper towel, I comb my fingers through the lengths of my hair, and fix my dress, checking the front buttons are properly fastened. I dig my Fenty lip gloss from my purse, doing my best to ignore the satellite phone next to it. I'm not a hormonal teen who can't last a few hours without texting her crush like a love-struck fool.

I laugh at that, accepting the fact I am very much in love and suddenly freeze when it beeps. Fishing it out, I stare at the screen, my heart skipping.

Unknown number: *Are you okay?*

I chew my lip, stupidly trying to hide my giddy smile that he can't see and type out a response.

Unknown number: *Yeah. I've missed him. But I miss you even more.*

His reply fires back instantly.

Unknown number: *Good girl.*

A wicked shiver runs the length of my spine and I press a hand to my belly, savoring the flutters.

Quickly tapping out another message, I hit send and silently beg for more.

Unknown number: *Are you busy?*

Three dots appear on the screen as if he's typing and then disappear. I hold my breath, waiting for him to answer me, but the screen goes black.

Had I been at home in the library, this distance would still be the same. Giovanni is busy... so I may as well enjoy myself while I'm here.

I exhale my frustration, return the phone to my purse, turn around, and walk out of the washroom.

"India!" Matheus calls me from the bar. "Come over here. Let's do a shot together and celebrate your birthday."

Oh, God.

This won't be awkward or anything. I'm certain André told him all about my silly teenage crush.

Matheus leans in and kisses my cheek. His fresh cologne mixes with liquor fumes. "This is my best friend, Luke." He slaps his friend on the back.

"Luke St. James." The guy confirms, like the name should mean something to me. It doesn't.

Straight, deep brown hair frames his swarthy forehead, the ends of his bangs hitting his eyebrows. His sharp, striking features offset against a royal blue, casually worn shirt.

"India Hardy." I take his hand and smile back at him.

"You're even prettier in the flesh," he whispers, tilting close. "Those blue eyes of yours really make you stand out from the crowd."

Even though there's something about him I don't like, there's also something intriguing that gently tugs at my core. A little pull of danger and a slight whisper of attraction.

Not enough to make me question my feelings for Giovanni. Rather an awareness of being a woman who's missing her man.

"Gio is a lucky bastard, isn't he?" Matheus agrees, his voice hoarse, smooth, and very much different from the way I'd heard him talk before. "You always were a pretty kid,

India. And now you're all grown up. That's why André is so protective of you. There are guys out there who'd love to mess with a girl like you."

"You're right, Mat. I have grown up and I can look after myself these days. The guys made sure I could handle weapons... *and* creeps." I fire a smug grin at Luke and watch mischief dance in his eyes.

"I guess you can." Matheus laughs, and I can't help feeling nervous. "I was a little concerned when Dré told me Giovanni was taking you in. I thought you'd never make it out of his house alive. Tell me..." His charming aura moves around me when he angles to the bar, collects a shot glass, and turns back to me. "What's he really hiding in that house he won't give me the address to?"

I accept the clear liquor he offers me, knowing I won't drink it and shrug nonchalantly. "Nothing. We all like our space. Your brother likes his."

His eyes narrow and he licks his lips. "Giovanni is the king of secrets. But you... he hit send on your pre-prom hook up and gave us a peek through the peephole. Why was that?"

"Fuck yeah, I saw that video." Luke interrupts, running his fingers through his hair, his full exhale loud. "I have to admit, I jerked off a few times with that one on repeat."

Matheus glances at his friend and smirks.

"Christ." I mutter, the drink in my hand becoming more appealing.

"What?" Luke raises his eyebrows, pretending his statement's perfectly acceptable. "It was hot." He shrugs. "Really. Fucking. Hot."

My expression falls. How many strangers have seen it? "It wasn't for anyone's entertainment."

"Well, kudos to you because we were entertained." Luke sinks a shot and slams the glass down. "Your turn." He nods to me.

“Who else did you show it to?” I keep my eyes on Matheus, glaring at him. “That was family business. Gio will be pissed if you’ve put his face all over the internet.”

Matheus breathes out a low laugh and burns his chestnut brown eyes into mine. “Relax, Indy. I only showed him.” His head tilts towards Luke who salutes me. “And our two roommates. That’s it.” His mouth curls at one side. “My friends are loyal... like you. Not blood, but one hundred percent family.”

Luke slaps a hand on Matheus’ shoulder and squeezes. “Fuck, Mat. I never thought of it that way. She’s like your little sister.” He frowns, then offers me a cheeky smile. This guy is trouble.

“Suppose she is.” Matheus cocks his head in contemplation. “More like a sister-in-law after my brother popped her cherry.”

“I’m standing right here, you know,” I grit out. “There’s no need to talk about me in third person. And whatever I did with Gio is my business.”

Matheus’ lips quirk. “You’re right. I’m only teasing, Indy.” He punches Luke in the bicep. “Apologize to her.”

Luke grins at me. “Sorry, blue eyes.”

Matheus leans into the side of my face and lightly kisses my cheek. “Maybe I’m just jealous,” he says, his breath an intimate caress.

The hairs on the back of my neck rise, my pulse pumping. His smell is a mix of liquor and cologne. A similar brotherly reminder of André. After a pause, he adds, “You know more about my brother than I do.”

I straighten my spine. “I’m sure Luke knows more about you than Gio does, or even Dré, huh?” I challenge. “I bet you don’t mention all the stuff you get up to with your friends to your brothers?” I side-eye Luke. “I mean, you probably wouldn’t tell Gio that your buddy here jerked off to our video while you sat next to him, right? Because you wouldn’t

forward a super private video of him to anyone else in case it was leaked. You'd know better than that."

Luke chuckles under his breath. "I'd really like to play with this girl, Mat."

Matheus tips liquor into his mouth and lets it slide down his throat, keeping his eyes on me. "Said like a proper little sister, Indy. You'd look very cute with pigtails," he muses and turns to Luke. "Mess with her and I'll cut your throat."

I laugh to myself and knock back the shot, feeling a little rebellious and a lot proud of myself.

"She'd be worth it." Luke pats his jeans pockets. "But out of respect for your family... I'll treat your *sister* like she's *my* sister." He digs out a pack of cigarettes and takes one, biting it between his teeth. "Do I seriously have to smoke outside?"

"You heard Dré. No smoking near Sinéad while she's pregnant, or he'll shoot you in the face."

Matheus sucks the edge of his thumb into his mouth and cleans off a drip of aniseed liquor. The chunky gold bracelet on his wrist twinkles under the lights.

He pivots, sets his empty shot glass on the bar, and collects a freshly poured one. "You're gonna love Sicily, India. It's a shame Giovanni is too busy to join us."

INDIA



“I’m not going to Sicily. Not for a few months.” I tell him.

“Right.” Matheus replies, his attention snared by a platinum blonde waitress. “Maybe you should talk to Dré about that,” he says, looking past me.

“What do you mean?” I move in front of him, blocking his gaze.

“We’re flying back to Sicily later this afternoon.” His eyes finally slide to mine, the color of burned chestnut so rich and deep it gives me goosebumps. “Tommy and Carina are coming with us.”

My heart stops. “Us—”

“Yeah. Us.” He confirms. “I’ll save you a seat beside me on the jet, and you can tell me stories about my brother.”

Jesus Christ.

“I’m not going anywhere!” I maintain, spinning on my heels. “Where the hell is Dré? Gio’s pilot is coming back for me in a few hours.”

“This will be fun to watch.” Luke’s voice slips over my shoulder.

I look across the room where André had returned after smoking outside. Today had nothing to do with my birthday. He’s only buttering me up and playing with my emotions. Reinforcing our unconventional family and reminding me where I belong—with him. All before he drags me onto a jet

and takes me away from Giovanni. If it wasn't so underhand, I'd be flattered by the effort.

"André!" I'm before him in a few quick strides, my hands shelved on my hips. "What's really going on here?"

His brows snap tight. "Are you pissed because the cake hasn't arrived yet? It's your favorite."

He takes a drink and ever so subtly looks over my shoulder where I know Matheus and Luke are standing. Nodding slowly, he lowers his glass and regards me quietly as the next song spills out of the speakers.

"You know I'm going back to Gio's place this afternoon, don't you?" I point out, suddenly feeling unsettled.

If I had to choose between them, who would I pick? If he makes me decide, would I hate him for it?

André lets out a heavy sigh, whiskey and a tinge of marijuana strong on his breath.

"You'll get over your little crush on Gio eventually. We're all leaving Colombia, India. You included."

My eyes blow wide. "Little crush? Haven't you heard me at all, Dré?"

"I heard you and I also heard him when he said he'd escort you onto a jet himself. Times up, India. There's no need for you to waste your teenage life in an empty house with a guy who's never there." He runs his tongue under his top lip like he's tasting his temper. "I'm doing this for you. You'll thank me for it one day. There's nothing for you at his place. Besides, a whole new life's waiting for us in Sicily."

"No, Dré." I shake my head, aware of the solid locket at my breastbone. "He's expecting me to get on the helicopter. I have to go back." I palm my forehead, hot and flustered. "Scratch that. I *need* to go back. I feel at home there now. It's my happy place after Reno..."

"Your home is with us." He grinds his teeth so hard they almost break. "Like always. Me, you, Letterman, and Sinéad,

too.” His large hand lands on my shoulder. “Sicily is a new start, Indy.”

I steel myself, my heart thrumming in my throat and my hands trembling. “Dré?” His name rushes out on a tattered breath. “Please... don’t do this.”

“Do what?” He raises his glass to his lips and drinks. “Being with Gio was temporary. He understood the mission and you knew you’d end up under my protection again. Letterman is expecting you. He’s lost his way lately and I think seeing you will make his whole fucking year.”

“Emotional blackmail, André?” I snap. “I can’t believe you’d pull a shitty move like this.”

“It’s not my fault the guy isn’t handling it well.” He throws up his hand and raises his shoulders. “He won’t speak to a shrink and tells me he’s okay when I know he’s far from it. He’s not the same.”

I clench my fists and swallow the lump in my throat. “I want to spend time with all of you. You know that. But you can’t just steal me away from Gio, not like this.”

André tilts into me, his mood darker. “You know I can—and I am. I won’t let you waste your life waiting on a guy who’d never put you first.” His voice is thicker, full of grit and authority now. “My brother has business on the brain, India. He won’t notice you’re gone.”

I stare at him, knowing I can’t announce he’s an uncle or tell him about the Blackwater library and its roaring fire where I fell in love. I can’t tell him the news about The Covenant or how his twin had promised to train me too. I can’t share any of it with him.

“You’re wrong.” I stuff my hand into my purse and take out the phone. “I’ll prove it.”

“Go ahead. Call him. Let’s see if lover boy will show up here... because we sure as fuck know we won’t be invited to his house to drop you off.”

I scowl at him and hit dial. Holding my breath, the ring tone is shrill in my ear until it rings off, unanswered.

“Having trouble reaching the unreachable?” André knocks back the last gulp of his whiskey and smirks. “There’s a surprise.”

Even though tears sting behind my eyes, I won’t let them fall. Not here or now. “I need air,” I mutter and push past him.

“Don’t be long. Your cake will be here soon.”

“Screw your cake.” I scowl at him over my shoulder and watch my bodyguards fall into position now that I’m on the move again.

They aren’t so much protecting me from our enemies, rather they are keeping me from leaving.

When the doors close behind me, I inhale deeply and glare at the black screen in my hand. No messages and no inbound calls. It wouldn’t always be like this. Giovanni would take a step back when the time was right. He’d focus on me. On us. Wouldn’t he?

I growl under my breath and march down the corridor, making a beeline for anywhere that doesn’t have a Souza presence.

Rounding a corner, a body slams into me. The phone drops and skids across the tiles.

Hands circle my waist to steady me, and I freeze, meeting a familiar face.

Fabian Lozano.

“India?” He frowns, his hands still holding me. “Are you okay?”

My guards are beside me in seconds, fingers hovering over their concealed handguns.

“It’s okay,” I mutter to them and plaster a fake smile on my face when I angle back to Fabian. “Hey. Fancy meeting you here.”

He glances at the guards, unhands me, and bends down to grab my phone. Creases line his brow as he studies it. “A satellite phone?”

I clear my throat and pluck it out of his hand. “My boyfriend works all over the place. It means he can reach me wherever he is.”

“Where is he? The Amazon?”

“Nah, he hates spiders,” I laugh lightly, the inside joke mine to enjoy.

Fabian folds his arms and leans against the wall. Even though I’m not into him and we sort of fell out as friends, I have to admit he’s still gorgeous. His dark hair matches his starless eyes and the slight smile he wears is sexy.

He cocks a brow at me. “I didn’t see you at prom. Ana said you were there one minute and gone the next.”

“I was there for ages.” I lie. “It was hard to figure out who was who behind the masks.”

His eyes scoot to the armed men again, taking them in as they linger a few steps away. “You need bodyguards in a hotel? Who are you here with?”

“Family.” I shrug and offer him a thin smile. “You?”

“Family.” He shrugs too, mimicking me.

His gaze drops to the locket hung around my neck, lingering there for a few seconds too long. “How about we blow off the babysitters and get a drink at the bar?”

INDIA



“As tempting as that sounds...” I begin, because right now, getting away from the Souzas for a while is just what I need. “I was about to call my—”

Fabian holds out his hand. “Come on. Just one drink.”

“Blue eyes!” Luke wanders into view, a cigarette tucked behind his ear. “Who is this guy and where exactly does he think he’s taking you?”

Wonderful.

As if the paid goons sticking to my shadow weren’t enough of a pain in my ass, now I have Matheus’ frat boy best friend to deal with.

“I know him from school.” My wish of slipping away unnoticed had become impossible. “We’re only catching up. Don’t let us hold you back. Lung cancer is waiting for you through that door.” I smirk.

Luke joins us, keeping a respectful distance between me and him. But Fabian on the other hand, he crowds him with his height and smoky aura. “Come on, India.” He holds his elbow outward, signaling for me to latch on to it. “Take a walk outside with me. Mat’s preoccupied with a dirty blonde and I’d appreciate some company. You belong next to men, not boys, right?”

Fabian pushes off the wall, his expression tight. “You call yourself a man?” he admonishes. “Have you even hit puberty yet?”

Luke chuckles under his breath, his stance remaining perfectly casual. “Ask your mother. She wasn’t complaining last night when I railed her on your bed.”

“Oh, my God,” I groan. “This is pointless. You’re just as bad as they are.”

“Mommy came pretty hard. I bet she’s still thinking about me.” Fabian clenches his fists, taking a step into Luke. “Boy, I wouldn’t if I were you,” Luke warns, low and threatening. “Our good friends behind us don’t like trouble. And they sure as fuck don’t like you sniffing around girls who don’t belong to you. If security gets a hold of you, you’d end up crying to mommy and she doesn’t have time for whiny little boys.”

“Jesus, Luke, what the hell is wrong with you?”

“Yeah, buddy, you’re not doing a good job of charming the *girl*,” Fabian taunts. “I don’t think she’s impressed.”

“I don’t need to impress Indy. I’m not trying to get into her panties.” Luke removes the cigarette from behind his ear and flicks open his zippo. “But you—” The tip goes up in flames and he inhales. “You’re out of your league.”

“Oh, please,” I hiss at him. “We’re only friends.”

“This guy is not your friend.”

“Really, *Luke*?” Fabian says his name with a mocking tone and cocks a brow. “So, I can’t do this?” His chest bumps into mine and his strong arms engulf my shoulders. “It’s a shame you continue to surround yourself with assholes,” he says next to my cheek, his breath hot and his fresh cologne strong.

“Motherfucker,” Luke growls. “I think someone has a death wish.”

“Excuse me, sir!” A suited man marches across the foyer, heading straight for us. “You can’t smoke in here!”

While Luke puts his arm around the hotel employee’s shoulders and points out that he is indeed already smoking, Fabian grins at me, the slow smile a little sinister. “Family, right?” He winks. “Who needs them? See you around, India.”

He pockets his hands and pivots in his dress shoes, ignoring Luke on his way past. What a shitshow. If I'd known this afternoon was going to unfold like this, I would have happily stayed home with Leo. He's a kid and there's less drama with him than these grown men.

A pang of guilt nips at me. I love Dré and I totally understand why he's throwing his weight around. Especially when Giovanni can be so... distant at times.

As if sensing the uncertainty within me, the phone vibrates, and the screen lights up. My heart pounds and a giddy flutter turns wild in my belly. Stepping out of earshot, away from noisy guests, I push through a set of doors and into a corridor, aware of the guards following in hot pursuit.

"Hello," I answer, all breathy and relieved.

Loud bangs, like rapid fire, charge down the phone line, competing with Giovanni's voice. "I missed your call. Are you okay?"

"Did you know he's planning to put me on a jet to Sicily later? That I'm not going home to you," I report, making sure not to mention names.

More shots are fired in the background and someone yells. "What the fuck did you just say? He seriously thinks he can steal you out from under my fucking nose?" The gritty texture to his voice turns harsh, like a blizzard in a never-ending winter. "Is he for real?"

I flinch when a door slams behind me. "Everyone is here. We're all supposed to leave together."

Looking over my shoulder, Matheus prowls a few feet away. He drags a hand down his clean-shaven face and blows out a heavy sigh.

"I don't know what to do." I continue, turning away again for privacy, my voice low. "Ugh... Dré thinks he's taking care of me in his own crazy way."

"You don't need to do anything." My heart stops beating when the line goes dead.

“Hello...” I whisper, stupidly aware of the lost connection.

The already narrow walls close in around me. What does that even mean? *You don't need to do anything.* Of course, I do. I have to figure out a way to lose the goons on my heels and get to the roof when the chopper returns.

“Wait!” a female shouts. “I don't understand.”

My gaze settles on Matheus again, his tall, well-built proportions dominating the carpeted corridor. His sleeves are rolled to his elbows, showing off tanned forearms and a heavy gold bracelet. He fixes his disheveled shirt tails back into expensive dress pants, simultaneously catching my eye, his glazed pupils flashing shades of fire and brimstone.

Yanking at his already undone top button, he stretches his neck and exhales in a quick breath.

“You don't need to understand,” he mutters, avoiding eye contact with the blonde girl who's right next to him now. “India!” Although he smiles, it comes across as forced, almost cruel. “Were you talking to Giovanni just now?”

“I was having fun.” The girl reaches for him, her hand falling through the air as he heads straight for me. “I thought you wanted—”

“Christ.” He shoves his fingers into his thick hair, rotates toward her, and covers her open mouth with his, hard and sloppy.

Pulling away, he wipes his mouth with the back of his hand as she blinks up at him like he's a god. “Nope... nothing... I'm all out of interest today.”

The girl pulls her lips between her teeth and rolls back her shoulders. Her eyes cut to mine before she does a one-eighty and hurries off.

“Are you okay?” I ask him, eyeing his clenched fist and how he's taking deep, controlled breaths.

“Why wouldn't I be? I have everything I could ever fucking want,” he grinds out the words and somewhere in the depth of his sonorous tone, I detect satire or perhaps

something else. “Are *you* okay?” he asks, changing the subject.

“Giovanni knows about Sicily,” I admit, my stomach roiling.

“He was going to find out eventually.” Matheus juts out his elbow, beckoning for me to grab it. “We’re intense motherfuckers most of the time, but we look after our own. And you’re stuck in the middle of those two.” His long lashes lower briefly, his mood becoming less malevolent. “Rather you than me, India. We were all shocked when Gio sent that video to Dré. He’s tried to break into his world for years. I’ll take you back to the party. There’s a bottle of Cristal with our names on it. We could both use another drink to get through the rest of this shit.”

I nod and link my arm with his, letting him lead me along the corridor. “I wonder if he’ll get here in time to stop the plane taking off.” He adds, flicking out his wrist and checking his gold Rolex.

My stomach knots. “I’m not boarding the plane. So, it doesn’t matter if he’s late.”

Matheus opens the door and lets me walk in ahead of him. There’s no music playing, only silence. Tomás eyes me from across the room, his impeccably dressed physique imperial, as he stands there with his cell phone in his hand.

His unwavering glare shoots chills over my scalp. It’s an unsettling feeling to encounter after having spent time with him on Sin Island and never once had I felt threatened. But having this man’s sole attention alters the atmosphere, making it airless and uncertain. It’s almost like he doesn’t consider me as the little girl under André’s protection anymore.

Next to him, André takes a slug of liquor, his carbon black eyes watching me over the rim of his glass. They both stand there in the hush, not saying a word, their unreadable expressions plunging the room’s temperature to polar.

“What’s going on?” I whisper.

INDIA



“What’s it like?” Matheus asks me through his headset microphone. “Blackwater Manor.”

I lean forward where he sits on the opposite side of the chopper to me, seated snugly beside Tomás.

André sits right next to me, his knee jiggling. The confinement of a cabin quickly becoming an endurance test.

“I guess it’s similar to him.” I shrug. “Formidable and moody looking, but a surprise when you get deep inside.”

I’m still in shock. After Giovanni hung up on me at the hotel, he immediately rang Tomás. Summoning his brothers to his home, with the clear instruction that I had to return with them, or the hangar where the Souza jet awaits would go up in flames.

After years of keeping his address a secret, he’s finally opening the front door to the people who matter the most to him—because of me.

However, something doesn’t feel right. There’s a niggle of panic haunting me and the powerful men escorting me to Blackwater are seemingly aware of it too.

“What’s the surprise?” André asks me, cracking his knuckles. “And why the sudden change of personality?”

I smile to myself. “I don’t think he wanted me to go to Sicily.”

“If this is some bullshit trap, he can go fuck himself. I don’t fold for anyone,” André bites out.

“Trap?” I repeat, my heart thundering in my chest. “Do you really think your brother would lure you to a cliff-top mansion and lock you up?”

Oh my God. He wouldn't... would he?

“This is totally out of character for him.” Tomás’ voice comes through all our headsets. “Carina has my permission to blow his house off the cliff if I’m not beside her in twenty-four hours. I’ll send her the coordinates when we land.”

