

THE FOX FAMILY CRIME SYNDICATE

HIS JOB WAS TO
KEEP HER SAFE, NOT
KEEP HER FOREVER

Keep
ME

SUMMER O'TOOLE

Keep Me

The Fox Family Crime Syndicate Book 3

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Summer O'Toole

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Please note...

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Dear reader,

Acknowledgments

Also by Summer O'Toole

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You don't owe anyone your niceness, especially men.

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Author's Note

As a white author, I want to acknowledge that Reggie's character is Mexican, and this book includes other Latine characters as well.

In the process of writing *Keep Me*, I worked with paid Latine sensitivity readers who provided invaluable feedback, and I am grateful for their contributions to Reggie and Roan's story. With their help, I have tried to portray my characters as accurately and with as much care as I can. I hope that I have succeeded in that task.

My intention was to write Reggie in a way that is respectful and authentic while being conscious of not writing about any struggle that is unique to Latines, as that is not my story to tell.

I also want to recognize my privilege as a white author and the inherent inequities in the book publishing industry, both traditional and independent, that BIPOC authors face on a daily basis. I hope that I can use my platform to make space for Latine authors, and I encourage you to consider picking up works by the following authors, who have created own-voices characters and worlds that deserve praise and recognition for their brilliance:

Marie Maravilla

Freydís Moon

Jocelyn Soto

Maeve Black

Santana Knox

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Please note...

This book is a dark romance. Let's go through my usual disclaimers:

There are many scenes of graphic violence and sexual content. All content warnings can be found at SummerOtoole.com/content.

This book will not be for everyone, especially if you know me in real life. And yes, Mother, that means no giving copies to your pastor and deacons.

Remember this is a work of fiction.

Dark romance is an incredible, beautiful, gritty way of storytelling that people enjoy for many different reasons. Reading and writing about something does not mean you condone it in real life. If that were true, Stephen King should have been locked up long ago.

This is not meant to accurately represent safe sex or kink.

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Playlist

K eep an eye out for footnotes to pair specific scenes to the songs that inspired them. I'd recommend playing the suggested song on repeat until the end of the chapter or ornamental break.

You can listen to the full playlist at SummerOtoole.com/Playlists

Anthropocene—KR3TURE

Squeeze—Ghostmane

God's Gonna Cut You Down—John Grant

DARKSIDE—Neoni

Play with Fire (feat. Yacht Money)—Sam Tinnesz, Yacht Money

STUPID (Feat. Yung Baby Tate)—Ashnikko, Baby Tate

Fistfight—The Ballroom Thieves

Wait for Me—Maya Isacowitz

I Guess—Saint Levant, Playyard

Put It on Me—Matt Maeson

Movement—Hozier

Where Are You?—Elvis Drew, Avivian

Cravin'—Stileto, Kendyle Paige
DECAY—SXMPRA, Teddy Slugz
Gimme—BANKS
Make Me Feel—Elvis Drew
Lion—Saint Mesa
Control—Zoe Wees
Stay—Khalid
She Burns—Foy Vance
Human—Rag'n'Bone Man
Even If It Hurts—Sam Tinnesz
Atlantic—Sleep Token
Get You The Moon (feat. Snøw)—Kina, Snøw
Kiss Me—Dermot Kennedy

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Chapter 1

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Stories They Tell

Reggie

There's nothing more fascinating than a lifeless body preserved to halt the hands of decomposition. It still amazes me how something so animated and dynamic can be confined into such a static form. It's in this stillness where I dwell, where I thrive.

It's easy to assume that as the daughter of the Cortez cartel kingpin turned forensic pathologist, I am doing it to rebel against the crimes of my father, trying to do some good in the world when he rules with fire and death. But that's not it.

I'm simply fascinated by the stories dead bodies tell. And murdered ones tell the most interesting stories.¹

Like the one in front of me that's cold, gray, and cloaked in the smell of death, with a roughly sutured Y-incision carving down her chest and abdomen—no need to worry about scarring on a corpse. The stitches are remnants of the initial autopsy done at the June Harbor Medical Examiner's Office before the body went unclaimed and was donated to the Verano

Institute for Forensic Anthropology. Their donations are always more fun than the old people who croak and have their bodies donated to science.

Female. Caucasian. Twenty to thirty years old. Mechanism of death: asphyxia by manual strangulation, fractured hyoid bone present. Manner of death: Homicide.

That's only the beginning and the end of her story, but I'm interested in the middle. She's covered with perimortem injuries. Abrasions scatter her cheeks and limbs—most likely defensive or accidental wounds, not from a weapon. Fresh bruises in the form of handprints ring her throat, and another bruise, older by perhaps a couple of days, shades her cheekbone. Raw skin at her ankles and wrists indicates she'd been bound. Her feet were cleaned by the medical examiner, but dirt still lingers under her toenails. The minor abrasions that lash her soles are consistent with running barefoot outside.

Her teeth and hair show no signs of malnourishment or poor health, so she couldn't have been held captive for a long period of time. In fact, her hair is dyed in a balayage style—a service that easily costs several hundred dollars—and I can tell she had orthodontic work done. No signs of drug addiction. This isn't the type of person that disappears without anybody looking for them. So, why did her body go unclaimed?

The familiar taste of mystery coats my tongue, my pulse increasing steadily with eagerness to dig deeper.

I see so many bodies working here that often the details begin to bleed together. After all, killers are rarely original. People watch crime dramas and think that every murder has a unique ritual to it, carried out by some madman with mommy issues that would give Freud a raging hard-on. The truth is that most are committed by misogynistic pricks who can't control their emotions.

But when two cases present almost identical injuries...it catches my

attention.

I carefully shift the body onto its front, and my heart pounds a little harder. The shoulder blade has a garish burn mark on it that was done postmortem. This wasn't an act of torture. I take a closer look, and my palms grow sweaty under my nitrile gloves. Just like the body of another woman that came to us last week, the burn disfigures a previously existing tattoo, small traces of ink still visible.

It's not uncommon for killers to try to make it harder to identify their victims, and in turn, any connection that may lead back to themselves—cutting off fingers, removing teeth, obscuring identifiable marks or tattoos. But there are simply too many similarities to ignore.

Someone is keeping and killing women.



I stare at my computer screen in the lab, not able to process what I'm seeing. It's the same. And, yet, it's different.

I've been comparing measurements of the handprints on both Jane Does' necks for the better part of an hour trying to see where I'm going wrong, because they don't match. Two very differently sized hands mean two different killers.

But everything else is the same, even down to the soil samples taken from the bodies. The unique composition is an exact match. I'm increasingly frustrated that our database of composition with location doesn't have this one.

There must be two—or more—killers murdering women. I can't believe I haven't heard anything about this in the news. Another potential serial killer would certainly be blasted on every channel, especially after the shit storm the June Harbor Slayer stirred up.

But it's not my job to solve the case, it's law enforcement's. They've already examined the bodies and must not have come to the same conclusion. *Are they wrong, or am I?*

I push my rolling chair away from the desk and spin around, staring up at the fluorescent lights while I think. I twirl toward the door when I hear it open.

"*Buenos, hija.*" Dr. Verano walks in, coffee in hand, and sets his leather messenger bag down on his desk. "What's got you spinning today?" he asks with a warm chuckle. While technically my boss, he's also like an uncle to me.

"I think there's another serial killer." I stop my chair and plant my elbows on my knees. I push up the sleeves of my scrubs, exposing my snake tattoo coiling around my wrist. Verano looks at me through his wire-rim glasses while he takes a sip from his coffee mug.

He sits down, draping his blazer over the back of his chair like he does every morning. I don't know why he even bothers wearing it in the first place. This is his research facility; he doesn't have anyone to impress, especially right now when we don't have any interns or students. "What makes you say that?"

I tell him everything I discovered this morning, and he gives me a look I know well. It means *slow down, think it through*. I've always been impulsive, quick to react and jump to conclusions. Dr. Verano was the cartel's doctor

before he retired and my father gifted him the funds to start this institute. So, I've been getting this look for a long time.

“One coincidence doesn't make a pattern. Keep digging.” I give him a mock salute like a soldier taking orders, excited to continue down this rabbit hole until I have definitive proof. He shuffles some papers into a manilla folder, then stands up. “I am meeting with a family who wants a second look at their son's drowning, but I'll be curious for an update when I'm done.”

Our primary purpose here is researching different stages of the decomposition of bodies, looking for distinguishing markers of each stage to better help in forensic cases. But we also take private autopsy clients who want a second opinion or aren't satisfied with the medical examiner's conclusion.

“*Suena bien.*” He waves goodbye, and I pull up the catalog of all the bodies we've processed through this facility and type two words into the search: *burn + tattoo.*

My stomach twists at the number of results; there's maybe two dozen hits going back three years. When I narrow it down to females under forty years old, only two listings filter out. I open each remaining file and begin to jot down any similarities with the cases I already know.

Hands and legs bound perimortem. Similar defensive wounds. Matching soil composition. Relatively small age range between sixteen and thirty-five. Postmortem burns on areas of the body that are commonly tattooed.

I'm equally disturbed by what I've stumbled upon and exhilarated, like a shark smelling blood. I know my moral compass does not point due north. It's one of the reasons I decided to go into private and research pathology instead of law enforcement. I live in the gray zone. Being raised by the most

dangerous and deadly man in Latin America tends to have that effect. But, hey, I should at least get points for self-awareness.

The one thing that varies, and perhaps why the police haven't caught on yet, is the method of killing. There are women who were killed by strangulation, both manual and ligature, who were stabbed by multiple weapons, and others with only one clean, deep cut across the throat. Many are simply beaten to death.

But there's not a single gunshot wound in any of the files. Most murders are committed—accidentally or not—with a gun, making these starkly different. It could be that guns and bullets can be easier to trace, but I don't think that's it.

Whoever is doing this isn't interested in death. They are interested in *killing*.

I'm scrolling through images of the burned tattoos when something jumps out to me, turning my blood to ice. I may not have noticed if I saw each picture on their own, but together...I'm certain.

I have to see for myself.

Luckily, one of the bodies hasn't been put in the field yet. I head to our outdoor research area, nearly running through the halls. It always amuses me how similar these hallways are to hospitals, even though all of our *patients* are already dead.

I have to walk through the field to our frozen storage. The acres of land that surround the institute are where the bulk of our research takes place. I pass Wrap Row, a section where bodies are wrapped in different materials—tarp, carpet, plastic garbage bags—to study the differences in decomposition. The more unique traits that are discovered, the more accurately the police can learn where, when, and how a body was killed.

But sometimes we have too many bodies and not enough active studies or research hands. The ones that don't get put into the field right away are kept in cold storage until it's their time. The sounds of the forest, bird calls and insect chirps, give way to the constant hum of the generator when I step into the freezer building.

I find the cabinet I'm looking for and wrap my hand around the cold metal handle, not entirely sure which answer I am hoping for. As I open it and slide the steel body tray out, my heart pounds steadily in my chest, feeling heavier with each beat. The sound seems to fill the quiet place.

Despite the purple hue that the near-frozen corpse has taken on, I can tell her skin was once a tanned shade of light brown like mine. It only makes the remnants of the tattoo on her chest even more strikingly familiar. While this one only shows the bottom edge of the ink, with the rest unintelligible from the burn, the other one I saw on the computer was the top edge.

I would never have been able to realize they were fragments of the same design if I didn't have a matching one unmarred on my own skin.

A knot tightens painfully in my chest as I whisper into the room filled with corpses, "Oh, *Papá*, what have you done?"



Chapter 2

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Blood-Hungry

Roan

My finger traces the condensation on the smooth, cold glass in my hand that's resting on the arm of the leather couch. My nostrils flare in aggravation when a fresh blast of smoke wraps around the stage and the noxious smell floats to our VIP area. Finn was supposed to be training Lochlan on how to take over the management of Peaches, our gentlemen's club, but now that he's playing house in the country all shacked up, it's fallen on me.

I make a mental note to take a sledgehammer to the smoke machine when I leave. Which I would like to do soon. Lochlan's practically grown up in this club, so I don't have anything new to teach him. But my skin feels hot and too tight, my constant simmering rage getting dangerously close to boiling over. I need a fucking release.

This feeling isn't easily sated. It's not something alcohol can take the sting off of. It feels like a live grenade is settled between my ribcage. It dangles off a rib by the pin, and with one small jostle the pin will be pulled. The smallest thing could set me off. I can blame my father for this hair trigger since he

fostered it in all of us. He wanted his boys to be volatile and reckless because it also meant we were violent and ruthless.

I'll never be able to get rid of it, but I've become better at recognizing when I'm about to reach my limit. Throwing the grenade before it detonates inside me.

I scan the floor of Peaches. Our best dancers are on the stage right now, and the place is packed. It's filled with bored, suburban husbands who are desperate to live out their fantasies with one of the girls sliding down the pole.

Commotion by the bar catches my attention and my spine straightens, itching for a fight. My hands are already curling into fists. I quickly deflate when I realize it's some preppy motherfucker who can't handle his liquor and Dex is already escorting him out.

Well, if I can't beat someone to a pulp... I turn my blood-hungry gaze to the pack of women dancing up on each other right outside the velvet rope cornering off our area. I recognize some of them. They don't work here, but are always here vying for our attention. Their hands skate up and down one another's hips, but their eyes are desperately trying to lock with one of ours. I'd prefer to break some unlucky bastard's nose, but I guess a quick and hard fuck will work just the same.

I lock eyes with a redhead, and she attempts to bashfully drop her hooded gaze. When she raises her eyes again, I recline on the couch, spreading my legs. My arms drape across the back and curl my finger, beckoning her over.¹

She bites her lip while sashaying toward me and away from her friends, who give her excited looks. Alfie looks back to me for approval when she reaches the rope, and I give him a nod to let her in. She strides over to me on

long, toned legs that I wouldn't mind seeing thrown over my shoulder while I fuck her...Or maybe I'll just bend her over the armrest right here and take her without having to look at her face or fight off her attempts to kiss me.

I don't need to bother telling her my name. She knows exactly who I am and what I could do for her—if she were more than just a means to an end. Everything's a transaction in this world. It's why she's spent all night dancing in front of us. I have something she wants—money, power—and she has something I want, at least for the night.

She sways in front of me like a newborn deer on her high heels, a purple satin dress draping over her curves, but just barely. I bet I could see her pussy if I moved the fabric just an inch. “Hey, I'm Madison.”

I look to the side, dragging my knuckles across my jaw as if I've already forgotten she's here. Turning back to her, I take a slow sip from my glass, letting my gaze bore into her over the rim. “I didn't ask.”

“What?” She leans closer, not hearing me over the music. For the best.

My only response is the slight smirk that teases my lips. The confidence she had while dancing is seeping out of her the longer I make her wait. She anxiously clasps her hands in front of her, and I can't deny the sick thrill that her uneasiness delivers. I rake her body up and down with my stare, and she takes it as an invitation.

She closes the small gap, surprising me by boldly straddling my legs and toying with the collar of my shirt. She rolls her hips over my lap, and my hands find the curves of her waist. “You like it like this?” she asks in a sultry voice, ghosting a finger over the stubble on my jaw.

I cut right to the chase. “Show me how you'd ride me.”

“Okay, baby...” she trails off as she wraps her arms around my neck and gyrates while slightly bouncing over the growing bulge in my pants. I reach

for my drink in boredom, finishing the glass and thirsty for another. She looks at me through her lashes, and I know she's about to try kissing me by the tilt of her head. Before she gets a chance, I fist the back of her hair and tug her head to the side. Her eyes widen at the sharp pain, and I meet them with a dead stare, my jaw clenching.

A stupid, over-the-top moan spills from her, and I consider just pushing her off and picking a fight with the first person I see. Maybe I could convince Lochlan to go a few rounds with me if he wasn't busy sucking face with some chick further down the couch.

Her hand slinks down. Long fingers run over my dick, way too gently for my liking. "Or I could ride you for real—" She makes a small yelp as I cut her off, standing abruptly and catching her before she falls off my lap.

"Come with me," I say gruffly, then grab her hand. I lead her down the hall to the club's office.

As soon as we're inside the door, I slam her against the wall. She gasps and moans as I grind my thigh between her legs. I cover her mouth with my hand to shut her up. She places her hand on mine and pushes it down until my fingers collar her throat. A dark flame crackles inside me as I feel the fragile tendons of her neck under my hand. The corner of my mouth twitches as I ask, "You like being choked?"

"Yes," she sighs breathily, and a cold smile spreads across my face. I catch a small shudder run through her at the look in my eyes that says *I could eat you alive and pick my teeth with your bones.*

"Good." I chuckle, a dry, heartless sound that makes her swallow nervously. I move back, dropping my hands and stepping into the middle of the office. She looks at me, eyes wide in question, and I flick my chin at the floor. "On your knees then."

She takes a deep breath, as if to steady herself, before turning her fuck-me eyes back on.

Before she can drop to her knees, I shoot my hand out for her tits. I tug her dress down. The skinny shoulder strap snaps. I don't care. Shit like this dress is meant to be torn off. "Now, that's better, isn't it." I smirk, her perky tits on display for me.

I watch them rise and fall along with her breaths as she lowers to her knees at the same time I work my belt. She looks up at me with eager green eyes as I take my cock out. I grab her hand, and her eyes dart between mine and her lifted hand. She seems to be hanging on my every move.

I spit in the center of her open palm and wrap it around my shaft, making her slide up and down. She swallows deeply when she realizes her fingers can't reach her thumb. "You wanna fuck my mouth?"

"No." I clutch her chin, hinging her jaw open. "I wanna fuck your *throat*." She drops her hand, and I nudge the head of my cock past her lips. My teeth grind together at the first wet glide across her tongue.

"You'll let me, won't you, Madison?" Her eyes brighten when I purr her name, intentionally giving her false hope that I'll remember it tomorrow. She nods, eager to please, and closes her lips around my length.

She slides her hot mouth down my shaft, and a deep rumble comes from my chest. She looks at me, eyes hopeful that her hole is different from any other I could've had tonight.

She pushes forward and gags around my tip. But when she tries to pull back, I fist her hair and hold her in place. "You wanna make me happy, don't you?" She hums her agreement as much as she can with her mouth full of my cock. "Then all the way, Mallorie." *Can't give her too much hope.*

Her nostrils flare for air, but she lets me tilt my pelvis forward and drive

my cock further down her throat. I don't hold back the groan that spills from my lips. "Fuck." I rock back and forth, my eyes squeezing tight as she hollows out her cheeks for me.

Her eyes water as I begin to punch harder and deeper, the sound of her gags mixing with the wet sound of me fucking her face. Her hands fly to my thighs and squeeze. I knock them off. "Push your tits together. I wanna see 'em while you choke on my cock. 'Cause that's what you wanted, right? To *choke*."

Her brows fret together, but she nods, bobbing up and down and making me groan roughly. She presses her tits together, giving me quite the view, and heat shoots through my bones. "Pinch your nipples. That's it. Until it hurts."

She toys with her nipples, and they grow red and hard. Tension grows in my balls. I let my head loll back. *Fuck, yes, this is what I needed.*

But it's not enough, not quite. I clutch her face like a vise between my palms, stilling her movements so I can take what I need. I brutally shove my cock down her throat, and she paws at my legs, gagging with tears spilling down her cheeks.

I'm so fucking close.

My knuckles whiten as I twist them into her hair and hit the back of her throat again and again and—*Shit, that's it.* I spill my release into her with a heady groan, and all the pent-up energy leaves my tight muscles as if my whole body releases a heavy sigh.

I pull out of her mouth, and her eyes soften when I cup her cheek tenderly. "Now swallow." She gulps while I tuck myself back into my pants, then she holds out her tongue to show me her empty mouth. She remains on her knees, looking up at me as if expecting me to say something. *You were a nice hole to fill?* Yeah, I don't think she'd like what I'd have to say.

I remain silent, absentmindedly cracking my knuckles as she rises with confusion playing on her face. I give her cheek a pat, then turn around and stride over to the desk. I plop down in the chair, my shoulders looser than they've been all week, and pull out my phone lazily.

Without looking up, I notice her take a few hesitant steps toward the desk, her fingers dragging up the hem of her dress. "Did I do good?" Her constant need for approval grates my nerves.

"Hmm?" I pretend I don't hear her pathetic question as I mindlessly scroll.

"I'll let you fuck my ass," she blurts out, and to that I do finally lift my head.

I pinch the bridge of my nose, shaking my head. I take out my wallet, looking her up and down and scoff at her pathetic desperation, throwing hundreds across the desk. "For your dress."

My attention is already back on my phone before she even reaches the door, the sound of it shutting behind her like a breath of fresh air.

1. Squeeze by Ghostmane

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Chapter 3

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Sins of the Father

Reggie

I untwirl the towel from my wet hair and use it to wipe the steam off the mirror. ¹ Twisting around, I look at the ink winding into the shape of a rose on the back of my shoulder. The music playing through my phone's speakers fades away as I brush my fingertips over the tattoo, an uneasy pit hollowing out my stomach.

A rose, rays of light emanating from an eye in the center, two tears spilling. Three number fours trim the bottom. The sign of the Cortez cartel.

The only difference between the dead girls' tattoos and mine are the initials hidden in the petals. Added two years ago, when I graduated med school, the letters are crisper and darker than the rest: S.A.

I remember the pride that seemed to hum in the air with the buzz of the tattoo machine when I got the rose. Elation, excitement. I could hardly feel the sting of the needles. I'd always been a Cortez, but now I was committing myself to my family's legacy with this oath on my skin.

I guess oaths are only wishful promises made with good intentions until fate decides to laugh in your face.



The institute is empty on Saturday mornings, and for the first time since I started working here, I find the solitude eerie rather than comfortable.

Come on, Matthew. Pick up. I chew on the corner of my nail as I wait, not sure what answer I am hoping for.

“Dr. Cohen,” he answers, and I bounce forward in my chair.

“Matthew, hey. It’s Reggie.” I roll back over to the desk and open the folder of cases I’ve compiled.

“Reggie! Good to hear from you. What’s up?”

“I need a favor...”

“Sure, a drink to catch up sounds great. How’s tonight?” I can picture his mischievous smile on the other end of the line and laugh.

“Okay, fair. Let’s get drinks, but I still need that favor.” After graduating from med school together, I came to the institute for my residency while Matthew got in with the June Harbor Medical Examiner’s Office. I’m hoping he can give me some more information on the bodies. “The unclaimed Jane Doe your office sent us yesterday...What can you tell me about where she was discovered?”

He sighs. “You know I can’t tell you anything that pertains to an active investigation.”

“So you’re saying there is one?” I perk up, my heart racing. I want answers, but at the same time I’m not sure I will like what I find out if my father is in the center of it.

“I didn’t say that—wait, did you say yesterday?”

“Yeah. Caucasian, twenty to thirty years old, death by—”

“We haven’t had any unclaimed bodies for three months.” His words feed the growing seed of suspicion in my stomach, its roots twisting around my intestines. “Are you sure it wasn’t a different county?”

I read and reread the donation documentation. I’m right. “Yes, positive.”

“Okay. Let me check our files.” I hear him clack away on a keyboard and the silence makes room for my worst thoughts to spiral. My father’s a murdering, drug-dealing, ruthless son of a bitch, but killing women for sport...the wastebasket across the room is suddenly looking like a great place to upheave my breakfast.

“No, sorry, Reg. Our last donation was in February.” *Three months ago.*

I scroll through our logs to find the one he’s talking about. Delivered by Mortuary Shipping and Solutions. It quickly stands out to me as I scroll through the records that since then, all of our donations have been dropped off by a different company.

“This one was by DS Mortuary Transports,” I say.