“For fuck’s sake, Tommy.” Matheus grits out. “Our brother finally asked us to visit his home all because he doesn’t want Dré to take India away. You’d do the same if I was trying to steal Carina, wouldn’t you?”

Tomás grunts. “You’d know better.”

“Gio always has our backs. He’s not on a mission to wipe out his family tree. You’re fucking paranoid.”

“Don’t,” Tomás warns, his tone glacial. “Say that again and I’ll push you out of the helicopter and tell Mama you wanted to try skydiving.”

“Do it.” Matheus jerks forward in his seat, the harness yanking him back. “Come on, Tommy. Open the door and try to push me the fuck out. Just because Papá forced me into education doesn’t mean I can’t fight like the rest of you.”

André chuckles. “Someone’s wasted.”

“And you wish you were too, cabron. Instead, your ass is whipped, Dré.” Matheus fires back, his mood dark.

“I’d let Sin whip me all night long. That shit gets me hard just thinking about it.” Dré flips his brother the bird.

My stomach churns when the chopper swoops low, and I catch a glimpse of blackened turrets peeking out of the treetops.

“We’re here,” I announce. “This is Blackwater Manor. Where Giovanni lives.”

André leans across me to look out of the window. “Years ago, when he’d first bought it, he showed me a picture. I said

it looked creepy... but fuck... in real life it's clearly where he manifests nightmares," he mutters.

The flight path continues over the top of the old house, heading towards a concrete base where the helipad sits behind wind warped trees. After a few minutes, we land and the pilot switches off the engine.

André immediately rips off his headset and reaches for the door, jumping out ahead of everyone. I drag mine off too and follow him.

Salty fresh air plays in my hair and sea bird chatter broadcasts my return. A shiver skitters down my spine, instinctively aware of his eyes all over us from somewhere nearby.

He would have seen the helicopter close in on his territory from miles away, and now we've landed. His guests are exactly where he wants them.

"What the fuck is that?" André looks over at the modern structure sprawling out from the original house, its vast glass windows and clever angles soaking up the oceanic view.

"Home," I reply and fold my arms across my chest, looking for Gio.

I stare up at the sky where a layer of dark cloud moves in from the north. There's a storm brewing and something tells me it's not only Heaven that's angry.

André plucks out a pack of Marlboro cigarettes from his jeans' pocket. "Where is the fucker? You'd think he would be here to welcome us." His voice is smokier than the cigarette he nips with his teeth and sets fire to with a zippo.

As his words bite out, I finally spot Giovanni in the distance and my heart flounders. He's heading our way, dressed in pitch-black combat gear. His face is covered in a balaclava and a machine gun slung over his right shoulder.

In all his glory, Giovanni's warlike appearance gives me chills. Keeping my eyes glued to his dominant prowl, he peels off the face covering and lets it fall. Beneath it his thick dark hair is wild, and his expression tight.

Even this terrifying version of him makes my heart thrum faster.

An urgent compulsion to run to him and soothe the unhallowed monster within him has my legs twitching. However, a large hand lands on my shoulder and Tomás dips into the side of my face from behind.

“Don’t move.” His tone rumbles with precise annunciation, the ever-controlled boss of a family at war, his authority holding me ransom.

André takes a long drag of his cigarette and holds the smoke in his lungs as Giovanni approaches. Releasing it from his nostrils, he tosses what’s left, making sparks fly, and marches the short distance across the helipad towards his brother.

My stomach flutters when Giovanni’s gaze hunts mine, his eyes narrowing on the powerful hand holding me in place. The muscles in his jaw work as he processes his eldest brother’s control over me, the dying light deepening the grooves of his throat. The blood-red stone on his finger matches his lethal aura when he swipes a hand over unshorn stubble.

Through the intensity of his brief assessment, I fall victim to a rush of lust, my body tipping forward, automatically pulled in his direction like a magnet. I know he feels it too when his piercing stare lingers rather than focusing on his fast-approaching twin.

There’s no doubt the men watching him would easily sense the emotion bubbling between us like white-hot fire.

My heart recognizes the rage he’s battling. How self-discipline holds him rigid while he quietly assesses this situation we’ve found ourselves in.

In some ways, it gives me comfort to know he’d forced their hand and made his brothers bring me home—even if he wasn’t ready to reveal his private world. But the fallout from this meeting won’t end well. I can feel it in my bones.

“Brother.” André reaches him, the two men toe-to-toe.

A roll of thunder electrifies the sky overhead at the exact moment André throws a solid punch, the energy of it cracking Giovanni's jaw.

“Dré! No!” I yell, my muscles jerking.

Giovanni rubs his busted lip, smearing bright red blood with his fingertips as he chuckles darkly. “I’ll give you that one for free given you actually care about her, but I made myself clear when I sent the video, Dré.”

“Yeah, cabron. You made it fucking clear that I couldn’t trust my own twin to look after what’s mine.”

The transformation to ruthless hitman happens in a stuttered heartbeat. Giovanni no longer possesses a layer of calmness when he offloads the machine gun and throws it onto a bed of wildflowers. He raises his fists, and hammers André in the face, knocking him off balance.

His nostrils flare, the bright green rings crowning his pupils darken to a shade that depicts the true color of madness.

“Yours?” he hisses. “India belongs here, with me. What part of that don’t you get?”

André staggers a few short steps and spits out a wad of blood. Fixing his boots in a solid stance, he straightens with fists held in defense. “We used to be close, Gio. You and me. But as the years went by, you shut me out because of Papá. He got inside your head too much. You became his puppet.”

“Yeah, and we all know he was the master of fucking puppets, wasn’t he?” Giovanni stands stoic, almost statuesque. “I’ve always dropped everything for you... all of you.” He glances over at his brothers watching from the sidelines. “Wasn’t I there for you when Sinéad needed help on the yacht? And when you needed eyes on Saporì? I’m always there when you fuckers need me.”

“That’s business, Gio. I’m talking about us. The two of us, doing normal shit together. Being brothers.” Anger tightens André’s mouth, so he speaks with a sinister snarl. “You don’t have time for me, which means you’ll never have time for

India. I promised Reno I'd do the right thing by her and that's giving India the family she deserves."

In a blur, he charges, throws himself on top of Giovanni, and pushes him onto the concrete. Together they roll, embroiled in a flurry of striking fists and powerful punches. Lightning forks across the sky and I can't help thinking they look like gods of war going head-to-head.

"Please... stop them. They'll kill each other." I swivel to Matheus, who stands there with arms folded, unmoving except for the pulse pounding in his throat. "Do something!"

"No," Tomás' command is firm and final, his hand still on my shoulder. "This is between them. They have to sort this shit out on their own."

"She's mine, Dré." Giovanni snarls out between punches. "I'm not letting you take her away from me."

I swallow the growing lump in my throat, desperately doing my best not to cry. Helplessly, I stand by as the two men I adore most in this world continue to wrestle like ferocious animals.

My feet itch to move. From my ankles to my thighs, my legs burn, and my blood vessels run too hot. It's an ugly show of combat and one where we all know Giovanni could end his brother's life in one move.

Despite his skills, he doesn't reach for a weapon or use his elite training to annihilate Dré. Perhaps Giovanni is enjoying every bone-crunching jab and every bare-knuckle blow connecting with his body instead. That in some dark, twisted corner of his mind he thinks he deserves this punishment or craves it.

But neither of them is fighting to the death. André's had every opportunity to reach for his handgun too. I know how hot headed and volatile André could be—how ruthless they both are. No, this is sibling rivalry between two men who care about each other and can't figure out a way to end this.

Giovanni jumps to his feet, his nostrils flaring, and André matches his springboard bounce, both facing the other,

breathing heavily and bloodied. I'm about to shirk away from Tomás when Leo appears at the top of the path leading from the house.

His short legs carry him fast, all the way towards us. Worried creases line his forehead and big brown eyes glisten with tears. He barrels between the two men and plants his little feet wide.

“Stop it!” He kicks André in the shin, his chest rising in bursts as adrenaline courses through his small frame. “Don't hurt my Papá.”

“Jesus fuck,” Matheus mutters at the same time as Tomás lets go of me. “He has a kid?”

GIOVANNI



My heart leaps to my throat.

Leo's shoulders are pulled back, his tiny fists clenched tight, while his lungs work overtime.

I'd shown him a few combat moves over the last year, wanting him to be efficient in self-defense while still allowing him to have fun and be a kid.

Of all the lessons my father had taught me, the main one was to never raise a kid the way he did me or my brothers. I've made it my mission to shelter Leo from violence and death at this young age. There's plenty of time for the brutality of real life in the future.

Then I'll teach him the Souza way. My way. Not Papá's.

Despite safeguarding him from danger, he comes to my rescue like I did for him once upon a time. The little guy's more than exceeded my expectations in courage and loyalty.

He doesn't need to know the truth. How I could have set up a sniper rifle and fired a clean shot at André the second the chopper landed. I could have assassinated the head of our family and moved on to my youngest brother too, annihilating the Souzas in their homeland. But I don't need to kill any of them. And I *never* would.

First, my family is why I'm still breathing. Second, I'm more powerful than all three of them combined, especially nowadays. So, when I tell them India is mine, they'll fucking listen.

André's brows snap tight. He glances over at me, something unreadable flashing in his eyes before he catches sight of Lola hurrying towards us. His full attention returns to Leo.

In any other situation, I would have grabbed my son and fired a few rounds in our wake. But there aren't any warning flares and my instincts to kill haven't kicked in because deep down, I trust my twin without question.

Inviting my brothers to Blackwater wasn't the original plan and introducing them to Leo today—fuck, that was definitely not in the cards either. But there's no way I'd let them steal my woman. No fucking way.

Now they're all here together—and India is back where she belongs. I guess this is how it had to be.

When André sinks to his haunches, my spine stiffens. Subconsciously, I place my hand on the crown of Leo's head and gently stroke his chocolate brown curls.

“What's your name, kid?” André asks him.

My son swallows his fear of the man before him. “Leo Souza,” he answers bravely.

“Well, Leo Souza, I'm your Uncle André. Your Papá's twin. The better looking brother out of all four of us.”

Matheus snorts in the background, and Leo briefly glances over at him. “Please stop hurting my Papá,” he whispers, and stares right at India. “Are you going to hurt India too?”

“India?” André chuckles. “I'd die protecting that girl. But your Papá—he pissed me off.” He rolls his jaw, no doubt feeling it burn. “Have you got any brothers or sisters?” Leo shakes his head side to side. “Lucky. They're a pain in the ass.”

I stare down at André, the memories of our childhood blipping in and out of my mind. How I'd challenge Papá when he called André a dumb fuck, earned a black eye and fractured rib for my effort. My brutal punishment was worth the smile on my brother's face, though.

He was there, by my side, through it all. No matter what torture my brothers and I had endured, we came out of it stronger—together. I'd happily set my life on the line for each one of them. Looking back on our lives now, I know it was our old man I didn't trust with my secrets, not my siblings.

"You should probably know, kid... if a grown man kicked me in the leg like you did, which, let me tell you, fucking hurt, I would have popped a cap in his skull already." Leo backs into my leg. "But I'm going to give you the opportunity to finish this war instead."

"How?"

"We'll fight. You and me."

"Dré..." I warn.

André angles his head upward and cocks a split brow, the blood sliding past the outer corner of his eye. "He's a Souza, and this is how we sort shit out, right, brother?"

Not waiting for me to reply, his black irises cut back to Leo. "I'll punch you, because you hurt my leg. That's only fair, right?" Leo nods slowly. "And you can punch me back since I was about to knock out your Papá. Deal?" He holds out his hand and wiggles his ringed fingers.

"Okay," Leo mutters, looking uncertain.

He cautiously slides his hand against André's, the size of it quickly vanishing in the great expanse of my brother's palm.

"Right. Let's do this. Brace yourself, kid. I won't go easy on you just because you're my favorite nephew."

I dip into the side of Leo's face, wincing a little from the jab I took to the ribs. "Leo... you don't need to do this. I can end this myself."

André laughs. "Souzas don't kill each other, they just get even."

My skin prickles, not from my brother's true words. No, it's because I can feel my girl getting closer.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Dré. You can’t hit him.” India’s defensive tone pierces my heart. “Leo, take my hand. We’re going inside.”

“No.” Leo looks up at her from under his messy bangs. “I want to end the fight the Souza way. For my Papá.” He shuffles around to face my twin. “Hit me Uncle André.”

When he squeezes his eyes shut and holds his breath, India palms her breastbone and André just stares at him, emotion swirling in his eyes.

“Dré,” India says softly.

“Relax, Indy.” André makes a fist. “He’s a Souza. The kid can handle it.”

My jaw locks and sweat trickles the length of my spine. I swallow hard, the burning need to protect my son painfully strong. Despite my urge, I inhale a controlled breath and put my faith in André, who ever so lightly punches Leo in the bicep. It’s enough for him to feel firm pressure, but not nearly enough to hurt.

Leo blinks his eyes open and exhales loudly. “My turn.”

“Give me your best shot, kid, because this is the one and only time you’ll get a clean swipe at me... hit me in the future and we’ll fall out, comprendes?”

“Remember what I taught you, Leo.” I remind him. “Slow it all down. Breathe.”

A flash of lightning spooks the seabirds, making them flap on the branches. Leo looks up at me and smiles. “I’ve got this Papá.”

India moves beside me and takes my hand, fully invested in Leo. Her body fits right next to mine, warm and comforting in a rare moment that I’m finding hard to process.

I draw in a deep breath and glance at her side profile. She’s exquisite. From those watery baby blues to the cute frown she wears. For a fleeting moment, I go weak from the sight of her and then I catch myself.

None of this changes anything. I won't let André's attempt to take her from me slide. Just because he feels responsible for her doesn't make her his. It doesn't matter how he's seamlessly slipped into the role of my kid's uncle, either. I won't forget what his real intentions were.

"Come on, kid." André laughs quietly. "I'm bleeding here and your Papá owes me a drink."

Leo gets into position and raises his fist, taking a deep breath to settle his nerves. Exactly how I'd instructed him countless times in the past.

Eventually, he takes a swing and thumps André's bicep in return. I smirk when my brother fakes a flinch. "Wow, you've got some strength there, Leo." He praises. "You could teach your Papá how to throw a punch."

"Don't be silly. He taught me." Leo beams, oblivious to the brotherly jibe.

Tomás strolls over to us and pockets his hands in his dress pants. "I didn't come all this way to stand outside in a thunderstorm."

"Are you friends again?" Leo asks, taking my hand.

André rises to full height, fishes out a pack of smokes, and lights one as he walks with us. I meet his eyes, keeping India locked tight to my hip. "That depends on your uncle," I tell him. "He thought I'd let India go without a fight... and the evening isn't over yet."

INDIA



Tomás sits deep in the couch, his calculating gaze all over us. Behind him, the electrified horizon flashes blue and white as the storm moves in.

Lola bustles through the kitchen, preparing food and pouring the four men drinks without being asked.

“I can get my own drink, Lola,” Matheus stands, slides his arm around her waist, and kisses her cheek. “I still remember those cookies you made.” His smile slips. “Papá told us you were dead.”

“How did you end up here, Lola?” Tomás fixes his diamond cufflinks as he stares right at her. “Why did he think you’d died?”

Lola bows her head, her eyes falling to Leo sitting on Giovanni’s lap. “Giovanni told him that,” she says softly, an uncertain tone in her voice. “Your brother, he saved me.”

Without elaborating, she opens a cupboard, pulls out a first aid kit, and sets it on the kitchen island. “If you’ll excuse me, I have things to do before bedtime.”

She nods politely and heads for the door. I walk over to the medical supplies and pick out a wad of gauze, sterile wipes, and a packet of latex gloves.

I’d stuck to Giovanni’s side until we entered the house, all the while keeping an eye on André, who moved quietly, looking around. He’d finally sat on a stool at the island, his face bloodied, and his usual wildness contained.

I glance at Giovanni across the room, aware of his green gaze following me everywhere. I exhale, releasing hours of anxiety as my lungs deflate.

It makes me feel all tingly and hot knowing he fought for me. Even went up against his own brother, opening his world for me. And now I'm back where I belong.

But...

André is my world too, and having his blessing means everything to me.

“Dré.” I smile and pull out a stool next to him. “That cut will get real ugly if I don't sort it out.”

His dark gaze drills into mine, but he doesn't say anything. It's unsettling for me to see him so... quiet. His mind is turning over and over, but he's keeping it locked down. This man has no problem speaking his mind. Ever.

I tear open a foil packet and pluck out a moist wipe. “Do you remember the time I watched that horror movie with the clown in it, even when Reno told me not to?” I remind him.

The corner of his mouth twitches into a faint smile as he nods. “And that night, Reno and Letterman were out dealing with business.” I continue. “I was scared shitless. I couldn't actually exhale in case that fucking clown heard me breathe. So, I crept into your office while you were on the phone and curled up on your couch.”

The bones in his jaw work when I dab at the dried blood above his eyebrow. “When you looked over and saw me lying there, you disappeared for a few minutes and came back with a duvet and a pillow.” I continue to clean him up as I talk. “And what did you say to me when you tucked me in?”

He lifts the whiskey tumbler to his lips and takes a gulp, letting the liquor slide down his throat before answering. “I said you were brave enough to save yourself from clowns and that I'd always be right behind you to fuck them up if you couldn't do it yourself.”

“Yeah.” I want to cry, the heart-felt memory burned into my brain for eternity. “You let me sleep in your office that

night and took me out for breakfast the next morning.”

“You snored like a pig, India.”

I smirk and open another antiseptic wipe. “You could have left me alone and gone to bed, but you didn’t.”

He shrugs. “I had work to do.”

“You’ve always been there for me, Dré. Even now when I’m older.”

His eyes slide sideways for a second, finding Leo cuddling into his father. “You really do know him better than I do.”

I shake my head. “No, I don’t. I’m learning... still figuring out who he really is behind the mask he wears. I know he cares about me. I can feel it, you know? Like I know Sinéad loves you, simply by the way she looks at you. And we both know he could have shot you dead the second you jumped out of the helicopter, Dré. Rather than taking you down permanently, he welcomed you guys into his private world... so he can show you who he really is.”

André cocks a brow at me. “I think he brought us here to prove a point.”

“Yeah... I think he loves his family. All of us. Maybe that’s the point.” I take his manly hand in mine and check his knuckles for grazes. “And you could have pulled a gun on him too. But you didn’t.”

“And the boy? Where the fuck did he come from?”

“I’m sure Gio will tell you everything if you ask him yourself.”

“So, you weren’t here all alone. You had Lola and the kid.” His frown deepens. “And you didn’t tell me about them.”

I squeeze his fingers. “I know *everything* about you, Dré. Stuff only Reno and Letterman knew since I was there too, in the background. It was never just the three of you, it was the four of us, wasn’t it? That will never change. All of it stays in here.” My other hand settles over my heart. “I’ll take it all to my grave, because I love you. And his secrets... they’re mine to keep as well. Giovanni might be a monster, but I’m not

afraid of him. Not like that creepy as fuck clown.” I smirk. “Gio’s my monster, and I love him too.”

My scalp tingles and a streak of lightning temporarily blinds us. “What are you two whispering about?” Giovanni appears by my side, his own face showing signs of a fight.

“I’m fixing him up. That’s all.”

“He’s fine.” Firm fingers curl around my wrist, his vivid gaze directed at André. “For some reason, my son likes you. He wants you to play *Need for Speed* with him on his Xbox. There are a few controllers to pick from, and he’ll get you hooked up with a headset.”

Without waiting for an answer, he tugs me off the stool. My body bumps against his and he dips his face lower, our lips an inch apart. My pulse thrums being so close to him.

“I’ve told Tommy we have important business to discuss about Blanco.” He angles his head a little, eyeing André’s reaction to his dominance over me. “I just need a few minutes alone with my woman first.”

André cocks his head. “Minutes...” He muses and stands. “Right, enjoy the best few minutes of your life, Indy.”

I giggle when André stalks across the room at the same time as Giovanni drags me in the opposite direction. He leads me out of the kitchen, his pace quick to match the tempo of my pulse.

Without getting far, he spins me around and shoves me into the wall, his bulk crowding me. With a detectable change in his gaze, he seizes my face in his murderous hands and kisses me in an impulsive, fierce attack.

Our teeth clash and my skin blazes from his coarse hairs. He controls the position of my head to deepen the pressure, causing me to whimper.

My hands are on him. I rise to my tiptoes and glide them around his neck, feeling the warmth of his skin. The solid outline of his dick rubs against my pelvis, and a guttural groan escapes him.

Heat spreads from between my thighs and my breathing turns rapid.

Leo squeals in the kitchen, his laughter contagious and Matheus roars with him. Their voices are dangerously close. Though it doesn't stop Giovanni's mouth from devouring mine.

"India." The way he says my name with his Latino accent and gravelly texture has me dry humping his leg. "I realized something while you were away."

He hitches my dress up, roughly rips off my lacy panties, and manages to unzip his utility pants, quickly freeing his dick.

"Oh, yeah... what's that?" I say breathlessly, my skin burning for him.

The right corner of his mouth hitches ever so slightly. There's something in that one look he offers that holds much more than lust. The awareness of it gives me goosebumps.

"What is it?" I ask again.

Urgently slotting his hands under my armpits, he hoists me into the air and pivots, his legs working fast to carry me a few short strides.

In a blur, my ass lands on a narrow console table. My thighs automatically hug around him and my fingers weave into his dark hair, my chest pressing into his. God, he smells so good—an intoxicating concoction of sex and violence.

Rooted between my legs, he fists my hair, yanking my head backward to expose my throat, his teeth grazing a path along the curve.

"Aren't you going to tell me?" I whisper, my clit swollen and pulsating.

My breath hitches when he leans back, releases his hold on me, stuffs his fingers into the disorderly hair on top of his head, his gaze hot.

The way this man makes me feel is dangerous.

“I’ve always been independent and content in my own company, but watching the helicopter take you away earlier... I hated how unsettled I became.” His spine bends and his mouth captures mine, his tongue dipping inside. “I hated not being able to find you on the camera footage because you weren’t here. I hated the fact I missed your damn call. And what I hate most of all is knowing there will always be a piece of you that would leave me to go with my brother.”

Keeping eye contact, he grabs his dick and glides the satiny crown through my wet folds. Something lurks in his hooded gaze, a shimmer of excitement and a flash of possessiveness.

“I have to settle this once and for all, India.”

On his last word, he holds me tighter and pushes in deep. My body instantly welcomes him, the table beneath me butting into the wall as he thrusts in. I bite my lip to stop myself from crying out, the shivery pain reaching right through me.

I exhale in a whimper; the sound turning into a raspy, satisfied groan. He grips my hip bones and drags me closer. Dark hair tumbles over his forehead. Flashes of lightning make his eyes glow and his facial cuts more visible.

I should ask him how we’re going to reach an amicable solution for everyone, but I can barely breathe.

“Fuck.” He groans, his voice strained. “Fucking has never felt so good.”

My face falls to the crook of his neck, the rise of my release coming at me hard and fast. He places a hand under my ass and buries himself deeper. I bite his shoulder to muffle the scream burning the back of my throat. Then I pull back, staring into his eyes as he fucks me.

“Christ...” he hisses, trying to slow his pace.

I palm his chest, hurriedly diving my hands under his shirt, touching his sweaty taut muscles underneath. “Gio... you’re so deep.”

“Ah, fuck,” he growls, the sonorous sound spine-chilling as if the last thread of his decorum had snapped.

His fingertips jump to my cheeks, hollowing them and forcing my gaze to lock onto his. “Look at me when you come, baby.” He kisses me, so rough and hard that I forget to exhale. “This is what I’d fight any fucker for...” His raspy whisper is the last thing I hear. “For you.”

An orgasm shoots through me, my obsession for him a hungry ache. I exhale into his mouth, entranced by his unusual disregard of secrecy—how he’s taking me a few yards away from his brothers. One of them could wander into this hallway at any minute and find him fucking me.

His tongue continues to dominate my mouth, and suddenly the violent thrusts ease. Sweat glistens his temples, his lungs expanding in bursts. Pulling back a fraction, we stare at each other for the longest moment. Then he tucks a lock of hair behind my ear, unspoken thoughts running wild in his mind.

I shiver when his knuckles stroke the curve of my jaw and his lips linger. “I don’t ever want this to end,” he says.

“From where I’m sitting, it feels like you’ve made up your mind.” I blink up at him. “You are in love with me, aren’t you?”

The color of his eyes darkens, and I start to think I should have kept my mouth shut.

GIOVANNI



What is it with that fucking word?

It's just four letters and yet it's meant to neatly tie up all the raw, brand-new emotions inside of me. It doesn't though. There isn't a word that fits.

I freeze, motionless. Unsure how to explain my feelings and not really knowing where to start. I've never been in this position before.

A trickle of sweat rolls the length of my spine and I draw in a deep breath. Truth is, I could have taken a chopper to the hotel and caused a scene. But the second our enemies catch the scent of a family feud; they'd be all over us like vultures.

No, this was personal—private Souza business. Not to mention the fact I had ordered my brothers to escort India home—and they brought her to me. Priceless.

“I know for sure I don't want to live without you.” I admit. “And I'd slaughter anyone who'd hurt you. So, I guess that's what love is.”

She grins at me, fully aware I'm not great with the complexities of emotions. “You can't say it, can you?”

A breathy laugh rumbles in my chest. “I just did.”

Her nose brushes mine. “No... you alluded to it.”

My dick twitches inside of her. I grit my teeth and let it slide out. Only to heighten her hunger or to test my own restraint.

“Is my dirty little whore looking for a fight?” I nibble her mouth, teasing. “Because I’ll win this time.”

Not pushing me further, she runs her nails over my chest, making the skin prickle. Mischief flashes in her eyes. “I love it when we wrestle, and your dick grows full and hard. You enjoy it too, don’t you?”

“You know I do.” I lick the seam of her lips. “Is that what you want? Hardcore sex on the floor.”

She shakes her head. “That’s for later. I want you to make love to me instead. *Show* me how you feel about me.”

My hands keep moving, gently squeezing one of her tits, and brushing a piece of jewelry I’ve never seen on her before. I enjoy the hot sigh she exhales.

It’s her turn next. Her small hand explores my shivery skin and strokes my aching boner. Firmly fisting it, she cants her hips, getting ready to take it.

“Uh-uh,” I scold, my muscles visibly arguing with the decision to take my time. “Not yet.”

Her lips kiss a path to my ear, where she nips the lobe with her teeth and tugs. “Okay... I’ve changed my mind,” she whispers. “I thought you’d do it slow, not torture me.”

I laugh under my breath and inhale her natural scent, my eyelids turning heavy and my dick excruciatingly painful. It takes all my strength to resist wrapping her throat and letting my impulses take over.

Our lips cling. “You want me, don’t you? Like this?” I ask her, both of us panting in the same oxygen. “You like it messy and hot?”

She hums her approval into my mouth, rubbing her bare pussy against me.

This tenderness I’m offering is rare for a man like me. Slowing it all down is a first, but fuck, this sexy kiss is blowing my mind.

“I want to ride you,” she says between kisses. “Teach me how.”

Her innocence. Fuck, it's everything and more. "Oh, yeah..." I breathe into her mouth. "You want to fill yourself up with my dick, baby?" I laugh a little, dark and dirty. "Did your little cunt miss me?"

India plants her hands on mine and forces my fingertips to burrow into her hip bones.

"Yes... because you're the only one that's ever stretched that little hole down there." My heartbeat accelerates. "And your cum is all it knows. How does it make you feel knowing you own all of me, Giovanni Souza?"

She bites her bottom lip, knocking the air out of my lungs with her big blue eyes.

Christ.

My veins are on fire and my dick aches with need. I consider stuffing my dick in her dirty talking mouth, but then she'd stop and I want to hear more. Her voice alone sends shivers through my body.

"It feels so fucking good, my little whore." I capture her earlobe with my teeth and nip it. "You take my dick like a good fucking girl, don't you?"

"Uh-huh," she gasps, and my hand covers her mouth, absorbing the sound all the while she grinds her clit against my thigh.

The whites of her eyes sparkle, taunting me. Too damn hungry—I snatch up her mouth again, slightly more forceful than before.

"Do you like it when I come all over your dick, Giovanni?" she asks, making my balls grow tight.

And just like that, the kiss turns rough. I can't help myself. I want her. Crave her. Fucking need her.

She wants to make love, but... God, I'm not programmed to go easy on anyone. It's not that I don't want to show her how crazy-mad my heart beats for her. No, I'm just at the point of blowing my load all over her belly.

I shove my hands under her armpits and heave her onto my chest, walking backward until I reach my office. Making sure she won't fall; I secure her ass with one hand and use my other to open the door. The thrill of having her all to myself shoots through my veins.

A flash of lightning strikes when we enter, illuminating the desk I rarely sit at and the two armchairs opposite it. Reversing in, I kick the door shut behind us and then pick a chair to sink into.

Her knees rest by my thighs, our bodies coming together as she sits on my lap, her hands on my face and her teeth nibbling my bottom lip.

“We're all alone now.” Her eyes sparkle. “Will you show your little whore how good your dick can stretch her pussy?” Blonde strands catch in my fingers when she elevates, hovering over my dick. “Make me yours, Gio.”

“You're already mine, India.” I eat up her lips. “All mine.”

She grabs the hem of my shirt, pulling it up and over my head. Straight after, my hands are on her again. Sweat gathers on my brow, my muscles painfully tense from the effort of maintaining order.

I position myself at her entrance and help her lower onto it. Her delicious heat and snug inner walls almost finish me. I rip the buttons on her dress to get at her lush, proud nipples that jiggle in my eyeline every time she spears herself.

“And this tight little hole of yours, no one else will ever have it. It's all mine.”

We kiss madly, licking and panting, every inch of my skin on high alert as she milks my dick with her slow pace.

“Hmmm—that's it, Giovanni,” she whispers into my mouth, her voice thick with heat. “It's so good... just like this.” Her nipples brush across my chest, electrifying every nerve. “Do you like my pussy the best?”

“It's the only one I've ever paid full attention to.” I yank her hair. “The only one I can't stop thinking about.”

Goosebumps race over her arms. “Do you want to keep it all to yourself and fuck it hard?” Her voice is thick with lust, and I swear a bead of cum leaks out of me.

“Yeah, baby.” I steady our rhythm, controlling the tempo and moving slower. “I’m going to find you in every dark corner of our home and fuck you every chance I get.”

Her eyes drill into mine. “I like the sound of that.” She chews her bottom lip and rolls her hips, making the tip of my dick hit her cervix. “God, yeah.”

My hands lock on her hip bones, helping me tunnel in deeper. I’m not seeking cruelty in the movement. Only giving her what she wants, a sensual, grinding togetherness making me breathe hard too.

“Tell me you’re staying... here with me in Colombia,” I say, the words thick from the back of my throat, high on the softness of her skin. “That your home is here, beside me.”

Her pupils blow wide, and those baby blues dance all over my face. “You’re my home, Gio.”

A flood of heat surges into my chest in a way I’ve never experienced. I’m addicted to her. My skin blazes where it rubs against hers. My fingers continue to manipulate her tits, my lips kiss her everywhere, and my breathing gets faster and faster. I’m so into this woman.

I grab the back of her head. “Who do you belong to? Say it out loud.”

“I belong to you.”

“Who?” I bite the word in half, so close to coming.

“Giovanni Souza,” she whimpers, both of us panting loudly. “I love you.”

A shooting spark jolts inside of me. I close my eyes for a moment to rein it in.

“It’s okay. You don’t have to say it back. I know you love me too.”

Her bright, lusty gaze burns my barriers to ashes. I clench my back teeth and drive my pelvis upward, fucking her harder. Doing what I do best.

“We should make things official between us.” I hold her gaze, sweating and grunting. “I want you to be mine in every possible way.”

“How?” she groans, barely able to speak.

I shake my head and blink away the stars in my eyes, quickly capturing her chin and bruising her lips—the kiss rough.

“Give it to me harder.” She moans when I thrust in deeper.

And that’s all it takes, a well-angled upward thrust to send my body into a breath-stealing spasm. An electric current shoots from my balls and spreads like forks of lightning through my body.

“Oh, my God... y-yes... right there!” Her body shakes, the surge of pleasure strong.

Sharp teeth sink into my neck, sending shocks right to my heart. The beating organ thumps so damn hard I go blind for a few seconds. Her inner walls clamp tight around me as my cum spurts into her convulsing body.

I’m awestruck and temporarily dazed. I secure her against my chest, tight and possessive. She trembles in the aftermath, both of us regulating our breathing in the silence.

When her muscles finally relax and her pulse begins to slow, I stroke her hair and kiss the top of her head. I could sit like this forever.

“You like slow fucks, baby?” I say next to her ear, my voice hoarse.

“It doesn’t matter how it’s done, as long as it’s with you.” She peers up at me, her cheek still stuck to my sweaty chest. “So, how do we make it official? Are you talking about a wedding?”

I frown. “A wedding? Fuck, no.”

India pulls back and stares at me, a glint of hurt in her eyes. That's not my intention, but white weddings with spectators aren't my thing.

My gaze falls on the golden pendant hung around her neck. It's new to me and won't stop catching my eye. Red jewels form an 'S' shape, and it has a tiny hinge on one side.

"Where did you get the locket?" I ask, my hackles suddenly rising.

She reaches for it immediately, almost trying to hide it with her fingertips. "André and Sinéad gave it to me for my birthday."

"Is there a photo inside?"

She nods. A worried crease lines her brow and she scrapes her hair back from her face. "Yeah. It's just a keepsake. You know, something to remem—"

My stomach knots. "Open it." I cut her off, the order lashing out like a whip.

"Gio... why are you so angry? You haven't even seen it."

"Because I know exactly what my brother is trying to do."

I know this reaction is irrational given she's home now, but still, I'm her man. I'm the guy to lavish her with expensive gifts, be by her side, creating millions of happy memories together—Leo and I are her family now.

It's irrational and I know it. But my temper gets the better of me. "Open the fucking thing."

India shakes her head, and my veins thicken.

INDIA



“No.”

Rather than obey him, I shift my hips and climb off his lap. The bunched hem of my dress glides from waist to mid-thigh.

I quickly move across the room, putting distance between us and plant my feet on the rug underfoot, still tingling from sex.

“Not if you’re going to speak to me like that.”

His chest expands in bursts, a hint of jealousy lurking in his pretty green eyes.

“If you want to see what’s inside, then ask nicely. I’m not a school kid who deserves to be scolded for wearing jewelry. I’m the woman who chooses to be by your side and demands more respect.”

I roll back my shoulders, strengthening the stand I’m taking. “And the photo inside means something to me.” I tap the golden locket. “It’s *my* family. The men who were there for me long before you decided I was worthy of your attention.”

“India.” He warns, and I sense his short fuse igniting.

He’s off the armchair, rising to his full height. My insides coil when he stalks forward, his determined footfall not making a sound as he comes for me. “Show me the photograph, India.”

I scowl and slowly crack it open, holding the locket out for him to inspect.

Inside, my brother's face greets him. It doesn't matter that André and Letterman are there too, or that I'm younger and smiling. Because Reno was happy that day. We all were. And the locket will continue to dangle next to my heart, precious and thoughtful.

"That's his way of reminding *me* you belong to him." His arm twitches like he's fighting the impulse to yank it off my neck and snap the chain. "Take it off."

I suck in sharply, straighten my spine that little bit more and clasp the locket in my hand tightly. My defensive stance earns a low growl. "No way! It's mine."

"India." His Colombian accent caresses my scalp, so the hairs prickle in waves.

But I'm pissed off—and he's even more so. I swallow in a loud gulp when he narrows his eyes. "Take it the fuck off."

Shelving my hands on my hips, I continue to stare up at him, unafraid. "This bullshit alpha nonsense between you and Dré has to stop. You're jealous of my *family*. And he thinks you're only using me for sex."

He arches a brow at me. "The sex is pretty fucking amazing... the best I've ever had." I'm attuned to the quick drop in his timbre, how it switches from angry to animalistic. "Now hand it over."

"Giovanni!" I hiss at him, still hot and wet. "Those three guys practically raised me. So, you aren't allowed to confiscate a locket that makes me feel closer to them. Especially while I'm right here, with *you*! I picked *you*, Giovanni. Why can't you see that? I'm in front of you now, aren't I?"

I dart sideways. "Maybe Dré was right, and this was never going to work."

Launching myself toward the door, my heart jumps to my throat and my lungs cramp. Next thing I know, possessive arms wrap around me from behind. He holds me there, locked tight against him.

A raging heat burns in my core, a mixture of deep upset and the desire to be chased, kissed, and tied up by him.

“Stop it, Giovanni,” I plead, knowing I’m right to call him out for being so unreasonable. “I need space... *we* need space.”

“Too late, you already said it out loud. You’re mine.”

I close my eyes briefly and inhale. “Not if it means turning my back on the people who matter to me.”

“Can you feel it?” His mouth is by my ear, his voice a growl and breath a whisper.

I should fight against him and put my combat skills to the test again, but I don’t. Not this time. Being held by him brings out big feelings inside of me. Safety. Warmth. Belonging. It’s all there in the power of his consuming embrace.

“Feel what?”

“My ownership... it’s already inside you... and oozing out of your pussy. I’m right here too.”

My clit throbs, the sweet swell aching for his touch. “Don’t.” I argue, all breathy and frustrated. “Our relationship isn’t all about sex and control. I’m in love with you. I’ve opened my heart to you...” I wriggle against him. “And you can’t even call me your girlfriend.”

“Fuck this,” he mutters and spins me around so fast my head spins. Large hands cup my cheeks. “You’ll never be my girlfriend, my lover, or even just a friend.”

My eyebrows snap together, and air fills my lungs like he’s just slapped me. I stand before him, frozen.

“Because you’re all of those things and more.” He continues. “I’m new to this... to needing someone so much that my brain fucking hurts from thinking about you every second. You’re my everything, India. You’re just *everything*. That’s the only way I can explain who you are to me.”

“Everything?” I bite my lip to hold back a smile, my heart swelling.

“Everything, baby.”

“I guess I could live with that.”

And then his mouth covers mine, and suddenly I’m aware of that one word.

Everything.

I ache for this man, craving him like he’s *everything* I’d ever need in this world. But I want everything too, and that includes spending a few weeks in Sicily when Sinéad gives birth.

He grabs the back of my neck and pulls me in. A hand snakes across my ass and yanks me into his pelvis, leaving no extra space between our bodies. We kiss hard and urgent; sloppy and wet.

“I want to be your everything.” I breathe into his mouth. “But that means you accepting the part of my heart that belongs to the men in this photograph.”

He bites my lip, sucking it into his mouth. “That depends,” he says when my lip pops back into place.

“On?”

“How much room do they take up in your heart compared to me?”

“The same amount of space Leo takes up in yours.” He stills as he considers that. “There’s plenty of room for all of us, Gio. But if I had to quantify it, I’d say you take up the biggest part of my heart. And always will. You’ve become my everything too.”

The corners of his mouth curl ever so slightly, and he presses his forehead to mine. “Good answer.”

His lips gently settle on the tip of my nose, kissing it lightly before he peels himself off me. “I guess it’s time to get back to business. I need you to do one thing for me.”

“Sure...”

“Stay here with Leo while I take my brothers to the caves.” He puts himself away and buttons his utility pants. “A lot has

happened in his little world lately. He needs routine. Could you do that for me?"

"Is it safe for all four of you to go there... together?"

His eyes darken, and a shiver of fear runs through me.

"They'll be with me," Gio says as he walks around the armchair, sounding cold.

GIOVANNI



“Where are we?” Matheus climbs out of the two-seater Jeep Wrangler, eyeing the gray sky and choppy ocean through a mass of jungle greenery. “Have you got another secret house?”

“Not exactly.”

The second Jeep skids over the wet ground next to us, with Tomás being chauffeured by André. Not that he’d expected to take the passenger seat, André wouldn’t let him drive, not when dirt tracks and high-powered vehicles are involved.

Matheus takes after him, his own need for speed giving him a daredevil recklessness. But I’m the brother in control today.

Being with them out here reminds me of the afternoons when me and my twin would take backpacks full of ammunition and weapons into the forest to set up targets. We had fun together back then, in our own unorthodox way.

How else would the teenage sons of a gangster spend their free time? Those trips were short-lived after we had pulled the pins on a pair of grenades and blew the shit out of a dead guy’s abandoned vehicle. Security had dumped the Toyota Hilux deep in the wilderness after his invitation had expired.

When Papá had heard the explosion, he thought the plantation was under attack—that his enemies were finally closing in on him. Paranoid fucker.

I smirk to myself at that. I could have used the chaos to my advantage and blown him up too. The idea had crossed my

mind, but I remember arriving home afterward, how he'd planted Tomás close to his hip.

The older we got, the more he placed himself behind his sons when shit hit the fan.

Shaking my head, I glance at Tomás in his pristine suit pants and smart shirt. He's not exactly dressed for this evening's tour, but that's my eldest brother's impeccable standards. He always dresses in tailored suits, while I wear combat pants with an arsenal of weapons next to me.

"Why are we out here, Gio?" he asks, aware of my staring.

"I've got something to show you, Tommy. Something we should have created years ago."

I step away from them and hunker low, grabbing a hidden handle and heaving open a camouflaged metal door in the ground.

"What the fuck?" Matheus jogs over to me and looks into the black hole. "A bunker? Christ, you're more like him than I thought."

"It's not a bunker."

André and Tommy move closer, both of them assessing the fixed ladder and never-ending darkness. Raindrops pitter patter as a strong wind picks up.

"You think you can handle it?" I quirk a brow at André. "Or would you rather run back to Blackwater and have a nap? I mean, you must be exhausted after that beating I gave you."

André chuckles under his breath. "Beating? I've had harder massages than that, brother." He's beside me in a few strides. "What's down there?"

"Maybe you should ask *who* is down there." I shrug, swinging low and stepping onto the first rung. "I've set up a kill team." Climbing down, I add, "With one minor complication."

Matheus is quick to follow as Tomás shouts after me. "Do you seriously expect me to jump into a fucking dark hole without knowing what the complication is?"

“I’ll tell you all about it when you follow me. Trust me, Tommy.”

“Trust you?” André laughs. “I think we’re all out of trust up here.”

I keep descending into the cave. “Fine. Stay up there in the rain, but you’d be safe and dry down here with me. Your choice.”

“Fuck’s sake,” Tomás mutters. “Come on, Dré.”

The temperature drops as all four of us drop into the man-made tunnel. I wait for André to finally hop off the ladder and dust his hands, then yank a handle to switch on the lights.

At the end of the passage there’s a dug-out cave where connecting tunnels cut through the rock like tentacles.

“What the fuck?” Matheus walks ahead. “I knew you had secrets, but an underground... uh, I don’t even know what to call this place.”

“And a kid?” André says next to me. “You didn’t tell me about Leo. I should be fucking hurt.”

“You are hurt,” Tomás points out. “And you’re pissed too, because you know why he didn’t tell us.”

“Papá.” Matheus says the name on all our minds. “We all kept secrets from him in the end.”

Tomás throws me a stern glare, a look that reminds me so much of our father. “You should have told me about the kid after I’d taken over from Papá. Is there anything else you need to come clean about? Like his parents?”

“They’re dead. I’m all he has.”

“Not anymore.” Tomás confirms. “He has us now too.”

“Come on.” I offer him a tight smile and push on, even though his acceptance hits me hard. Fuck, emotions are a bitch to deal with. Maybe I was better off dead inside. “We’ll go to the control room, and I’ll fill you guys in on The Covenant. I’ve got a few bottles of whiskey in there.”

“The Covenant?” Matheus’s eyebrows pop up. “They even have a name?”