“Never heard of them. We have an exclusive contract with MSS.”

I force a smile on my face, hoping it will mask the apprehension in my voice. “Okay. Thanks, Matt.”

We chat for a few more minutes—about god knows what—and plan to get those drinks next week after all. “They have five dollar wine glasses on Thursdays.”

I’m antsy to get off the phone. “Sounds great, see you then.” We say our goodbyes, and I slump back in the chair after hanging up.

My stomach churns as I consider that this could be a misunderstanding, a coincidence. Cartel members lead dangerous lives, so it’s not unrealistic that two would meet an early demise. Growing old is a luxury in that world.

A world that I am narrowly straddling the edge of. And it seems DS Mortuary Transports is too.

I search the company and quickly find a simple web page. There's not much there except for a phone number and some generic spiel about caring for your loved ones with care and professionalism. I call the listed number. If the donations aren't coming from the medical examiner, they can tell me where they are coming from.

It rings and rings before cutting to voicemail. A feminine automated voice apologizes for missing my call and to leave a message after the beep.

"Hi, this is Dr. Cortez with the Verano Institute for Forensic Anthropology. I am calling because I have some questions about recent donations you delivered. The June Harbor Medical Examiner doesn't have records for them, and I was hoping you could provide more detail on their source. Thank you, and please call me back at the Verano Institute. You can reach me at extension 8496."

I hang up, but one piece of information that isn't sitting right with me is *why*. Why send us murder victims' bodies knowing we are going to study and examine them?

Study and examine.

Shit, that's it. We'll study and examine, but we won't *investigate*. Because by the time the bodies are donated, it's assumed they've already passed through all relevant hands of law enforcement. It would be like calling 911 after the fire department has put out the fire.

I chuckle bitterly to myself and shake my head. *Good one, Papá. You almost got me.*

Anger and betrayal flow hot and thick in my veins. He's using me, playing me for a fool. *Pinche cabrón.*



I arrive at work on Monday morning and am surprised to see Dr. Verano's car already in the parking lot. Good thing he's here early because I have questions that need answers, like does he know my father is using his facility as his own personal dumping ground?

I find him in the office, staring at an opened package. It's a small cardboard box, the ripped tape dangling off the side flaps. He's standing stock still and jumps when the door closes behind me, as if he didn't hear me come in. He looks up, his black-and-gray eyebrows pinched together behind his glasses, worry lining his usually genial face. He quickly rights himself and fixes his expression into something cold, looking at me stoically.

I haven't seen this look on him since he was under my father's thumb. It's the mask he wore going into a surgery that was needed because of the most brutal acts of humankind. Like stitching up the mother of a member who was taken and raped for four days by a rival gang in retribution. Or sewing up the abdomen of a member who was disemboweled and hung from the bridge of a territory we were working to claim. He was dead, of course, but Verano wouldn't let him be buried like that.

Chills slide down my spine, and I swallow hard. "What is it?"

He purses his lips and pushes the box toward me. There's a note on a torn piece of paper, and I read it without picking it up:

Dead girls don't talk. Remember that as you stick your nose where it doesn't belong. My heart beats harder, and I suck in deep breaths through my

nose to try to calm the storm threatening to flood my ribcage. Verano hands me a pair of blue nitrile gloves, and I look at him in question.

“Pick it up.” His voice is steely and deadpan. He must know what’s underneath.

It takes me twice as long as it should to put the gloves on because of my sweaty palms. Curiosity and dread eat at me in those thirty seconds, the room feeling unusually cold.

I glance at him, and he gives me a solemn nod to go ahead as my heart thunders. I reach inside and pinch the note’s edges, lifting it out slowly, like a scorpion is going to jump out at me if I move too quickly.

And then I see it. The real message. Stumpy and still pink, a severed human tongue waits for me at the bottom of the box.

“I thought you were out, Reggie,” Verano says solemnly.

I get defensive when I see the disappointment in his eyes. “I am. Are *you*?”

He looks taken aback, peeling his glasses off and sitting down before gesturing to the other desk chair for me to sit. “Tell me what’s going on, *mija*.”

I tell Verano everything I’ve discovered, constantly searching for tells that he’s in on it. I’ve known him my whole life. I love the man to death, but he’s a terrible liar. So when he insists he isn’t involved, I believe him.

“This doesn’t sound like your father. He wouldn’t go under my nose either. If he wanted to use the facility for those purposes he would have just asked.”

“Who else would have the knowledge and means to do it though? It’s a huge risk unless they know you’d never turn them in.”

He shakes his head and flips the open flap of the box over as if the answer suddenly appears. Addressed to the facility and nothing but a PO box as the return address, the box itself is little help.

“I don’t know, but they know you’re onto them. They won’t send us any more bodies and *you*”—he lifts his bushy eyebrows—“need to stop digging.”

“There’s a serial killer out there murdering women. *Our* women. They may stop sending us bodies, but they aren’t going to stop killing.”

“Then go to the police. Let them handle it.” He tries to push an authoritative tone, but I can hear the concern leaking through. He’s scared for me, but I’m sure the women being butchered were much more scared.

Clashing emotions and prerogatives battle in my mind. On one hand, I want justice. But on the other...

“If he’s involved, I’m not gonna hand the police enough to put him away for life on a silver platter.”

“Then let it go.” He sighs, sensing this is a losing argument. He knows me, and he knows the blood that runs in my veins, the DNA woven into my very being. I’m a Cortez, and I don’t back down.

1. God’s Gonna Cut You Down—John Grant. Play until end of chapter



Chapter 4

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Nightmarish

Roan

***T**here's a barrel of a gun aimed between my eyes. It's so close that they cross as I struggle to focus on it. I can smell old gunpowder around the muzzle. It's the same scent my dad's men carry with them, like rust and firecrackers.*

My mouth is dry, my lips sealed shut so none of the screams bottled up in my throat escape. Men don't cry. But Lochlan cries. He's still a baby. The screams from his crib are audible all the way out here, and each wail makes me want to flinch. I can't show my fear, though, so my right eye only twitches a little.

I should have never opened that door—

I slam out of my dream, finding myself where I always do: standing in front of my bedroom door. My knuckles ache, but when I look down, they aren't bleeding. I tug my shirt, cold with sweat, over my head and throw it into the hamper before walking into the kitchen. There's no point trying to go back to sleep, it never comes.

At least this time, I woke up before I broke my hand again.



Reggie

After receiving that package, Verano closed the institute “until the dust settles.” But we won’t ever know who’s kicking up all this fucking dust if I can’t be in the lab. I hate feeling like I am spinning my wheels and I could get out of the mud if only someone stopped holding me back.

The Keeper’s Café’s signature scent hits me with nostalgia, instantly taking me back to the hours I spent studying here during school—freshly brewed coffee, sea-weathered lumber, and old books. Originally the June Harbor lighthouse keeper’s cottage, the new owners kept the rustic look, restoring the original wood flooring and filling the space with antique arm chairs and desks.

There’s no public Wi-Fi, so most of the guests are reading quietly while Ella and Louis play in the background, her youthful, bright voice mingling with his raspy, rich one. Some people are on laptops or writing in journals, and the overall tone is studious and cozy. With the lack of internet and being on the outskirts of town, the patronage tends to be small but loyal.

I recognize George, an elderly man who always wears a sweater vest and slacks. His glasses are balanced precariously on the tip of his nose as he reads in an old, leather wingback chair. There’s Micky, a tattoo artist who comes here to sketch. His notebooks are spread out before him as he hunches over, his nose practically kissing the paper as he works attentively. There are several more faces I recognize but have never gotten to know.

As I step up to the counter to order, my head spins in the direction of the front door opening. Despite only coming here once in a blue moon since graduating, I know the man that walks in doesn't belong here. He steps inside, his footsteps heavy in black-leather boots. He has the air of a rogue cowboy in a western, swinging through the saloon doors in a cloud of dust. I don't know him, but there's something about him that instantly sets alarm bells off in my head.

He plucks his sunglasses off, and I notice that the back of his hand is tattooed with vines of roses. His stormy blue eyes lock with mine, and I stand frozen for a second. But only a second, then I'm whipping my attention back to the barista, trying to ignore the burning sensation down my spine that is screaming trouble.

I commit his face to memory as I wait for my drink, feeling his gaze prick the back of my neck. I run his image through my mind—high cheekbones, strong brow, dark auburn hair and stubble—trying to remember where I might have seen him or something to explain the dark chill I got when I looked into his eyes.

I spot an open table in a corner with a view of the whole floor. Once my order is ready, I make a beeline straight for it. As I set up my computer and personal hotspot, I keep an eye on the stranger in my peripheral vision. He's sitting in another leather chair next to George, pulling out his phone as the old man tries to make conversation. I sneer internally, offended on his behalf. *What a jackass.*

I take a deep breath and focus on what I came here for. I pull up DS Transport's website to get their phone number again. As I dial and bring the phone to my ear, I look up. The stranger's gaze locks with mine as if he has been staring at me the entire time. I narrow my eyes, making it clear he's

been caught, when an automated voice informs me the number I called has been disconnected.

The call drops, and my stomach along with it. The company was just a front. I knew that, but the confirmation still settles uneasily in my chest. We lost our only lead. My fingers hover over my keyboard, ready to continue, but I don't know where to go from here. Frustrated, I ball my hands into tight fists until my nails bite into my palm.

Think, Reggie, think.

Okay, so if I can't trace who is delivering the bodies...maybe I can trace who the bodies belong to. Not being part of law enforcement or government of any kind, the facility doesn't have access to a lot of databases for identification. But missing persons cases are public.

I spend the next two hours scrolling through missing persons that match the victims and timeline, checking each potential for notes on tattoos. So far, it feels like I'm chasing a ghost.

But the stranger is no ghost. He's real flesh and blood, tapping his foot like he's getting impatient waiting for someone. Sometimes when I take a glance, he's on his phone or reading the newspaper the café puts out. Other times, though, he's slumped in the chair, chin resting on his palm and elbow on the armrest like a bored king. And I'm the only member of his court. We make eye contact, and he doesn't waver, only breaking when I return to my work.

Eventually he rises, a bitter tick in his jaw and one last cutting look my way before putting his sunglasses back on. His stormy eyes disappear, and something settles in my gut. With a sneer that I might be imagining, he strides to the door. I watch his tall frame walk away, feeling a small sense of victory. I won this time.

But the feeling quickly fades, and I'm left with an itchy sense of

foreboding. My eyes keep flicking up to the door like I expect him to walk back in any minute. The strong wind off the bay makes the old building creak, and sea spray taps against the window pane. The hairs on the back of my neck rise. I feel like a sitting duck, and I don't like it.

I pack up my things and step outside, hoping to shake this feeling. But instead, I'm greeted by the same asshole's sunglasses. The stranger leans on the hood of a black sports car, his legs crossed at the ankles and a cigarette balanced between his fingers. I walk down the porch steps, and he tilts his head as he brings the cigarette to his lips. Straightening my back, I watch in my periphery as he exhales plumes of smoke and takes off his sunglasses. A tingle of awareness skitters up my limbs, and I glance his way to find his hardened gaze following me.

I stutter in my steps, debating whether or not to confront him. He must take my pause for fright, because he lifts his chin in a slight nod as the smallest smirk curls his lips. I decide to just roll my eyes, refusing to give him anymore fodder. He looks like the kind of man who gets off on making people feel beneath him.

He's not going to kill me. A crowded coffee shop is no place to execute a hit. And even here in the parking lot, a dozen people have already seen his face—with geometric tattoos sprawling across his neck and up to his jaw, they won't be forgetting him. He was most likely sent to intimidate me, but whoever is behind this will have to do better than him.

I won't run away. Not this time.

I turn my back to him as I open my car door, throwing my bag into my passenger seat even as my muscles tense with the vulnerability. I'm not planning on giving him any more of my attention, but then I hear a dark chuckle from across the lot. I can't help myself as ire ignites in my veins. I

twist to face him, then flip him off. He has the same hint of a smirk as he drags his thumb across his bottom lip. The image makes my stomach tighten as I climb into the car, my skin dancing with flames. Right before my door slams shut, I hear him speak.

“See you soon, Cortez.”

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Chapter 5

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Trixie's

Reggie

I shimmy the black-silk dress over my head and down my hips. It fits like a slip, snug around my chest and hanging loose to mid-thigh. It doesn't look like you could hide anything under it, but it's just flowy enough, and the watery look of the dark silk disguises any hint of the holster around my thigh. My brooding shadow has been following me around like a bad cold you can't seem to shake. I'm sure he will make another appearance tonight. ¹

I'm planning on it.

I'm just finishing loading my Derringer and double-checking the safety when Roe calls to tell me she's outside. "I'm walking out the door right now," I say, holding my phone between my neck and shoulder as I stuff my feet into my Docs. Not bothering to tie them, I shove the laces into the ankle and grab my red-leather jacket off the hook on my way out.

"You look dressed to kill." Roe's head pops out of the back window of a waiting sedan, a mischievous glint in her eyes.

"Good," I joke as I open the door, taking a peek over my shoulder as I do. Sure enough, that same damn sports car is parked a few cars back, the

headlights coming to life as I slide into the backseat. The Uber driver looks back to make sure everyone's in and then takes off.

“For real, you look like a sexy assassin.” My best friend eyes me up and down, one of her long legs draping across her knee.

“Well, you would know.” I raise my eyebrows back and she huffs, swatting her hand at me.

“Oh don't start back up with that. You very well know I'm just a political consultant.” She rolls her eyes, then looks out the window.

“Mhmm, sure.” I laugh. I met Roe in undergrad, where she majored in poli-sci with minors in Russian and Arabic. She's also fluent in French and can get by in German, Spanish, and about six other languages.

It's probably frowned upon to invite your friend to a night out at the bars when you're planning on luring out your tatted, potentially murderous stalker. But I'm ninety-nine percent sure Roe is a covert CIA agent and can handle herself just fine. Her long, cabernet-colored nails tap on the car door handle, and her eyes dart out the window at every intersection like she's mentally keeping track of every street name.

There's not one thing in particular that makes me think that. It's a combination of a bunch of small things that come together like pieces of a puzzle. A puzzle I know all the pieces to, growing up surrounded by people leading double lives. Like my father: a respected businessman, beloved mayor, adored family man, and the most dangerous crime lord in all of Mexico.

Taking trips that even the people closest to them only know about once they're back. Never sitting in public with their back exposed, scanning every room for escape routes as soon as they enter. So masterful at deflecting

questions when it comes to certain parts or times of their lives that the other person will think they were the ones to change the subject.

It's a short drive to Trixie's. You'd think with a name like that, it would be a dive that sells two-dollar Pabst Blue Ribbons and has free peanuts at the bar. Turns out, the name came from the owner's witchy black cat. So rather than beer-stained floors and a bartender with platinum hair still teased like it's the '80s, it's a sleek, modern bar stylized with black and astral ambiance.

The driver lets us out, and I pause for a moment to search through my purse on the sidewalk like I'm making sure I didn't leave anything in the car. In truth, I am waiting for the sports car to appear from around the corner. He slowly cruises by us, and I don't even try to hide my glare directed at the driver. The windows are tinted, but I know exactly what I'd see on the other side—blue eyes, so cold and bitter you can't help but get a sour taste in your mouth, and a stare so intense that it makes you feel like he is either reading you down to your darkest secrets or looking right through you like you're nothing but a gust of air.

I don't know which I'd rather.

His constant presence makes me feel hot and itchy, like I'm always on the verge of fight or flight. But there's another part of me that keens under his perpetual gaze. As if we are the only two people in the world and everyone else is just a prop on our stage.

I don't like it. I don't like anything that gets under my skin and makes me question my gut. I want him gone. I want the non-stop feeling of eyes boring into my back gone. But I also feel the tugging need to know more. I want to peel back his tattooed skin and see if his heart is really as black and dark as it looks through his eyes. Are the pain and anger that keep his body always tense and ready for a fight just a charade, or do they go down to his core?

But wouldn't anyone want to know these things about the person tailing them? What makes them tick, their blind spots and weaknesses. What they want and how to get rid of them. It's a habit my father instilled in me—instinctively looking for anything that could be used to make someone a weaker enemy or stronger ally, but always leaves you as the victor.

Well, tonight I'm getting some answers.



I'm only half listening to Roe tell me about her latest dating adventures, and she can tell. "And he came at me in a clown mask with a knife. Turned out he had tons of dead bodies under his floorboards—"

I flick my gaze back to her from my shadow over her shoulder at the bar. He hasn't drank or eaten a single thing. Just sat down and slid the bartender some cash to leave him alone. "You look great for a murder victim."

She smirks smartly, brushes a braid off her shoulder, and takes a sip of her martini. "You should see the other guy." She laughs, the sound warm and full of memories. The pair of men at the high top next to us glance her way at the infectious sound. She catches them and smiles.

I wonder what they see when looking at us. Complete opposites probably. Roe's dark skin is striking against her bright-green dress and layers of gold rings and necklaces. Her hot-pink heels elevate her already tall frame to almost six feet. Whereas the only pop of color on me comes from my dark-red jacket. Everything else is black, down to my nails. Her smile draws you in, and I'm often told I come off as intimidating. Probably why she's my best friend—opposites attract and all.

I tap her on the arm. “I’m going to the restroom, be right back.” Instead, I go to the back alley.

I’m expecting to hear the heavy, metal emergency door close behind me, but instead hear the soft muffle of a palm catching it followed by footsteps. I walk a few more paces down the alley before leaning against and putting my foot up on the brick wall. The perfect casual position for smoking a cigarette. I take a pack out of my pocket like I’m going to light up, while my other hand sneaks to my propped up leg to discreetly unholster the small gun.

My blood doesn’t thrum, and my hands don’t shake. Instead, electricity and anticipation skate up my spine. I wait until he’s a few steps away to look up. When I do, he’s giving me the stare that feels like he can see all my secrets clear as day.

Hopefully, he doesn’t see this one.

Pushing off the wall, I raise my gun and aim right between his eyes. His hardened gaze locks on the gun, and he smirks.

“Who sent you?”

1. DARKSIDE—Neoni. Play until end of chapter



Chapter 6

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Papi and Me

Roan

4 *days earlier*

“I’m not doing it.” *Fuck this.* I am not going to become some bodyguard for hire because some cartel princess can’t handle the heat.

“Yes, you are.” Cash throws the butt of his cigarette on the ground of his rooftop pool deck, and I grind it with my heel.

“We have dozens of foot soldiers who can do the same shit.”

“No. Our deals with Cortez are too big to insult him by putting a recruit on the job.” He looks up at me lazily from the chair he’s lounging in while I’m still standing. This was supposed to be a short conversation.

I slide my fingers through my hair and tug with frustration. “How important can they be? It’s fucking avocados, Cash.”

“And you know what every basic bitch wants? Avocado toast, poké bowls, green smoothies, and margarita night with a giant-ass bowl of guacamole. Those *fucking avocados*,” he imitates me, “are worth more than their weight in gold.”

I roll my eyes. Black market avocados are apparently the new cocaine. “Doesn’t he have his own people for this?”

“He doesn’t know who he can trust. The threat might be coming from inside his organization.”

“Sounds like he needs help with housekeeping, not babysitting,” I scoff.

Cash stands and jabs his finger in my chest. “You’re doing it. End of discussion.” He runs a few steps and cannonballs into the pool, splashing me head to toe.

Asshole.



Present

She’s made it pretty fucking clear she’s just as unhappy with this arrangement as I am. Shooting me cutting glares that are both a challenge and an invitation, like she’s daring me to step out of line and do something to get her father to end it. She acts like my presence is an offense to her existence.

Well, I’m not too fucking thrilled about it either.

But for the first time since I started guarding her, something other than disdain and resentment flickers in me when I follow her into the alley behind Trixie’s. I know everything about her daily habits and movements, and none of those include smoke breaks. So, when I see her pull out a pack of cigs, I am hit with a zing of...I wouldn’t call it excitement, but it’s something other than boredom.

She’s finally making a move.

I don't know what it is until the anemic alley light catches on a flash of metal and I'm staring down the barrel of a gun.

Her eyes are as dark as her hair, and there's a fire in them that I can't describe but instantly recognize. I can't help but smirk back. Fucking *finally*, this is getting interesting.

"Who sent you?" The question takes me by surprise, but her voice is calm and her hands are steady. She appears relaxed and not frightened, but the wildness in her eyes, like prey backed into a corner, is what tells me she truly doesn't know why I've been trailing her.

"Your father."

"I won't miss at this distance, so you better think twice before lying to me again." I reach behind me, catching on to the way her eyes widen subtly and her breath stutters at the perceived threat. She thrusts the gun in my direction and chides, "Hands up."

I keep my hand in my pocket still, unmoving, and cock my head to the side. "Shoot me, and you'll never know who sent me." Her jaw grinds, and my lips quirk smugly before pulling out my phone. The tension in her shoulders deflates when she sees it's not a weapon. I hold it out flat in front of me so she can watch me dial a number and press call.

It rings twice before a rough voice answers bluntly, "Sí."

"Sir, it's Roan. Would you please tell your daughter to lower her weapon?"

"¿Regenia, qué?"

"¿Papá, qué significa esto?"

"Cálmate, hija, él está ahí para protegerte. Juan told me about the package. Until we find out who sent it and what they want, I want you protected. If anyone can keep you safe in June Harbor, it's the Foxes."

Some sort of realization dawns on her face, and she looks up at me.

“You’re a Fox?”

I ignore her question, and her father huffs on the other end of the line.

“Well, are we good? I have things to do—”

She shouts into the phone, “Wait, no—”

“Don’t shoot him, *mija*. And, Roan, don’t give her a reason to. She’s a great shot and won’t miss.”

“So I’ve been told,” I respond, and he hangs up with a laugh. I tuck my phone away and look back up at her. “This explains why you’ve been treating me like I’m a puppy murderer and not the person saving your ass—”

“You haven’t saved me from shit.”

She doesn’t lower her weapon, and I can’t deny the crackle of energy. There’s nothing quite like the tension between oneself and the barrel of a gun. I was eight the first time I flinched at the sight of a gun. That was, of course, unacceptable to my father. So every day for months, he would randomly draw his pistol on me. Eating breakfast, waiting for the school bus, tucking me into bed. Any moment was an opportunity. The tests didn’t stop until I quit flinching.

My young brain made a game of it. If I could smile before I flinched, I won. If I won enough times, maybe it would bring her back.

It didn’t bring anyone back. Now it’s just a dance with an old friend.

A gust of wind down the alley makes strands of her raven hair flutter around her face. She brushes it out of her way with one hand. She hikes the hem of her dress up with the hand still holding the gun, exposing a stretch of warm brown skin to holster it. It’s the only soft part of her; everything else is hard and fierce.

“I’m going back inside to enjoy the rest of my night.” She pushes past me. “*You* stay at the bar, but try not to look like such a fucking creep.”

I snatch a fistful of her long, silky hair and yank her around. Her eyes ignite, and irate defiance cuts across her features. Her hand shoots to her thigh, but I smack it away, forcing her neck back to stare up at me. Angry breaths punch from between her parted lips. Mine tug into a sneer as I say, low and deadly, “You’re not the Cortez I take orders from. Bark at me again, and *I’ll* be the one you need protecting from.”



Reggie

Would my father ever actually hurt me? No. Would he send me a threatening package in an attempt to deter me? Yes.¹ I’m stubborn as a mule with ADHD. I won’t let something go once I’m hyperfixated and he knows it. Perhaps not even to deter me, but to give himself a reason to hire someone to spy on me under the guise of protection. The Foxes are a notorious crime family, but they aren’t known for one specialty. They’ll take any job that offers a big payday.