“Are they here?” Tomás’ dress shoes clip the stone underfoot, the sound echoing as he walks with me. “Your team.”

“Yeah. They’re staying here for a while to train. It’s safe and out of the way.” I lead them through the cavernous cave and into the yawning mouth of another shadowy tunnel. “It helps me to keep an eye on them.”

“You’re certain they’re loyal.”

“Ninety-nine percent of them are.”

“It only takes one percent to kill a man.” Tomás instinctively pulls his gun out and checks the clip. “Why do you think they can’t be trusted?”

“Because the one percent works for Carlos Blanco.”

“Jesus fuck!” André’s voice barks over my shoulder. “You’re training his men? Did I hear that right?”

“There’s only one standing. I shot the other one dead, because he pissed me off. I’m training the whole team to work for us. If they are defective, it’ll be lights out. No matter what, they take orders from me and only me. No one else. Blanco’s main goal was having access to sicarios fully trained to my standard.”

“Blanco headhunted you to train people who’d turn on us?” Matheus frowns. “And you agreed?”

“They won’t. Anyway, it was either that, or India would be targeted for the rest of her life. I’d happily kill for the woman on repeat, but I’m not invincible. One of these days, I’ll end up in that family crypt next to Papá. And she’d be vulnerable. All of you would.”

“I don’t believe this,” André growls, directly behind me. “You sold your soul to our enemy, dragged us into this cold, underground shithole to meet a bunch of fuckers who’d stab us in the back.”

“Blanco made a deal with me. *His* enemy.” I laugh darkly and unlock the door, moving inside without saying another word.

When I close the door behind us, Tomás just stands there, his arms folded and that calculating brain of his ticking. “I’m trying to understand what the fuck is happening here, Giovanni.” His forehead creases as he considers me. “We’ve been waiting for the right time to wipe out Blanco’s entire organization, and you’re telling me you’re working for him? Why the fuck are you only telling me this now?”

“I’m not working for him.” I correct. “The Covenant works for me. For us. He only gets to them through me.”

“And the soldier from his side.” Tomás twists his diamond cufflinks. “I bet they have plenty of conversations with Blanco.”

“Which is why I’ve been monitoring their every move and listening in on their calls. I gave them all satellite phones that were tapped. Every conversation they have is recorded.”

I stroll over to a hand carved table where a few bottles of liquor are stashed. They help ease the aches and pains following physical fights. I’m not getting any younger and although I’m fit, some of these guys have youth on their side. The fuckers bounce back quicker. “I want them ready for your big wedding day, Tommy.” I add.

“And once you’re certain you have their allegiance, you’d have direct access to Blanco, right? Through the soldier you’re training.” Tomás states, not actually asking, more thinking out loud.

“Precisely.”

“I’m sure Blanco has thought of that already,” Matheus points out.

“And that’s why I’m keeping my enemies close. Isn’t that what Mama always told us to do?” I pour a drink and hand it to him. “He got to us the night of India’s prom—”

“Yeah, fuck, *you* went to prom. Giovanni, the recluse, stepped back into society after years of hibernation. That was a

shocker.” Matheus interrupts, smiling.

“I’d do anything for her,” I say truthfully. “She wanted to go to prom, so that’s exactly where I took her.”

André appears beside me, grabs one of the bottles, unscrews the cap and drinks. He doesn’t say a word as I continue.

“Blanco’s guys ran us off the road. They injected India with some shit that knocked her out.” My blood boils, even now. “I broke my own fucking rules to make her happy.”

André takes another drink and stares at me. “The bastard did what no one else could. He got to you... through her.”

I nod. “And even though I don’t trust him, he said he didn’t have anything to do with Uncle Angelo’s assassination or Papá’s murder. He told me to look closer to home for the answer. The fucker could have cut my throat while India watched and sent her to Sicily with the message. But he didn’t. So why would he lie about Papá?”

“Maybe he’d rather you train the guy who’s going to be your replacement.” Tomás shakes his head. “Blanco wants what Papá had. Who better to give him a hitman of your caliber than you?”

“No... it doesn’t add up. Papá was next in line to take over from Angelo. Blanco had every opportunity to challenge him and didn’t. Why would he wait all these years to finally gun down Papá in an alleyway?”

I walk across the room and turn on the monitors, letting them see the setup for themselves.

“How do you know this team won’t betray us?” Matheus moves behind the desk and sits in the chair.

I shrug. “Because I know too much about them.”

Tomás sighs heavily. “You set all this up to protect the girl?”

“Yes. It’s all about her... and my son.” I admit. “I want my family protected at all costs, even when I take a step back. I don’t want to be a full-time sicario anymore, Tommy. I’m not

standing down or abandoning you. I'm just trying to figure out a way to be a better father than Papá... and be the guy India deserves."

My wrist vibrates and the hairs on my nape rise like hackles. My property's sensors have detected something. I march over to the keyboard and tap, bringing up the outdoor surveillance cameras for Blackwater.

A cold chill freezes my veins, and my heart stops beating.

"What's wrong?" Matheus asks.

"Fuck..." I scramble to pick up the radio on the desk. "Soldiers!" My voice is loud and sharp. "Load up and get ready. This is code fucking red."

"What the fuck is going on, Gio?" André draws his handgun and Matheus bounces to his feet.

"Blackwater... there's incoming helicopters." I swallow my panic and head straight for the weapons cabinet to gather up the rocket launchers. "We have to get back... NOW!"

India

Waiting for Leo outside his bedroom, I press my shoulders into the wall and blow out loudly. What a day. The sun has set, but the air is still electric.

After Giovanni led his brothers out of the house, I hung around while Lola supervised Leo's bedtime routine, the knots in my stomach growing tight.

I can't figure out why I'm so unsettled, not when the four brothers have an unbreakable bond and left here on friendly terms.

Well, Giovanni and André haven't exactly made up. But they aren't throwing fists at each other either, so I guess they'll

work through it.

It's quiet now without their deep voices, the atmosphere dark and secretive all over again.

“Will you read me a story?” Leo appears in the lamp lit hallway, his curls damp and his fresh navy pajamas one size too big.

His wide smile lights me up from the inside. There's something so pure and innocent about the little guy. He takes my hand like we've known each other forever.

A fierce need to protect him weaves through my muscles, making them that bit stiffer and my mind more alert. Daenis circles my legs and sits between us.

Knowing his uncles are finally aware of Leo's existence should pacify me. Only it doesn't. I can't shake this weird feeling. I have a restless sense that something isn't quite right.

“How about we go to the library in the manor and chill on the couch together?” I ask him. “There are heaps of good books in there.”

He nods at me. “Will those men stay here tonight? Papá's brothers?”

We walk along the hallway together, with Daenis trotting ahead. “I'm not sure what their plans are. One thing about the Souzas is you never know what they're planning from one minute to the next.” I laugh a little.

“Where did Yanni take them?”

“He wanted to show them something he's been working on. He said he'd be back in a couple of hours.”

Leo falls silent. He's used to his father's ways, even if he doesn't understand why the man comes and goes so much.

“Anyway.” I gently squeeze his tiny hand in mine. “Now Lola's having her downtime, we can do whatever we want.”

His long lashes flick up and he looks up at me, mischief dancing in his warm cocoa-colored eyes. “Can we eat candy?”

I waggle my brows. “Oh, yeah... potato chips and maybe a few chocolate bars. How about we build a blanket fort and stay up late?”

“Yes!” He lets go of my hand and runs ahead, his slippers thudding the tiles. “I’ll grab some stuff.” His voice becomes distant when he enters the kitchen before me.

“I know the perfect books to read. Have you heard of the Famous Five?” I call over to him, watching as he raids the fridge and shoves snacks into his school backpack.

Leo shakes his head, more interested in packing our supplies. “That blanket could work.” He points to the couch. “It’s big.”

“Sure, I’ll grab it. There are a few more in the library too.” I walk around the island and move into the sunroom, my eyes catching veins of lightning spreading across the sky in the distance.

Throwing it over my shoulders like a cape, I hug it close. The softness comforts my simmering anxiety.

“All set?” I turn, walk back to Leo, and close the fridge door as he zips everything inside his bag.

“I love you, India.” He grins up at me and starts to drag the bag across the floor. “Lola would never let me eat chocolate bars or candy after dinner.”

“There’s a reason for that.”

“I know,” he sing-songs. “My teeth would rot and fall out.”

“Is that what she tells you?” I giggle. “It also makes bending the rules more fun when you have a sneaky late-night feast. I won’t tell if you don’t.”

He pretends to seal his lips shut and throws away an imaginary key. “Souza swear,” he whispers.

Together we leave the light and step into the concrete corridor linking modern and gothic, heading toward the darker half of Blackwater. Holding my palm to the wall mounted pad, we wait for my fingerprints to glow before we’re permitted access.

Sporadic flashes of lightning play with the shadows peeking out of every corner. I cross the kitchen, skirting the large island. Flicking the light switch by the doorway, I suddenly realize I've forgotten my satellite phone.

"Dammit," I mutter to myself.

Leo is beside me in seconds. "What's wrong?"

"I left my phone behind. I'm supposed to keep it with me."

"It's okay." He tugs me into semi darkness. "You've got me. Yanni will be back soon. He's going to love our fort. I know he will."

He's right. It's not like I've wandered off and need to be rescued. We're only going to my favorite room in the whole house, where Gio could easily find me.

Walking into the library, Leo drops my hand, runs straight to the couch, dumps his backpack, and gathers the blankets into a bundle. I wander over to the hefty mantelpiece, pat the ledge to find the lighter, and stand on my tiptoes, lighting a few of the melted candles, shivering from the switch in temperature.

With its high ceilings and cavernous space, this room is always chilly until the fire is roaring.

"Come on, Indy," Leo shouts, using the name he'd heard André call me. "We have to build the best fort ever to keep the monsters out."

"There aren't any monsters in here." I join him, grab one end of a blanket, tuck it into the sofa, and let it drape over the back to create a tent.

"Yes, there are." His head cocks as he stops trailing another blanket along the floor. "Monsters are everywhere."

"I guess they are. But I've always got your back, little guy. Okay?"

He trots over to the mahogany desk and climbs into the leather chair. "Then we need to make swords to slay the dragon. There's lots of paper here."

A chill runs over my scalp and a terrifying thought runs through my mind. *Slay the Dragon*. What if The Covenant turns on the most powerful men in Colombia—my family—while they're all together—trapped in a cave?

I falter. My pulse thrums in my throat and I stare at the little boy folding paper into an origami sword. Standing here, I don't say a word. Instead, I keep my spine rigid and do my best not to show the concern unraveling in my chest.

“What's that noise?” His forehead creases as he looks up, his eyes suddenly serious.

I hear it too, in the distance, and it's not thunder. It sounds more like an incoming helicopter. And I know the brothers left in Jeeps since that's what Giovanni brought me home in the last time.

I'm at the window before Leo says another word, but I can't see anything. Daenis starts to whine and scoots to my heel, sensing my unease.

“It must be the helicopter on its way back to take them into the city again.” Turning away from the moody sky, my skin prickles.

The loud rumble sounds like two helicopters are coming our way.

“Leo,” I say his name with a quick exhale. “Something doesn't feel right. Come on. We need to go back.”

He doesn't say anything when he reaches out and takes my hand, neither of us sure of what's going on. It's rare for any sort of aircraft to fly overhead, never mind two.

Together, we charge across the library and dart into the hallway, practically running toward the kitchen. But before we get there, the lights are cut. The second they go dark, it's like I'm blind. I break out in chills, instinctively understanding this isn't a test.

“India?” Leo's small voice comes at me from the darkness. “Who turned the lights off?”

“It’s okay.” I swallow my panic and close my eyes to focus, stepping sideways into the wall, my shoulder bumping cold plaster. “Stick to me. I know my way to the kitchen from here.”

I walk against the wall, holding Leo’s hand and talking to him quietly, trying to keep us both calm. Feeling along ridges with my fingertips, I know we’re at the doorjamb. I ignore my full body shiver and slowly move inside, pulling him with me.

A pale haze from the window helps me to see better. But when I press my hand on the wall mounted screen to unlock the door, nothing happens.

“Shit!” I fist the wall. “Blackwater is locked down. We’re stuck in here until Gio comes for us.”

This must be protocol when there’s a potential threat. The sensors switch everything off, making the modern extension impenetrable. I press my forehead to the door for a second to think. We’re trapped and I can’t get to the underground weapon room.

“We’re locked in here, aren’t we?” Daenis sniffs along the tiles, snorting and scampering from scent to scent.

The engines from outside are louder now. I was wrong to think there were only two—there’s a racket of helicopters bringing a war to Blackwater, and I’m unarmed. We’re sitting ducks.

“We have to go upstairs.” I hunker to eye-level and stroke a curl out of his lashes, the subtle moonlight making the whites of his watery eyes sparkle. “You know the passageways, don’t you?” He nods. “Can you take us to my old bedroom?”

GIOVANNI



“Why the fuck isn’t she picking up?” I grip the satellite phone next to my ear, panic rushing through my veins.

Loaded with weapons, we switched drivers so I could have my hands free. A few members of The Covenant have hitched rides in the rear of our soft top Jeeps.

Matheus slams his foot on the gas and takes the lead, with Tomás and André right behind us. I can’t see shit right now, because of the overgrown wild plants sheltering the dirt track. But I sure as fuck can hear the helicopters and feel the warning as it buzzes on my wristwatch.

“Christ, India, answer the damn phone!” The ringtone stretches my patience.

I pinch the bridge of my nose when it goes to an automated voicemail message. Immediately after hanging up, I call her again and shove shaky fingers through my hair in an attempt to establish some sort of balance within me.

My hands haven’t been this unsteady for years, not since I was a teen. My emotions are haywire and my heart slams into my ribs.

This is it.

The day I lose my fucking mind forever.

When it rings off again, I call Lola, who answers in a fluster. “Giovanni... they’re not here!” she says, out of breath. “They’re in the manor house. I can’t get to them. They’re locked in. The door won’t open.”

Nausea burns in my throat and a bead of sweat trickles down my spine like a jagged icicle. “Blackwater is in automatic defense mode. You can’t reach them now. I’m on my way.”

A burning ache spreads through my heart, the pathetic organ beats for her—for my family. Everything goes blurry beneath the sound of blood whooshing in my skull. I hang up and toss the phone into the footwell.

Pushing to a stand, I set the assault weapon on the metal bar in front of me while the rest of it sits on my shoulder. High-speed air hits my face. My knees bounce when we fly over a hump, the front wheels smacking the dirt when we land again.

A mist of darkness creeps over me, my veins running ice-cold.

I physically can’t speak anymore. Nothing comes out, only fast breaths. Glancing behind me, Tomás is driving right up our asses and André is propped upright too. He has the same idea as me—blow these motherfuckers out of the sky, whoever the hell they are. I swallow against the hammering pulse in my throat and grit my teeth.

Racing out of the natural canopy, Blackwater comes into view in the distance. My scalp prickles when I look skyward, counting at least four aircraft dotting the navy-blue canvas.

“There’s an army of them!” Matheus yells. “Who the hell did you piss off this time, Gio?”

I try to inhale and exhale through mounting anger. Already the monster inside of me is ready to exact brutal revenge on the enemy flying in from all directions, via land and sea.

I’m still not close enough to reach India and Leo by foot, but I am in range to fire the first rocket.

It soars through the air and rips off the tail rotor of a chopper moving in from the coast. Spinning out of control, it plunges beyond the cliff face. Dropping from view, an explosion signals the small victory. However, it wasn’t the

only chopper to crash and burn since André had unleashed a rocket, too.

We systematically reload and launch while Matheus and Tomás drive like maniacs. My heart is thumping within my chest, so hard I swear it's going to stop all together.

Papá screwed with my emotions for years until I was numb. In hindsight, maybe that was a good thing. Then I wouldn't be so goddamn out of control now. I wouldn't be in this position—and neither would my brothers.

None of that bullshit matters, though, because they're mine to protect. And I'm on a mission to murder every single fucker who breaches Blackwater and threatens my family.

Tapping my earpiece, I talk to my kill team again and reinforce the message. "There are three innocents. Two women and a boy. They are the priority. Kill anyone who isn't a Souza or a member of The Covenant. Don't hold back. And I don't care who the enemy is. My direct order is to wipe them the fuck out."

I glare at the soldier closest to me in the Jeep, the one with a buffalo stitched on their balaclava. If this attack was organized by Carlos Blanco, she wouldn't last five fucking seconds. I'd kill her myself.

The Jeep speeds through the coastal air, tearing over uneven terrain in the darkness toward my home. The full beams catch glimpses of flaming debris. All out of rockets, I pack my utility pants full of ammunition, grenades, and sling a machine gun strap over my shoulder.

Nodding to the soldiers in the back, I roll down my balaclava and inhale slowly, purposefully—deeply. The warm air catches in my lungs when my thoughts turn deadly. So bleak, I can barely see straight.

Another helicopter hovers over the ancient slate roof, ropes dangling and men zipping down like spiders. From this distance, I'd need my sniper rifle to wipe them out. Except, the ground we're rattling over is too uneven to lock on moving

targets. Tonight, I opt for high-impact weapons. Our enemies won't get out alive.

This is fucking war.

The wheels lock up, stopping next to the stone boundary wall, close to the entrance that only my fingerprints would unlock. Matheus climbs out and grabs a machine gun, his chestnut brown eyes almost black now.

“Here.” I round the hood and toss him a bulletproof vest, realizing there isn't enough to go around. “Put this on.”

He frowns at it. “Where's yours?”

“Mat.” I step into him, our chests bumping. “Put the fucking vest on. There's more of those guys than there are us. I won't be there to have your back. Not until I find India and Leo.”

“You still think I'm not good enough, don't you?” He rips open the Velcro and stuffs his head into the neck hole, his tone gritty.

Tomás slams on the brakes and parks next to us, both him and André reaching for machine guns and vests too.

“You're my brother, Mat. I taught you how to shoot. I know you're good. Tonight is the night you'll earn your ring. Just don't get yourself killed. Now keep close and I'll get us inside the Manor House.”

Tomás appears beside me, his expression tight. “I assume you have a plan?”

I nod. “Get inside the walls. Use the shadows. Find India and Leo. Kill everyone else.”

“The walls?” he repeats, pulling a bulletproof vest over his head.

“We'll get in on the ground floor and work our way through the passages from there.” My pulse jumps. “Tomás...” I look right at him, my nostrils flaring, trying to contain the storm raging inside of me. “You don't have to do this, you know... you can leave... you're the head of our family...”

you're the boss. Papá wouldn't want you to risk the organization."

Tomás stares at me for a beat. The features resembling our father darken, but his expression remains utterly blank. "Fuck Papá. And fuck anyone who challenges Souza authority." He positions a tactical helmet on his head and adjusts the night vision monocle over his right eye. "Your family is my family, don't ever forget that, brother. Now let's show these motherfuckers what the Souzas are capable of."

I offer him a tight smile and slap his bicep. "Watch your back, Tommy."

André joins us, a cigarette clinging to his lips, wearing a vest and has a machine gun primed in his ringed fingers. "Ready to butcher these bastards?"

"Always." I spin around, trying to hide the fact I'm a mess inside and train my focus on getting inside Blackwater as quickly as possible.

Unlocking the steel door, I dart onto the grounds, moving through the strategically planted forest and trampling wildflowers. I continue to run, ducking behind bushes to hide my approach.

There's no way to fight the beast inside of me, and now it's triggered blood will paint the walls and seep into the floorboards.

Behind me, boots thud—my brothers aren't as covert as I am. But that doesn't matter. Not when they're here for all the right reasons. For me—India and Leo.

Every step I take isn't fast enough. Thinking about it, I shouldn't have gone against my better judgment and welcomed my brothers into my private space. Secrets have a way of protecting the people you care about, and maybe they were better off not knowing the real me. And now they're at risk—we all are.

An unusual surge of anxiety shoots through my muscles, but I keep going. They're grown men, they can look out for themselves.

More choppers arrive and more dark clothed men scramble over the roof. Whoever sent them here has an agenda. This isn't a random attack. Then again, they haven't descended on a random guy's house either.

André's voice rumbles over my shoulder when I pull out a pocket knife to hack at the mass of climbing ivy disguising the west side entrance. "Do you know where she is exactly?"

My heart shrivels. I'd checked the camera footage before we left the caves and couldn't see them. Which means they're hiding in the passageways and could be anywhere.

"She's in there... in the Manor House with Leo." I tell him, snipping the woody vines as a flash of lightning illuminates the old door. "The newest part of the house is locked tight. Lola can get out if she needs to, but no one can get in. We have the advantage. They won't see us until we're ready."

The crack of gunfire rings in my ears, the sound of it coming from deep inside Blackwater. My heart stops beating and my ears strain to hear.

"Jesus fuck," André says what I'm incapable of muttering.

I've never truly known fear, not when I've always been the man in control. The instigator. The punisher. The assassin. But right this second, fear is my fucking master and not even darkness can hide it.

INDIA



“Stay right here, okay?” I tell Leo, both of us standing in a narrow tunnel lining the wall of my old bedroom. “Whatever happens, keep hidden in the walls and be quiet. As long as the strangers don’t know these passageways exist, you’ll be safe.”

Worried lines crease his forehead. “What are you doing?”

“I’m grabbing weapons in case we need them. Remember what I said about keeping the monsters away?” I lean down and kiss the crown of his head. “Back in a sec.”

I push inward, let the panel close behind me and cross over the plush carpet, its color appearing darker in the dim light. Repetitive thuds come from above like human raindrops. Immediately, my gaze darts upward, following the sounds.

My stomach twists. How the hell did our enemies find Blackwater? I rush over to the window and look out at the night sky where a helicopter is hit by a missile and loses control.

I gasp and quickly wedge a scream in my throat. An explosion from the cove at the bottom of the cliff brightens the night sky like a beacon of hope.

Giovanni is on his way back to us. I know it. And he’s targeting the choppers like clay pigeons.