So, sure, Roan could really just be a glorified babysitter, but he could also be hired for ten other things while disguised as another.

I don’t know how my father is tied to the bodies being dumped at the institute yet, but anyone he hires is looking pretty shady to me. So, I’ve given myself fucking cabin fever, locked up in my apartment for two days while trying to keep as much space between me and Roan as possible.

But tonight, I’m finally getting those drinks with Matthew and Stephen. If Roan will be driving there anyway to keep an eye on me, I may as well get

something out of this arrangement and make him my DD.

When I get outside my apartment, however, it's not just Roan sitting in his car. There's a blond dude talking animatedly with his hands while Roan stares bored out the windshield. When Roan spots me, he perks up and slaps the man in the chest, who in turn looks out the window at me with a lopsided grin. I walk across the street and throw open the back door.

I settle myself in the middle of the back seat and cross my legs and arms. Both men whip their heads toward me, Roan scowling and the other biting back a smile. Roan looks me up and down with derision, and I can't say I don't feel the same. "What are you—"

"I have somewhere to be tonight and, congratulations, you're my new boyfriend."

He rears back, and the blond laughs before clapping him on the shoulder. "Congrats, brother."

"Archangel Winebar, and we're already running late so you might want to step on it." I nod at the road ahead of us.

"What the fuck are you talking about, Cortez? I'm not your goddamn chauffeur, and I'm sure as hell not your boyfriend," he growls. His masculine scent mixes with the smell of the expensive leather seats. Somehow it makes his blue eyes feel deeper, but not in a dark way—in an almost intoxicating way.

Before I can get drunk on it, I relax into the seat and reply, "Archangel is a lot smaller than Trixie's, and your whole lurking-wet-blanket shtick tends to stick out."

"So?" He sounds exasperated, and I realize I'm in for a long night. I briefly consider calling Matt to cancel, but changing my plans would let this bastard

win. And who knows, maybe I'll get lucky and he'll finally snap and quit. *A girl can dream.*

“So, my friends don't know about my family, and I'd like to keep it that way. So you need a reason to be there.”

“No fucking way.” He shakes his head and turns around in his seat.

His friend's eyes bounce between us. “I'll do it. I'd be honored to serve as your arm candy for the night, Miss Cortez.” He offers a smile that I'm sure is panty melting to most girls, but there's something about his eyes that doesn't light a spark in my stomach. They're the same icy blue-gray as Roan's, but don't have the same pull.

I narrow my eyes. “And who are you?”

He reaches across the vehicle to offer me his hand. “Lochlan Fox, at your service.”

When I leave his hand hanging saying nothing but *okay*, I notice a quick flash of a subtle smirk from Roan. It's then that I realize that anything that makes him happy, I want to do the opposite of.

I clasp his hand and offer a warm smile. I meet Roan's glare in the rearview mirror, then give Lochlan a wink. “Step on it. *Papi* and I are running late.”

1. Play with Fire (feat. Yacht Money)—Sam Tinnesz, Yacht Money



Chapter 7

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Fucking Hell

Roan

Lochlan was just supposed to drop off my dinner and leave. ¹ Yet, somehow, here we are. He and Reggie are talking like fucking high school girls going over the details of their fictitious relationship. He's having entirely too much fun. She's a fucking *job*.

There's an open spot along the curb right out front, a sign on the sidewalk indicating it's valet drop-off. I pull up into it and park. A kid in a burgundy jacket runs over to me, already reaching out to hand me a ticket.

I watch my punk-ass brother make a show of opening the back door for Reggie, sweeping into a bow and holding out his hand. She laughs. There's something painfully light about the sound, and all I want to do is smother it.

I look at the guy trying to take my keys in exchange for a numbered ticket, and something about the desperate and spineless way he's catering to me pisses me off. I ignore him and head toward the bar door.

"Uh, sir, you can't park here. It's reserved for valet." *Breathe one, two, three—ah, fuck it.*

I pull my gun from my waistband and spin around, holding it visibly at my side. His eyes shoot open, and he stumbles back. “Tonight, it’s reserved for me.”

“Erectile dysfunction. Makes a man real grumpy,” I hear Lochlan confess behind me, and I get the urge to punch a hole through a wall. “For the inconvenience,” he says, while I’m sure handing the valet a roll of Benjamins.

This place is indeed much smaller than Trixie’s, but there’s an open seat at the bar and I head straight there. I don’t like drinking on the job, but I deserve a fucking medal for putting up with this shit. The least I’m owed is a drink.

I don’t look at the bartender, instead keeping my eyes glued on my brother and *her*. Her body is tight and wicked in a pair of painted-on black jeans, and my jaw grinds when I catch Lochlan getting an eyeful of her ass. “Scotch. Neat.”

“Sorry, we only serve wine.”

“Fucking hell,” I grumble.

I watch them settle into seats on the same side of a four-person table. Reggie’s full of bubbly energy that grates on my nerves with its fakeness. My brother’s charming, but he’s not *that* charming. Our eyes briefly meet, and her obnoxiously bright smile drops. I realize then that this is all to get under my skin. I can see the taunt in the way the corner of her mouth ticks up and her focus sharpens in challenge.

And it’s fucking *working*.

Lochlan places his hand on the table, palm up, and she happily places hers in it. Their fingers intertwine and, if I didn’t know better, I might be fooled by the look they give each other. Saccharine sweet.

But despite knowing this is a charade, nothing but a farce, I can’t help but

think that something about this just feels...*wrong*. The constant, low simmering that possesses my psyche flushes with envy. At first, I'm angry at myself for letting this act of hers get to me. But then I realize I'm not envious of the way she looks up at him through her lashes or that he knows how the weight of her hand feels in his. It's not that.

I'm jealous that he's squandering this perfect opportunity. Not to fuck her, but to fuck *with* her.

They order wine, and he offers her a taste of his. She takes a sip with a curve of a smile on her lips and her eyes locked on his. And he may as well be a goddamn cartoon with bulging heart eyes for all he's eating it up.

What's worse is they look totally in place, like they belong here *together*. The bar has a classic but minimalist style, the perfect place for the happy couple on their romantic night out. My own saving grace is that they don't serve pasta, so I don't have to watch them share a piece of spaghetti *Lady and the Tramp* style. *God, that would really make me sick.*

She spots two men walk in together from across the restaurant and shoots up from her seat to wave them over. Without thinking, driven by nothing but spite, I find myself yanking Lochlan out of his chair by the collar of his shirt.

"What the hell, dude?" He grunts, and Reggie gives me an equally enraged glare.

"Make yourself scarce," I growl.

"But I'm her—"

"Not anymore. Fuck off." He rolls his eyes, exasperated, but follows my order and walks right past the two men on his way out.

"Reggie, how are you?" one of the men croons as they approach.

She loosens the divot between her brows, and her scowl transforms into a smile. She hisses through her teeth, "Behave, Fox."

I loop my arm around her waist and pull her into my side. “Don’t worry about me, *babe*.”

She introduces me to her friend, Matthew, and his husband, Stephen. “Nice to meet you.” I turn up the charm, shaking their hands with a wide smile. I start up friendly conversation as we take our seats. Reggie’s shock and confusion that I haven’t bitten anyone’s head off yet delights me.

She’s rigid in her chair, the pulse in her neck jumping, and my eyes zero in on the minuscule movement. While the men check out the menu, I grip the back of her neck. She tenses, her hand instinctively wrapping around her dinner knife, but eases when I begin to massage the taut muscles.

I work my thumb in circles and lean over to whisper, “Relax, Cortez.” I feel her bristle with my proximity. This rare show of discomfort has me leaning in further to brush my lips against her temple. The gesture may look tender, but it’s anything but as my breath flutters on her skin. “This is your game we’re playing. Can’t back out now.”

Her jaw pulses, the only indication that she heard my words. Then pain shoots up my arm as she wrenches back the pinky finger on the hand I didn’t realize I’d placed on her thigh. I swallow down a groan. For some reason, it’s not a grimace I have to fight back, but a smile. I hear her message loud and clear. *Let’s fucking play.*

“So, how do you two know my little stinky?” I ask the table as I dust a knuckle across her cheek, and her face twists into a forced smile.

“Well, that’s one nickname that shouldn’t leave the house.” She chuckles dryly, and her friends laugh as she looks at me pointedly. There’s fire in her eyes, but it’s not all anger. No, there’s a spark there too—small, but still noticeable like a flash. The spark of a challenge accepted.

It’s so easy to get a rise out of her. Just my lax smile in return makes her

bite her lip in restraint. That's when I realize exactly how much fun this night is going to be.



Reggie

I think I would be less annoyed if he were doing some over-the-top shit like airplane feeding me his risotto. Instead, he's a master of small touches, light grazes, and shuttered looks that make me feel off balance. He plays the part so well. Down to the nuanced subtleties, like how he seemingly absentmindedly brushes a strand of hair off my neck or the barely noticeable way his shoulders are curled in and angled toward me like I'm the center of his gravitational pull.

I can tell Matt and Stephen buy the act completely, asking us questions not to interrogate the veracity of our relationship, but because they are genuinely curious about this new development in my love life.

And what pisses me off even more is that he has an answer for everything—how we met at the gym but I wouldn't give him the time of day, how he won me over by leaving daisies on my windshield. It's as easy for him to lie through his teeth as it is to breathe in oxygen. And when he's not lying, he's telling the god's honest truth. He knows my order at my favorite coffee shop, that I don't like mayo on my sandwiches, and that I listen to ASMR if I can't sleep.

It's bone-chilling honesty that makes me feel exposed and violated. He has no right to know these casual, mundane facts of my life as if he is a part of it.

The waiter comes around to drop off the check. Roan already has his card out and ready, held out between his two fingers. Matt begins to protest, but he insists. "Please let me. The pleasure was all mine, getting to meet friends of this beautiful lady." He gives me a simmering look that, for a second, makes my skin tingle before I remember he's full of shit.

"You got lucky with this one." Stephen wiggles his eyebrows between us, and I plaster on yet another fake smile.

"Didn't I?" I cup his jaw, the low stubble rough on my palm. Pulling him toward me, I place a kiss on his cheek, feeling his jaw tense under my hold. My lips barely graze his skin as I whisper, "I'm not paying you back for that."

He plucks my hand from his face and brings it to his mouth, lips fluttering lightly across my knuckles as he speaks quietly. "I don't need your money, Cortez. Your daddy's paying me plenty."

I wrench my hand away as subtly as I can. Kissing his cheek, soft and teasing, gave me a heady rush of power and control. But when *his* lips brush against my hot flesh, I get the same heady rush for different reasons. Dangerous reasons.

Once the check is signed, we all make our way outside to say our goodbyes. Lochlan is nowhere in sight. He must have found some other way home. Despite everything with Roan, it was really nice to see Matt and Stephen, so I say, "We should do this again soon," as I stand on my toes to wrap my arms around Matt's neck in a hug.

"Anytime, Reg." He squeezes me back, then more quietly says, "And we love the new boo. Way to go, girl." *Goddammit.*

I let him go, and Roan reaches for my hand, interlacing his long fingers with mine as he waves to my friends as the valet pulls up with their car. It's

possessive and controlling, but not nearly as much as when he spins me toward him and presses me tight against his hard body, his arm like a bar across my lower back.

He tilts my chin up. It's deliberate and cunning, meant to shake me like every other move tonight. He lowers his mouth toward mine, but I palm his chest, holding him back. "What the fuck are you doing?" I hiss, our lips only a breath's width apart. I can smell his rich and masculine cologne and feel the heat in his gaze, causing the tops of my ears to burn.

"You want it to be believable, right?" His mouth hovers over mine, his breath tickling my lips, and my eyes narrow in on the tip of his tongue flicking out to wet his bottom lip. "They're driving past right now. Better make it look good," he taunts. I can feel the low, raw tenor of his voice vibrate through our chests pressed firmly together.

"I hate you," I say, grasping either side of his face in my hands in what looks like a passionate embrace. In reality, I'm holding him back from bringing his lips down on mine, the hard flex of his jaw under my palms. The arrogance in his smirk is hot on my face, and I have a sudden urge to bury my long nail in his eye socket.

I hear a honk behind me and assume it must be Matt and Stephen as they pass. The second they're gone, he steps back, releasing me. All artifice of charm is swiped clean from his features. The only thing left is those stony-blue eyes, cold and detached, as they bore into me.

"Get in the car, Cortez," he orders, stepping off the curb and around his car. He opens his door and looks over the top of the car to see me still on the sidewalk, not having moved an inch. "If you're waiting for me to open your door like a gentleman, you're gonna be here all night."

The street light catches the copper in his hair and cuts his defined jaw and

cheekbones with shadows. His blue eyes are as stunning of an azure as they are heartless. Never has such a pretty face pissed me off so much.

“Fuck off, Fox. I’m calling an Uber.”

1. Continue playing Play with Fire (feat. Yacht Money)—Sam Tinnesz, Yacht Money until end of chapter

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Chapter 8

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Reluctant Partners

Roan

***H**er body doesn't make a loud thud when it hits the ground like it should. Maybe it's because my ears are still ringing from the gunshot. Her eyes are still open, and I want to go to her to close them, but another man wedges a gun between my eyes, stopping me.*

Are my ears ringing or is it my heart I'm hearing? Is it her heart? Can your heart still beat with a bullet in your brain?

I know what death is. I know what guns do. And I know that the red splattering the walls and the couch and the pillow with a fox and the red seeping into the carpet under her head means she's dead.

The gun did that.

The man that shot her walks over to me and crouches to look me in the eyes. I hate his eyes. They are black and evil. As soon as he does, the one holding the gun in my face removes it.

I was supposed to keep them safe, and I failed. So, I charge at the man with evil eyes. My fists only get a few punches in before I'm being pulled back, the gun now pressed to my temple.

The man with evil eyes laughs. It's not a happy sound. It makes the air feel cold, like the wind in the pumpkin patch before Halloween. "Tell your pops Worenski stopped by."

I should have never opened the door...

My knuckles are split, and droplets of blood dot the floor at my feet. Even though this has happened hundreds of times before, I still wake up dizzy and disoriented like it's the first time. I dazedly grab a shirt out of the hamper to wipe the streaks of red off the new, fist-sized dents in the metal door.

I wrap the shirt around my hand so I don't leave a trail of blood as I stumble to the kitchen. I avoid looking at the couch as I pass, vivid splotches of crimson still haunting me in my wakefulness.



Reggie

*Potatoes, tomatoes, garlic, fresh cilantro, chicken breast...*I mentally run through my grocery list in my head as I enter my apartment's residents' parking garage.

*Potatoes, tomatoes, garlic, fresh cilantro, chicken breast...*The second I unlock my car from a few yards away, I turn back around, realizing with an aggravated sigh that I left my reusable bags on the hook by the door where I swear *every time* I won't forget—*BOOM!*

The sound ricochets through the cement garage. I instantly feel the intense heat, followed by another explosion. On unstable feet, I turn around, stumbling back. My car is nothing but a ball of flames, and the second explosion must have been the car parked next to mine also raging with fire.

The quake of the structure, the noxious smell of the fire, and the adrenaline that consumes me is so similar to the last time that for a moment I forget where I am. Instead of another floor of concrete above my head, it's the Mexican sun. My body responds before my mind catches up, and I hear a yell torn from my own throat, a guttural, horrified howl. "*Sofia!*"

The breath in my lungs is shoved down deep where I can't access it. I lower myself to the ground, clutching my chest and gulping for air. I'm as mesmerized by the brilliant, burning flames as I am terrified, unable to tear my gaze away. My hands shake. My knees shake. The sound of my heartbeat is a heavy echo of the explosion in my ears.

The sprinklers switch on, dousing the flames but not doing much to subdue them. The cold water is a shock to my system, breaking me out of my flashback and forcefully slamming me back to the present. Smoke, thick and black like the robes of a grim reaper, coil across the garage and out the open siding.

A force grabs me from behind, gripping under my arms and hiking me to my feet. I writhe, arms swinging and fists wailing into a wall of muscle. He's easily six-four, but his hulking body is not what makes me immediately place him. It's Roan's stony-blue eyes, reflecting the violent swirls of fire now behind me. They're wild and harried, chilling me to the bone despite the heat. I latch onto them like an anchor in an ocean storm.

I don't realize I'm still lashing out until my wrists are caught in his iron grip. He propels me back, pushing my body against the back of another car, and I finally allow myself to heave in a breath. His mouth moves, but I can't hear anything. I realize it wasn't my heartbeat but the thrumming echo of the explosion still ringing in my ears.

I can't imagine what I must look like to make his brows crease with

something suspiciously close to concern. His lips form words soundlessly as he drops my wrists and brushes my hair out of my face with both hands. One rough palm clutches my cheek while the other slides down to press two fingers into the underside of my jaw. My eyes fix on the furtive way his gaze is scanning my face. In my distant awareness, I realize he's checking my pulse.

Something about the caring gesture, the way he's looking at me like I'm frail and vulnerable, makes my lungs seize uncomfortably. He thinks I'm weak. That dawning thought has me throwing his hands off me and pushing out from between him and the car.

"I'm fine." I know I'm speaking from the vibration in my throat, but my voice sounds miles away.

"You're not fucking fine. Can you even hear me?" It sounds like he's under water, but there is something barely audible under the hollow ringing.

"Yes." I must be shouting by the way he tucks his ear into his shoulder.

He shakes his head and tries to loop my arm around his neck while grabbing me around the waist. For a second, I almost let myself melt into him—his solid, sturdy frame holding me up and making me want to give in to the post-adrenaline exhaustion seeping into my bones. He's offering. I should let him, but I still find myself shaking him off me.

The sting of rejecting his help is evident in his scoff. "Suit yourself."

We hobble down the garage stairwell to his car that's parked in its usual spot outside my apartment building. Well, *I* hobble, my equilibrium still unsteady after the blast. He walks like a soldier—tall and proud—with poorly concealed sighs and eye rolls when I wobble.

He opens the passenger door. "Get in the car." He barks orders like a soldier too.

I lean against a fire hydrant on the sidewalk. Looking up, I can see the smoke and flashing lights of the fire alarms coming from the garage. My head throbs, but I don't think the blast wind was enough to give me a concussion.

"Where are we going?" I ask what I assume is a reasonable question for the man demanding I get in his car, but Roan's mouth draws into a tight line. He looks up at the sky like he's praying for patience.

"Christ, not this again." He grabs me by the bicep and tugs me toward the open car.

"Where. Are. We. Going?" I demand again.

His grip tightens, and I bite back a wince as his fingers dig into my skin. "Get. In. The. Car." He bares his teeth. When I continue to push against his attempts to shove me in, he huffs as if in defeat. "I'm taking you to see our doctor."

"I don't need a doctor. I'm fine," I stress, pointing at my ears to emphasize my returning hearing. I don't know why I'm fighting this. I'm clearly in danger. A bomb meant for me just left my car a ball of flames. But for some reason, going with him, accepting his help, feels like letting *them* win. Whoever *they* are.

Oh, and he's a grumpy fuck and I'd rather spend eternity with my shittiest ex-boyfriend than a second longer with him.

"Have you forgotten I'm the one who went to medical school?"

His lip twitching in the flash of a smirk is all the warning I get before he drops my arm and pulls out a gun instead. "And you must have forgotten I'm the one with the gun."

I take a step closer, so close that my chest is inches away from the muzzle. For the first time since the explosion, I feel steady on my feet. "Shooting me

kinda defeats the purpose of keeping me safe. How much is my father paying you for that anyway?” I bounce my gaze between him and the gun like it’s nothing more than a toy. He’s not going to shoot me.

“A bullet hole would make you agree to seeing a doctor.” One eyebrow raises, and he tilts his head to the side. There’s no humor to his statement. *Okay, maybe he would shoot me.* This is a man who is used to killing and maiming to get what he wants. “Car, now.” He gestures for me to get into the car with the gun, and I relent, climbing into the passenger seat.

He gets in, and I refuse to look at him, but I can hear the goading taunt in his voice. “Don’t worry, I know where to shoot to keep you alive.”

I force out a dry laugh as we drive off to the sound of approaching fire sirens. “Ah, right. Gotta protect that payday.”

I see him look at me in my periphery, so I turn my head and am met with the same scowl he always wears. But there’s an intense sincerity in his deep blue eyes. “Don’t insult yourself.”



Roan

She’s in my house, my *home*. And it’s suffocating.

She’s already consuming my days with this fucking job, and now she’s invading the only space free from *her*. Soon she’ll worm her way into my veins and take up unwanted residency in my bloodstream.

With the way she keeps sending me daggers over Dr. Romero’s shoulder as he waves a flashlight in front of her eyes, you’d think I’m the one who set

the car bomb, not the one who saved her.

Romero walks to the end of the table where he has his first aid kit, and I get an unfettered view of Reggie's glare. "You know, for a doctor, you make a pretty terrible patient."

She crosses her legs where she's perched on the end of my dining table. "No one's ever complained about my bedside manner before."

"Well, your patients are usually dead." I can't stand the snarky entitlement in the way she rolls her eyes. I take two quick strides to stand right in front of her, so close she has to crane her neck to meet my eyes. "Why do you have to be so fucking difficult?" I snarl, and if I expected her to cower at my threatening tone, I'd be disappointed.

She juts out her chin and steels her gaze. "Because I don't fucking trust you. Everything was fine until *you* showed up. Now, someone's sending me severed body parts and trying to blow me up."

"That's why I'm here, protecting your ungrateful ass!" Goddamn, she makes me want to rip my hair out.

"For all I know, you're the one that sent that tongue!" She jumps off the table and jabs a finger into my sternum. Dr. Romero keeps his head down, searching for something I'm sure he already found, pretending like he doesn't hear us.

I resist the urge to bend her finger back until it snaps. Something tells me that's the exact reaction she wants from me. Instead, I bite my lip and take a heavy breath through my nose. "You can make this as difficult as you want, but your father hired me to do a job. I'm gonna do it either way. So, how about you make both of our lives a whole lot easier and stop digging in your heels at every turn?"

She stares up at me, the dark in her eyes smoldering like hot coals as she

takes in what I said. I can tell she's the type of person who doesn't like being backed into a corner. But tough shit. If she stopped being an ungrateful brat for two seconds, she'd realize I'm in her corner too. I sigh and try to soften my features, hoping easing mine will cool her attitude. "I don't like you anymore than you like me, but if we're gonna be a team—"

"We're not a team."

I clench and unclench my fist before continuing. "Fine. Reluctant partners." She nods with a shrug of approval with this new definition of our current shit show. I keep my eyes on her as I say, "Dr. Romero."

"Yes, sir?"

Her gaze is magnetized to mine, one fine eyebrow arching in question of what I'm going to do next. It's subtle, but clear. *Are you going to fuck up again so quickly?*

"Leave." I sense rather than see her shiver at my commanding tone. It's a ripple in the air between us.

Romero doesn't say another word, just silently packs up and leaves. The whole time, I never break eye contact with Reggie. I absorb every speck of gold and amber highlighting her dark irises. I try to understand the complex depth of emotion in them. How they can be closed off and shuttered but still a deep, dark well.

And why do I see my own reflection in the murky water at the bottom?



Chapter 9

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Dogs

Reggie

After Roan's people swept the entire parking garage and my apartment for any other bombs, he finally drove me home. He offered to let me stay at his place, but I can't think of anything I'd hate more than *living* with the man.

He says he "saved" me from the car bomb, but technically he showed up a little too late. If I hadn't forgotten my bags, I would have been barbecue. My skin goes cold as I finally admit to myself how close I was to dying. If it wasn't for those fucking bags...the thought makes my stomach roll. I shake my head, clearing my thoughts and returning to Roan's supposed hero moment. The way I see it, his brief moment of gallantry doesn't do much to make up for all his rudeness and creepy stalking.