My pulse is racing when I back away from the window. I’m spurred on by the fact we won’t be alone for much longer, but terrified to my bones that people I care about could get hurt—or worse—killed.

Aware of the creaks and thumps overhead, I fling open the doors to my gun cabinet, the one Giovanni had commissioned for me a few weeks ago as another birthday present. It houses all the weapons my brother had ever bought me, from daggers to bullets and everything in between.

Still wearing the dress from earlier, I quickly strap on a thigh holster with a small revolver. From there, I clip a pistol belt around my belly before throwing on an oversized hoodie to hide it.

Needing more, I slip a switchblade into the front pocket and check the clip on my favorite Cabot, removing the safety.

To blend in with the shadows, I pull my hood up over my head. The footsteps above me continue, but they aren't just in the attic now. They're pounding in the hallway too.

My eyes shoot to the doorway, and my heart jumps into my throat. I start to back away when the door swings open and a masked man points a flashlight and service pistol into the room.

Instinctively, I drop low and shuffle against the wall, breathing hard. A second soldier, shorter in build, storms in next and instantly pinpoints me in the beam of his flashlight. "She's in here."

Shit!

I hold my breath and weigh up my options. He's pointing his gun right at me, and now the other guy notices me too. If I shoot first, I could easily kill one of them, but then the other soldier could shoot me dead next.

The shorter guy kills the space between us and roughly manhandles me to an upright position. My hood is dragged down, my chest pushed into the wall, and the gun ripped out of my hand.

Fuck him, I have more where that came from.

I twist my head around to see what they're up to, watching the whites of their eyes light up when a flash of lightning strikes.

“We’ve got the girl,” the guy who entered first speaks into a microphone concealed within his sleeve at the underside of his wrist. “There’s no one else with her.” He pauses for a beat, presumably listening. “Souza isn’t here. None of them are. I’ll bring her now.”

As he finishes, ruthless fingers dive into my hair, dragging me a few steps.

“Get off me!” I’m about to reach under my hoodie when a muffled sneeze stops them in their tracks—and me.

Leo!

Both men scan the room. Cold steel jams against my temple. “Who else is in here?”

“Must be a ghost.” I grit out, stooped over. “I’m alone. Take a look.”

The guy who’s not ripping my hair out at the roots wanders over to the bed and shoots a bullet into the mattress. Backing up, he walks the length of the room, getting closer to the secret panel in the wall.

While they’re preoccupied, I reach for the gun under my hoodie, twist into my captor, and fire off two bullets. One to the gut, and when he doubles over, a second in his throat.

Warm spatters pelt my face. Yet I don’t feel an ounce of remorse when he slumps to the floor, his blood darkening the carpet like spilled ink. But my heart stutters when I look up to where the other guy had stood only seconds ago. He’s not there anymore.

No, he’s behind me now, cuffing my neck with the crook of his arm and squeezing. While I choke and squirm, he grabs the weapon in my hand and tries to win possession of it.

Adrenaline kicks in and I refuse to let go, but I’m starting to feel lightheaded. My lungs are desperate for oxygen.

Flailing at first, I take a beat to think on my feet and blindly reach for the blade in my pocket.

Finally, my fingers find it. I press the button and feel the blade pop out. It doesn’t take me long to stab his thigh and

almost grin when he roars from the pain.

But the fucker doesn't let go, tightening his vice-like grip on my neck instead. This time, I aim for the bicep locked next to my jaw and slash downwards.

His arm immediately loosens, giving me space to lurch forward, coughing and spluttering. I spin around to face him, the bloodied dagger ready, but I'm met with a harsh slap from the back of his hand.

The fast crack across my jaw causes my head to jerk sideways and black spots pop in my vision, appearing everywhere.

"Try that again and you're dead, bitch," he snarls, glancing at the knife wound, his nostrils flaring. "We only need you alive long enough for bait. After that, you're worthless. Or maybe it wouldn't matter if you died now."

Bait?

These men are here for Giovanni.

And Carlos Blanco is the only one who knows who I am to the Souzas.

"You're working for Blanco, aren't you!" I try to inch away, rubbing my throat and inhaling in bursts.

He stares at me, his face hidden except for the blatant malice in his slit-like eyes. "Shut the fuck up and drop the blade."

"I'm not scared of you, motherfucker." I straighten, glaring up at him defiantly. "You're nothing more than a dead fuck standing. And when he finds you—"

His fingers tighten around his gun, and he steps into me, pushing it deep into my ribs. "Drop it."

Letting it thud at my feet, I square up to him. "I don't need a weapon. I can gouge your eyeballs out with my thumbs."

"Not if I break all the bones in your hands."

I laugh, forcing courage. "Keep on thinking you're on the right side of this war. When your heartbeat goes weak and

your lungs collapse, all you'll feel is regret. Regret that you picked a fight with the wrong man."

My comment earns a throaty grunt. "I think *you've* got the wrong man, sweetheart."

More men dressed in black military-style uniforms barge into the bedroom and surround us. "We've searched the upper floor. They aren't here," someone says.

"Take her downstairs." The guy in charge shoves me backward, my ass butting into the body behind me. Hands clamp my wrists and yank them behind me. "I can't wait to see this bitch's face when she figures it out."

"Figures out what?" I thrash and force my weight into the guy holding me hostage.

"Does he need her to be conscious?" the voice next to my face asks, wrestling with me. "I could easily knock her the fuck out."

I freeze, knowing I need my wits about me and my senses on high alert. "Fine. Take me to see Blanco. Let's end this shit once and for all."

They laugh at me, clearly amused that I could try to kill a second time. I could and I would. I'm frog-marched out of the bedroom, having successfully distracted them from Leo's sneeze.

"She's hung up on that guy Carlos Blanco for some reason," the henchman beside me mutters.

A shiver rattles my bones.

What are they talking about?

"They really have no idea, do they?"

INDIA



I'm penned in a tight circle by six armed men who force me to descend the staircase with them.

My eyes scan the shadows, feeling them move around us, wondering if Giovanni is here somewhere. I could take a chance and pop off a few rounds if it weren't for the constant threat of steel still rammed into my ribs.

One wrong move and they'd shoot me dead. While my brother taught me how to defend myself, he also coached me on the importance of reading my enemy and figuring out an alternative plan.

We push past a bunch of soldiers lining the hallways and I take a mental count. There are far too many for me to take on by myself.

Frustrated tears burn at the back of my eyes, but I blink them away. This isn't the time to show weakness. For the next few minutes, I have to stay quiet, watch everyone, and bide my time.

I shake my head, holding my clenched fists by my thighs, ready to meet the bastard who rallied an army to come after us.

Voices mutter from the library as I'm herded into it. Immediately my gaze searches the dark corners, taking in books, more dark figures, guns, and part of the blanket fort I'd made for Leo earlier.

"India Hardy!" I freeze, hearing my name drop from the tongue of a familiar man. "Or is it India Souza? I'm not quite so sure."

Fabian strolls toward me, exuding confidence in every stride. Broad shoulders are pulled back behind a tactical vest that bulks out his lean physique and his moonless eyes pin me to the spot.

But it's the cocky grin tugging at the corners of his mouth that sets fire to my anger. Behind him, someone tosses a pile of books into the fireplace, smashes a bottle of liquor over the top of them and sets fire to it.

Flames shoot up the chimney, the shadows the fire creates dancing over Fabian's handsome face.

My body shakes with horror, confusion pumping through me. "What the hell are you doing here?"

His sinister chuckle makes my stomach burn. "I did a little research after the night your *bodyguard* boyfriend showed up at Ana's place. It was the red stone on his finger that caught my eye... well that, and the way he kissed you like you were his whole fucking world. Turns out your bodyguard is the infamous Giovanni Souza. The son of a bitch every guy on the planet wants to be, and the same guy we all want to get rid of."

"Why the hell would you care?" I demand. "They're the cartel, and you're still at school?"

He folds his arms over his chest. "Do you know how hard it is to pin those Souza fuckers down? Virtually impossible—until you came along, that is. But I guess the old guys were gonna trip up eventually, especially when one of them fell for a cute thing who wanted him to take her to prom," he says, looking smug.

It was him.

"Christ," I mutter under my breath, scowling at him. "You're working for Blanco, aren't you?"

"Fuck no!" He balks at the suggestion, giving me a look of complete disgust. "I just told him when Souza had arrived at our prom with his hot date and left the rest to him. I don't need to work for old school fuckers like Blanco... or the Souzas. It's time for a new generation to step up and take over. A

younger, more masterful leader with his finger on the pulse of Colombia's youth."

I squirm against the guy securing me and laugh at Fabian, eyeing his sharp, swarthy features tighten.

"You're joking, Fabian, aren't you? You seriously think you can take over from the Souza cartel and step on the toes of the Irish mafia. Are you *that* stupid?"

He chuckles softly, his teeth bright white. "You know my father is a billionaire, right? I told you that already, didn't I? Money talks and pays for armies big enough to annihilate the most powerful cartel syndicate in South America. And let me tell you another little secret..." He leans in, thumbing his lower lip as his gaze dawdles over the hoodie I'm wearing. "—you were with Tomás, André, and Matheus Souza when I accidentally bumped into you earlier. I have friends everywhere. And you led me straight to this creepy old house on the coast where all four of them are hiding out. One discreet little GPS tracker dropped in your purse was all it took because I'm smarter than those guys."

My hands itch to slap the smirk off his self-satisfied, clean-shaven face. Instead, being this close to him gives me the advantage and I launch my forehead into his face. Following the obvious crunch, he rears back and pats the bridge of his nose, catching sight of the blood on his fingers. His eyes pop wide and his nostrils flare, as if he's both shocked and enraged by my ability.

But rather than lash out at me, he chuckles from the back of his throat. "I'm going to enjoy shooting those four assholes. But you, I had a little crush on you for a while. It died when I realized who you were so tight with. Although, I might be persuaded to keep you alive for a time—if you wanted to beg for your life? Kneel, and let me see how good you'd look groveling on the floor."

"Go fuck yourself, Fabian!"

He snuffs out the space separating us, his body so close I can smell his fresh cologne. His gaze locks with mine as his hand snares my throat—tight and unforgiving.

I refuse to react, even when his lips brush across mine. The muscles in my body brace and my back teeth grind so hard my jaw aches.

“You should have taken me up on my offer to go to prom.” Somehow, his voice changes. It still sounds like him, but the pitch of his tone has gone flat—emotionless.

I shudder from the unusual way he looks at me. “Fucking with danger is your kink, India. Kind of like my own. I mean, how could the son of a billionaire prove himself worthy to a father who basically smashed every single goal there is?” The tip of his tongue glides along my jaw. “Power and respect—those are the only things a man like him understands. I get it. I really do. Like right now, your pulse is fluttering against my palm like the wings of a tiny bird trying to flee. I could squeeze it until it stops—that’s power too. Do you want to tell me where your boyfriend is hiding?”

“He’s every shadow in this house,” I hiss. “And when he appears, you’ll wish we’d never met.”

Fabian stares at me for a split second. Something unreadable creeps over his handsome face. A sinister veil darkens his features, so he appears utterly terrifying.

My stomach churns, and I wonder if he’s always been this evil.

I inhale a tattered breath and steel my spine as the percussive sound of machine gun fire sputters exploding from another room.

He’s here.

The right corner of Fabian’s mouth hitches. “Finally. Time to say goodbye to your boyfriend and his fucking show-off brothers. It won’t be a happy ending for them. But don’t worry your pretty head, I’ll find it very satisfying.” He hollows my cheeks with his fingertips. “This shithole will burn to the ground soon and I’ll be here filming the flames. The world will know the Souzas met their match and I’m the guy who’s taking over.”

He releases the biting control he has on my face, then tenderly sweeps the tangles of my messy hair away from my face.

His eyes catch a flash of light at the same time as he dishes out a sucker punch to my gut. The grip on my arms releases.

“Get on your fucking knees bitch... know your place, India.”

Winded, I hunch over and clutch my belly, holding back the urge to vomit. With the background takka-takka of automatic bullets spewing, I suck in a breath, quickly straighten, and throw a fist into the side of his jaw, followed by an upper-cut to the chin.

Fabian staggers back, his eyes turning black as my own metamorphosis takes place. I am the darkness in Blackwater Manor and this fucker won't ever touch my family.

“Come on, Fabian.” I fix my stance, solidifying one foot in front of the other. “Let's see how good you are without your paid goons holding me back.” Bending my knees, I put my hands up. “Think you can fight a girl without using a gun? Just me and you. Better still, do you think you could win a fair fight? Or are you a little pussy who stands on the sidelines while the real men do the fighting for you?”

“Oh, I see...” Fabian snickers, his eyes drilling into mine. “You're brave now, because you think your boyfriend will step in and save you?”

“No, asshole, I'm confident I can take you down all by myself.”

A ghost of a smirk plays on his lips, and he glances left at a few of his men. “This will work out well. While I beat the shit out of you, my men will be pumping the Souzas full of lead. Maybe when you're ready to surrender, Giovanni will step out of the shadows and face me. Man to man.”

“Haha, you're not a man, Fabian. Luke was right. You're pathetic.” I lunge forward and strike with my right arm, using the space between my fingers and thumb to jack him straight in the Adam's apple.

The sharp thrust steals his breath, and he clutches at his neck, sucking in air. He stumbles a few steps and throws a hand to the back of the couch, struggling to keep himself upright.

My pulse accelerates, and I go to run, but a hand seizes my arm. Locked in place by one of his men, Fabian swivels and charges at me, his breathing short, sharp sips.

His hands are in my hair, forcefully yanking my torso to meet his knee. The guy holding onto me from behind lets go, allowing Fabian to take charge. In that second, I seize the opportunity to grab Fabian's wrist, dig my nails into his skin, and twist until he releases me.

Straightening, Fabian starts to throw solid punches. I dodge and duck out of the way, waiting for the right time to sweep his legs out from under him. As his frustration mounts, so does his momentum.

One lucky jab clips my mouth, and instantly I taste blood. I spit out a wad of it and taunt him with a low laugh. "It's a shame it had to come to this. You getting your ass handed to you on a plate by a girl and the Souza brothers fucking you up after."

He holds up his fists to guard his face. "That's just the warm up, India." He pauses, his gaze sailing to the doorway over my shoulder. "But you know what—I didn't come here for you." My throat tightens and an icy chill races down my spine. "Well, well, look who we've got here."

INDIA



Crippling panic attacks my lungs. I spin around to the doorway where four men wrestle André.

They drag him into the library to join us. His muscles vibrate like a raging thunderstorm, his nostrils flare, and that handsome face of his is dappled in someone else's blood.

My heart aches at the sight of him, such a powerful warlord, captured. While he fights and wriggles to get free, the lengths of his tousled hair fall over his creased forehead.

Somehow, the men manage to haul him next to me and our eyes find each other. His dark, intense—lethal. While mine are wide with worry. “Are you okay?”

He scowls. “Which fucker did that to your face, Indy?”

I pat my busted lip and glance over at Fabian, feeling so much rage that I'm physically shaking. “Him.”

André faces Fabian, spits on the floor, and narrows his eyes. “Good to know.”

Fabian takes a confident step toward us, unholsters a Glock, and jabs the chilly air with it. “Why? You planning on shooting me, big guy?”

He takes a mocking bow toward André's torso, his laugh prickling my scalp like needles. “That would be hard when you don't have a gun to hide behind. Or maybe we should have a bare-knuckle fight to prove who's faster, stronger—*younger*. But we all know that's me, so I'd sooner pop a cap in her head instead.”

André bares his teeth, seething. “Who the fuck is this joker, Indy?”

My stomach knots. “I met him at Thornhill Academy.”

“You’re a fucking kid?” André’s smoky laugh rumbles from the back of his throat. “Oh, this is priceless.”

Fabian pushes his face up close to André, their foreheads almost butting. “Isn’t it? Don’t worry, you won’t have time to feel embarrassed about your entire family being wiped out by a *kid* since you’ll have a bullet in your skull. And once I’ve taken you out, I’ll find your wife next.”

The growl scraping out of André’s throat reminds me of who he actually is. Aside from being the guy who watches over me, he’s a vicious cartel boss with impulsive, murderous tendencies.

“You think you have it all worked out, don’t you, motherfucker?” he bites the words to pieces. “If my twin doesn’t hack your head off, my wife and her personal army will do it. You have no fucking idea who you’re messing with.”

“Oh, I do.” Fabian shrugs. “And I know the Souza men like their women feisty.” He pushes the gun into André’s temple. “Like this one here.” Fabian’s eyes cut to mine—cold and dark. “She fights well. But good fighters don’t win wars. It’s all about strategy and power.”

I lunge at him, my attack abruptly stopped by merciless hands. “You don’t have to do this, Fabian.”

In the far corner, a soldier drops to the floor. The crack of a bullet soars through air and another body drops. I glance over my shoulder, recognizing Matheus tucked neatly against the doorjamb, his gun pointed inside the room.

He’s wearing a night vision monocular helmet and body armor. Opposite him, Tomás peers from the shadows, dressed the same. He quickly aims and shoots another guy.

To my right, André starts to laugh. “This is fucking epic. You’ve made a huge mistake, motherfucker, and you’re going to pay for it.”

Fabian's eyes narrow and he lashes out as quick as a viper, fisting my hair and dragging me away from André. Backing himself against the wall by the fireplace, he plasters my spine tight to his chest and rams his gun under my chin.

"Get him over here," he yells over his men's rapid retaliation gunfire.

Helplessly, I watch André fight with the men around him. He knocks one soldier out and breaks another's arm until he gets a smack to the side of the head, dazing him long enough to receive a boot to the backs of his knees and a pistol pointed at his forehead.

"Keep shooting my men, and these two are dead." Fabian shouts over the chaos. "Throw down your weapons. Five... four..." He starts the countdown. "Three."

My throat tightens when the ceasefire welcomes silence and Matheus is shoved into the room, followed by Tomás. I hear Fabian's fast breathing behind me when his men strip off the Souzas' tactical gear and kick away their weapons.

My heart is beating like crazy, horror prickling over me.

"Holy shit, this is too fucking easy." Fabian's voice is shrill with excitement. "You guys are a lot slower in your old age. I mean, how old are you? Thirty or something?" He laughs and the tone of his voice slips to playful, as if he's getting off on this game. "Hmm... Who should I kill first? I'm thinking you're my first choice, Tomás. But then again, I'd love for you to watch me slaughter your untouchable family."

Something crosses Tomás' face, an evil bubbling under the stoic facade he portrays.

"Then again..." Fabian eyes him and continues. "... I came all this way, and your legendary sicario hasn't shown up to welcome me into his home. Makes me think he doesn't really care about this sweet little whore."

"Thing is, kid, you're not welcome in his house," Tomás says in a quiet voice. "Pest control should be here soon."

"Right." The hard steel prodding my chin digs in deeper. "That's kinda rude, don't you think, given I'm taking over

your organization? Guess I should kill her first, then.”

Before he gets a chance to say anything else, the shadows in the farthest corner move. I squint to see a figure approaching, only a set of remarkable green eyes visible. The black clothed form embodies eternal darkness.

Giovanni.

My heart skips a beat. The atmosphere instantly changes, making me tingle in a way I can't explain. My pulse jumps and every skin cell becomes hyperaware of his presence. The instant our gazes snag, I stop breathing.

His villainous dominance commands my full attention, making the guy who's threatening to shoot me fade from significance.

Between my captor and my man, Giovanni wears the crown of effortless supremacy, whereas Fabian, a spoiled brat, has a lot to learn.

Except this situation doesn't sit in our favor. André and I are vulnerable to the whim of an egotistical fool.

Giovanni stands by the desk, his boots rooted to the floor, his calculated gaze wandering around the room. Aside from the subtle elevation of his broad chest, he remains motionless in his silent assessment.

My pulse goes haywire at the sight of his black balaclava and dragon emblem, and how his calm appearance is the essence of danger and mastery in one divine form.

“And you must be the fourth brother. Take the stupid mask off. Let's do this face to face.” Fabian tightens his arm around my waist.

“Step away from her.” Giovanni's deep, sultry voice tingles right through me.

“This isn't a negotiation. Make a move and pop...” His gun digs in hard. “Just like that, she'll be dead.” Fabian drops his nose to my hair and inhales. “Fuck, she smells good, though. Mind if I rail her against the wall first? You guys

wouldn't mind a quick, dirty interlude, would you? All of us could have a go."

Slowly, Giovanni says something inaudible and tugs the balaclava off. His wild hair falls messily from the top of his head, thick ebony strands hooking his brow.

Although the scar on his cheekbone makes my heart flutter, it reminds me he's not immortal. None of us are, except for our actions. Those would last for an eternity.

His gaze darts from me to André, to Tomás and Matheus, and then back to me again. Giovanni knows the odds are stacked against us.

The intensity of his stare weaves into my soul, the heat of it warming my veins. And it's in that second when I understand my final challenge.

He can't save all of us, but he can save some of us.

I choose André.

GIOVANNI



In the seconds my eyes are off India, I do a headcount, not seeing Leo. Knowing my woman's quick thinking and devotion, he'd be somewhere in the house, safe for now. A small consolation given the circumstances.

Intermittent gunfire from the other rooms tells me The Covenant are taking care of business. Eventually, there would only be this asshole and a few men left standing at his command.

If my family wasn't not at the center of this nightmare, I'd take my time to wipe these fuckers out one by one. All in my own sweet time. Doing what I do best. Chasing the thrill of a cruel surprise.

But this is no game. Not when I have to decide who to save first. André... or India.

They're both under immediate threat. Both of them are powerless to get away without earning a bullet to the brain.

After we entered the passages, I'd shown the team the spy grills mounted in the walls, pointing out where x's mark camouflaged doors. I'd given them orders to terminate every soldier in sight and then I took off to find India and Leo, trusting my team to fight the fight with me.

Now, my brothers are all in one place. Two of them are unarmed in my peripheral vision, the other is straight ahead on his knees, surrounded by four goons and staring down the barrel of a service pistol.