He wants to talk about teamwork, but really he's just protecting his payday, not me.

We park on the street below and have to make our way up to my apartment on the fifth floor through the lobby. I continue a petty quest to not hold a

single door open for Roan. If I'm lucky, he might even get locked out, or maybe the elevator doors will cut him in half.

We get to my unit, and I unlock the door. I am about to sigh in relief, ready to be done with this day and done with *him*, but he barges in behind me.

"What are you doing?" I snap at him.

"Clearing the place," he says as he walks down the hallway toward my bedroom, gun drawn and at his side.

"Didn't your men just finish doing that?"

He answers with an unintelligible grunt, but the tension in my chest relaxes knowing he'll be leaving once he's done.

But once he's done, he falls onto my couch like he fucking owns the place, dropping something on the floor I only just now realized is his overnight bag.

I stomp over to him and cross my arms, hating how he makes me feel like a petulant child. But if he's going to treat me like one, I may as well act like one. "Outside." I throw my arm toward the door.

He stands, and there's something about seeing him rise back to his full height while he cracks his knuckles that has me taking a step back. His head hangs forward, and I can see he's clenching his jaw as he steps toward me. My stomach fills with foreboding, like I've woken a sleeping monster. I know I've been pushing his limits all day.

He lifts his chin and levels me with a dark stare, the gray in his eyes feeling black like coal. "I'm not a dog, Cortez."

I stand my ground as he tries to leer over me. "Could have fooled me. Following me around like a lost puppy."

His nostrils flare, and my heart races. I don't like to be made to feel small. Especially in my own home. "Now be a *good boy* and do your business outside. *Vete.*" I narrow my eyes so he knows I mean it exactly as it sounds.

“I can’t keep you safe from out there,” he says through gritted teeth, and I can sense the tension rolling off him. I wonder how far I can push him until he snaps.

“Then you must not be very good at your job.” I sneer as he rolls his shoulders back and steps closer so our chests are almost touching. The air feels thicker, my skin hotter.

“You think I wouldn’t be able to get in here if there was a guard outside?” Another step forward, and I’m forced to take one back so he doesn’t bump into me. Giving up ground makes heat creep up my cheeks.

“You think you’d be safe in here, all alone?” There’s an edge to his voice that sends shivers down my spine. He walks me back until I hit the butcher-block island, shoulders curling over me as if to prove how much bigger he is. “You think I couldn’t do whatever I wanted to you?”

There’s a heavy threat in his words, but his tone is almost emotionless. The exact opposite of mine when I growl, “I’d like to see you fucking try.”

All the wind is knocked from my lungs as he spins me around with lithe speed and bends me over the island. My heart accelerates, pounding against the wood, and blood whooshes in my ears. “Get the fuck off me!”

“Get me off yourself.” His voice is like tumbling stones, hard and gravelly. “Come on, Cortez. Fight me off.”

I struggle uselessly in his iron grip. Breathing becomes harder when he shoves my head down and his fingers wrap around the side of my face to cover my mouth. “Go ahead and yell for your guards outside. Scream for help.” He leans down and whispers with mock assurance, “Surely, someone will hear you.”

Any attempt at sound is muffled by his heavy hand, and panic bubbles up in my chest. Especially when he tugs my pants halfway down my ass. The

feeling of air on my cheeks is like a shock of electricity through my body, demanding I fight harder. I flail and kick as I hear him undo his belt, the sound of clanking metal making my stomach roil.

He leans over me, and even the lightest pressure of his weight against my back is suffocating. His voice is like sandpaper as he rasps in my ear, “I could take you right now. Any way I wanted, and there’s nothing you could do to stop me.” Hot tears prick my eyes, and I hate him the most for that. “And after I’ve taken everything from you, I would set a fire so hot and so efficient that it would make that car bomb look like a Boy Scout bonfire. You’d be nothing but a pile of ashes by the time your precious security outside even noticed anything was wrong.”

He further drives his point home by grinding against me. The cold metal of his belt is sickening against my bare skin. He releases his hold over my mouth and stands up straight, but keeps a domineering palm between my shoulder blades. “You can hate me, treat me like a dog, tell me to be a good boy, but where you go, I go. And when shit hits the fan, you’ll be glad I’m in *here* and not out *there*.”

He gently pulls my pants back up, his hands hesitating on my hips, almost in apology, before he pushes off me. His abrupt absence is like the floor falling out from beneath me. I stand on shaky legs, my blood still thrumming. By the time I’m upright and turn around, he’s sitting back on the couch, ankle crossed over his leg and some magazine off my coffee table fanned out in front of him.

He’s the picture of cool and collected while I’m stewing with toxic heat and unabated rage. I demand my lungs to take deep and slow breaths as I glare at the sight of him and promise myself to make his life hell.



I lock myself in my bedroom, roiling in anger and humiliation. ¹ I'm livid that he was right. I couldn't fight him off. I couldn't have stopped him from going further. I couldn't even fucking call for help. He proved his point and then some. And that's what's crawling under my skin and making me feel like a live wire. That he was right.

He was right in his assertion, but he was wrong as hell in the way he went about it. He laid his fucking hands on me, and I won't let that go unpunished. He may be hired to do a job—for an obscene amount of money, I might add—but he will do it without treating me like a cheap doll he can throw around.

If he's going to be living under my roof, he's going to respect me or deal with the consequences. I may not be able to beat him in a physical fight, but I am one petty motherfucker, and he's about to find that out.

When I fling my door open, I instantly hear weird, labored breathing and grunting. *I swear to god if this asshole is jacking off on my couch I will—*

Roan's profile is red-faced and sweaty, lowering himself down to the carpet in the living room in a push-up. Sweat drips down between his shoulder blades, cascading down the vaulted ceilings of a gothic cathedral tattoo covering his entire back. The artwork itself is stunning, creating the perspective as if you are standing in the cathedral yourself. Depictions of angel statues weep at the bottom of the piece, and at the center of the altar where a crucifix should be is the backside of a topless woman in thigh-high garter lingerie with her hands bound behind her in thick rope.

A low heat simmers in my stomach as I watch his honed muscles flex and work, decorated in so much ink I could spend hours inspecting it all. But at the same time, I remember how those same muscles held me down while his mocking voice rang in my ear. *Come on, Cortez. Fight me off.*

“You're not going near my furniture dripping with sweat like that.” His head snaps up at my voice.

He lifts off the floor into a squat, resting his elbows on his knees. His chest puffs in and out with heavy breaths as he looks up at me like I'm the gum on the bottom of his shoe. “I was going to shower.”

The idea of him making himself at home in my place like that irks me almost as much as what he did earlier. “The building has a dog park on the ground level. There's a dog bath too.”

He rolls his lips together, and his nostrils flare as he stands. His hands ball into fists, and I hold back a smirk, knowing I'm nearing his limit. His defined abs contract on each deep breath, and I have a feeling it's not from exertion but an attempt to calm himself down from whatever edge I've pushed him to.

If I can get him to hit me, my father will fire him on the spot. I'll take the pain if it gets him the fuck out of my life.

He doesn't say anything, just picks up his duffel and brushes past me toward the bathroom. “Still with the dog jokes? Thought you'd be smart enough to come up with something new.” His jaw ticks, and he looks down his nose at me, his eyes narrowing on my lips. “Try running away while I'm showering, and I'll find you before nightfall.”

I stride up to him. “You're not going to scare me out of my own home.” He brushes his sweaty strands of hair out of his face again, and an idea jumps into my head. “Whatever,” I acquiesce. “Let me get some things out of here first.”

He steps aside, and I shut the door behind me, a satisfied smile playing on my lips as I spot his leather toiletry bag sitting on the counter.



I'm just putting the pasta into the boiling water when a bellowing yell comes from the bathroom. "*Cortez!*"

I give the noodles a stir, grinning like a madman. I practically skip to the bathroom. I knock once on the door and it flings open, a furious looking Roan on the other side. I lean against the door jamb, a self-satisfied smirk no doubt painting my lips. "Something wrong?"

"My hair is falling out in goddamn chunks," he rages, fisting his hair and showing me the clump in his palm. His body is practically vibrating. He's wearing a pair of black joggers, a white towel hung around his neck.

He looks at me expectantly, and I raise my eyebrows. "Was there a question in there?"

He pulls his bottom lip between his teeth and seethes. The magnolia bloom tattoo on his neck bobs as he swallows down whatever spew of obscenities he wants to throw my way. He pulls out an electric razor from his toiletry bag. He plugs it into the wall, and then turns to face me.

His eyes harden, and my lungs constrict with the full intensity of his gaze bearing down on me. Like the world's strongest magnets, I am incapable of pulling my eyes away from his, even as the razor begins to buzz.

I lower my chin and glare at him as he runs the razor through the patches of hair he has left. The volatile look on his face turns to a detached, stoic

mask as he continues to shave his head, never once breaking eye contact. Suddenly he's the picture of cold, unbothered indifference.

With each pass of the blade, it feels like he is inching closer and closer to getting the upper hand. Once he's done, he brushes his hand over the short buzz covering his scalp. I want to sulk when he looks just as handsome without hair. It gives him a harder and crueler edge. It fits him perfectly.

My smug grin falls, and he gives me a small sneer and lifted brow as if to say, *that's all you got?* No, it's not, *pendejo*.

I don't want him to see me falter. I push off the jamb and look at the mess of hair on the bathroom floor. "There's a vacuum in the hall closet," I say before walking away.

I finish cooking our spaghetti dinner while Roan reads a book on the couch. His presence has me constantly on edge. Every time I turn my back, I half expect him to appear behind me, forcing me down onto whatever surface I'm in front of. I'd rather he left me with my pants down and anger righteous than the confusing way he tenderly pulled them up. He was careful not to touch my bare skin, his fingers only hovering a moment longer than necessary over my hips at the end.

The fact that he felt he needed to coddle me after humiliates me even more. I'd rather his disdain than pity. My chest burns hot with embarrassment as I slice a serrano pepper down the middle with plastic gloves on. I score the inside of the pepper and scrape the seeds off into a mortar before tucking it into my pocket. I keep a subtle eye on Roan making sure he isn't paying attention to me.

I go straight to the bathroom and take the pepper out. The door opens into the bathroom, so I can rub the pepper—the scores bringing out the spicy oils—over the knob without being seen. I close the door and sit on the toilet idly

for a minute before flushing an empty bowl. I do the same to the inside knob and then peel off my gloves, throwing them in the wastebasket and tossing a few scrunched up balls of tissue paper over top.

“Dinner’s almost ready,” I say gruffly, trying to keep any tiny hint of excitement from my voice. I hate him, so I need to sound like I hate him. He’s been chugging water since he finished working out, so I’m not surprised when he gets up to go to the bathroom after my announcement. I was hoping he would.

While he’s in there, it gives me enough time to pound the serrano seeds into a wet paste. I serve myself and then stir the pulverized seeds into the rest of the spaghetti and red sauce. *Dinner’s served, bitch.*

“Food’s on the stove,” I say as he comes back, already seated at my small dining table that separates the kitchen from the living room area.

He huffs something under his breath that sounds like thanks. Once he’s seated, he squirms in his seat, a pinch between his brows showing his discomfort. His one hand on the table tenses into a tight fist and the other adjusts himself in his pants. I keep my eyes on my plate so I don’t give away anything on my face.

He dives into his food almost angrily, probably to distract from the burning in his pants. After he shovels a few bites, he inhales sharply and chugs a bunch of water. I watch him try to discreetly search the noodles with his fork, inspecting the chunks of onion and tomatoes in the sauce. He won’t find what he’s looking for. That’s why I ground up the seeds—I didn’t want him to be able to pick them out.

“Not hungry?” I ask as he drains his water cup, his plate barely picked at.

He fidgets in his seat again, and his jaw pulses. “So what did you put in my shampoo?” I don’t miss the fact he’s ignoring my question.

I fold my forearms on the table and take in his shaved head and the pained look on his face he's desperately trying to hide. "Nair."

"Clever," he drawls dryly, unimpressed. He tries to go back to his food unfazed, but he takes breaks every few bites to swallow air.

He looks at me suspiciously as I pointedly eat a forkful while meeting his glare. He watches me chew and swallow, a look of confusion peeking through his angry facade. The small smile I give him makes him finally snap.

He shoves the plate away from him and throws his napkin on the table as he stands. "Okay, what the hell did you put in this?"

"*Ay, pobrecito.*" I look at him like he's a misbehaving child, flicking my chin at his chair and waiting patiently for him to sit back down. He begrudgingly does with a sigh. "The same thing that's making your dick feel like it's on fire." His eyes narrow bitterly. "Serrano pepper."

He bares his teeth, and his eyes fill with the promise of violence as he growls, "You're a fucking menace."

I laugh, standing and picking up the steak knife as I do. I circle the table as I say, "Finally something we agree on."

I plant my palm on the table next to his hand, fingers spread and knuckles whitening as he grips the table. I lean in close enough to smell the freshness of his shower and feel the anger radiate from him like heat. "And the next time you threaten to rape me, it won't be serrano in your food." I punctuate my last words by stabbing the knife into the table between his fingers, intentionally missing them by millimeters. "It will be fucking *cyanide.*"

His eyes darken, and his chest rises with a deep breath, but he doesn't say a word.

"*Buenas noches, perro,*" I call over my shoulder as I walk away. "Don't forget to clean up."

He remains silent. I don't know what I expected him to say. I certainly didn't expect an apology, but nothing still feels like he's spit in my face. I feel nearly as powerless as I did when he had my face down on the counter.

I hear his chair scrape against the floor and his feet hurry after me. He quickly catches me, wrapping a hand around my wrist and whipping me around. "That's not what I was doing."

I scoff. "Could have fooled me." I tug my arm away unsuccessfully and snap my eyes to his with all my vitriol. His hand sears my skin. I don't want him touching me. Not ever again. "Let. Me. Go."

"I'm a bad man, but I'm not the worst." I open my mouth to counter, but he talks right over me. "In order to protect you from the worst, I have to think like them, and *you* have to realize this isn't a game."

I grind my teeth together, fuming. "You done?"

"Yeah." He drops my hand with a subtle, disapproving shake of his head that makes me feel so fucking small. I watch him walk away, running a hand over his short hair, and glare daggers at his back, hoping he trips over his own feet and cracks his skull open.

1. STUPID (Feat. Yung Baby Tate)—Ashnikko, Baby Tate. Play until end of chapter



Chapter 10

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Sugar or Cyanide

Roan

It takes me forever to fall asleep on the couch, partly because I hold out as long as I can. Because if I sleep, I dream. And if I dream, I wake up yelling and punching shit. I don't need Reggie to like me, but I need her to at least tolerate me enough so that she doesn't try to poison me. Waking someone up with a fist to the face doesn't tend to build bridges.

Fuck, Lochlan would be good at this shit—as long as he didn't end up sleeping with her. He's protective by nature and can actually make her smile, and probably a hell of a lot less murderous. But I'd rather saw off my dick than admit to Cash that I can't do the job. Protesting when he assigned it is one thing, but backing out now would be a failure, even if Lochlan is better suited.

And I'm so sick of failing.

I know they all blame me for what happened to her. They may not say it now, but at one point they did. Those are words that can't be taken back, no matter how much my brothers have matured or grown. I'll never forget the

permanent truth in Cash's eyes when he told me it was my fault that Mom was dead. I wasn't brave enough, strong enough, *man* enough.

He'll tell me now that I was just a kid, it's not my fault. But I know, I *know*, that deep down he still blames me. I could see the belief carved into his psyche through his eyes. Once you believe something so wholeheartedly, you can't ever fully let it go.

Time doesn't heal shit.

It only gives wounds more time to fester.

When I finally lose my battle to sleep and doze off, it feels like I am woken minutes later by the sound of a door opening. Instinct has me reaching for my gun wedged in the couch cushions and drawing it at the same time as I open my eyes. Immediately noticing that the front door is closed, I spin my gaze and aim down the hallway where Reggie is exiting her room. I quickly stuff the gun back in its place while she rubs the sleep from her eyes.

For a second, I am taken aback by the complete casualness of her. She's wearing a pair of plaid boxers folded over at the waist. With her hands raised, her ratty old t-shirt slides up, revealing a patch of golden skin. Her hair is barely contained in a bun, loose and spilling out. She looks...soft, like well-worn jeans.

Then she goes and opens her fucking mouth.

"God, I was really hoping I imagined this new living situation." She barely affords me a glance as she strolls into the kitchen with a yawn. *Maybe she's being too casual...?* I eye her suspiciously, half expecting her to pull a bazooka from the cupboard instead of coffee.

I sit up on the couch and lean forward on my elbows, watching, waiting. She notices and lifts her brows. "*Qué quieres?*"

I roll my head to the side and stare at her. She sticks her head out in a

repeat of her question. So much sass. But I catch her picking at her nails, her hands hanging down by her sides. She enjoys the back and forth, the bark and the bite. But silence? This makes her uncomfortable.

I stash that little sliver of information in the back of my mind and stand. “Are you going to offer me any coffee?”

She pauses, about to fill the coffee pot by the sink. “Are you going to keep your hands off me?”

I huff a dry laugh and walk over to her. She goes back to filling the pot. There are hints of tension in her shoulders and neck when she turns her back to me. I lean against the island and watch her work, my eyes tracing every inch of her bare skin, letting the silence simmer a little longer.

The machine beeps as she turns it on and faces me, mimicking my position against the counter. “Why don’t you trust me?”

“Because my father hired you,” she replies immediately and matter-of-factly.

“I guess a better question then is why don’t you trust your father?”

There’s a slight wave of disappointment over her face before she speaks, as if she doesn’t like the answer. “Because I think he’s murdering women—cartel women—and using me and Verano to cover it up.”

“What makes you think that?”

She laughs, pushing off the counter and wagging her finger. “You’re smooth. I’ll give you that, Fox.” She crosses the kitchen and pulls out two mugs, then a sugar jar. She gives me a mischievous smirk, dark eyes dancing under her lashes as she looks up at me. “Sugar or cyanide?”

“Black.”

She rolls her eyes. “You know drinking shitty coffee doesn’t make you any tougher.”

I nearly laugh, because it's true. I got in the habit of drinking black coffee as a teen because I thought it was manlier, now I just prefer the taste. I disguise it as clearing my throat. "Back to my question, Cortez."

She looks at me almost bewildered, like I'm crazy for even asking. "Why would I tell you? So you can go report everything I know back to my father?"

I beat her to the fridge. "That's not what I was hired to do. But I know my word isn't enough." I hand her both the coconut milk and the soy milk because I know she likes a mix of them. "So, how about I help you find whoever is responsible?"

"And why would you do that?" She gives me a side eye as she accepts the milks.

"It's pretty fucking boring sitting around all day. At least this would be something to do." I can't help but wonder if this is an offer I'll regret. Me and her working together? Should be a terrible prospect. I should take it back right now. But for some reason I find my heart's beating faster waiting for her response.

She takes her coffee to the small dining table, a pensive pinch in her brows. She didn't come back with an immediate snarky answer, so she must be seriously considering it. "What if it turns out to be my father?"

I pull out a chair and join her. I fold my arms on the table in front of me, and her eyes drop to my forearms. She licks her bottom lip, and a spark of heat flutters in my stomach.

Her eyes jolt back up to mine when I speak. "I don't have a dog in this fight. If you think it's a serious possibility that he's behind this, then you have to decide before we start if that's something you even want to know."

Her jaw shifts, and she stares into her coffee. It's not fear that shadows her face, it's heartbreak. My family is fucked up in too many ways to count, but

none of them would ever try to kill me. And with something as destructive and violent as a bomb? No, they would take me out execution style, painlessly.

“He didn’t protest when I wanted out.” There’s a crack of vulnerability in her tone that has me leaning forward. “When I wanted to come to the States to study, he supported me one hundred percent. We may not be as close as before, and I’m sure there’s miles of secrets between us, but we’ve always had a strong relationship.”

She pauses, and her throat bobs with a swallow. I want to brush the messy strands of hair off her neck. Or twist them around my fist, I’m not really sure. I just want to *touch* her. The urge is so sudden and unexpected that I have to clench my fists to keep from shoving this table out from between us.

“I’m sure he’s capable of things far more horrible than I think he is, but it’s hard to believe he’d try to hurt me.” She lifts her chin and meets my eyes. “But I’ve been on the outside for so long that I’m worried I don’t truly know him anymore.”

“You don’t strike me as the kind of person to go down without a fight. We’ll cross that bridge when we get there.” There’s a flash of pride across her face, and the hint of a smile.

She brings her coffee to her lips and smirks over the rim of the mug. “Look at us, working together as a *team*.”

“Reluctant partners,” I correct, then rise from my chair. I stride to the hall, turning my back so she doesn’t see the same smile haunting my lips.



I make some calls to set things up while Reggie spends an eternity getting ready. I don't know what she was doing because when she comes out of her bedroom, she's wearing the same thing but switched out the boxers for a pair of denim cut-offs.

She stops in front of where I'm sitting on the couch. "Ready?"

Standing, I nod. My body hums the closer she gets to the door, but relaxes when she only grabs her purse on a hook by it. I glance down at a text from Finn for a half second and hear the heart-stopping sound of the opening door.

Blinding and painful illogical panic courses through me, as if I'm being struck by lightning. I've already closed the distance between us before I even consciously decide. "Don't open the door!"

My arms are wrapped around her middle, picking her up off the floor and carrying her away from the threshold. I feel her abdomen twist and flex under my vise-like grip. "Put me down!"

I register the empty and quiet apartment hallway, then set a fuming Reggie down. "Don't do that again." My voice comes out even despite my heart still racing. I haven't been triggered while awake in years, and I feel a wash of shame. *Weak.*

I feel as frazzled and confused on the inside as she looks on the outside. Her eyes are big and wild, her shoulders are shaking with heavy breaths, and her fight-or-flight system is still roaring. "Don't do what, *pendejo*? Open my own fucking door?"

"You never know what's on the other side. I clear every door first, got it?" I force my shoulders to relax and my fists to unclench, calming my battering internal storm. A moment of heavy silence passes as we both regain our footing on solid ground.

I can tell the exact moment she's found hers, because the shock in her eyes

is replaced with vitriol and she steps up to me, unafraid. “Let’s get on the same page about this, Fox. You are some *gringuito* who has inserted himself into my life—*my home*—uninvited, and you made it crystal clear yesterday that there’s nothing I can do about it. But I don’t owe you my niceness, and I sure as hell don’t owe you my obedience.”

Hearing the strength in her voice makes my chest inflate, and not in defense. I look down on this woman who is staring me down like I’m not one of the most notorious gangsters in the country. I realize with an uncomfortable insight that it’s respect I feel growing in my chest.

She takes another step forward, crowding into my personal space so she has to tilt her head back to keep her blazing gaze on mine. “And if you lay your hands on me *one more time* without my permission, I don’t care what it takes, I will get rid of you. *Entiendes?*”

I trace my molars with my tongue as I continue to survey her. Unwavering, she stands up to my wordless scrutiny. Small beads of sweat that I can only see at this distance dot the bridge of her nose. I don’t know if it’s her demand that I *can’t* touch her or something else that makes me want to feel her cheek with the back of my hand. I bet it burns like the rest of her.

Instead, I swallow down the urge and rake my teeth over my lip. “Got it.”

She looks almost surprised for a second, but then it’s gone and her confidence shining again, walls coming down. “Good.”

“I won’t touch you unless it’s for your safety.”

Her walls shoot back up. “No.”

“Yes.”