I smile inwardly, feeling unusually sane inside. Under normal circumstances, André would tear them apart with his bare hands. No one can contain my unhinged twin for long.

Despite that, his typical wild side is simmering—because he’s plotting. We all are. And we have to act fast.

Taking it all in, the situation appears to be impossible. There’s no easy way out of this mess. If I had time to plan, the team would be in position, ready for my order to blow these fuckers’ brains out at the exact same time. But we don’t have that luxury tonight.

In the back of my mind, I hear Papá telling me to protect the head of our family, no matter who else dies. My duty is to ensure Tomás gets out of here alive and to leave the rest of them behind as collateral damage. That’s the sort of messed up bastard my father was.

His cartel organization was the priority.

But I am not that man.

And I don’t need to do his dirty work anymore.

Casually shifting my feet, I mutter the number five, just loud enough to be detected by my trainees along the airwaves of my hidden comms. It might seem like a strange thing to say, but now the team knows there are five targets in this room.

I hunt out India’s face again and recognize the fierce flicker in her glare. For a moment, all I see is her and nothing else. Only my girl.

She eyeballs the guy threatening my twin, baring her teeth at him as she writhes against Fabian fucking Lozano.

He’s got some nerve putting his hands on my woman. And the fact he’s doing it puts me one heartbeat away from losing my shit.

When India’s eyes drift to mine, unwelcome tremors shake my hands and I shove my fingers through my hair to settle myself. This isn’t like me. Then again, the emotions I’m battling with aren’t normal for me either.

It's vital I keep my cool even though my veins are on fire. But the way she stares at me aligns the stars in the universe, tethering us together. My heart's pounding for her.

Our connection is more than a feeling.

And it's only now that I fully accept the platonic love she has for André. Those baby blues of hers don't change when she looks at him, but for me, they shine brightly.

On quick inspection, a deep red mark surrounds a swollen lip and dried blood decorates her pretty features. Despite the bruising, from what I can tell, the blood doesn't appear to be hers.

Before her long inky lashes lower, something odd flashes in her eyes. A shiver of fear catches me off guard.

She's plotting too.

Instinctively, I understand the expression she's wearing. That courageous flare vibrating through her is the telltale sign she's about to make the next move.

A furious pulse throbs in her proud neck and her bottom lip slips between her teeth as she thinks.

I witness every thought running through her mind.

Feel the consequences of every single choice she debates.

Her siren eyes darken like a turbulent ocean and her stubbornly set chin holds its place—strong and rebellious.

Despite her heaving chest, there's something different about her rigid posture. It's an undetectable wisp of recklessness—or worse—the edginess of the risk she's about to take.

This is what she'd warned me about. How she had wanted the independence to defend herself when our enemies finally showed up. She'd wanted to train hard, build on her skills, and fight for herself—the people she cares about. And that's what I want for her too.

But she shouldn't be in this mess. I'm the guy who'd endured grueling years of training to become the Souzas'

guard. To protect all of them.

Unbrushed blonde hair maps the hoodie she wears, those light strands, the threads of sunshine forever reaching into my dark world.

I've slaughtered more men in the past few minutes than I could count on both hands. None of those lives mattered. And now, here I am—fueled with dread for what she's about to do next. My glacial mood becomes deadlier by the second.

India's about to say something—or do something. The ache in my chest is getting worse, especially when Fabian starts talking like I care about the shit coming out of his mouth. I don't. None of us do.

I glance over at Tomás, who's forever self-contained in his appearance. He shoots his eyes to the armed men circling André. They're closer to him and Matheus. And I know exactly what he's thinking. When the time comes, he and Matheus would move in and steal their weapons.

“So... now that we're all here, I should introduce myself,” Fabian announces, amusement dancing in his eyes. “Since I'm the guy who has personally overthrown your organization, and it's all because of my attraction to this girl. Isn't that right, India? You led me straight to them.”

“You're a bit presumptuous, aren't you?” I say, disinterested.

“Semantics. You're all here, and the clock is ticking until the grand finale.”

When he trails his gun lower, touching, feeling, and breathing too close to her, my temper ignites. As if sensing the twitch in my arm, her lips part and her ballsy voice cuts him off.

“Hey... Dré. You know how I hate clowns?”

I don't dare blink. My eyes are locked on every move, even though my stiff muscles are burning where I stand, resisting the impulse to reach for her.

“Well, there's a few in here, right?” She continues.

“Shut the fuck up, India.” Fabian returns the barrel of his gun to her neck.

But she keeps talking to André, anyway. “But this time, you can sleep on my couch because Gio has my back.”

Jesus.

She’s talking to my brother in code. The second she lifts her knee and stretches a hand under the hem of her dress, I lose my breath.

Although her movements are quick and sharp, everything slows. André yells at her and she draws a Beretta M9, takes aim and precisely shoots the guy holding a gun at my twin’s head.

My knees weaken, but my instincts have already kicked in. I aim, snap the trigger, and lodge a bullseye bullet in Fabian’s forehead. India staggers forward, both of us drawn to each other like magnets.

Not taking any risks with her life, I charge straight for my girl and throw myself on top of her, tucking her body beneath my weight as we land.

André continues to yell, and I take a painful breath, knowing he’s still alive.

Gunfire explodes around us and my body jerks violently. Growling in pain, my muscles scream and catch fire. After a few heartbeats of shielding her, silence creeps over the coldness I’m feeling.

I can’t bring myself to move, or maybe I choose not to. Not when I know I’d see the heartbreak in her eyes—once she figures it out. Or when they all would.

“Gio?” Tomás shouts my name, his voice swirling in the back of my mind. “All clear.”

Shifting a little, I hunt out India’s face and pinpoint watery ocean eyes, and that beautiful smile of hers. “You, okay?” she asks.

“You’re a crazy bitch, baby.” I don’t answer the question. She’ll see for herself, eventually.

“I didn’t have a choice,” she says softly, and I can tell she’s shaken up. “I trusted you to come through for me.”

Sweat breaks out in waves and I manage to roll sideways, my abdomen throbbing and my left arm weak. Looking up, I see my brothers standing in the middle of the carnage, ferocious and out of breath.

“Gio?” India’s voice turns urgent. “Is this your blood or theirs?”

But while I lie here, a shadow moves in from the doorway. I try to lift my head, growling from the flaming agony deep in my side. I swallow, my throat too dry, and focus on the kill team trainee, whose aim is directed at Matheus’ head.

“Mat,” I hiss, taking wobbly aim, my arm shaking and my heavy-lidded eyes blinking away an unnatural exhaustion.

Even though I’m struggling to breathe properly, and my eyes are gritty, the buffalo emblem imprinted on a balaclava is all I see. Using the last reserve of my energy, I manage to keep my arm in the air.

Despite my efforts, an ear-piercing gunshot splices the air before I can lock on the target.

INDIA



I turn into him, my shaky hands slipping all over his bloody torso. He's barely resting on one elbow while trying to get up.

But it's the strained look on his face that has my stomach in knots as his swarthy complexion grows paler.

When he mutters Matheus' name and clenches his teeth, I push off the floor and tuck my shins under me to see him better.

His arm shakes as it lifts, aiming his handgun. I follow his gaze where Buffy's stealth approach is undetected by Matheus, and her rifle is pointed right at him.

My pulse stutters the very second Tomás spins on his heels and launches himself at their youngest brother. The crack of a single bullet echoes to the ceiling and I forget to breathe.

The two men tumble to the floor, and it's only then that I notice one of Fabian's soldiers drop like a stone in a shadowy corner. He was the real threat, not Buffy.

Matheus bounces to his feet, his nostrils flaring and his eyes wide, ready for war. A grunt follows the glare he shoots at the buffalo balaclava. But he points his gun to the floor and pumps four rounds into the dead guy.

Once he's emptied his clip, he throws his hand out and helps Tomás rise to his feet.

"You okay, Mat?" Tomás butts their foreheads together.

"You didn't have to do that, Tommy," Matheus bites out. "You could have been hit."

“I wouldn’t do it for just anyone,” Tomás replies, steps back, glances at the bloodied vest he wears, rips open the Velcro straps and strips like his skin is on fire.

In a blur, he tugs at his shirt, the buttons ping-ponging, and drags it off his broad shoulders. His muscles twitch and his chest heaves. In that second, André appears beside him, unscrews a bottle of liquor, and douses his big brother’s hands.

But I’m not interested in them, not when my heart is racing. I’m blinking in the mess of Giovanni’s clothes, and how there’s blood all over him.

It’s everywhere.

“Gio... you’ve been hit.” I carefully peel his top up and find a leaking gunshot wound. “Dré! Oh, my God... someone help!” My urgent yell prickles my scalp. “Gio needs a hospital.”

Wincing, Giovanni squeezes his eyes shut and grunts, doing his best to sit upright.

“Wait... what are you doing? Don’t move.” I pant in stone-cold shock. “You’re losing too much blood.”

“Help me up, India... please.” He grabs onto my arm and moves his legs in preparation to stand. “Where’s Leo?”

“He’s upstairs,” I say, my voice shaky. “In my bedroom passageway. I told him to stay there.”

“You.” A bare chested Tomás points at Buffy. “Come with me. We’ll get the kid.”

André is beside me on my next ragged exhale, his over-the-top energy fisting his brother’s top as he snarls into his face. “Why the fuck didn’t you put on a vest? You’re not invincible, *cabron*.”

“He gave me his,” Matheus says over my shoulder. “There weren’t enough.”

My throat tightens, ready to cry.

“Christ, you’re a fucking asshole, Gio,” André shouts, showing his distress.

He extracts a knife from under his pant leg and carves up Giovanni's top, removing it to get a better look at his injuries.

Taut tattooed muscles are painted red and a dark hole oozes blood. It's a massacre.

"Stay down. You're hurt. This isn't just a scratch... it's serious." André bunches up the material and presses it over the raw flesh.

"I know!" Gio snarls. "But there's something I need to do." His eyes darken with determination, refusing to listen to reason. Point blank ignoring the fact he's hemorrhaging blood. "Help me get up, Dré, or back the fuck off."

André sighs loudly, slots a hand under his brother's armpit, and hauls him to his feet. I stay tight to Giovanni's hip, sliding my arm around his waist and doing my best to support his weight.

Together, the three of us lurch toward the desk, managing to maneuver him onto the swivel chair. His breathing is shallow and slow as sweat rolls from his hairline.

"Paper..." He pings the switch on the green and brass lamp, stares at the top drawer, goes to grab the handle, and grits his teeth.

"I'll get it." I tell him, sliding it open and taking out a notebook full of blank lined pages.

Reaching for the pen holder, he sways a little and lets out a frustrated growl. "Fuck this!"

I quickly pluck a pen from the container and hand it to him. His troubled gaze snares mine, and he crooks his finger, beckoning me to come closer. I swallow the lump in my throat and close my eyes briefly when a bloodied hand settles on my cheek. His grimace makes my eyes well up and then I notice his bicep is bleeding too.

"I do love you," Giovanni exhales the words in a breath. "In here." He thumps his heart. "So much."

His hand drops and my knees go weak. "I love you too. You know that, so why aren't we going to the hospital? You

need medical attention, and I don't want to lose you.”

“She’s right, Gio. We need to go.” Matheus stands opposite us, presses his knuckles on top of the desk and stares at his brother. “Mama will freak out if anything happens to you...” He swallows hard. “And me.”

“In a minute.” Gio fists a page and rips it from the notebook.

Even though it’s crumpled and a little torn at one edge, he starts to write on it.

“Enough of the secret bullshit,” André throws his hands up and clasps them behind his head. “We’re wasting time—you’re wasting time.”

“How I feel about her isn’t a secret, Dré. I’m just formalizing it.” Giovanni blows out a heavy breath. “It won’t take long.”

I stroke his hair. “I need you alive, not bleeding out on a stupid notebook.”

While he continues to write, I point to the trampled fort. “Matheus, grab the blanket.”

He looks over at them, his eyes narrowed and nods.

“I don’t need it.” Giovanni grinds his back teeth. “Get the First Aid kit... in... there.” He slaps the stack of drawers beside him.

Without saying a word, Matheus moves to the same side as us and yanks out the top drawer, then the next one.

André sighs heavily, removes a tin from his pocket, takes out a blunt, and sparks the tip with his zippo. “Fuck, Gio... you’re pissing me off.” He scrubs at his scruff, letting smoke swirl.

Gio runs a hand down his face, smearing it in crimson blood. “She’s my everything,” he explains. “It all belongs to her. My son. My money. My weapons. My fucking heart.” The scrawled ink on the page blends with his blood as he continues to record the words he’s reciting. “I’m putting it down on paper. It’s all hers... everything.”

Finally, he plants his hand on the page, impressing a blood red handprint over the writing. “Make this a legal document, Mat,” he grits out, signing his name at the bottom, then leaning back in the chair, allowing Matheus to plaster a massive dressing over the gunshot wound.

“Is this supposed to be your last will and testament?” Matheus grabs the handwritten document and lifts it to the lamplight. “It needs witnesses and—”

“Think of it as a prenup. She gets everything I have.”

“Are you getting married?” Matheus shoots back.

“We’re eloping. Right now.”

My pulse goes haywire and my mind swims. He’s delirious, or just crazy. We aren’t going anywhere other than the hospital.

“Gio! Can we please go now?” I plead, exhaling a whimper, my lungs getting tighter and tighter. “You’re talking like you’re about to die. And I won’t let that happen.”

Giovanni tugs his family ring off his finger, reaches for my hand, and stares right at me. “Will you be my everything, baby?”

Tears sting my eyes, feeling nauseous at the thought of losing him. “Yes.”

“Am I your everything?” he asks.

“Gio—” I touch his clammy cheek and thumb a streak of blood through the dark hairs on his jaw. “Always.”

“Then it’s sealed, India Souza.” He slides his big ring onto my wedding finger. “You’re mine and I’m yours.”

I nod and start to shake, my lower lip quivering. His eyelids droop and he tips into me, pressing his mouth to mine. The kiss we share isn’t biting or demanding. It’s gentle, soft, and heartfelt, unlike anything this man had ever offered me.

“Giovanni...” André interrupts, his voice rushed. “The clock is ticking, brother. You’re bleeding out. Come on, where are your cars parked? I’ll drive you to the hospital.”

The clock is ticking.

Fabian's statement replays in my head, and suddenly my heart stops beating. I jump to my feet, feeling my blood run ice-cold. "Dré!"

André's gaze darts to mine, his spine straightening as he senses the horror unraveling within me. "Indy, it's okay. We're out of here once Tommy gets Leo."

"No... no... we need to leave now!" The words rush out, urgent and sharp. "Fabian said this place would go up in flames. Dré... I think he planted a bomb in Blackwater."

GIOVANNI



“I have to warn Tommy!” Matheus folds the contract and stuffs it into his back pocket.

“Do not go upstairs,” I yell at him, the pain firing through me unbearable.

But my youngest brother doesn’t listen to my command. He’s already sprinting out of the library and I’m struggling to see straight.

I tap my earpiece and say, “Everyone, get out. There’s a bomb. I repeat. Get the fuck out now!” Swallowing a breath, I speak to one trainee in particular. “Buffalo... have you found Leo?”

There’s a lifelong second of a pause over the airwaves and then she replies, “Affirmative, Dragon. We’re making our way outside now.”

“Do you have eyes on Mat?”

“Negative.”

Fuck.

“Where are they?” India asks, wrapping my bicep with a tight bandage. “Did Tomás find Leo? The little guy must be terrified.”

I nod, rummaging through packets of shit I don’t need, finding the self-injector, and jamming the chunky pen into my thigh to release a shot of adrenaline.

Sucking a gust of air into my lungs, my heart rate goes berserk. I think I'm about to have a heart attack. But I inhale deeply and use the burst of energy it gives me to push out of the chair.

“What the hell?” India grabs the injector out of my hand. “This could kill you!”

I set my hand on her shoulder and close my eyes briefly. The urge to hug her is strong, but there's not enough time.

“It won't. Come on. Move it. We're against the clock with no idea how long we have.” I slide my hand down her arm and grab her wrist, the warmth of it my anchor.

We're far from safe. Even though the medication charges through my veins, it doesn't dull the pain or the rage.

“Quickly,” I press, pulling her along beside me, through the library and into the hallway.

My head is thumping so hard I could throw up at any second. I've been this way before, maybe not quite so critical. But still, I survived and I could do it again.

As soon as we near the entrance hall at the foot of the stairs, André yells into the darkness, calling for Matheus. There's no response.

“We can't leave without him!” André moves ahead of us.

When he shouts his name again, I know what I need to do. This is my house. My fault. My duty.

Reluctantly letting go of India's hand, I push her toward my twin. “Get her out of here, Dré.”

She shakes her head, horror tugging her brows together. “No... what are you doing? Keep calling him. Do not go up there, Gio.”

“He's not answering, and no one knows this place like I do.” I explain, taking a measured step back and wishing I could walk out with her. “Get as far away from here as possible, and I'll find you later.”

André stands beside us, quietly glaring at me. I offer him a slight smile and steal the blunt from his fingers, placing it between my lips.

Inhaling the marijuana smoke, I move further away, hoping the lethal concoction that's held in my lungs and spiking my bloodstream would get me up the stairs without collapsing.

“Go! Hurry the fuck up. No hesitation, India. Remember?” And then I brace myself, step onto the first tread and turn, trusting André to do what's right for her.

“Gio...” There's a scuffle behind me and I know she's trying to follow me. “You'd better come back for me, or I'll kill you myself,” India calls after me. “I mean it, Giovanni!”

But with every step I climb, I have to stop myself from looking over my shoulder. From letting her see just how scared I am of never seeing her again.

I don't want my last memories of her to be heartbreak or anger. No, I want to remember her beautiful face next to mine on the pillow—happy, pretty, and all mine.

Tomás and Leo should be outside by now. André and India are exiting Blackwater through the front door, and I have no clue where Matheus is.

When I reach the landing, I shout his name and listen. Nothing. I yell again and hear a muffled voice.

“Mat? Where the hell are you?” I yell, my stomach muscles aching. “This place is about to explode.”

Then I hear him again, but I don't see him anywhere. I lurch forward, dipping in and out of the moonlit rooms at either side of the landing.

By the time I'm at India's old bedroom, I hear his voice again. “Christ, Gio. I couldn't find Tommy and Leo. And then I bumped into this fucking thing.”

Matheus stands in the middle of the adjoining bathroom, the door wide open and a silver casing next to his boots. “That asshole must have paid big bucks for this. It's high-tech. I tried

to find a switch to deactivate it, but it's still counting down." He frowns. "Didn't you find Tommy and the kid?"

"They're all outside." I stare at the streamlined cylinder. "It's just me and you, Mat. I'd never leave a Souza behind, especially my little brother. Now let's go."

Matheus grins, his face splattered in blood and his eyes dark. He reaches for the blunt hanging from my lips. "I'm really your favorite brother, aren't I, Giovanni? Not Dré?"

"Fuck you." I shake my head and sigh. "I should punch your pretty boy face for not listening to me."

He shrugs, his playful expression slipping. "You won't need to when this thing blows."

"How long have we got?"

Matheus sucks the tip of the blunt and holds the smoke in his lungs. "As of right now, less than four minutes."

Fuck.

Together we dive into the bedroom, where my obsession for India raged out of control following her arrival into my home. There was something about her I couldn't resist, no matter how much I'd tried to ignore the chemistry. I knew I was toxic to her. And so did she.

It wasn't just that tight, womanly body of hers that had snared my attention. It was the whole package. The brokenness inside of her had called to me. The sense of staunch loyalty she's always had for my family, and her dauntless warrior spirit.

Writing the contract was my way of proving to her, beyond the words I find hard to find, that these big feelings I have for her are real. They're forever.

Dark spots scatter in my vision and I scrub my eyes to get rid of them. I need to get out of here before I end up the same way as Reno. She'd never forgive me for that.

"Gio?" Matheus says my name, his voice deep and uncertain. "You good?"

I turn my eyes on him and grunt, pressing a hand to my side. The white padding turned red, I'm covered in sweat, and it feels like my heart is about to beat out of my chest.

"I'm okay... just working this out." I look at the panel doorway. "Going that way will take too long."

Matheus runs his fingers through his hair, combing back the lengths and blowing out loudly. "So, what's the plan, big brother? We're cutting it close."

"You afraid of heights?" I stagger toward the lead-lined window, unintentionally smearing the glass when I press a hand to it, and exhale heavily.

He's beside me in a flash, cracking the window open to help me and peering out at the sloping slates. "Me? Afraid of heights. Do you even know me?"

"Then what are you waiting for, cabron? Get the hell out of here and keep moving." I'm fighting the urge to sit down, gritting my teeth from the effort of staying upright.

His searching eyes are filled with suspicion and brotherly concern. "No. You need my help, Gio. Go first and I'll shove you onto the roof."

My stomach rolls. I rub a hand down my face, trying to stay focused. "You're stalling, Mat. We'll both go up... in smoke at this rate..." Fuck, it hurts to breathe.

"Fine. But you'd better be right behind me." He steadies his footing on top of the cast iron radiator and hauls himself out into the night air.

"Do you think I'd make it easy... for you to make a move on India." I blink away black blobs and shiver, feeling ice cold.

"Jesus, Gio. She has no interest in me. That girl was made for you. And the way she worships you..."

My heart malfunctions, randomly skipping a few beats and then speeding up again. I grab onto the window frame for support and growl. I need to be with her right now.

I don't know where I find the strength to climb through the window, but I do. When Matheus' hand reaches for me, I gladly take it and use his strength to heave myself onto the rooftop.

"Go that way." I point toward the ocean at the rear of the house. "We'll be able to jump onto the extension from there."

Matheus stays low, scrambling ahead from one slant to another and constantly peering over his shoulder at me. "I reckon we've got about sixty seconds left," he shouts, in a rush.

But I don't give a fuck about the seconds slipping out of reach, not when my pulse is thumping in my throat and my lungs are growing tighter with each inhale. My footing is sloppy, each step starting to slow down, my vision blurry, and my knees growing too weak.

I don't think I'm going to make it off this roof alive.

My mind drifts to India, wondering if she can see me up here. If she's waiting for me somewhere safe, away from the bomb that's about to devastate our home. The thought of reaching her gives me the extra push I need—the motivation to scramble harder and faster. She makes my heart keep on beating.

Almost reaching the extension, a thunderous blowout creates a high-pressure blast.

In front of me, Matheus leaps into the air and I lose my footing. He's out of sight now and I'm clinging to a turret watching violent flames, thick smoke, and broken tiles burst into the sky at the front of the manor house. Even though I'm breathless and losing too much blood, I barely manage to throw my leg out and secure my boot on the rain gutter, clambering onto hands and knees.

Where the fuck did Mat go?

If I wasn't so cold, I'd be sweating from the exertion.

Finally meeting the roof overhang where I know there's a gable wall, I gaze downward, my eyes gritty and my head swimming. Thankfully, Matheus is on the flat roof of the

corridor linking the old house to the new. The look of fury on his grimy face matches his frustrated snarls and scraped hands.

“What the hell are you doing?” I call to him, my nostrils flaring, watching him launch himself at the wall and slide back down again.

“Christ.” His eyes flick upward, and he drags a hand through his disheveled hair, exhaling in a gust. “You’re okay. I was trying to climb up again to find you.”

“You think I need your help?” I mutter, throwing my legs over the edge and using a drainpipe as my rope, gradually lowering myself to his level.

“We all need help.” He places his hands on my hips to anchor me. “And right now, you need it more than any of us, Gio. You look like shit.”

I swallow, my throat desert dry. “Charming. And I was going to tell you how... proud I am of you, Mat.” I swipe my forehead with the back of my hand, feeling sick.

After dropping onto the stone path surrounding the exterior walls, my knees buckle under me.

“Come on, brother. Time to get you to the hospital.” Matheus hauls my arm around the back of his neck, snakes my waist with his own, and supports some of my weight.

Interlinked, we leave the burning building behind—the house I had once thought was my home. It only became a real home when she was in it with us.

“You did good today, Mat. Shooting those fuckers... without getting hit.” I blink wildly, doing my best to see straight. “And trying to deactivate a bomb takes balls. You’d make a decent soldier.”

“Papá forced me into law instead of giving me a city to rule over like Dré. I’m bored shitless, Gio,” he admits. “I’ve been thinking about it for a while now, and everything fell into place when you brought me here. I want to join your kill team as your trainee. I’ll do whatever you tell me to do.”

“No.” I grit out. “You’re twenty-two, over-the-top smart, and the world is at your feet. Choose something else.”

Just as he opens his mouth to speak, we spot the rest of our family. They’re spilling out of the dark forest, bounding in our direction. United.

André has his arm around India’s shoulders. She’s holding Leo’s hand, and Tomás is holding his other hand. Beside him, Daenis sniffs a nearby tree trunk and Lola palms her cheeks, upset and shocked by the state of me.

She’s seen me busted up before, and even bound one of my broken fingers to a splint. Only this time I’ve one foot in the grave and it’s obvious to everyone.

Seeing them makes my insides warm even though my teeth are chattering.

They’re all I need—*mi familia*. Not the thrill of sniper rifles or a lifetime cloaked in lonely shadows, not even the power that comes with being the most feared man in Colombia.

I just need these people in my life, and the woman who’s reprogrammed my heart to beat for a different future.

India stops herself from jumping into my arms and carefully presses her warm body against the gnawing pain in my chest, taking my face in her hands. “Don’t ever do that to me again,” she scolds, her eyes watery. “I thought I’d lost you.”

“You almost did,” I mutter, loving how she smells, but feeling pain in every muscle. “Except you can’t get rid of me that easily, baby. We’re attached in too many ways.”

Studying her before me, I inwardly admit she’s too good for me. A killer like me shouldn’t suck her into violence and mayhem, even if she thrives on the danger. Despite my guilt, I’d never let her go.

Over the years, none of the females I’d used for sex ever managed to earn my complete respect, own my attention, or evoke any worthwhile feelings inside of me. Nor did they

make my controlled impulses go to shit. Whereas this woman, she makes me *feel*—crazy, mad—in love.

For India, I would easily smash up my father's expectations and go against every torturous lesson I'd ever endured.

The glint in her ocean blue eyes has depleted and beneath the blood spatters and bruising, her complexion is whiter than snow.

“You kicked ass, baby.” I kiss the tip of her nose.

“So did you.” Her dry lips stay slightly parted, her forehead furrowed in thought, and feathery eyelashes flutter against her eyelids as she looks up at me like I'm the god of war returning home.

The permanent shift that had happened inside of me led me to a much more fulfilling role than being a lonely monster. I just want to make this woman happy for the rest of her life.

As my eyes roll and the last dreg of energy drains to my boots, I try hard to fight the exhaustion tugging at my eyelids. I have to usher my family out of here before the police show up.

Lozano's father is wealthy like us, which achieves influence and deals through corruption. We know that fact only too well. Papá had bribed countless government officials, funded high-flyers, and paid off the chief of police. Those people aren't so much loyal to the Souzas as they are to the cash, we pay out to them.

Power speaks through dollar signs—and bullets. That part we promise, especially when Tomás had stepped up.

Until I find out who's on Lozano's payroll, and anyone else involved in this attack, we aren't safe.

“Time to go, Gio.” Tomás' stern tone slips into my mind and then a softer voice follows it.

“Papá.” Leo grabs hold of my arm and buries his face. “You're hurt. Bad.”

His little shoulders shake quietly as he sobs. India draws her lips between her teeth, slowly places a hand on his head, and then nods, giving me a look that tells me she hates pulling away. But she understands Leo needs to be with me too.

That soft crease on her forehead and the way she nibbles her bottom lip fizzes warmth through my freezing chest.

Even though there's a measure of space between us now, I still feel the heat of her skin like a roaring fire. Being so close without having my hands on her is playing havoc with my temper.

I lower to my haunches and meet my son's glistening eyes, the worry on his face yet another regret. Losing my balance, I end up bumping my ass onto the wet earth, weariness getting the better of me. I drag him down to the ground with me and hug him tight.

They're safe.

And then my eyes finally close.

INDIA



Despite slipping in and out of consciousness, Giovanni refused to go to the hospital. No surprise there.

Instead, André had driven us to Dr. Valderrama's private clinic. She put him in a sanitized treatment room used for minor operations at the farthest end of the facility and cordoned it off.

Security guards moved in minutes after we arrived to patrol the hallways and secure the entrance.

The doctor arranged for a surgeon friend of hers to bring extra medical equipment and together they removed the bullet stuck inside of him. Afterwards, she hung around to oversee his recovery.

In the beginning, when I first met her, I thought they had a dirty past. Turns out, her love affair is with the flowing cash Giovanni pays her for discretion and professionalism.

Apparently, this isn't the first time he's landed on her doorstep in the middle of the night demanding medical assistance. Since then, she's purchased various operating room equipment to ensure the clinic is his one-stop treatment facility, and her bank balance is topped up regularly.

Although, it is the first occasion the top leaders of the Souza cartel have paid her a visit. Her complexion turned ghostly pale when Tomás introduced himself, and during the meeting with Matheus, her cheeks burned hot pink. However, André wasn't interested in meeting the woman. His twin—his only concern.

While Giovanni was in surgery, I'd spent my time away from him in a shower cubicle, shaky and unsettled. In the quiet aftermath, I realized my skull was pounding and my lip was bruised beneath the thin cut Fabian had given me. I hadn't noticed my own injuries, probably since I was so freaked about Giovanni's blood loss.

So, when flashes of death hit me, I revisit the exact moment when he had thrown himself on top of me and put his life on the line to save mine. I vividly recall the blood spewing from his abdomen, and with that memory, an overwhelming rush of devotion and gratitude shakes me to the bone.

Thankful to be alone so no one could see me break down, my tears blend with water droplets, and I palm my heart to settle it. Somehow, I hold my other hand over my mouth to silence my sobs.

Gio did that for *me*.

And I would do it for him in a heartbeat.

No hesitation. No regrets.

I would protect my monster and gladly wear the battle scars.

When I'd told him he was my everything, it was the absolute truth—I couldn't be more certain of my feelings. He's my soulmate, no matter the obstacles we continue to face or how ugly our future could be in his dark world.

I take temporary refuge under the jets to pull myself together. The warm water helps to ease my tense muscles and cleans off the dried blood. Afterward, I'd returned to his designated room with my hair dripping and wearing a clean dress given to me by the doctor.

Once Tomás and André were certain Giovanni was in a stable condition, they'd taken Leo and left.

Initially, I argued against it, wanting to keep the little guy close to me. But Tomás had already made up his mind, and I knew better than to lock horns with a man like him.

I've earned his respect and trust, and he's always had mine. These powerful men may well consider me family, but Tomás is still the head of it.

André told me Carina and Sinéad were excited to welcome Leo into the family, which means he'd likely be treated like the cartel prince he's become.

That being said, Leo was hesitant to go with them at first, but then he'd taken André's hand after he promised to tell him stories about his Papá when they were kids.

A little tug of jealousy had me wishing I could hear those tales too. Despite myself, I would never leave Giovanni's side. Not when he's hooked up to an antibiotic IV and twitching from the nightmares running amok in his mind.

Rather than leave with his brothers, Matheus had stayed behind and parked himself in the corner of the pale green room on a comfy-looking leather armchair. Following Giovanni's operation in an improvised operating theater, Matheus walked behind the nurses as they wheeled Giovanni through the corridor and moved his bed into a quiet position under the window.

One rogue grin and a husky thank you from Matheus was all it took for them to offer him a drink from the staff kitchen. He went with them and returned a few minutes later with a big mug of coffee for me too.

It's been a few hours since then and Matheus had to dip out to answer his cell phone. He hasn't returned yet. I continue sitting in this armchair, next to the narrow bed Giovanni is lying in, trapped within the same four walls for what feels like eons—quietly waiting. Patiently, I watch his chest rise and fall as I twist the chunky ring on my wedding finger.

What does it mean for us now?

I remember the sincerity in his eyes when he'd slid his ring onto my finger in front of two witnesses. It was real—me and him declaring our feelings for each other in that moment together.

"You're mine and I'm yours."

Our heart-felt commitment is all that matters. Well, that and him getting out of this bed.

When the door opens, I keep my tired eyes on the manly hand I'm stroking and make a silly comment about Matheus needing to leave the nurses alone to do their job.

He clears his throat. "Have you met my mother yet, India?"

My eyes shoot to the doorway as Teresa Souza glides in, her shrewd green eyes settling on her debilitated son. An elegant, green-colored dress loosely hugs her curves from neck to shin, cinched in at the waist with a black Chanel belt.

Shiny sable hair skims proud, drawn back shoulders and her spine's poker straight. But it's the look on her face when she assesses Giovanni's state that separates her from her mafia composure and reveals a loving mother.

"Mrs. Souza." I blush for some weird reason. Probably because this woman intimidates me by simply strolling into the room.

I blink at her, shock all over my face. Of course, she'd visit her son after he almost died. It just wasn't on my radar since I don't really remember my mother—and this is the first time I've encountered his.

Matheus moves in behind his mother, a playful smirk twitching his lips and his chest rising silently with a quiet laugh. He knows this is a big deal for me and is clearly amused at my stunned expression.

Still staring at Giovanni, she lowers to sit with her knees pressed together. She holds her chin high and crosses her ankles. I glance down at her stiletto heels, in awe of her polished elegance.

"He adopted a young boy?" Her brows rise as she finally meets my gaze.

I nod and swallow, feeling bone-deep exhaustion. "Yeah. His name is Leo. He's a special kid."

She smiles, but the corners of her mouth barely rise. “Much like my darling Giovanni...” Her chest lifts slowly as she inhales. “As a mother, there was only so much I could take. After Elias murdered his dog, I bought him a puppy and kept it at my place, away from his father. I told Giovanni it would be our little secret, that his Papá would never know about it.” Her throat bobs. “But he wouldn’t go near the poor thing. He even told me he would stop visiting Mag Mel if I didn’t get rid of it. For a while, I thought his father had succeeded in destroying his beautiful heart.”

Teresa splays jewel encrusted fingers over her heart like it’s breaking. “One day, I took Matheus for a walk in the wild gardens at the back of my home and found Giovanni on his knees. When he heard his little brother shout for him, he jumped to his feet, cradling a wild rabbit in his hands, and staring at me with a look of pure horror on his sweet face. As if I’d caught him caring...” Her eyes turn distant, lost in the memory. “There were carrots at his shoes and a bunch of hand-picked leaves. That’s when I knew he’d become the master of secrets.”

She continues, patting Matheus’ hand when he sets it on her shoulder. “Secrets that even his mother would never learn. And as much as that fact saddened me, I was happy too, because it meant Elias hadn’t robbed my son of his humanity. He still felt something inside.”

Her gaze returns to mine, darkness powdering her expression. “I was okay not knowing what he was hiding, as long as he kept in touch. I know what sort of man he is and what he’s capable of. On the outside, he’s a despicable monster and on the inside, he’s still that little boy who just wanted to love his brothers.”

She falls silent, studying me with the eyes of a committed mother. The pivotal female in all their lives. A lump forms in my throat and I helplessly drop my eyes to the ring on my finger.

“That ring belongs to my son.” She narrows her gaze. “It only leaves his finger when he dies. And he’s not dead.”

“He gave it to her, Mama,” Matheus tells her, hunkering to eye level beside his mother. “Like a wedding ring. He wrote a contract, signed it, and even bled over it.” He gently squeezes her hand. “It was a special moment.”

Teresa’s pupils flare as he speaks up for me. “I know what he did. André seems to think they’re perfectly matched... but that ring... he’s not dead, Matheus.” Her voice trails off.

I find my voice and link my fingers with Giovanni’s for courage. “The ring was a last-minute gesture when he was bleeding out. I’ll give it back.” I release him, easily slide the ring off my finger, take his hand in mine, and push the ring over his knuckle. And not to the original finger. No, I return it to his fourth finger to replicate the exact spot he’d left it on me.

Teresa catches my eye, the intensity strong. I can’t tell whether she’s angry he gave it to me or relieved it’s back where it belongs—that he’s still alive.

Unclasping her hands, she stares at her own fingers, her expression contemplative. “Did he ask you to marry him before Lozano’s boy attacked?”

I shrug. “Giovanni told me he’s not into weddings. But we shared simple vows, and he made me sign his contract. I didn’t care about any of it. Really, I didn’t. I just wanted to take him to the hospital. He told me he loved me. He actually admitted it... I don’t know what that was in the library, but it felt like a real commitment for both of us.”

The corner of her mouth twitches and a gentle laugh surprises me. “Weddings are definitely not his thing. However, there is a big difference between a wedding and a marriage. My sons don’t conform to society and its limitations. They are powerful men who do whatever the hell they want. If he made a verbal commitment to you, then it is real. And from what Matheus has told me, his love for you was the one secret he couldn’t keep to himself.”

Her gaze drops, and she slowly removes a ruby and diamond cluster ring from her forefinger, holding it out before

me. “This belonged to my mother. I’d like you to have it as a replacement for the ring you kindly returned to my son.”

My chest tightens at the sight of the pretty ring sitting in her palm. “I can’t accept that, Mrs. Souza. Not if it was your mother’s. What if I lost it?”

“Then my son would buy you another one.” Teresa rises when I take it, her movements graceful as she fixes the other rings on her dainty fingers. “But something tells me you’re not careless with the things you love. Am I right, Mrs. Souza?”

My belly flips at her acknowledgement of my place in Giovanni’s life. I nod and stand too, clutching the ring in my fist. “You should know...” I say softly. “He didn’t tell anyone about Leo, because he was afraid of what his father would do. It’s not that he didn’t trust you with his secret. I think he felt like he was protecting his son and you.”

A flash of something unreadable passes behind her eyes, her composure faltering for a split second. She glances over my shoulder to where Giovanni is resting and then her observant eyes find mine again.

Clearing her throat, she takes a step forward, her nails brushing my temple as she gently strokes a lock of hair away to study each of the bruises I wear on my face.

“You’re a warrior. And no one is more deserving of his love than you. We will celebrate your union when Giovanni drags himself out of that bed.” Her eyes crease at the corners as a soft smile tugs at her lips. “Welcome to my family, India.”

Her family.

INDIA



It's just the two of us now.

I've been sitting here, waiting for Giovanni to open his eyes.

Despite him being pumped full of antibiotics and a high dosage of morphine, the doctor assured me they repaired the internal tissue damage and successfully stitched up both gunshot wounds.

Thankfully, the other bullet only grazed his bicep and wouldn't affect how he uses it.

All the courage I had earlier seems to slip from my body. Giovanni almost died.

We all faced mortal danger.

For greed. Power. And Fabian's ego.

Why didn't I see it coming? I should have known. Or at the very least, been more vigilant. Reno would be so pissed at me for befriending the enemy.

Then again, Fabian was good. He'd used charm as his mask, and I didn't see past it. That wouldn't happen again. But what about his family? Are they our enemies now too?

My eyes return to Giovanni's chest, rising with every shallow breath he takes. My belly aches. Even though he's right beside me, he's so far away, stuck in that secretive head of his.

I'm overcome with slashes of emotion, each one slicing my heart to pieces. What will happen when those vivid green eyes reopen and he sees me again?

Will our commitment to each other stay intact, or will he go off on a full-scale rampage to take down the Lozano family, leaving Leo and me to live without him for months?

I'm not sure if I could go through that again—constantly wondering if he's alive. My stomach twists in hundreds of knots. My heart aching and my mind racing to the worst possible scenarios.

I find myself staring at the engagement ring in my hand, not quite sure which finger to slip it onto. Yet, intuitively knowing it belongs on my wedding finger.

Giovanni and I have an unconventional relationship. However, so much has happened over the past few months, and this feels surreal.

I didn't really know what to expect from him in the long term and told myself just being with the guy was enough. And it was. I *knew* he loved me without hearing those three impossible words. I could *feel* it.

He gave me the ring as the last wish of a man who thought he would die. There was no fancy proposal or short-term engagement, just a heart-wrenching dedication said on a whim.

He hadn't arranged a marriage license and there wasn't an officiant to oversee our simple vows.

I'm not really Mrs. Souza. Not in the eyes of the law, but I can't help thinking all the formal, legal bullshit doesn't matter.

We love each other.

Fuck all the red tape and bureaucracy.

But what now?

Now... I have this family heirloom gifted to me by his mafia princess mother and a lingering doubt about whether I should wear it.

Touching his muscular arm, I tingle all over. Even now, this man of power and dominance, who at the moment looks somewhat vulnerable, still makes my veins hot and my heart pound.

As he rests with his tattooed physique taking up the narrow mattress, I recognize the darkness within him—more so in these bright white surroundings. His presence continues to vibrate supremacy and his new wounds just add to his collection of scars.

He's forever the disciplined *sicario* I'm inexplicably drawn to.

"I'm either dead or you're thinking about leaving me." Inky lashes framing intensely green eyes blink at me, and he runs his tongue under his top lip.

Our gazes tangle. The thrill I'd felt from the beginning of our relationship electrifies me, our combined energy more fulfilling than a spoken word.

For a nanosecond, we just stare at each other, my whole world revolving around this man. I don't care about the anguish I've endured or the murderous shadow of violence we live under. It's unhealthy, I know that. But all I care about is him.

My belly flutters, the intensity of our bond firing up my senses. I no longer know how I'd ever survive without him.

"You're one hundred percent alive." I smile at him, immediately taking his hand. "And I'm never leaving you."

Shadows darken the perfect outlines of his bare torso, giving him a lethal edge of risk and danger. The corner of his mouth hitches and he lifts his head off the pillow, scanning the corners of the small room. Forever assessing his surroundings. "Where's Leo?"

I reach for the water just next to the bed and pour him a drink. "He was kidnapped... by your brothers for some Souza family time. I'll FaceTime André and you can speak to him yourself. Lola and Daenis went with them."

“Christ,” he chuckles under his breath and scrubs his face. “Poor kid. I assume they’ve increased security?”

“Yeah, and Matheus has The Covenant on standby. I get the feeling he wants to be a part of the team.”

Giovanni shakes his head slowly and sighs. “Did he leave too?”

“Dré wanted him to go back to the hotel with them. But Mat said he’d rather stay here and keep me company while you were recovering. I’m guessing he’s out there chatting with the nurses.”

His eyes settle on the family ring hugging his wedding finger. “Why the fuck is that on my finger?”

“Your mother was here for a while. She left a few hours ago.” I tell him. “She said the ring belongs to you and only comes off when you’re dead.”

His eyes narrow on the stone, confusion tugging at his features. “But I gave it to you, didn’t I?” He winces, struggling to shuffle farther up the bed a little.

“You did. Because you thought you were dying.” I point out. “Anyway... she gave me this as a replacement.” I pinch the gold band and hold it up for him to see. “She said it was her mother’s.”

Giovanni’s brows knit together, and he takes it from me, studying the sparkly diamonds and deep red ruby. “Right... it’s not really you,” he mutters, and then dismisses it, dropping the ring into my hand. “Set it over there and we’ll call Dré. I want to check on Leo and make sure those fuckers haven’t put a gun in his hand.”

My heart drops to my toes.



A few days later, Giovanni is adamant he’s leaving the medical facility.

Though the doctor thinks it's too soon, but he won't listen to reason. There's a change in him and I can't quite put my finger on it. I'd caught him taking calls on his cell phone, and quieting every time I entered the room.

He even received a package this morning and when I'd returned from the shower room, it had vanished.

Secrets.

That's his forte.

Although, he's not distant. Far from it even. We spend sunrise to sunset together and at night we sleep side by side after he'd demanded another bed be brought in. I haven't brought up the ring or how it had disappeared either, giving us both time to process what life means for us now.

But today he feels edgier than usual, and I get the impression he's about to tell me something I don't want to hear.