Her brows screw together. “No.”

I relax into this familiar banter, sliding my hands into my pockets and tilting my head to the side. “Yes.”

“*Fine!*” She throws her hands in the air like she’s writing this conversation off as pointless from the start. Which in a way, it is. I’ll do anything to protect her, whether she likes it or not. For the job.

“Can you clear the fucking hall or whatever it is you freaked out about so we can go?” She lets out an exasperated sigh, and I try to ignore the pestering poke of shame her mention of my “freak out” causes.

We manage to make it to The Fox’s Den without killing each other, the drive much less tense than I expected. The Den is an Irish pub, but also serves as our family’s headquarters. We head inside, and I take us straight to the back office where Finn is already waiting for us.

He’s taping up a large styrofoam cooler with a big warning that reads: TIME-SENSITIVE. REFRIGERATE IMMEDIATELY. Not one for small talk, he gets straight to it. “I lined the inside with dry ice so it’s cold to the touch and then filled the rest with bags of flour. I inserted a tracking device into the styrofoam, so unless this guy stomps it to pieces, he won’t find it.”

“Good. Thanks, Finn.” I pick the hefty box up from the desk, checking to make sure the mock mailing address is correct. I nod to Reggie, who has been standing behind me wordlessly for the entire interaction, that it’s time to go.

She steps aside to let me open the office door first. Maybe this *reluctant partnership* can work after all.



Chapter 11

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The Stake Out

Reggie

The FedEx looks like it hasn't been updated since the eighties. Everything is beige and gray, and the wall of brass PO boxes has seen shinier days. The electric chime above the door dings as Roan and I walk in, and the woman behind the checkout lazily raises her head from a book. When she sees Roan, her face transforms with alertness. He doesn't notice, but I do. He's probably so used to commanding a room with his mere presence that he doesn't notice the way people snap to attention around him anymore.

But it's not just the way his black t-shirt stretches over his broad muscles or the tattoos that snake up his neck. It's the energy that he carries with him, something dark and chilling, like his eyes. People see him and fear him. As they should.

It's that same darkness, though, that makes the reddish hues in his hair seem brighter, fierier in comparison, that makes the clench of his jaw feel seismic. And that same darkness is the reason I don't fear him because I recognize it for what it is: a cloak he wraps himself in to hide whatever ghosts haunt his soul.

I wear a matching one.

He sets the styrofoam cooler on the counter in front of the woman and, like he did at dinner with Matt, he turns on a warm and soothing charm that instantly has the cashier relaxing. “This was accidentally delivered to my house—must have mixed up street number with box number.” He leans against the counter casually and lets out the perfect disarming chuckle. “Anyway, I saw these warnings and figured I should bring it here rather than return to sender. You know how long that takes.” He fixes his handsome blue eyes on her like they’re in on the same joke.

“Yeah, sure do.” She barks a laugh as if he’s the funniest person alive. It wasn’t even a fucking joke. I cringe for her and stroll over to the rows of mailboxes so I don’t have to acknowledge the weird way my gut twists watching Roan flirt.

“Do you know who owns this box? Might want to give them a call.” I look over and see him pat the warning label. “Time-sensitive and all.”

“Yeah, great idea.” She grabs the store phone and I turn back around, listening to her keyboard clacking.

I locate the box number that was listed as the sender of the tongue at the same time Roan calls out, “Right, ready, babe?”

I spin around, both annoyed he wants to leave right when I find it and flabbergasted at *babe*. I shoot him a glare, and he meets me with a cocky grin, tongue prodding at his cheek. I know there’s no real information I can gain just from looking at the box, so I snap a quick picture and head his way.

I follow him to the car parked across the street with a clear line of sight to the store and slide into the passenger seat. Even though we aren’t going anywhere, his hand instinctively curls around the gear shift. The veins and flex of his knuckles make the rose-thorned rosary tattoo look almost 3D,

tactile. Just seeing it around the gear shift, I can easily imagine the haunting yet illicit way it would look around someone's neck.

Roan rests his head back against his seat with eyes closed. I look at him and try to see what the cashier saw. It's easy to see all the ways he's beautiful. Strong-cut jaw, long dark lashes, even down to the small dusting of freckles across his cheeks. Add in the tattoos, and he truly is objectively breathtaking, if not a bit terrifying. I can't stop myself from snarking. "So, what now, *babe*?"

His head remains reclined, but he looks at me from the corner of his eye, the hint of a smirk tugging on his lips. "I wasn't very well going to yell your name in there."

He has a point, but it's small. "If you're going to be calling anyone babe, it should be her." I flick my head toward the store. "Will I be invited to the wedding?"

I regret the words instantly. He rolls his head to look at me straight on and slowly wets his bottom lip with the very tip of his tongue. "Jealous, darling?"

"I'm not even going to dignify that with a response," I huff, but internally I am burning with embarrassment, like a goddamn school girl caught doodling her crush's initials. When I look away from him, my eyes catch again on his tattoo. Desperate to change the subject, I ask, "What's with the rosary? You don't strike me as the praying type."

He's looking back out the window, snapping a picture of a mom and toddler walking into the store. "I'm not."

"Okay, so why?"

His chin slowly twists toward me, and there's a simmering heat in his eyes. A heat that I feel settling deep in my stomach. He speaks in the same deadpan tone he answered in before, but there's nothing dry or emotionless about the

way he pins me with his stormy stare and says, “Because when my hands are wrapped around your throat, *I’m* the one you’ll be praying to.”

...*Lord have mercy...*



“What part of time-sensitive does this joker not understand?” We’ve been sitting in the car outside of the store for the better part of an hour, and I’m ready to bash my head into the dashboard. Roan has been meticulously taking photos and notes on every person who comes and goes, but no one has come for the cooler so far. “You think he knows it’s a setup?”

Roan answers without looking my way. “Maybe.”

“So, *maybe* we are just wasting time sitting here all fucking day?” I groan.

“That’s all I’ve been doing for the past week. You’ve been here for”—he checks his watch—“forty-nine minutes.” He lifts a brow and adds flatly, “Boo-fucking-hoo.”

“I don’t need your sympathy.” I fold my arms across my chest and sink lower into the seat, kicking my feet up on the dash.

“Good, ’cause you don’t have it.” He knocks my legs down.

“Hey, no touching!” I shout, sitting upright, my heart racing.

He scoffs. “Are you serious?”

“Deadly. That was our deal, not a single finger without my permission.”

He spins a silver ring on his thumb. “And what do I get out of this deal?”

I smile sweetly. “I won’t kill you in your sleep.”

He lets out a low chuckle, shaking his head and sliding his hooded eyes up and down my body. “Violence looks good on you.”

It's an insult, but there's something about the way his low, husky voice rolls out the sentence and a glint in his eyes that says *I'm famished* that makes it feel like the highest praise.

I fight the urge to squirm in my seat, but it's pointless because the very next second I'm nearly shooting out of it. Across the street, a man exits the store with one big, white styrofoam cooler in his hands.

"It's him!" I clap my hand on the dashboard, excitement and thrill consuming me. Roan coolly takes a photo of the man and then starts the car. "*Ah qué bueno.*"

I watch, eyes peeled, as the middle-aged man opens the back door of a windowless navy van and slides the cooler inside. "Perfect car for a serial killer."

"Eh." Roan shrugs. "If you chop someone into small enough pieces, you can transfer a body in really any vehicle," he muses, so casually, as if debating whether hot dogs or hamburgers are best.

"Well, I will be locking my door tonight," I add sardonically, still keeping my eyes on the man who is now doing something on his phone before closing the van door.

Roan scoffs a dry but amused laugh that makes the back of my neck tickle. "You and I both know a locked door wouldn't keep me out."

Something about that prospect sends a shiver down my spine, and it's not all fear.

"He's leaving!" I shout and point out the window, trying to shake the image of Roan sneaking into my dark room at night...



Roan

“You and I both know a locked door wouldn’t keep me out.” I sense her squirm next to me, a shudder traveling her body, so subtle I almost miss it. ¹ I wonder if, like me, she’s picturing me making my way past any locks in a useless attempt to keep me out.

My eyes are fixed on the navy van, but my mind is elsewhere. In a dark hallway, on my knees as I pick the lock to her bedroom door. The apartment is quiet, but the street and city outside still bustle with sounds of life. The swoosh and thump of a trash bag being thrown into a dumpster. A distant siren. The unintelligible chatter of a couple stumbling home drunk.

But here, everything is still. After I creak the door open, the only sound is Reggie’s slow and deep breaths and the faint padding of my feet across her floor.

Her room is somehow both messy and tidy, the floor is clear, but there's a pile of clothes hanging over a chair and a couple pairs of shoes lay on the floor in front of it, as if she simply kicked them off in that general direction. Her furniture is clear of dust, but her desk has papers stacked haphazardly around her closed laptop. As I silently approach her bed, I can nearly taste her screams on my tongue, feel the way her yells will vibrate against my lips. My hands buzz in anticipation of feeling her silken skin under them as I pry her legs apart and force my way in. She’ll resist and fight, but it won’t stop me from taking what I want. The closer I get to the bed, the harder my dick

gets, desperate to hear her protests muffled by my kiss, her moans of pleasure when her body finally gives in and accepts how good I make her feel, how wet and hot—

“He’s leaving!” I’m pulled back to reality by the object of my daydream nearly bouncing through the goddamn sunroof. Sure enough, the man who picked up the cooler is closing the backdoor and walking toward the driver’s side.

“*Pero*, where is he going?” She curses when our target keeps walking without getting in his car.

“Into that bar,” I nod as we watch him disappear into Mike’s Bar and Grill.

Reggie collapses back into the seat as if she’s been mortally wounded. “I cannot sit here for another hour.”

“You’re not a very patient person, are you?” I ask, jotting down his license plate, make, and model—actual helpful things other than complaining.

“I never claimed to be.” She shoots me this look out of the corner of her eye, like she stole a fry off my plate and was seeing whether I noticed. Her teeth dig into her bottom lip as she holds back a grin, and I’m a second too slow to press the child lock.

She’s ripped the car door open and is already halfway across the street before I can even blink. “Goddammit, Cortez.” I slam the door behind me as I chase after her. Dark lashes of hair whip across her face as she looks over her shoulder at me, a devilish kind of delight lighting up her features.

I’m not the least bit surprised to find her sidling up to the bar, two seats away from our mystery man. Things would be a hell of a lot easier without her stupid no-touching rule. I could just throw her over my shoulder and carry her out of here. Fuck, I was already on a hair trigger after my little

fantasy, and now the thought of her annoyingly tight ass swinging in my face has my dick growing uncomfortably hard in my pants.

I sit down next to her and tug her stool close so I can growl in her ear, “This is not how it works.”

She leans closer, meeting me toe for toe. “Is there some kind of criminal manual I don’t know about?”

“Yeah, it’s called *How to Not Do Stupid Shit and Get Yourself Killed.*”

“Good thing I have you to make sure that doesn’t happen,” she says flippantly, then waves down the bartender.

He’s one of those dudes trying to bring back the mullet with a dopey smile that instantly makes me want to punch his teeth out. “What can I get you two —”

“We’re not staying.” I stand and am about to grab Reggie’s arm when her eyes sharpen, flicking between me and my hand, reaching out for her. Her face is stony and fierce, and I find myself falling back onto the stool. “Fine. A Stella.”

She orders a paloma and sits back with a giggle, clearly pleased with herself. You know, maybe punching that kid’s teeth out isn’t such a bad idea...

Reggie’s done nothing but push my limits and make everything about this job ten times more difficult. Add in that I haven’t had a good fuck in days spending all my damn time watching her, and I’m liable to put the next guy that breathes on me wrong in a coma.

A featherlight touch on the top of my hand makes me jolt. “Dude, chill. You look like you’re about to have an aneurysm.” Reggie’s delicate fingers burn my skin, sending electricity up my arm, and I realize I’ve balled up a cocktail napkin so tightly my fist is turning white. As soon as I relax my

hand, she removes her fingers as if she hadn't realized she'd been touching me.

There's an odd tension that hovers after her touch that makes my throat scratchy. So like anything that makes me uncomfortable, I deflect by being a dick. "Seem to think the rules don't apply to you much, huh?"

Her mouth flattens. "The deal is *you* don't touch *me*. But don't get your panties in a twist, Fox. I'm not stumbling over myself to get my hands on you. Just act like a normal fucking person for once."

"Mhmm," is all I say, taking a big swig of the beer the bartender just dropped off. I try to hide my smug grin with the bottle because, unlike every other time she's told me off with nothing but honest conviction, this time, she doesn't look me in the eyes.

She twirls the cocktail straw in her drink between her fingers mindlessly while she watches the horse races playing on big screens behind the bar. My own drink goes down a tight throat when I watch her soft lips wrap around the straw. Luckily, she doesn't notice my attention, her own on the man two seats down nursing a Bud Light.

She does a good job of discreetly watching him, her eyes bouncing between the different screens and just barely stopping on him as they do. He, on the other hand, can't seem to keep his grimy eyes off her, and I catch myself gripping my bottle until my knuckles hurt. I'm strung too tight. He can look all he wants and it shouldn't bother me unless he tries to hurt her. That's all I should care about—her safety. Not the way he's groping her with his beady little eyes. If he doesn't touch her, I don't touch him. *That's* my job.

"Take off your watch," Reggie hisses in a whisper.

"*What?*" I ask, a little too harshly.

“*Take. Off. Your. Watch.*” She enunciates each syllable under her breath, her eyes daring me to refuse.

My nostrils flare and my jaw ticks as I unclasp my watch and shove it into my pocket. I shoot her a glare that says *there, happy now?*

She smiles back and says through her teeth, “Get ready to leave.”

I watch curiously as she floats over to our target, drink in hand. “Hey, I’m so sorry to bother you, but do you have the time? My phone died.” *Oh, so she does know how to ask nicely.*

“Yeah, sure.” While he digs into his back pocket, Reggie looks at me with lifted brows and nods aggressively toward the door. I’m tempted to ignore her, just for the fun of it, to get under her skin just a little bit as much as she is under mine. But I’m more interested in seeing whatever she has planned play out, so I stand up, throwing some cash down on the bar.

He pulls his phone out. “Two-thirty—Ah, fuck!” He hollers as her paloma spills onto his phone as she leans over to look at the screen.

“Oh my god, I’m so sorry!” She grabs the phone from him and starts frantically drying it with the hem of her shirt. She continues to spew apologies as she works the phone over in her hands before setting it on the bar in front of him, the dumbass June Harbor Pirates mascot grinning at me on the back of his phone case.

She rushes toward the door, and I catch up to her. She doesn’t look at me but speaks just loud enough for me to hear. “We have about two seconds before he realizes his case is missing a phone.”

I glance down at the stolen phone in her hand and breathe out a low chuckle. “Goddamn menace.”

1. Fistfight—The Ballroom Thieves

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Chapter 12

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Intentions

Reggie

“Here you go.” I slide back into Roan’s car, handing him the access pass for my apartment’s garage I just got from the leasing office. I figure there’s no rush to get a new car now that I have a personal chauffeur for the foreseeable future. He didn’t like it very much when I posed it that way.

He adheres the sticker to the windshield and grumbles. “This doesn’t make me your fucking chauffeur.”

“Whatever you say,” I singsong, still riding the high of stealing the phone. I turn it over in my hand as we pull into the garage and begin winding up the stories. He parks in a spot a few down from where the explosion went off, the cement above blackened with smoke and burning metals. There’s another car parked in the spot, like nothing ever happened.

“I wonder why the cops haven’t come to talk to me yet,” I wonder aloud.

“I took care of it.”

We get out, and I have to scurry to keep pace with his long strides. “What does that mean?”

“It means I took care of it.” Like everything Roan says, it’s clipped and flat, and I find myself groaning at the non-answer. He works his jaw, the muscles clenching like he knows he’s about to say something he wasn’t planning on sharing. He relents with a sigh. “*Officially*, it was a freak accident. Electrical problems paired with a faulty battery.”

“And unofficially?”

Roan places his hand on his weapon cautiously as we make our way through the doors connecting the garage and the apartment. “Unofficially,” he continues after scanning the empty hallway leading to my unit, “a few ATF agents won’t have to worry about their kids’ college tuition.”

“Generous. Any new intel on who set it?” I ask, shuffling behind Roan as he slips the key into my unit’s door.

“It’s unlocked,” he whispers coldly, his hand freezing on the knob. His other arm swipes out to flatten me against the wall next to the door. His expression instantly settles into one of a soldier: stoic, emotionless, alert. My heartbeat instantly rattles in my ears, adrenaline spiking as I suck in breaths through my nose.

“Don’t move. Unless you hear shots, then run.” He presses his phone into my shaking hand. “Call the first contact under favorites and someone you can trust will come for you.”

I nod fervently, and he dips his chin to pin me with his stony gaze. His hand reaches out for my cheek but stops an inch away, curling into a fist instead. “Got it?”

“Yes,” I breathe, and he nods, his eyes darting to my parted lips before refocusing on the door and drawing his gun. My stomach twists as he opens the door, my heart loud and pounding. Suddenly, I ache to feel his palm on my cheek, cursing myself for my stupid rules and wishing he’d broken them.

He moves in, and I brace myself for the gunfire, squeezing my eyes shut while waiting for the shots to start ringing. I rest my head against the wall and inhale deeply, filling my lungs in preparation to run.

“Jesus Christ,” I hear Roan exhale. I push off the wall to listen closer, confused.

A voice I instantly recognize follows. “Regenia?”

I pop my head around the corner. “*Papá?*”

Stepping inside, I find my father and his *teniente*, Ángel, sitting on my couch. Daniel, my father’s *soldado* and driver, stands next to them. Roan holsters his gun, but Daniel remains holding his, hands crossed in front of his hips, a pointed power move.

“What is this?” I ask my father, catching Roan’s eye. He’s trying to remain passive, keep his face unreadable, but I can tell he’s scrutinizing me trying to see if I knew about this surprise visit.

“Glad to see you safe, *mija*.” My father stands to greet me in my own fucking home.

“*Hola, princesa*,” Ángel says warmly with a polite nod in my direction.

“As much as I love surprises, why are you here?” I ask skeptically.

“Someone tried to kill you, Regenia. I’m glad to see Roan has kept you safe, but you can’t fault a father for wanting to make sure his baby girl is okay.” He puts a hand on my shoulder and looks at me with those deep, brown eyes that have always made me feel safe. Even when he came home in a blood-soaked shirt or our house was being torn about by police searching for something to incriminate my father. He’d look at me, and I knew everything would be okay. That’s why it’s so hard to believe he’s behind these murders, but I just don’t have enough proof one way or another, and it makes me feel adrift.

He gives my shoulder a firm squeeze with a faint smile as if trying to reassure me again that it will all be okay. He turns to Roan. “And I have business with your brother. It won’t hurt to do it in person. Let’s meet for dinner after, sí?”

“Sounds good, sir.” Roan holds out a hand. They clasp hands in a sturdy shake, then my father claps him on the back. I can sense Roan tense, clearly not feeling the camaraderie that would make a move like that anything but patronizing.

Daniel gives me a solemn nod on their way out, and I force a warm smile and nod. “Daniel.” I grimace as the door closes behind them all.

Ten years later and it still doesn’t get any easier. If anything, time just drags out the pain more.



I step out of my room, and the wide legs of my red-satin pants sway over my white cowboy boots as I walk down the hallway. I take one last glance down to straighten the matching red top and make sure the skinny straps are lying flat.¹

I look up once I reach the living room to Roan clearing his throat. As my eyes raise, I take in his form-fitting black slacks that are spread taut over his strong legs relaxed on the couch. He’s left the top buttons of a black dress shirt undone, showing off the dark swirls of tattoos as he rests his arms out over the back of the couch. *Damn*, this man cleans up nice.

Shame about the personality though.

My throat bobs as I reach his eyes next, darkened and *ravenous*. I suddenly feel small, caught under the gaze of a lion as he leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees and dragging his hand over his mouth. The burning, raw emotion in his eyes makes my skin feel hot, and I fight the urge to curl in on myself.

Instead, I try to play it off like my body isn't humming at the vision of him in all black, freshly buzzed hair adding a cruel edge to his overall handsomeness. "Are you ready or do you plan to sit there staring at me all night?" Despite my best efforts, there's no bite in my words and he knows it, a vicious smirk forming on his lips as he stands.

He isn't shy about the way he lets his hungry gaze rove my body as he rolls up his sleeves, veins tracing over his flexing forearms. He steps up to me, and I freeze as a finger reaches out to swipe a strand of hair out of my face. It's so light it can barely be considered a touch, never brushing anything but hair. "Relax, Cortez. You look like you're about to have an aneurysm."

I huff, swatting his lingering hand away as he laughs roughly, the sound vibrating in my lower stomach. *Damn him*. We head out together, but the idea of sitting in a car with him feels suffocating.

"Let's walk," I blurt out.

He lifts a brow. "It's nearly two miles. Can you do that in those shoes?"

"Let me worry about my shoes, Fox." And before he can protest, I pass the door to the garage and head straight to the elevator to take us down to the street.

By the time we reach The Fox's Den, the dinner crowd is already pouring in. As soon as we walk in, though, the hostess recognizes Roan and leads us straight back to a long table. My father, Ángel, and—

"Santi!" I shout. My brother stands up from the booth to wrap me in a

giant hug. “Now, this is a surprise I don’t mind. Papá didn’t tell me you were in town too.”

“I was *occupied* earlier today.” He gives me a look that I know means we’ll talk later, and I nod in understanding. He turns to Roan, hand outstretched. “Santiago Cortez. Thanks for keeping my little sister safe.” He shoots me a teasing side eye. “I’m sure she doesn’t make it easy on you.”

Roan doesn’t take the bait. “It’s my pleasure.” He slightly lifts his chin and squares his shoulders. Subtle shifts that I may not have noticed if I hadn’t spent so much time with him. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think he might even be offended by my brother’s slight dig on my behalf.

A man approaches from behind Roan and wraps his arm around his shoulder, tugging him into his side. He has a wolfish grin and a bit of an uncaged wildness in his eyes despite being clean cut and put together in an expensive suit. “Cash Fox,” he drawls, offering a hand for me to shake.

“Reggie, nice to meet you.” I recognize the name instantly; not many people in June Harbor wouldn’t. Prolific businessman, generous philanthropist, and dangerous crime boss. He has a natural charisma that is both chilling and welcoming. And even though I know he’s the eldest Fox brother, there’s a childlike daringness that makes him appear almost younger than Roan. Or maybe it’s just that Roan carries a weighty layer of burden, a shroud of age-old pain that makes him seem older than he is.

Cash turns to the gathering of people around the long table. “Sit, sit. Business is over, let’s eat! Jewel”—he waves down a server—“pints for the table.”

My father, Ángel, and Santiago sit in the booth against the wall while Cash and Roan pull out chairs on the other side of the table. I feel unexpectedly torn on which side to sit. The decision is made for me when Roan pulls out

the seat next to him. I feel my father's scrutinizing gaze on us, and I don't know if he's approving of Roan's polite gesture or maybe he's wondering—like me—if this pairing may have been a dangerous idea from the start.

Jewel returns with two pitchers of dark-amber liquid, and another woman walks next to her with a tray of frosted pint glasses. “A *chuisle*, you're not supposed to be working.” Cash jumps up from his seat and takes the tray from her, revealing a round baby bump under her black dress.

“*Jesus*,” Roan groans under his breath and rolls his eyes at his brother's antics.

“Everyone,” Cash addresses the table like he's about to give a toast, which only makes Roan bury his face in his hands more. “This is Harlow, my beautiful fiancée and partner-in-crime—*allegedly*.” That gets him a round of laughter from the table. Harlow's fair cheeks turn a ruddy red as she blushes and takes a seat next to Cash, who's still beaming from ear to ear.

The rest of dinner passes with lots of beer, boisterous laughter, near-death stories, and no talk of why we are all here to begin with. Until it starts to rain, sheets of water pattering against the big front windows, and I notice Daniel come in. His jacket shoulders are wet, and he shakes droplets from his short hair as he stands near the doorway. My stomach sinks seeing him treated like a dog, left out in the rain. But like a good soldier, he retakes his stance inside, one hand in his pocket and the other resting on his hip where I'm sure a gun is hidden beneath his coat.

Throughout dinner, I've noticed a pair of men, who are clearly security for Cash, “playing” chess at a table by the front door. Their eyes are more focused on the door and who's coming and going than on the board. I know my father needs security of his own too, but it grinds against something raw in my chest that it has to be Daniel.

“Can Daniel not join us? We have an empty seat.” I nod to the empty chair next to me.

My father takes a slow sip of bourbon. Setting the glass down, he clasps his hands together on the table in front of him. “Daniel understands his job.”

Roan rests his arm on the back of my chair as he twists to look over his shoulder toward the door. He turns back to the table, but leaves his arm casually draped. There’s a cold shift in my father’s tone, and he fixes Roan with a serious stare. “Just like I hope Roan here understands his.”

“Sir?” Roan sits up straighter, and I catch Cash’s eyes darting between the two of them, jaw tense.

“I’m just reminding you that I am paying you—*generously*—to do a job. You’re still breathing, so you must be doing something right. My daughter’s a grown woman, I won’t dictate her life outside or *inside* the bedroom—”

“*Papá*—” He holds up his hand, and I clamp my mouth shut.

“Just remember, you are on a *job*—one I don’t want compromised—and she is a *Cortez*, no matter who warms her bed.” A thick silence covers the table, and his message is clear: If I cross that line with Roan, I’ll be stepping back into their world and it doesn’t matter who I sleep with, I’ll always be a *Cortez* and my loyalties will always lie there.

“Rafael, I can assure you—” Cash speaks up, but Roan interrupts.

“That I have not crossed any lines of professionalism. Nor do I intend to.” His words are firm and sure, and there’s an underlying current of offense that cuts me a little deeper than I care to admit.

“I’m not saying you have. Merely a friendly reminder of the roles we all play.” My father indicates the end of this conversation by picking his rocks glass back up, ending it the same way he began it—with a long, slow sip.

Santiago shoots me a measuring glance, and I give him a subtle look

telling him it's all good. Then he breaks the silence with a call for tequila, and the tension is shattered but clings to the air.

A few minutes later, Jewel drops off a round of tequila shots with lime slices. Everyone but Harlow grabs one of the tiny glasses and the Irish people pass the salt and lime around.

“¡*Salud!*,” Santi whoops and raises his glass.

“*Slàinte Mhaith,*” Roan and Cash respond as everyone else lifts their shots.

Mine clinks with Roan's, and he forces his heady gaze on me. Embers that have been barely flickering all night in the pit of my stomach burst into tantalizing heat. Eyes still intent on mine, his tongue flicks out and he swipes a wide path through the salt on his hand. My breath catches in my throat as he throws back the liquor and sucks on a lime slice all without taking his burning eyes from mine. The way they bore into me is a threat, a challenge, and a promise.

I try to scoff at the heady feeling and roll my eyes. “*Gringo,*” I chide, and sip my tequila rather than downing it.

Dinner and goodbyes wrap up without incident, but there's a new itch in my bones. I constantly feel the intensity of Roan's gaze skate across my skin, but when I look at him, his eyes are never on me. When it's time to leave, the cool air feels so good against my heated flesh, the tequila and tension making my chest and cheeks hot to the touch.

Daniel is holding the town car's door open for my father when a woman walking down the sidewalk crashes into Ángel. “Ay, watch it!” he snaps, shoving her aside.

She looks up from the ground disoriented, mascara running down her cheeks and her heels in her hands. “Oh, sor—” She hiccups and sways on her

bare feet as she stands. “Sorry.” She’s clearly drunk and upset, wearing a cocktail dress and a man’s blazer thrown over her shoulders.

She continues to stumble down the sidewalk, and Ángel joins my father in the backseat grumbling, “*Put a estúpida.*” I bite my tongue, knowing I can’t call out my father’s second for being a misogynistic ass in front of associates.

Daniel closes the door behind him and glances at the woman catching her balance on the side of the building a few yards away. He turns back to me. “She shouldn’t be walking alone at night like that.”

He’s right, she’s a walking target. “I’ll call her a cab,” I offer, and he nods relieved, the concern in his eyes softening.

“You guys head home, we’ll wait with her,” Cash says to me and Roan while Daniel gets in the driver’s side and starts the engine.

“You sure?” I ask.

“Definitely. We’ll be hanging out here for a bit anyway.” He smiles and claps me on the shoulder in reassurance.

Roan and I start our walk home, but it’s not long until the chill starts to seep into my bare shoulders and, despite my best attempts at hiding my shivers, I feel Roan’s jacket wrap around me. “I don’t need—”

“You’re cold.” It’s not a question. It’s not even an order. And for some reason, I feel like that’s how it has to be. I pull the jacket tight, the smell of leather and rich cologne surrounding me and making my stomach clench.

“Thank you.” I look at him, but he keeps his eyes straight ahead and sniffs, the bridge of his nose pinching. It feels like he’s refusing to look at me, but why would he? I didn’t do anything wrong. If anything, I’ve been better behaved tonight than any other he’s spent with me.

No hidden serranos or spilled drinks. No pretending to date his brother or opening doors before him. It chafes being iced out for no reason. And then it

stings double that I'm bothered by it. I didn't want him here to begin with. I wrap my arms around my middle tighter and walk faster.

He doesn't look at me until we get into the elevator at my building. And when he does, I wish he hadn't. He leans against the handrail opposite me, wraps both hands around it, and tilts his head to burn me with his stare. He lazily drags his gaze down my legs then slowly back up, pausing for a breath on my bare strip of midriff. His face is an unreadable impasse except for the strong clench of his jaw.

The elevator dings on my floor and the doors slide open, but he doesn't move, just hangs his chin. His icy-gray irises flash darkly up at me. He's feet away, but I feel physically pinned. I shake off his invisible hold and exit first, not stopping or looking back until I reach my door.

I stop in front of my door, fishing around my purse for my key, fully ready to screw his ridiculous door rule and hide in my room until morning. A hand slams on the door by my head, and I feel him close in behind me. I stand as still as a statue while his other hand slips a key into the lock. His masculine scent swims around me, and my skin feels too tight when his breath flutters against my neck. He surrounds me fully, overwhelming my senses and yet *still* isn't touching me.

The hallway feels painfully quiet as he turns the lock, the sound of metal moving almost blaring. But instead of opening the door, his fist tightens around the knob and I hear him swallow deeply before his jacket is being gently tugged from my shoulders. I let it fall with a shuddering breath.

I feel him shuffle closer, but still not touching me, his body like a whisper against my back. A gasp is trapped in my throat when he hangs his head, leaning forward to rest his forehead on the door above me. I dare a glance up at him and see his eyes are screwed shut, tight, harsh breaths coming in and

out of his nostrils. He finally twists the knob and lets the door swing open, but we remain frozen like stone, his face hovering just above and next to mine.

The light above the stove is the only thing casting a streak of dim light into the dark apartment in front of us. Something about the darkness is so appealing, a sweet siren begging us to disappear into it, promising that what happens in the shadows doesn't exist in the light.

I'm seconds from spinning around when a strained and ragged whisper demands, "Get inside, Cortez." I find myself unconsciously rolling my head to the side, opening up my neck for his words, his breath...his *touch*. My heart hangs between beats, expecting him to take the offer. Instead he growls, in both a threat and plea, "Don't make a liar of me."

1. Wait for Me—Maya Isacowitz

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Chapter 13

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Finneas Fox, the Berry Farmer

Reggie

I toss and turn in bed for what feels like hours. My heart is still beating irregularly, and my stomach drops every time I think about the way Roan's desperate words raked against my skin. ¹ I was so ready to break my own self-imposed rule. So ready to know if he tastes as smoky and intangible as the storm in his eyes. Does he kiss like he wants to savor every moment or does he bite and fight for every second? Would he kiss at all? Or would he flip me over and muffle any cries of pain or pleasure—not caring which—into the mattress as he took and took and took—

And fuck, now I'm taking out my vibrator from my nightstand. Roan should be fast asleep on the couch by now. Hastily, I turn it on and shove it under my blankets. I slide two fingers up and down my slit, gathering up my wetness. I dig my teeth into my bottom lip as the slickness coats my clit, already swollen and hot. As I exchange my fingers for the vibrating head of the wand, my eyes flash through my dark room to the hazy outline of my *locked* door.

My stomach clenches and hips buck at the first buzzing touch. My eyes close, and I begin to imagine what it might be like if, like he claimed, a locked door couldn't keep him out. Maybe I'd wake to the sound of metal scraping as he picks the lock and the creaky hinge on my door gave away his presence. Maybe I pretend I'm asleep to see how far he'll take this game. Or maybe I don't wake up at all. Not until a rough hand clamps down over my mouth...

I can imagine the soft hush he'd give me, the hiss of his breath as he held a finger up to his lips. *Shhh*. He'd tell me to be good and to stay quiet and maybe he wouldn't make it hurt...*much*. My toes curl as I circle the vibrator teasingly around my clit but never directly on it. I pretend it's him, grinding his hips into the cradle of mine. His cock would be hard and demanding, pushing against his jeans, but he wouldn't rush to lose them. No, he'd take his time to make me realize just how completely powerless I am. Prying my knees open with his strong legs. Pinning my wrists above my head. Caressing the column of my throat then squeezing just a little too hard to be comfortable.

Would he laugh when he slipped a curious finger into my panties to find me soaking? *Twisted little slut*...My legs shudder as I imagine his voice purring all the ways I'm going to let him ruin me.

Dizzying tension wraps itself around my core, and I choke in air as my pussy throbs and flutters with each pass over. God, I'm not going to last long. Especially when my imaginary Roan begins to undo his belt, the clang of metal reminiscent of the first day he had me equally powerless below him in the kitchen. And just like then, though I didn't want to admit it, my pulse jumps—eager, scared, *excited*.

On all fours, he orders me as he removes his pants with tedium. I do as he

says, but it doesn't stop him from taking his belt and wrapping it around my neck and cinching. I scramble onto my knees, hands clawing at the tight leather, panic and heat flooding my veins. He laughs darkly, then I feel the cold kiss of a sharp blade tracing down my spine. I lower myself onto the mattress, trying to curl away from the knife traveling down my back.

He gives the belt a tug, yanking my head back so he can whisper into my ear, *You going to be good for me now?* It's not a polite request or even a question. Not when he's pressing my head further into the pillows, mocking any illusion of choice.

Desire gnaws at me as I imagine him yanking my hips into the air, delivering a merciless slap to my ass. I whimper out loud as if it's more than just a figment of my imagination, the pressure and tension building and building and—*Goddammit!*

With a frustrated growl, I throw the vibrator that just died on me to my bedroom floor. I huff and flop back onto my mattress, my whole body wound so fucking tight that think I might burst and float away. But in the new-found quiet without the mechanical buzzing, something else cuts through the silence...

I tense, convinced I am hearing things in my horny delusion. But then I hear it again: the punch of a masculine moan. I swallow heavily, heat flooding to my cheeks as I squint at the small crack at the bottom of my door. The faint light from the neighboring building is just enough to reveal the unmistakable silhouette of feet standing right outside my door. I clamp a hand over my mouth as if that will somehow change everything Roan has just overheard. My heart beats wildly in my chest at being caught, but then evens out to a devilish determined tempo as I listen to him straining to conceal the sounds of his grunts.

A storm of butterflies lights up my stomach as I slide my hand back between my legs. If I listen really closely, I can hear him fisting his cock, and I begin rubbing myself to the same rhythm. And this time when a whiny moan crawls up my throat I let it out, my thighs clenching as I do.

“*Fuuh...*” I hear bitten out from the other side of the door and the rugged, untethered texture of it makes my insides squirm and I circle my clit faster, harder.

Breathless, I pant in sync with his moans which are growing harsher and more desperate with each stroke. Liquid heat pools in my lower belly, and I am becoming so sensitive that even the lightest brush of my fingertips has my heels digging into the mattress as I fight back my building climax.

“Oh god,” I keened, and my back arches off the bed as I thrust my fingers hungrily into my wet pussy, the beginning rolls of my orgasm cresting.

“*God—fuck—shit—*” Roan’s rough fricatives become a chant, and I let every cry spill uninhibited from my lips. I rise and crash on a tidal wave of pleasure as we come at the same time.

My heart is like a hummingbird caged in my chest as my dancing fingers stop and the last waves roll through me. I lie sighing and sated, a satisfying sheen of sweat on my forehead and heat radiating on my cheeks.

“*Goddamn,*” comes a hushed curse along with the soft rustle of fabric. I listen to his receding footsteps next, sinking back into my bed, but there’s a lingering, nagging sense of restlessness. Like the game ended but I don’t know the final score.

I don’t let myself overthink, slipping out of bed and throwing on an oversized sleeping shirt. I walk out to the kitchen, passing Roan on the couch. He’s lying with his back to me, but there’s an unnatural stiffness to how he’s positioned under a blanket, like he’s trying to be as still as possible to

convince me he's sleeping, but instead it just makes him seem more alert. Not that I'd believe he'd fallen asleep in the two minutes since he left my door.

I grab a cup from the cabinet and then press the ice machine on the fridge door. The loud clattering of ice into glass prattles into the quiet space, and I see Roan shift out of the corner of my eye.

"Do you mind? Some of us are sleeping," he grumbles, his voice scratchy and thick.

"No you're not." I smirk to myself, then continue to fill up my glass with water. If he has a snarky comeback for that, he keeps it to himself.

I shuffle back past him toward my room, chuckling while saying softly under my breath, "Goodnight, *mentiroso*."



Roan

Mentiroso.

The little menace knew exactly what she was doing. Playing with me, teasing me, getting off on how far she could push me. I'd gotten up to go to the bathroom and when I was done, I heard the unmistakable vibrating sound. I told myself I was checking on her safety as I crept toward her door, that I needed to confirm what I thought it was. But the second I put my ear to the door and heard the intoxicating sound of her stifling a moan, I knew I wouldn't be able to walk away. Especially with the hard-on that was now raging in my sweatpants. I'd have to get rid of it one way or another, so I stayed.

I listened to her work herself up, only for the vibrator to die. I knew because the groan she let out was not one of release but frustration. But then she started again, and the picture I imagined of her fucking herself on her fingers, keening, back arching, was like fireworks behind my eyelids. The best fucking show, and I couldn't even see it.

Her moans were no longer clipped and bitten off. Instead she lets them pour out of her. Each one was a hit of the strongest drug. Her pleasure, her body, her fucking irritatingly fierce and stubborn attitude. I wanted to fuck it out of her as much as I wanted to fuck her because of it. I punched my hips, slamming my cock through the circle of my hand imagining it was her hot, dripping cunt.

I pictured my hand wrapping around her throat as I pounded into her, the rosary tattoo a sinful reminder of who's really in control. Because the truth of it is, her no-touching rule only works because I allow it. If I wanted to, there is nothing that could stop me from fucking her bloody.

I suspected she knew I was there, and she confirmed it when she got a cup of water. *Mentiroso. Liar.*

And maybe I am. Because right now, as I'm cooking breakfast, I can't stop envisioning her. Walking in, tousled from sleep, shoving her against the counter and taking what I'm owed. And fuck do I want her. It's like fire in my veins.

I'm plating my eggs when she finally rolls out of bed. I hear her lazy shuffle down the hall and have to actively remind myself to release the tension her presence causes. She rounds the corner into the kitchen, and my grip tightens on my plate. "Go back in there and put on some fucking pants," I bite out, her bare legs on display under an oversized black tee that doesn't hang much past her hips.

“Why? Does it bother you?” She rests a hip on the butcher block, and unbidden memories of her bent over it flash in my mind. I bite my inner lip hard, hoping it will abate the swelling of my dick at the sight of all her bare skin. I can’t help but imagine what her thighs would look like with my fingerprints bruised into them.

My knuckles whiten around my plate. I’m going to smash it if I don’t set it down on the island next to her. So I do, then lean forward and grip the edge of the counter with both hands, needing something to hold and squeeze to stop myself from reaching for her, bending her over and finding out what she’s really wearing under that shirt. She plucks a piece of bacon off the plate and snaps it between her teeth. She cocks a brow at my lack of protest. When I don’t do anything but silently seethe, she picks up the whole plate with a smug smile. “Thanks for breakfast.”

Fine. It’s fine, I tell myself as I stomp over to the fridge and get all the ingredients back out. I crack four eggs into a bowl and start whisking them together with maybe a little too much vigor.

“Okay, Hulk, don’t go breaking my shit because you can’t control your emotions.” Reggie rotates in the dining chair to sneer at me. She’s goading me, I know she is, but that doesn’t make it any easier to ignore her taunt.

“Once I’m done making breakfast—*again*—we’re going to the farm so Finn can look at the phone.” I keep my back to her, focusing on the stove in front of me.

“What’s the farm?”

“Just be ready. That means *pants*.”



Her hand is out the window, rolling with the wind as we speed down the country roads, her fingers tapping air along with the music coming from the car's stereo. I can't help stealing glances at her under the cover of my sunglasses. I know we're close when a patch of sunflowers breaks up the seemingly never-ending stretch of pastures.

"Your brother lives *here*?" she asks incredulously as we pull into the gravel lot past the sign welcoming us to Bartlett Farms. "He seems more like the evil lair type of guy than..." She takes in the big farmhouse and rustic barn complete with an old, rusty Chevy truck out front. "...This." She doesn't say it in a demeaning way, more like she's intrigued and maybe even finds the place endearing.

I park by the truck, my car looking like a child's Hot Wheels toy next to it. We get out, and I lead us to their barn-loft-turned-apartment. I let myself in and Reggie follows, looking around at the high, wooden beams and eclectic decor with appreciation.

"Finn?" I call out, but get no response. My hand instinctively goes to the gun in my waistband. She notices the movement and I see her tense, subtly angling herself behind me. And there's something about the movement that makes my chest warm. Something I don't quite understand, but it feels a little like pride. Or maybe gratitude that she's finally seeing me as a protector, not an opponent.

"They're probably in the studio." There's no signs of a break-in or conflict. That aside, my brother and his wife can handle themselves. She returned the

last man that crossed her to her father, the Don, after Finn flayed the skin off his hand.

Reggie follows me back outside, her tension loosening the more she sees me unbothered. Effie's painting studio is down a short path that winds through the woods surrounding the property. I don't see them through the window as we approach, and I start to get irritated that Finn had me drive all the way out here when he isn't even here. *The fucker.*

I push the door open just to confirm and—

"Jesus, fuck, Finn!" I shout, and Reggie giggles behind me as my brother and his wife scramble to cover themselves in the *compromising* position we found them in on a canvas laid out on the floor. I try not to look as I shove both of us back out the door, slamming it behind me. Unfortunately, it's not before I see—against my will—paint in places it should never be.

"Well that's an art project I haven't seen before," Reggie snickers.

I run my hands over my shorn hair, making a mental note to sucker punch Finn next time we're alone. "Yeah, they're real crafty," I deadpan.

A few minutes later, he comes strolling out to meet us in rumpled jeans and an untucked and crookedly buttoned dress shirt. He still has streaks of blue and gold paint on his cheeks and in his hair. "You should have called," is all he says with a bored roll of his eyes.

"I did, asswipe," I huff. "Give him the phone." I flick my chin between Reggie and him.

He pockets it and nods. "Alright, find something to do for the next hour while I check this out."



The wet, mossy smell of the forest brings back memories of running around here as a kid. We didn't come often, but sometimes my father would send us with his lieutenants for a few days. We spent nearly a week here after Mom was killed. I realized as I got older that these weren't random trips, but rather times when June Harbor—or just being near my father—wasn't safe.

Just the earthy smell conjures scenes of running barefoot, weaving in and out of the trees in epic games of tag, and makes a fruity sweetness tickle my tastebuds. Back then, operation had decreased along with the Bartletts' increasing age, but there were still what seemed like miles of wild blackberry bushes.

Reggie walks next to me now as we aimlessly stroll. Recalling the warm memories on the farm melts a little bit of my icy exterior, and I find myself being the one to start conversation. "So, what's the story between you and your dad's guard dog?"

She stops in her tracks and gives me a cutting side eye. So much for trying to be nice. "Daniel?"

"Yeah."

"Just because you're a glorified guard dog doesn't mean everyone is." The defensiveness in her voice only confirms what I suspected after dinner. They have history. But she seems to have recognized her haughty reaction and takes a collecting breath. "He's my father's driver, and I guess part of his security. I don't know, it's a long story."

I give her a crooked smile. "We've got time to kill."

She sighs with a slow nod, and I wonder what's going on behind those mahogany eyes. I recognize the flicker of something both solemn and full of guilt. The look of someone who has spent so long shoving down their pain that when it's mentioned, it's a struggle not to push it down out of instinct. I understand the debate between not wanting to face it but also feeling like maybe if I can look the gaping maw in the eyes without backing down, it won't hold so much power over me anymore.

"We were born just a few weeks apart, and grew up together. His father was a close business associate of mine and his mother was Santiago's godmother. But it was his older sister, Sofia, who ended up being my best friend." She drops my gaze and kicks a stick on the ground, then continues walking down the half-cleared path.

"We were inseparable. She was my sister, my partner, my..." She struggles to find a word that encapsulates what she was to her.

"Your person," I say, understanding.

She looks up at me meekly, and there's a soft vulnerability in it that makes my chest pinch. "Yeah." Her lips twitch, and a small crease appears between her eyes. I have to resist the urge to reach out with my thumb and smooth it. "We got initiated into the cartel around the same time."

I remember seeing her shoulder tattoo that night at dinner. I gently guide us toward the lake on the property and the decrepit dock that by some divine miracle is still standing.

She continues as we walk, "One of our first runs together was a routine drop, a simple exchange with a smaller gang we'd been doing business with peacefully for years. Low level shit. After the *catador* approved our sample, Sofia went back to the car to get the rest of the product and—" She suddenly stops and looks at me like I'm crazy as I step onto the dock.

“It’s a lot sturdier than it looks, I promise.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be concerned for my safety?” She looks at me sideways and eyes the dock with absolute distrust.

I bite back a smile at how quickly she bounces back to being the same pain in my ass as always. “Which should tell you how confident I am.” I walk backward with my arms held out to my sides. “C’mon, Cortez. You cut up bodies for a living. What are you scared of?”

Her mouth flattens into a thin line, and she looks off to the side like she too is holding back a grin. Then she holds her chin high and walks right past me to the end of the dock. Stubborn, competitive, and unable to resist a challenge. Classic Aries. *Goddamn Stella for putting all that useless rubbish in my head.*

She sits down on the edge of the dock and swings her legs, taking in the floating water lilies below. When I join her, she starts talking again without me prompting. I wonder how long it’s been since she’s talked about whatever happens next. “There was a bomb in one of the other crew’s cars that was parked right next to ours...” The sinking in her voice fucking hurts, and *shit*, I’m so tempted to move my hand a half inch to just barely let our fingers touch.