Earlier, Matheus and Giovanni had gotten into an argument and when I asked them what it was about, they both brushed it off.

After that, Matheus left in a bad mood. While Giovanni went about dressing in camo pants and a black t-shirt, throwing on a zip-up hoodie and pulling up the hood. He popped open an orange tube and tipped a few pills into his mouth, crunching them into powder with his back teeth.

Taking my hand, he leads me out of the building into the mild morning air and ushers me to an electric Audi. I get in and sit quietly when he slams the car door shut, then rounds the hood. His stern expression makes my stomach twist.

The sky is clear when I stare out at it whizzing past the windshield. I should ask him where we're going given Blackwater is in ruins, but when he turns onto the familiar coastal road, apprehension fizzles through me. Apparently, that's exactly where we are headed.

"Are we going to the caves?" I ask him, my gaze settling on his family ring, still displayed on his wedding finger. "To visit your team?"

“Not today, baby,” he replies, his voice low and thoughtful. “There’s something we need to settle.”

In the distance, the iron gates of Blackwater come into view. The towering space once dominated by a gothic home is bare. The explosion demolished one half of the building and fire had swept through the rest, causing the last standing walls to fall inwards.

Through the trees, yellow bulldozers are hard at work, scraping rubble into heaps and clearing the site where the manor house had once stood.

“Are you rebuilding it?” I ask as the gates judder open.

“No,” he says matter-of-factly and puts his foot down on the accelerator.

When the car stops, I step out and stare at the massive hole left within the landscape, looking through trees toward the calm ocean and big blue sky. “Oh my God, the extension is gone too.”

“Yeah,” he replies, taking my hand and walking me to where the front door and its creepy knocker once was. “In a couple of days, it’ll look like Blackwater never existed. What’s left of it will be wiped from the face of the earth with no trace of us ever having lived here. It has to be this way.”

“Because of Fabian’s family?” I ask, oddly feeling the echo of our time spent together here.

“Sort of.” He shrugs, lets go of my hand, and places his on my shoulders. Skillfully, he angles my body away from the devastation, putting my back to it all.

Giovanni takes a sharp breath as if he’s apprehensive and then he just stares at me, saying nothing.

“Are you okay with it being knocked down? I mean, this place was your home. Your safe house. It’s where you raised Leo.”

He looks over my shoulder for a beat, thoughtful. “It served its purpose,” he finally says. “And now Blackwater and everything it offered me is in the past. That life is in the past,

India. I want a fresh start. And..." His eyes lock onto mine and my heart stops beating. "... I want to be wherever you are."

Slowly, his hands fall away, and he drops to one knee, shoving a hand into his pocket to pull out a small velvet box. "You deserve to wear a ring of your own. One that has meaning behind it. I committed myself to you in front of my brothers. I told you I loved you... I let them know you're my everything, and I meant every fucking word. So now, I'm asking you to officially be my wife and I mean that too, because I don't want to live without you."

He opens the box where a ring sits cushioned in navy satin, the ruby and diamonds catching the sunlight. I stop breathing, my eyes wide. It resembles his family ring, only this one is slightly more delicate and daintier.

"I arranged for the ring my mother gave you to be redesigned. The jeweler extracted the gemstones and melted down the gold to make a ring worthy of a Souza Queen." Giovanni stands. "You're the love of my life. It's you, baby. You make me want to spend my life in the sunshine."

"You really want to get married?" I say breathlessly, my heart thumping faster.

He keeps his profound eyes on mine and takes the ring out of the box. "My girl deserves more than a blood-stained contract. We'll do it right this time. Make it legal."

"Your commitment was enough for me. I just needed to know it was what you really wanted. You didn't die in the end... you could have woken up and changed your mind."

"I woke up and saw you. That's what I want to wake up to everyday. Doing it properly this time means you'll have the Souza name, and my twin will have to stop referring to you as his kid sister," he replies, amusement sparkling in his eyes. "Although..." He bites his bottom lip, leans in, and whispers next to my ear, "There's something filthy hot about fucking a naughty stepsister, or whatever you are to him now."

My stomach flips. "You're a bad man, Giovanni Souza."

“Oh, I really am. But you haven’t said yes yet,” his voice rumbles, full of heat.

“Well...” I nuzzle the side of his unshorn cheek and breathe him into my lungs. “If I say yes, I need you to promise me there won’t be any secrets between us anymore. You have to tell me *everything*.”

“I promise.” He pulls back a little, holds my shaky hand, and slips the perfectly sized Souza ring onto my wedding finger. Staring into my eyes, he smooths back flyaway strands of hair at either side of my face, the contact tender and shivery. “India, my secrets are yours if you want them.”

My heart thrums, his wicked ebony lashes batting slowly as he waits for my answer. “Yes, Giovanni. I want to know your secrets and I want you.”

He kisses my knuckles and offers me a devastating smile. “Want to know what the first secret is?” He snakes a hand around my waist and yanks me into him, our chests gently colliding.

I gasp, a nervous, excited giggle bubbling out of my throat. His head dips and he kisses my neck, his grazing teeth prickling my skin in a wave. “I’m not sure if you’ll like it.”

I inhale sharply, the heat of his breath chasing the goosebumps he’s conjured. “I’m waiting...”

“I’m not into big weddings.”

I laugh at that and run my hands over his shoulders. “Really? I would never have guessed. All I need is a nice dress and you. And maybe André and Letterman there too. That’s it. Though the ring is a nice touch. It’s beautiful. But what will your mom say?”

“Mama was happy for the ring to be repurposed and even happier for you to have it. She likes you, even if she thinks you’re young.”

“I am young.” I shrug. “But that doesn’t mean I don’t know what love is or understand what my heart wants. André brought me into your inner circle a long time ago. It’s the only life I know.” I inch closer, careful not to press against his

wound. “Will you tell me what you and Matheus were fighting over?”

He stiffens.

GIOVANNI



“So... you’re really doing this?” André sits in the ivory leather stitched seat to my right and crooks his ringed fingers at the male flight attendant, signaling for liquor.

It’s been a long week for all of us.

Lola leads the dog on a leash as she boards, her gaze wandering over the sleek interior of Sinéad’s private jet. She plops herself down on a beige couch beneath two portholes, pats the space beside her for Daenis to curl up on and picks up the television remote control, her wide eyes dazed by the sitting room layout.

I push my Randolph aviators further up my nose and hunt out India’s beautiful face. She’s sitting next to Leo a few seats away, talking about the jets she used to take with her brother and my twin. He’s all starry-eyed at the luxe décor and how the efficient cabin crew had given them frozen treats for take-off.

My twin’s pregnant wife sits opposite them, listening to the stories and laughing at India’s off-the-wall memories of André.

“Yeah. They’re my priority,” I tell him, my balls tingling when India sucks the tip of her popsicle. “It doesn’t mean I’m hanging up my sniper rifle permanently. If you guys need me, I’ll be there. But The Covenant will take over the daily grind. I said the same to Tommy before he took off.”

“Are you one step closer to trusting them?”

My girl glances across the aisle to find me staring, unable to take my eyes off her. And I never will. If I hadn't thrown myself on top of her that night, those spineless fuckers could have killed the only woman I've ever been in love with. The bullet I gladly took for her could have taken her away from me—and I'd rather die first than be without her.

The constant ache in my stomach isn't from healing scar tissue. No, it's the haunting fact I almost lost her. Aside from that grim realization, I'm brimming with pride too. She's a fearless, devoted woman and I'm lucky she picked me.

Her intentionally teasing smile and sexy licks send my balls into a spasm. Christ, I love her so much.

My pulse beats harder, faster—stronger. I feel alive for the first time in my life. All because she loves me too.

“I can't answer that right now,” I admit, all the while keeping my gaze locked on her every suck. “Buffalo saved Matheus, but that doesn't mean shit. An opportunity presented itself and could easily be viewed as a calculated plan to blindside us. But I'll figure it out.”

India hands her popsicle to Sinéad and strips off her hot pink hoodie. Beneath it, she's wearing another one of those skimpy sports bras with crisscross straps. They hint at the thin leather straps I've buckled over her curves before and suddenly, my conversation with André disappears behind my filthy thoughts.

My blood catches fire and it takes everything I have to stay seated. Once the jet takes off, she's in trouble.

I discreetly fix the hard-on she gives me behind my black joggers, not really minding the strain on the comfy jersey material compared to my usual day-to-day utility pants.

I can't give up my old habits that easily, though—nothing beats extra pockets for concealed weapons. They're strapped to parts of my body now, and India seems to appreciate the look of them when I take off my clothes. It gives her chills and turns her into my hungry little whore every damn time.

I decided to take a more relaxed approach to my style now that I'm stepping down.

My days spent as the Souza Sicario are in the past. The future is for training the next generation of killers who'd serve me without question or doubt. Me—not Carlos Blanco.

“Yo, cabron?” André slides a whiskey on ice across the lacquered table. “Stop eye fucking her while I'm sitting here. That shit is still weird for me.”

I leave behind the image of India's perfect tits in my hands and roll my neck to ease the tension. “I'll keep a close eye on the team and watch Blanco's trainee like a hawk.”

André sits forward and rests his elbows on the table. “They might be loyal to you in the beginning, but it only takes one asshole to plant a seed and poison the whole lot of them.”

I hum out my agreement and catch Matheus boarding next with his dark hair tousled and his expression blank. He's been out of sorts these last few days. Or maybe he wasn't acting like himself long before he came home to Colombia. How the hell would I know since I was preoccupied with my own duties for too long?

I jerk my chin at my youngest brother and acknowledge his half salute. Rather than join us, he sinks into a seat closer to the cockpit and puts his AirPods into his ears.

“He's quieter than usual.” I point out, remembering the conversation I had with him about his career path.

André continues to sip his whiskey while his knee bobs up and down. “Yeah, he doesn't say much about Uni either when I ask him about it. Just that he passed all his exams and says everything is fine.”

“Why do you think Papá treated him differently?” I say out loud, having wondered that forever and never asked the question.

“Because our old man was a psycho.” André scratches the coarse black hairs on his chin. “Although I'm not going to lie. Sometimes I wish the bastard had ignored me too. Then again,

I guess it only made it harder for Mat when he was expected to be like us.”

“He asked me if he could join The Covenant.”

“Fuck...” André grunts. “And what did you say?”

“I said no. But India thinks it would be good for him.”

André goes quiet for a few seconds. “Mat’s not afraid of danger and we know he has a sharp aim. The guy took out at least five soldiers before we were separated. School books and law degrees don’t mean shit when we’re under attack, Gio.”

“So, you think I should agree to train him? To let him leave his fancy lifestyle behind to live in the shadows?”

“Maybe...” André drums the table, thinking. “Maybe he could join the team for a few months. He could learn tactics and get an idea of what it takes. It wouldn’t hurt to have him on the inside acting as your eyes and ears when you’re not around. A mission for Mat to figure out if any of them are shady. They’re following us to Sicily, aren’t they?”

His suggestion has merit. I blow out a breath and knock back my drink, lust still simmering in my veins. “Yeah. Wherever I go, they go too. I just don’t know if I could let Mat sacrifice everything like I did. If he joins, he must fully commit. No half-hearted effort or favoritism just because he’s my blood. I need time to think about it.”

The engines fire up, and the pilot’s voice is all around, welcoming us on board the flight. “Right. You think it over while I check on my wife.” André rises. “Things are going to be different from now on, Gio. Me and you have a lot of catching up to do.”

I drag the shades off my face and chuck them onto the table. “Are we good now?”

“We’re good.” He confirms, tilting his drink at me. “She’s changed you, brother. Hopefully, you won’t be an asshole anymore.”

“I could say the same about Sinéad whipping your ass into line. Who the hell are you these days, Dré?”

“Go fuck yourself.”

“Yeah. Go fuck yourself.” I hold up my glass in the space between us as my twin leans in and clinks his glass to mine.

We both smile. His dark eyes full of mischief and mine filled with hope for a brighter life on the other side of the world.

When he saunters away and sits in the seat next to his wife, directly opposite of India, I watch my girl’s eyes dance. A niggle of misplaced jealousy pinches my gut. Instead of letting it bother me, I knock back the liquor and focus on the wheels bumping over the tarmac as the jet accelerates.

Adios Colombia.

Sitting back in my seat, I look for her again. Our gaze’s fuse and her chest rises as she licks her sugary, wet lips, the popsicle now finished. I swipe my thumb across my mouth and enjoy the buzz when she draws those soft lips between her teeth and tries to hide her naughty, girly grin.

There’s nothing hotter than this woman when she teases me. To play the game, I break eye contact. I’m hungry for her, but I want her to be hungrier. Aching. Squirming.

Matheus’ eyes are closed and now the plane has leveled out, the flight attendant is covering him with a blanket. I think about what India had wanted from me—to equip herself with skills to survive. He’s got his own ruthlessness and cutthroat ways, learned from each of us over the years. Who better to infiltrate The Covenant than my baby brother?

Blanco has skin in the game.

And with Matheus on my side, I’d learn who’s trustworthy and who isn’t.

A figure passes within my gaze and moves toward me. My nape prickles, instinctively knowing its India.

Rather than stop, she keeps on walking, purposefully strolling past me. At the last second, before she enters the toilet cubicle, she glances over her shoulder and pins me to the seat with her big baby blues.

If I needed an invitation, that would be it. But a man like me prefers a challenge.

INDIA



There's something about the calmness of the ocean and having the luxury of being able to follow it wherever I live.

In Miami, it was far-reaching from my apartment windows. Ever present in the memories I have of my brother. Blackwater's shoreline quickly became the backdrop of a new home where I fell in love. And now, I'm spending time in a huge mansion with my extended family and the crystal-clear sea sparkles under a full Sicilian moon.

Sinéad was right. This really is the most idyllic part of the world. Over the months she'd redesigned an entire suite for me and updated everything, so there was no trace of her late father. She's the mafia queen of the castle now.

On the outside, there's a likeness to Blackwater with its arched windows and imposing architecture. But on the inside are thick sandstone walls, ivory marbled floors, and plush furniture on a much grander scale. This home is a monster in comparison to the dark manor house.

Giovanni and I can make as much noise as we want in our wing, and no one would hear us. Well, except perhaps the security guards who patrol the corridors and walk the grounds. Though they should be well used to the screams that come from this room when Leo is with his Uncle André.

The bottom of my floor length dress catches in the sea breeze when I walk out onto the huge stone balcony to look for Giovanni. Not finding him, I return indoors and move to the dressing room to change.

It's late evening and I've returned to my room, having spent a few hours with Letterman on the outside veranda. We reminisced about the good old days with Reno, and then I filled him in on all the macho drama between Giovanni and André. He wasn't overly thrilled about the fact I'd hooked up with the Souza hitman either, but he saw us together at dinner and quickly realized Giovanni was in it for the long haul. We both are.

After giving me his blessing, I kissed him on the cheek and asked him to make me waffles in the morning for old times' sake. Even though I'd become bored of them, they're still our thing, and that makes waffles my all-time favorite.

I untie the cord around my waist, unbutton the front of the dress, and let the floaty material puddle to my feet. Behind me, a shadow stretches across the tiled floor.

"Gio?" I call to him and spin on the spot, my long loose hair whipping my shoulders.

Silence.

If we weren't living in one of the most protected properties on the whole island, I would think twice about strolling into the bedroom naked. However, I know my man and exactly what gets him off.

Watching me.

Worshiping me.

Outside of his family, the world considers him a killing machine—inhumane and stone cold. Someone to hide from and pray he never darkens their doorstep. He's brutal. Bloodthirsty. The devil.

Except I'd learned his secret in the days following Reno's murder. I laid under the sheets and listened to him breathing at the foot of my bed. I'd pretended to be asleep when he pulled the sheet higher and paused for a second, noting the pulse in my neck thrum. I'd felt his eyes burn into my skin and tried to ignore how it somehow excited me.

Giovanni had stepped into my orbit that day and opened my eyes to the dark world he was hiding in. For those couple

of days, *I* had his full attention. No one else. Just me. It wasn't obvious to me back then, not when I was grieving. But looking back, he gave me something he'd only ever given Leo.

Himself.

And for that, I felt undying gratitude.

Awe.

A shiver of attraction, even then.

A need for him to cure the desire in my belly.

And then I suppressed my intrigue until I couldn't anymore—the day he came for me again.

We collided in more ways than one. Our bodies. Our minds and our hearts.

Prancing out of the dressing room, I dart to the massive bed, excitement buzzing through my veins. I climb over the mattress on all fours and taunt him with my bare ass. “You'd better watch yourself. I belong to a very bad man, and he doesn't like other men watching his woman when she's in bed... especially when she's touching herself.”

I slide a hand between my thighs, already wet for him, and rub my swollen clit, moaning softly.

“Stop touching what's mine,” his voice rumbles over me and then he steps out of the shadows.

My heart flutters when I see him, a burning heat coursing through my muscles, making me giddy.

“Make me.” I challenge him, playing it cool.

Raw authority vibrates through his muscular form when he prowls across the room. A surge of raw energy more dangerous than an erupting volcano sweeps me up in a blur. Strong hands seize my waist, and he effortlessly flings me onto my back.

His power knocks the breath from my lungs. I'm flat on my back, staring up at the thrilling expression he wears. He's not only on a quest to fuck. He's also trying to settle the

powerful emotions within himself—the feelings he has for me that he’s still not used to.

My blood runs red hot. Being a retired hitman for all of two weeks, he gets his kicks from preying on me instead, biding his time in the shadows. And when he does emerge, I play the game too.

Despite the rough way he manhandles me, his eyes give away his excitement. The otherworldly color of them glows in the darkness, not exactly human and every bit a calculating hunter ready to claim his victim.

I wriggle and squirm, my wrists possessively clasped together above my head, pressed deep into the mattress, locking them in place. He arches over me where the bright moon casts a silvery sheen on his inked chest and healing war wound. The patterns come alive as he one-handedly frees his dick from under his joggers, his nostrils flaring from need.

His love language is power and taking control, whereas mine is knowing I’ve claimed parts of him that no woman—no person ever has or will.

“Who was the first woman to blow your mind?” I pant, gazing up at him.

His fingers tighten around my wrists while he positions himself between my knees. “You.”

“And who was the first woman you fucked more than once?”

One hand skates to my throat and he gently squeezes. His breathing deepens and he swears in a muttered groan, then growls out his reply, “You, baby. And you know it. You know exactly what you do to me, because this...” He presses his dick against my aching clit. “... is constantly hard for you, especially when you’re around.”

He offers me a lazy, seductive grin. It’s the kind of heart-stopping smile that reaches his eyes and strips the violence from his soul. In that silent second, I exhale and run my nails along the curve of his spine.

My stomach quivers when he lowers his mouth to mine and licks my lips. “You’ve achieved what no one else ever could. And very soon, you and I will be married for real. Then I’ll really own all of you and enjoy doing this to my wife for the rest of her happy life.”

His other hand roughly grabs my breast, tweaking the proud nipple until I groan. “I wouldn’t have asked you to marry me if I wasn’t certain how well we fit together. Your thoughts are violent too. And your veins, they run just as dark as mine. You, India Souza, are the only woman on this planet who fits right next to me.” The fierce possessiveness of how he snarls sets me on fire.

The instant his statement is free, he slams inside me deeply—brutally. I suck in a tattered gasp, my body turning rigid from the force of his thrust. It both hurts and feels amazing at the same time.

When a strangled whimper escapes me, he lets go of my neck and kisses me hard. A heady wave of pleasure starts in my core, intensified by the rough hairs scratching my chin. Tingles shoot all over me, heightening my arousal.

He hooks his arms under the backs of my knees to give himself more leverage for thrusting power. His energy soars and his pounding rhythm speeds up with it. Except, this evening, his movements aren’t quite as harsh—more dominant than cruel—more demanding than controlling. He needs this. We both do.

All I can hear are his sexy grunts, the hungry slapping noises of our flesh and my own greedy groans. My body shunts across the mattress every time he reenters me.

He angles his pelvis and easily hits the sweet spot that has a low moan channeling from my throat into his mouth. The unusual sensation temporarily paralyzes me. In those seconds, I’m one with him. Connecting deeper than ever and happy we’re finally at peace, without war and danger hanging over our heads.

Here we can start a new life together and figure out what it could look like for a retired hitman and his teenage wife.

Whether happiness is even possible in the shadows of our enemies.

“What if the Lozano family comes after us?”

His spine stiffens, just a fraction. Enough for me to notice, but not enough to knock him off his rhythm. “Don’t forget who we are, India. We’re the motherfucking Souzas and our enemies don’t stand a chance against us. You and I are a team.”

The primitive way he continues to slam into me has my heart thumping. At one point I forget to breathe and then he kisses me again, like he’s giving me oxygen to stay alive. The exquisite pain blending with lust is just how I like it.

“I love you, Giovanni,” I whisper-groan next to his ear.

“Good, because I’m your one and only,” he spits out, claiming it as law. “And you’re going to take it...” Thrust. “Like my bad little whore...” Thrust. “Before her wedding day.” Thrust. “In the morning you’ll officially be my wife...”

He stills for a heartbeat, catches my mouth with his and kisses me messily before adding. “... because this is more than love, India. And I feel it all for you, so fucking much.”

The End.

While the **Bonus Scene** concludes Giovanni’s story, the brother’s are still in grave danger. The youngest brother Matheus falls for the enemy and figures out life-changing secrets while Tomás & Carina prepare for their big wedding.

If you love dark mafia & cartel romance with a reverse age-gap, forbidden love theme, then grab **Hostile Rival** and continue reading the Souza cartel series. Download your copy **here** today.

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Hostile Love

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today Bestseller Autumn Archer spends her days romancing the darkness to create delicious, tortured men who deserve to be loved. Not only does she bleed Dark Romance, she dabbles in the lighter side of love with Romantic Comedies written as A. Archer. With all of her books, you can expect high heat, passionate emotions and happy endings.

For more information on her work visit:

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“When there is darkness, the light will always shine.”