“She died instantly.” She pauses and glances to the sky. “One small blessing.” She inhales through her nose and fixes her eyes on the opposite edge of the lake in the distance. “And I, I couldn’t handle it. The randomness, the unfairness, the complete lack of a reason she went to the car instead of me, why it went off at that moment. No one ever looked into it, figured it was meant for someone else since it wasn’t on our car. But it never sat right with me, and instead of looking into it, I ran away. Like a fucking coward, I dropped everything, cut ties as a member, and came to the States for school.”

She pauses, and I let the silence hang, never knowing what to do in situations like this. We weren't taught to empathize, we were taught to suck it up and shut the fuck up. After a few beats, she continues, "I used to wish it were me instead of her, but then I realized I'm the one living with all this fucking pain and guilt and regret. I wouldn't wish it on my enemy, let alone my best friend. So, I guess I'm glad she died and didn't—*isn't*—suffering." Swallowing, she picks at the ragged wood of the dock. "Does that make me a terrible person?"

I force a dry chuckle. "You really think I'm the best person to ask about what makes someone a terrible person?" She huffs an equally heavy laugh. "But if you really want to know what I think." She turns her head and hits me with those soulful brown abysses, and my throat constricts. Somehow, I still find the breath to speak. "I think grieving is always fucked up. There's no right way to do it, but not because there's no wrong way either. There's nothing right or just or *healing* about grief. It's a wound that never heals."

She pulls apart a splinter of wood. "I think you may be right."

I wish I wasn't.

1. I Guess—Saint Levant, Playyard



Chapter 14

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Just a Taste

Reggie

I haven't talked about Sofia in so long. Doing so lifts a heavy weight from my chest, but the process of removing it leaves me raw. ¹ Seeing Daniel certainly hasn't helped, his position a direct result and reminder of what happened. Their parents had died in a boating accident three years before Sofia. She was all he had, his provider, his parent-figure. So my father brought him on as his driver and security as he got older.

Every time I see him in that role, I'm reminded of the reason he has it and it hurts in the way her funeral hurt. Does he wake up every morning and have to face that same reminder? Is that why his eyes felt colorless and hollow?

On our way back through the forest from the dock, Roan takes us a different way and we end up on the edge of a field with rows of low-sprawling greenery. "Come on, I want to show you something." He waves me on, and we trail down one of the rows.

"Strawberries!" I squeal, spotting plump, red berries poking out from under the green leaves. "I thought you said it wasn't an operating farm anymore?"

“It’s not,” he says, and I wrinkle my nose and jut my chin as if we aren’t in the middle of a goddamn strawberry field. His lip quirks. “Not really. Finn just grows them for...” He tilts his head, and his eyebrows draw together as if he’s searching for a word. “...*fun*, I guess.”

I bark out a laugh, in part because of the answer and also because Roan struggled to wrap his mind around the idea of doing something for fun. It feels good after the weight of our previous conversation. “Crafty *and* a berry farmer? You Foxes are a bundle of surprises.”

“And a damn good one apparently.” He kneels down and begins searching the plant. I take the moment to appreciate the strong, corded muscles of his back visible under his shirt. He’s got several inches on all of his brothers and is much broader too. He tilts his head to the side, and the sun highlights every little detail of the tattoo covering his neck. A big magnolia flower in the center turns into geometric designs that crawl just past his jawline. It’s surprisingly pretty for such a hard man, toeing the line between art and violence.

“This one,” he says, more to himself than me, as he stands up with a perfectly ripe berry pinched between his fingers. He faces me with a crooked grin. “I guarantee this will be the most delicious strawberry you’ve ever had.”

He holds it out to me, his eyes dropping to my lips. Without thinking, I lean forward and wrap my mouth around the berry. His mouth opens in surprise, and his eyes get glossy, pupils blown wide. His fingertips brush against the corner of my mouth as I sink my teeth into the juicy fruit, the sweetness bursting like sunshine across my tongue.

His other hand roughly glides down his thigh, fingers flexing, and I watch his Adam’s apple bob on a heavy swallow. It feels like time hangs suspended

as sunlight bathes the field, and soft bird songs echo that remind me of the twinkling of a jewelry box ballerina.

I pull away, and his hand hesitates in front of me for a second before he brings it to his mouth and eats the remaining half. His tongue flicks out to wipe the juices from his lips. The minute movement makes my stomach flutter. He glances down at his hand, where ruby-colored juice is dripping down his index finger and thumb. He drags his tongue across his teeth and holds his fingers out to me again.

I'm under a captivating spell that compels me to step closer to Roan and suck his strawberry-covered fingers between my lips slowly, like a hesitant first kiss. Heat spikes in my core at the sound he makes. It's soft, rumbly, *pained*. And when I swirl my tongue between his finger and thumb, he slowly exhales, chin lifting. The beautifully inked tendons in his neck pop with what looks like restraint.

"*Fuck*, you're a menace." He shudders, his free fist balled at his side and his eyes glued to his fingers in my mouth. A sharp ringtone breaks the spellbinding tension, and we both take quick steps back as if shocked with electricity. He pulls out his phone to check the notification. "Finn's done." His voice, still thick, sparks down my back.

While walking back to the farmhouse, we pass a horse barn and I stop in my tracks when I see the small plane sitting inside the wide breezeway. "Is that Finn's?"

"Yeah."

"Can he take me skydiving? I've always wanted to!" It's been on my bucket list forever. The freefall, the adrenaline, the bird's eye view of the world. It sounds almost magical.

Roan just grunts. "No."

“Why not?” I prop a hand on my hip.

“One, because I’m in charge of your safety and jumping out of a plane sounds like a great way to get yourself killed. And two, Finn doesn’t know how to fly. He’s just restoring it.”

He continues walking, and I hurry to catch up with him. “Why buy a plane if you don’t fly?”

“Damn it, Cortez,” he says harshly, and I rear back at his sharp tone. “Do you always have to have a thousand questions? Stop coming up with stupid ideas that will get you killed.”

My feet stutter to a stop. I’m stunned and quickly flooded with anger.

“*Shit*, I didn’t mean that.” He holds his hands up in apology, but annoyance still pricks my skin and sweat beading the bridge of my nose.

I’m tempted to ask him what he *did* mean, but instead I just shake my head and storm off. “Fuck you, Fox.”

I knew something like this would happen. It’s why despite all the times, including minutes ago with the strawberry, when I’ve thought about throwing my stupid rule out, I’m glad I didn’t. Roan and I would be explosive. I’ve already survived two explosions. I don’t want to push my luck with a third.

I clench and unclench my fist in agitation. My whole body feels twitchy, one rogue spark away from erupting.

“I guess he got bored with cars.”

I jump, twisting around with a scowl. For such a giant of a man, he sure knows how to sneak up on people. I probably didn’t hear him over my own distracting thoughts. I shake my head. “What?”

“That’s why Finn got the plane.”

“He bought a plane because he was *bored*?”

He walks past me, and I catch up to him. His lip twitches, and Roan drags

his hand over his mouth like he's coolly trying to hide a smile. He peers down at me from the corner of his eye and shrugs with a scoffing laugh. "Cash once bought a whole island because he was bored."



I slump in the passenger seat of Roan's car as we head back to the city, gazing bitterly out of the window at the passing scenery. "I can't believe we got *nothing* from the phone."

"He probably picked a box number at random." Roan keeps his typical flinty attitude, but I can tell he's more peeved than he's letting on by the way he keeps running his hand over his hair and pressing his lips into a firm line.

"Why would he do that? There has to be a reason he picked that one."

"To lead us on a wild goose chase. We've wasted three days chasing down this lead, and it's only gotten us further from the truth."

"*Joder.*"

Without the anticipation of hacking the phone, the return drive feels quicker. What a bust. By the time we get back to my apartment, I go straight to my room, wanting only to lay in bed and pout. Opening my door—

I clutch my chest and stumble back, a scream drying up in my throat.

A man dressed all in black with a matching balaclava is hunched in a defensive position in the middle of my room. My feet are cement blocks. I'm unable to move as he brings a glove-clad finger to where his lips would be.

"Roan!" To his surprise and my own, I find my voice and scream. The man's dark eyes, the only visible part of him, shoot wide, and he races for the

window as Roan's thudding footsteps barrel toward the room. He charges through the doorway just as the man is lunging onto the fire escape.

He sprints to the window ledge and leans out. He pushes off and stomps toward me, shoving his gun into his waistband. "*Bastard.*"

"Who was—" I'm embarrassed by the weak shake in my voice.

"Pack a bag." He barely spares me a glance before slamming a fist into the door. "Damn it!" he roars, and I flinch.

I speak cautiously, like I'm talking to a wild horse. "Roan—"

"We're not staying here."

He turns to leave, but I shout after him, "Wait—"

He spins on me, eyes nothing but the black steel of a soldier. "Be ready in two minutes."

"*Pendejo,*" I curse under my breath as he stalks down the hall.

My blood feels electrified as I begin to haphazardly toss clothes and necessities into a bag. My eyes keep darting to the window, expecting the man to climb back through, even though I've double- and *triple*-checked the lock.

He found me at work. He knew where to find my car. And now, he's been inside my home. My skin vibrates with anxiety. I get that chill on the back of my neck like someone is watching me.

I startle when Roan knocks on my open door. He slides his hands into his pockets and grimaces. "Are you okay?" He almost barks it, as if getting the question out is physically uncomfortable.

I snort, because this must be a joke. "No, I'm not fucking okay. And you acting like I did something wrong doesn't help."

"I should have cleared every room." His tone is angry and bitter as he looks off to the side, but I realize it's not directed at me.

“Fine. Be mad at yourself for that, but don’t take it out on me.” I pick up a sweatshirt from my bed and try to force it into my already-full bag. “You fucked up, not me.” His nostrils flare and his jaw clenches, but he doesn’t say anything. He nods slowly and looks like he’s about to leave when his eyes catch on the floor by the window.

“What’s that?” He rushes over and picks a small, plastic card off the ground. “A hotel key.”

“He must have dropped it.” We both pause in silence, realizing the giant fucking opportunity that just landed in our laps. But then, my stomach sinks as I read the hotel name. “That’s the hotel where my father is staying.”



Roan

“No talking to anyone. No approaching anyone—”

“Yeah, yeah, we’re just surveilling,” Reggie says, clasping her hands together in her lap to keep them still despite the fact that she can’t stop bouncing her knee eagerly as we drive to the Chariot Hotel.

Heading into a situation with a half-cocked plan isn’t something I like to do. But after thirty minutes of her constant badgering, I relented, agreeing that we only had so much time before the man realized his room key was missing and checked out. Plus, my ability to stop myself from doing something reckless is hanging on by a thread ever since she licked my fingers clean earlier in the day at the strawberry field.

Fuck, even now blood rushes to my cock remembering the wanton, heady look in her eyes as she peered up at me through her lashes. I could easily replace my fingers with my cock in my head and know exactly how she'd look, compliant and lustful on her knees.

So, yeah, the idea of blowing off some steam by doing something stupid was a hell of a lot harder to turn down. Plus, she gets this childlike excitement when she's fixated on an idea that I can't help but want to feed. And I'll keep her safe while doing it.

The Chariot is a ritzy hotel with gaudy, Vegas Grecian-inspired decor. Everything is marble or gilded, and structurally irrelevant columns are everywhere. It's the exact place I'd expect a kingpin to stay. I don't voice my concern because I'm sure it's crossed her mind too, but out of all the hotels our man could be staying at...it doesn't look good for her father.

As planned, I enter the lobby a few seconds behind her and sit in one of the lounge chairs while she goes straight to the front desk. She talks animatedly to the desk attendant, hands waving and propping her chin on her hand, elbow on the desk. My lip curls at seeing her pretend to flirt and get all flustered around another man. The sour taste of unjustified jealousy slides down my throat. I grip the armrest tighter and tell myself to get it fucking together.

Cash got himself lured to an empty warehouse, stabbed in the fucking leg, and then arrested as the June Harbor Slayer because he let a woman get in his head. Finn saw a similar fate when he nearly started a war over a woman. I'm heading down a dangerous road if I'm ready to tear off some mid-level hotel employee's head after feeding her a goddamn strawberry. The leather creaks under my fist as my nails dig into the chair.

She starts walking toward the elevators, and I stand to follow her. I relax

my jaw after having it clenched since our arrival. She looks lethal and fucking divine in high heels and a tight, black dress, and I can't help but take a moment to appreciate the sight. She spots me, and I let my eyes continue their journey down her body and toned, golden legs. She inhales pointedly like she's peeved and rolls her eyes to the ceiling, but I catch the way she crosses her legs, pressing her thighs together.

She ignores me as I stand behind her, like two strangers waiting for the elevator. A shudder rolls down her back as I take a step closer. "Nervous?" I whisper with a blank face, watching her reaction in the shiny metal elevator doors. Her first instinct is to pull her bottom lip between her teeth, but then she catches herself and purses her lips with a cocky tilt of her head.

The ding of the arriving elevator rings, and she smirks like she got away with something as the doors slide open. *Saved by the bell*. As soon as the doors close with us inside, she's asking, "What do you know about Diablo Entertainment?"

"Haven't heard of them. Why?"

She picks at her nails, brows pinched. "They've rented the room." She holds up the key card. "I feel like I've heard that name before, but I can't place it."

She taps her foot as the elevator rises, then whips her head to me. "What if we run into my father or Ángel?"

I shrug, pushing up my sleeves. "Then we say we came to see them." She visibly exhales with such an easy explanation.

We reach our floor and she whispers, "Room 1604. He said it should be to the left."

Rounding the corner of the elevator bank, I read the room numbers. *1600, 1602, 1604—*

The calm, collected focus I always have going into jobs frays into kinetic action. I grab Reggie around the waist, one hand clamping over her mouth, and yank us back behind the small wall. “Someone’s at the door,” I whisper into her ear. Her breath quickens against the palm of my hand, and her stomach contracts where I hold her tightly. There’s the sharp rap of a knock, and she stiffens.

Now that the initial adrenaline rush has passed, all I can think about is the feel of her body against mine. She’s pressed against my chest, and I try to control my breathing so she doesn’t feel my increasingly heavy breaths.

Another quick succession of knocks sound, and she quietly and tediously pulls her phone from her purse. Turning on the selfie camera, she holds it out in front of her to get a visual on the man behind us around the corner. His gray hair is styled neatly, like his designer suit and Italian leather loafers. He looks obnoxiously wealthy like every other guest. He glances nervously from side to side, then checks his Rolex.

The longer he waits, the more he shifts from foot to foot and the redder his pale cheeks turn. He’s clearly anxious and doesn’t want to be seen in front of this room. He checks his watch twice in the span of thirty seconds. He tries knocking once more, then shakes his head with a loud sigh.

Instead of walking back the way he came, he starts toward us. Reggie yanks her phone back toward her body, and I can feel her take a shocked inhale. There’s only one thing I can think to do. It’s still for her *safety*.

I spin us and push her against the wall, one hand digging into her hip. I readjust my hand on her mouth to grip her chin. She buries her fists in my chest, and I genuinely can’t tell if it’s to keep me back or go along with the act.

“You're gonna quit playing and come to my room, right?” I groan with a

convincing roll of my hips into hers as the gray-haired man enters the elevator bank. I hear him scoff at us, and I can admit I probably would too if I stumbled upon a couple groping each other in a hotel hallway. Reggie's eyes drift over to him, and I pull her chin back to me forcefully. They narrow in offense. My hand leaves her hip, and a small gasp falls from her parted lips as I brush aside a strand of hair that had fallen out of place when I spun us. "Come on, baby, you know we'd have some fun together."

She arches her back off the wall. Her chest presses into mine on shallow breaths. Our hearts beat in tandem. "I know. That's the problem." Her voice is low and husky, believable—*too believable*. "We'd have too much fun."

I can hear the man tap his foot behind us and the gears of the elevator whirring to life, but it all feels petty and irrelevant with this woman caged between my arms. *All of it*. Especially all the reasons this is a bad idea. My eyes fix on her lips when her pink tongue swipes across her bottom lip. "What if we pretend we hate each other?" My nose lowers to brush against hers, and her breath feathers against my face. "Bet you'd like to fuck me like you hate me, huh?"

She waits until the man is safely inside the elevator and it starts descending to push me off her. "I do hate you." She crosses her arms protectively across her chest.

"Funny way of showing it..." I taunt. She opens her mouth, but then shakes her head with a roll of her eyes as if I'm not worth the effort. "*Mentirosa*."

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Chapter 15

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Occam's Razor

Reggie

“Guest bedroom is the last door on the left.” He flicks his head behind him toward a hallway while loading bullets into magazines on the dining table.

I walk throughout the apartment, noting how clean and impersonal it is. I'm not surprised to learn that Roan is a clean freak, but the place hardly has anything that points to Roan as a person. It reminds me of how houses are staged sparsely so that people can envision themselves and their things in the empty house.

The only art on the wall as I walk down the hallway is a vintage photo of a pub. “McGregor's” is painted across its face, but through the sepia tones and erasing the passage of time, I can tell it's what now is The Fox's Den. The roof is squat and flat, and the apartments that are there now haven't been built yet. The sidewalk doesn't exist yet either, and the road is instead unpaved with carriage wheel tracks and horse hoof prints marked in the dirt. I wonder why this, of all things, is the one piece of himself Roan puts on display.

Further down the hallway, there's an odd metal door that feels very out of place. It looks like the kind used in commercial buildings. It's slightly ajar, so I peek inside. The only things that make me place it as Roan's room rather than the guest room are the pair of men's running shoes on the floor and two different bottles of cologne on a dresser.

The guest bedroom turns out to be less sterile than his own room. There's a queen-sized bed with a big, fluffy comforter and several colorful throw pillows. There's even a vase of flowers on the nightstand. I toss my bag on the neatly made bed and change into more comfortable clothes for the night.

When I come out, Roan is setting a bottle of beer and a handgun on a side table before sitting in an armchair. If I hadn't grown up with men bringing guns to family dinner, maybe I'd be more scared or concerned. Instead, it feels as natural as watching someone pouring a glass of scotch for a night cap.

He moves mechanically and practiced like a soldier, checking the safeties and doing a press check. Maybe that's why he hasn't made this place feel lived in and personalized. Because he doesn't see himself as his own person, but rather as a soldier with a greater purpose: to serve the family.

"Why do you have a metal door to your bedroom?"

His hand freezes where it is about to pick up his bottle, and the muscles of his jaw tick. As if it were only a temporary glitch in his programming, he goes back to what he was doing. "It's cheaper than wood."

"Okay." I half laugh, half roll my eyes at his non-answer. "What a fucking day." I flop onto the couch and kick my feet up on his coffee table, feeling surprisingly at home here. Even though the last time I was here, I was cursing Roan for all the reasons I didn't trust him. And, despite what I said at the Chariot, I don't hate him.

I mean, sometimes it feels like I do. Like when he snapped at me for asking questions after the strawberry field. Or the arrogant look he gives me that both grates my nerves and turns me on. Or just knowing that this whole no-touching rule is a farce because he and I both know that if he wanted to, I wouldn't be able to stop him. He's proven as much.

It's aggravating and confusing because I want him to honor it, but I also want him to break it. *God*, do I want him to break it.

"You don't like losing, do you?" He gives me a teasing look over his bottle.

"Does anyone?" I scoff. Once the coast was clear, we used the key card to get into room 1604, but it was completely cleared out and smelled like cleaning supplies.

He shrugs, then spreads his arms and knees wide, taking a long, slow pull of beer. He comes off equally exhausted and relaxed, but still has the edge of a guard dog always on duty.

"It wasn't all a dead end. I'll get the video of the man to Cash and start asking around about Diablo Entertainment. If anyone knows anything, we'll find out."

"It feels like we're chasing a ghost," I say aloud.

"Every man has a weakness. We'll find his." There's a steely set to his eyes, like he's beginning to see this job as more of a personal mission. He picks up a book from the side table and begins reading, effectively ending the conversation.

I take my computer from my bag, and we both go about our business as if unwinding together after a long day is the most natural thing in the world. It amazes me how quickly Roan has become a comforting fixture in my life, even if he drives me fucking insane.

A thought crosses my mind, and I log in to the institute's remote server. It takes me a bit, but once I'm done, I shut my laptop and sit up straight with a horrifying realization.

"What is it?" Roan asks, closing his book. The longer I don't answer—because I'm not sure I want to give voice to what I've discovered—the more his brows knit together. "Cortez, talk to me," he orders, but it's with a concerned undertone that feels almost comforting.

My mouth feels dry when I finally speak. "Do you know the Occam's razor principle?"

"Yeah, the simplest answer is usually the right one."

"We use it all the time at work. Hyoid fractures make up .002 percent of all fractures in humans, but occur in one-third of all homicides by strangulation. It can happen by blunt force trauma in car accidents or martial arts, but it's extremely rare. So when a body comes in with a fractured hyoid bone—"

"It's safe to assume they were strangled," Roan finishes my sentence, nodding.

"Right. So..." My stomach churns. "I went back and looked at the dates for all the deliveries of unclaimed bodies we got from DSM Transports, and all of them are within a few days of or during one of my father's visits to June Harbor. It could be a wild coincidence, or..." My voice trails off, and I look at the floor, unable to face the obvious conclusion.

"Or the simplest answer is usually the right one."

I fidget with the hem of the lounge shirt I'd changed into after the hotel. "What am I going to do?" My voice sounds brittle. Roan warned me about this in the beginning. Would I really want to know if my father was behind the murdered women? Now, the truth is staring me in the face and I'm not sure I can handle it.

He leans back and knits his fingers together on top of his head, sighing. His eyes flicker across the ceiling, and he slowly nods like he's thinking. He's clearly processing something, working something out in his mind, but he keeps any clues of what off his face. He must come to a conclusion because he rocks forward and rests his elbows on his knees before asking thoughtfully, "What about Thai?"

I bob my head in question. "What?"

"For dinner. What about Thai food? There's nothing to be done right now about your dad and, who knows, maybe it's like a fractured hyoid bone from a car accident—not the obvious answer, but not impossible."

I smile weakly, appreciating the notion. "What do you think?"

"I can't decide, but I think I'm leaning toward green curry—"

"No, *tonto*." I laugh, but then say more seriously, "About my father."

He waits until I meet his eyes to speak. "It doesn't matter what I think. What I think won't affect the truth, and that's all that matters. We don't have all the information yet, so it would be foolish to assume that something is true only because it *looks* like it is."

I inhale deeply, nodding along, wanting to file away all of my conclusions and put them aside until we know more. "I'll get the pad see ew."

Roan smiles, satisfied. "That's my girl."

I'm sure he doesn't mean it in any way other than he's happy to get his choice of dinner, but I don't like the way my stomach swoops at the idea of being his girl. It would make the harrowing question before us a little less daunting. But growing attached to the idea of being his girl poses a much bigger threat.



Roan

Halfway through the movie, she berated me for my lack of decent dessert choices and accused me of being a robot when I argued it tasted just as good as the real deal. I don't remember exactly when she fell asleep. It must have been some time after she polished off the rest of my ice cream, a half-filled pint of "a sad, ketogenic excuse for dessert," according to her. And when I stand up at the end of the movie, she is curled up on her side with her arms tucked into her chest, fast asleep.

I don't know what to do. I've never had a woman sleep over, let alone pass out on my couch before. I stare at her like a wild animal who's broken in and made herself at home. I consider carrying her to the guest bedroom, but for some reason the prospect of her in my arms, holding her body to mine, sounds as dangerous as walking into a burning building.

I grab another beer and sit there slowly sipping it, watching the steady rise and fall of her breath as I try to figure out what to do with her. I run through what my brothers would do, hoping for some ideas.

Cash would carry her to bed—*his* bed.

Lochlan would slide in behind her and snuggle her to his chest. *Hard pass.*

Finn would leave her as is since she decided to fall asleep there. *Maybe* he'd toss a blanket over her.

That seems like the most logical response—though I don't know if I'd use "logical" to describe any of my brothers, especially when it comes to women.

I go to the guest bedroom to get a blanket, grabbing a light throw off the bed. I hold it in my hands, hesitating because I know I keep the AC low at night. *Will she get cold?*

I wipe my hands over my face. This is getting ridiculous. I throw the blanket back on the bed and grab a heavier one from the closet, my eyes catching on the pillows before I leave. I shake my head. She can survive one night without a pillow for her *princesa* head.

I return to the living room and drape the blanket over her, then drag the armchair across the room to face the door. I sink into the chair cushions and close my eyes, ready for sleep to end this foolhardy saga. But something keeps nagging me and I bolt up, stomping back to the guest room to grab that damn pillow.

I gently lift her head. Her eyelids lightly flutter, but luckily she doesn't wake. I can't think of anything more horrifying than her waking up amidst my pathetic attempt to make her comfortable on my couch. I've carefully chosen the parts of me I let her see, and whatever compels me to slide a pillow under her head isn't one of them.

When I settle back into the armchair, I fall asleep right away.

In the morning, my legs stretch out before me and my neck is sore. A soft rustling jolts me awake. I wrench my head to the side in the direction of the threat, only to see it's Reggie looking at me like a deer in headlights. I deflate, and my fingers that are tightly gripping the armrests relax.

"Why are you sleeping there?" she asks, her voice curious and light.

"You were on the couch," I explain simply.

"What about your bedroom?"

"You were here, so I was here."

The chair starts vibrating, and I dig into the cushion to pull out my phone.

“Yeah...Okay...On Delancey, right?...Okay, bye.” I stand and say to her,
“The safe house is ready.”

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Chapter 16

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Sewer Rat

Roan

I hold open the sidewalk cellar hatch. Reggie goes first, then I follow into the basement of Dino's Meats and Deli. Shelves of dried food stuffs line one wall, and a pile of empty produce boxes are gathering in a corner. A door with a keypad leads to a stairwell up to the main floor. I tap in a code and, instead of the door unlocking, the air vent above us opens and a ladder slides down the wall from the hidden attic.

"Ladies first." I sweep my hand out, and she starts climbing without asking a hundred questions—for the first time ever. In fact, as I grip onto the rungs after her, I realize she's been uncharacteristically quiet since she got a text during the car ride over. It puts my senses on high alert.

The converted attic at the top of the ladder is nothing fancy, but in terms of safe houses, it's better than most. There's a dresser in the back corner, a queen-sized bed along one wall, and a simple kitchenette against the other. The only thing that makes it different from any other studio is the bathroom, which is kind of hard to miss—

“Why are the bathroom walls made of glass?” Reggie stares dumbfounded. Every part of the bathroom, except for the toilet behind a stall door, is visible. Including the shower that takes up one corner.

“It’s a safe house. I have to be able to have eyes on you at all times,” I say simply.

“Whatever.” She throws her bag on the bed and sits on the edge, looking at her phone.

I notice she’s picking her nails, which means that something is bothering her. “Who texted you?”

“No one,” she says quickly and defensively, tossing her phone onto the mattress like it’s unimportant. I lunge for it, and she scrambles to grab it but she’s too slow. “Hey!”

I hold the phone above my head and she jumps trying to take it, tugging on my arm and cursing me in Spanish. “How do you know my password?” she protests as I unlock the phone and pull up her messages.

I break my attention from the phone to smirk down at her. “I know everything about you, little menace.” Then I read aloud a text from an unknown number, “I know what really happened to Sofia. Pier 17. Come alone.” I give her back the phone, and she huffs defiantly, crossing her arms. “You weren’t seriously considering going, were you?”

“Well, you weren’t exactly invited,” she shoots back.

“*Jesus*, Cortez. Don’t you see how stupid that is?” I brush my hands over my hair and pace. “We’re staying at a fucking safe house for a reason—”

“But it’s Sofia. What if—”

“I know what she means to you, but so do *they*, and they’re trying to use her against you.” I lower my voice, recognizing the anguish and self-hatred in

her face, the temptation to do something stupid if it means getting a little relief from the pain.

She pushes the heels of her palms into her eyes and groans. “I know, it’s just...” She shakes her head and roughly runs her fingers through her hair.

I don’t want to say it, but I see how easily her desire for answers could cloud her judgment. I raise my chin and keep my voice level and firm. “Try to run, and I won’t hesitate to do what is necessary to keep you safe.”

“What does that mean?” She eyes me bitterly, and I hate it. I finally felt like I was something other than the bad guy with her, and now she’s looking at me again like she did in the beginning.

I sniff, shoving down those feelings of hurt and inadequacy so she sees nothing but a stone wall. “Push me and find out.”

She scoffs, then mutters under her breath, “Just when I was beginning to think you actually had a heart.”

Her words are a dagger to the chest that I let sink in deep. I let the sting remind me that at the end of the day, she’s a job and my feelings have nothing to do with it.

She takes the bed, I take the desk, and we simmer in hostile silence. After an hour, her shoes are kicked off and she hasn’t looked up from her book in twenty minutes, so I think it’s safe to assume she isn’t going anywhere. I take a much-needed bathroom break.

It’s not even ten seconds later that I hear the mechanical hum of the air vent and ladder being lowered. “*Damn it,*” I hiss, feeling like a fool caught with my pants down—*literally*.

Fuck. I rush to finish, grabbing a pair of handcuffs from the desk before I practically jump down to the basement, skipping the last twelve rungs. My cheeks burn, pissed at myself and annoyed at her. I see her feet disappear

onto the street at the top of the steps. If there's a car waiting for her, I'm screwed. I push my legs harder, taking the steps two at a time. "Cortez!"

Her head whips around and I see her whisper *shit* when our eyes lock. She's too busy looking back at me to see the giant refrigerator truck speeding down the street as she's about to step right into it. "Stop!" I yell, sprinting faster than I ever have to pull her back right as the truck whizzes past.

It drives through a puddle of black water left in the gutters after street washing, sending a wave splashing down on us. Reggie, clutched in front of me, blocks most of it from hitting me, but she is drenched.

"Ew!" she screams, twisting wildly in my grip, but I don't let her go until I've wrenched both hands behind her back and handcuffed them. "Are you fucking handcuffing me?" she howls, and I'm grateful that there's no one on the street.

She's dripping with dirty, brown water like she just crawled out of the gutter and tries to huff a wet, nasty strand of hair out of her face. "I told you this would happen," I growl, and she meets me with a fiery scowl.

I see the moment she decides to make a run for it in her eyes seconds before she bolts. She darts to the right down the sidewalk, and I catch her mere seconds later.

Grabbing her around the waist, I throw her over my shoulder, and she kicks and wails on my back. "You're not allowed to touch me!"

"Trust me, I don't want to be within ten feet of you, let alone touching you when you look and smell like a sewer rat," I grumble, scrunching my nose.

"Then put me down!" she demands.

"It's for your safety," I bite out and carry her down the steps. Setting her down, I use a padlock to lock the hatch. She eyes it warily. "Also for your safety."

I walk over to the ladder, and she laughs smugly. “How am I supposed to get up there now, genius?”

“Oh shut up, would you?” I rub my forehead. She’s giving me a headache. Then I pick her up, throwing her over my shoulder in what’s starting to feel like the only way I can control her.

I begin climbing one handed, and she doesn’t flail like last time but does threaten, “If you drop me, I will cut off your balls.” Among other creative ways to punish me the entire way up.

I take the key out of the control box for the ladder and make sure she watches me put it in my pocket. “No key, no way out.”

“Alright, you’ve made your fucking point. Uncuff me so I can shower this nasty-ass shit off me.” Some of the muddy water has begun to dry, streaking her face with gray residue.

I rub my thumb over my scarred knuckles and rake my bottom lip between my teeth. “You’re welcome to shower, but I’m not uncuffing you.”

She rotates until her back faces me and wiggles her hands. “How do you expect me to do that with these on?”

“I could help you”—a slow grin plays on my lips—“but I’m not breaking *your* rules.”

“Go to hell, Fox.” She tosses her head dramatically to purposefully whip me in the face with her wet hair. She struts into the bathroom and groans loudly when she realizes there’s no door to slam in my face.



Reggie

There's not even a goddamn *door*. This bathroom is the most ridiculous thing I've ever seen. But not as ridiculous as Roan thinking I'd ask him for help now. Or so I thought...Until it takes me ten minutes to get my pants a quarter of the way down my thigh.

The whole time, Roan stands on the other side of the glass watching me struggle. What makes it worse is that he doesn't gloat. All he has to do is stand there with a slight cock of his head and the ghost of a smirk on his lips, and I feel two feet tall. Somehow, despite throwing me around like a sack of potatoes, there's only a light smudge on his shirt while I look and smell like a sewer rat.

"Jackass, get in here." I jerk my head at him. The smug bastard cups his ear and leans toward the glass, his brows squished together. "*Please*." I just want this shit off. The thought of the grossest city-street water all over me makes my skin crawl.

He doesn't move an inch, but raises an eyebrow. I throw my head back and give in. "Would you please help me get my clothes off?" ¹

"Begging suits you." His eyes blacken and his voice comes out hoarse, so gravelly that I can feel it scrape down my arms like grit. He walks past me and turns on the water. The shower isn't separated from the rest of the bathroom by anything other than space. It's tucked into a corner, sharing the same blue-tiled floor as the rest of the room. No curtains, no tub, no door, not even a half wall. Everything is out in the open.

I hear a flick of metal and then feel the sharp point of a pocket knife drag across my shoulder. I swallow deeply as he coasts the blade up the slope of my neck and stops below my jaw. "I can see your pulse." He presses the flat

of the knife deeper into my skin, and I feel the thump of my pulse push into it.

Everything is narrowed down to the delicate point biting at my skin so thinly covering my carotid artery. His presence at my back is suffocating, even though our only place of contact is his knife at the juncture of my throat. I take long and full breaths through my nose, doing anything to keep my pulse from rising and jumping into his waiting blade.

He lifts it off my neck and uses it to brush my wet hair off my shoulder. “Hope you didn’t like this shirt too much.” He cuts the straps of my tank top, and it falls into a pile at my hips.

“I’m burning these clothes anyway.”

I peek at the mirror next to me to watch our reflections as he unclasps my bra, and his chest caves on a heavy exhale. I pinch my arms to my side so that when he cuts my bra straps next, it doesn’t fall to the ground.

My cheeks grow hot, and my skin prickles before I let it fall. His fingers twist in my bunched-up tank top, and he begins to slide it down my hips. When he gets to where I stopped with my attempts to remove my leggings, he drops to a knee. My chest burns with the need for urgency, battling the slowly brewing heat in my lower stomach that craves to drag this out. His gaze is scorching on the exposed top of my ass. Fisting my pants and shirt, he pulls everything down.

My eyes slide to the mirror to find Roan’s already there. His bottom lip falls open and his brows knit together like he’s in pain as he regards my bared body. His head lolls back and his jaw clenches, his neck bobbing with a swallow.

I can’t handle the weight of his attention. Not when I’m so exposed, unable to cover myself, and he’s fully dressed. I don’t look at him when I walk past

and into the stream of hot water. He doesn't leave.

I do my best to ignore him and grab a bottle of body wash from a shelf cut into the wall. It's awkward and difficult to grasp with my hands behind my back. I drop it, and heat floods my cheeks knowing I'm going to have to ask for his help again.

He watches the bottle roll into the center of the shower, then slides his hooded gaze to me. The stench of the street water seems to magnify in the steam. If it were possible, I'd stand under the water until it scalds the filth off me. But I won't feel clean until it's scrubbed off.

"Will you help me?" I stare at my feet.

"I'll have to touch you," he says with trepidation, like he's not sure *he* can handle it.

"Just to wash me, nothing else." The words feel like a betrayal to the flame flickering inside me.

He moves closer. "Turn around." He takes the detachable shower head from the wall and soaks my hair. I tense when he begins massaging shampoo into my hair with gentle fingers. It feels too sweet, too caring. But by the time he begins to rinse out the conditioner, I've melted into the feel of his hard hands and their soft touch.

He reaches for the body wash still on the floor, and panic jolts through me. "Don't touch me," I say quickly, and he cocks an eyebrow. "Don't touch me directly. Keep a washcloth between us." If he touches me, skin on skin, I think I might combust. Water has soaked his white shirt and it clings to his defined core. The blurred lines of his tattoos showing through the wet fabric are like a hidden canvas.

Moving behind me, he starts the tender and tedious task of scrubbing off the grime. Each pass of his hand drags the scratchy terry cloth over my flesh,

making my skin tingle in its wake. When he reaches my lower back, I have to fight to keep my breathing steady.

“Spread your legs,” he rasps, his voice raw and rough compared to the light feathering of his breath on my neck. My heart leaps and flounders like a fish out of water, sputtering uselessly. My legs and feet press tight together rigidly. I slowly inch them apart, and a shaky breath from him makes a shiver light up my spine.

He coasts the soapy cloth down the curve of my ass and the swell of my hips. I get light-headed when he drags it up and down the back of my thigh. My skin is feeling extra sensitive and ticklish, and I curl my toes into the tile. Once done, he holds the shower head to my back, spraying it all down.

He moves to stand in front of me, and his gaze rakes down my body, ice cold and a raging inferno at the same time. He pokes his cheek with his tongue as he sightlessly adds more body wash to the cloth. The fresh mandarin-and-bamboo scent fills the steam.

My eyes flutter shut as he wraps the towel around two fingers and begins to wipe at my cheeks. He’s so delicate as he gently brushes over my eyelids that with them closed, I can hardly believe he’s the one behind the tender touch. When he finishes and the soap is rinsed off, I open my eyes to see that his are blown wide and there are divots in his bottom lip where his teeth have been digging.

My stomach squeezes, and warmth blooms in my core while he washes over my breasts, my nipples stiff peaks despite the hot water. The further down my body his hand goes, the more my nerves quiver. He rubs the lion tattoo at the dip of my ribs and the olive branches in a V under my belly button, then stops when he hits the juncture of my hip and thigh.

A sound, not quite a sigh and not quite a groan, comes from his chest. The

rough noise claws at a primal craving deep inside me. I feel almost dizzy when he bends to a knee and lifts one of my feet onto his thigh.

His shirt is now mostly soaked through, and his black pants are now an even darker midnight. Every inch of fabric kisses and hugs each muscle, clinging to his frame. He starts at my ankle, slowly drawing further up my calf. There's something about being completely nude while he's still covered that makes this all the more unbearably intimate.

He urges my knee to the side, spreading me open to him, and I suck in a sharp inhale as his hand glides up my inner thigh. Inching higher, he takes his gaze off my body to latch onto my eyes. My breath hitches when he changes directions right before reaching my pussy and glides over the sensitive crease between my hip and thigh. "*Roan...*" The soft plea spills from my lips, barely louder than a single breath.

I wouldn't be sure he even heard me if it wasn't for his free hand squeezing into a tight, white fist. He doesn't say anything. Doesn't look at me. Just moves on to the other leg while the air thickens with my unanswered plea.

Grabbing the shower head again, he remains on his knee as he rinses my torso and down each leg. I watch his chest rise higher on deeper breaths as he brings the stream of water back up my leg.

My body grows even hotter from the inside out, and the hot water feels lukewarm in comparison. His eyes watch his movements, hooded and lustful as he passes over my pussy to the other leg, my body giving a slight shudder. His mouth falls open, then he wets his bottom lip like he's fascinated by my reaction. He passes over again, hovering for just a second on the place that makes me shudder.

Again and again he does it, lifting his eyes to watch how my brows fret

together and my breathing becomes more desperate with every pass, every lingering second. I can no longer find the shame in asking, begging. My cunt clenches painfully around nothing as my clit swells in need and anticipation. “Please. *Please*, Roan.”

He abruptly stands and slams off the water. “No touching.”

I’m left spinning from the climb, only to fall sharply before the top. The smell of citrus hangs in the steam. I feel clean, but raw. Roan wraps a towel around my shoulders, but I don’t feel any less exposed.

He goes straight to the small window in the back of the attic and thrusts it open. Grabbing a pack of cigarettes off the windowsill, he lights one and sits on the ledge, placing one foot on it.

Leaning back, he takes a long drag before blowing the smoke out the window. I go to him and, without taking his gaze off the blue sky, he holds out the cigarette for me. I can feel the stress drifting away from him, the stress of restraint. His eyes stay glued outside until my lips brush his two fingers holding the cigarette. They cut to me, sharp and stinging like the crack of a whip. They narrow in on where our skin touches, and flames burn behind the icy-gray irises.

I pull my mouth away and hold in my breath as my tongue swipes over my bottom lip. I lean my front on the windowsill and I exhale, the smoke spiraling outside like the snake coiling my forearm.

I hear Roan take another thick inhale and watch his smoke join mine. I’m surprised by what he says next. “I have an assassin buddy in Mexico. If Sofia was a hit and he didn’t execute it, he’ll know who did.” My eyes sting with emotion. “If you’re going to insist on jeopardizing your safety to learn what happened, then I’ll find out for you.”

My thanks gets tangled in my throat, and I don’t think I can recall another

gift that made me feel quite this way.

1. Movement—Hozier

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Chapter 17

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Thinking of You

Reggie

I hope they find the gray-haired man soon. ¹ I've spent less than a day cooped up in here with Roan, yet I'm about to jump out of my damn skin. He spends the day crisscrossing around the room. Whether it's angrily hammering out a text while pacing or going back and forth to the window to smoke, Roan doesn't walk. He *prowls*. It's like I am trapped with a lion stalking down every dimension of his cage.

I can't say I'm any less on edge. In the shower, he stoked something inside me that burns bright and hot and refuses to extinguish. It's been like sitting on a live wire all day. I've been dreading the moment we have to share the one bed. The bed has been haunting me as much as the aching need between my thighs. I know this no-touching rule is for the best, but the boundaries between us are quickly disappearing.

But my father was right. I'm out. And I don't plan on coming back. You can't have people waltzing in and out of the cartel like it's a country club. You're either in or you're out...and dead. It was different eight years ago

when I was newly initiated, dealing with Sofia's loss, and being El Jefe's daughter. I could walk away before my life on the inside ever really began.

If I return to this life, I can't do it on a Fox's arm, and I can't be on a Fox's arm without returning. Once the threat has passed and the job is over, Roan and I will go our separate ways. It's best that nothing ever starts.

I don't like letting go of someone once I know what it's like to have them.

Even though it's only nine when Roan announces he's going to take a shower, I decide I should try to fall asleep before he joins me. If I'm not awake when he comes to bed, maybe it will be like it never happened in the morning.

As soon as the glass walls of the bathroom begin to steam, Roan sheds his clothes, and I cover my face with a book. His presence isn't any easier to ignore as his inked shoulders and back cut through the steam like mountains above fog at night. My body feels hot and itchy as unbidden visions of water rivulets running down his abs and between his taut shoulder blades conjure in my mind. I shut my book, turn off the lamp, and roll over, determined to fall asleep before I lose my mind and join him.

In an attempt to quiet my mind, I focus on the sound of the shower, imagining it's a rain forest and I'm somewhere far away from this attic with claustrophobic levels of tension. I try to zero in on the sound of the water, but a gruff exhale breaks through. Once, I could have imagined. Twice, and I know it's not in my head.

I slowly roll over, hoping Roan can't make out the details of my position in the dark. With the lamp off, the shower light backlights him, and my breath catches in my throat. Everything is a foggy blur in the steam, but the motion is unmistakable. A rough groan sends chills down my spine while the silhouette of his hand pumps back and forth.

My mouth dries up. My skin burns. My stomach is twisted so tight I can't breathe. I squeeze my eyes shut, intent to fight the urge to slide off my panties and glide my fingers through the wetness that has been present all day. My eyes slam open at the sound of a loud smack. On instinct, my gaze darts toward the noise and I see Roan's big palm, fingers flexed and spread out on the glass wall.

An airy moan floats out of my mouth as I watch his head roll back and his palm press harder and flatter on the glass, as if for support. His throaty exhales grow louder, and I can't fight the flame any longer.

I shimmy out of my panties under the covers and finally press my fingers against my aching clit. I stroke down and feel all the slickness and swollen flesh. *Fuck, I don't think I've ever been hornier.*



Roan

I stand there letting the scalding water pelt my back while I catch my breath, hanging my head back. The euphoric post-release feeling never comes.² Instead I pant with an even stronger, hotter *need* infecting my blood stream, even with my dick softening in my fist.

I'm agitated and exhausted. Exhausted but not sated. If today was an indication for how the rest of our time here is going to go, I'm certain I'm in Hell, or some fucked-up version of sexual purgatory at the very least. I slam the faucet off. Any calm from coming quickly dissipates the second I hear a familiar, breathy whine. My control is barely hanging on.

I turn off the bathroom lights and wait in the dark until my vision adjusts to the darkness. All sounds from the bed stop. I begin to make out Reggie, laying on her back, face perfectly still. Too still. While her face is a blank mask, her chest gives her away, rising and falling on noticeably deep breaths under the sheets.

I walk toward the bed, wondering what I will do if she insists on pretending she's asleep. Do I climb in beside her and do the same? Or do I slide in behind her and whisper into the slope of her neck, *wake up, I need to be inside of you?*

The old, wooden floorboards creak with my approach, and I freeze each time to see if she stirs. The closer I get, the more my dick begins to twitch. I'm mentally preparing to fuck my fist one more time before falling asleep when I spot an out-of-place, black piece of fabric poking out from under the white comforter.

"You don't have to pretend you're asleep."

"I am." She purses her lips, but keeps her eyes closed, even when the only sound in the space between our breaths is a drop of water sliding down my naked skin and dropping onto the wood.

Drip.

Drop.

A steely chuckle leaves me. "*Mentiroso.*" I bend down to swipe her black panties out from under the blankets. Her eyes fly open then. I keep a straight face, soaking in the cocktail of emotion on her face as I sway the lacey fabric from a finger: shock, embarrassment, *desire*. I'm drunk on it and committed to riding it to oblivion.

"So you weren't touching yourself while you watched me fuck my hand wishing it was your tight cunt?"

“No,” she gasps, having the audacity to sound offended. She sits up and tugs the sheets tighter to her chest.

“You didn’t get off knowing that you make me so fucking feral that I have to beat my fist just to be able to sleep?”

“That’s pathetic,” she scoffs, but there’s no hate in it.

I huff a dry laugh. “It would be if I were wrong. If you weren’t out here pretending to be asleep while you pleased yourself thinking of *me*.”

Her pitch rises. “You *are* wro—”

I am only fueled further by how flustered she’s getting. “Prove it.”

“*What?*”

I drag my tongue over my molars and repeat myself slower, “*Prove. It.*”

Her brows flex together, then her eyes widen, affronted. “How am I supposed to—”

“Pull down the sheets, raise that shirt, and show me you’re not dripping for me right now.” Her eyes get impossibly wider, and I’m sure her cheeks feel a thousand degrees. Her mouth opens and closes on aborted responses. Realizing she isn’t going to do it, and I’m sure as hell not breaking her rule to prove something I already know, I taunt her further. “Surely, you want prove you *weren’t* fingering your tight little cunt to the thought of me tearing you up—”

“You know what? *Fine*. Fine!” She shoves the comforter off and raises her knees, planting both feet on the mattress. I can see the plump, bare lips of her pussy, but it’s not enough.

“Doesn’t prove anything other than you got a fucking perfect pussy. You could still be soaked.” I cock my head to the side and lazily begin to stroke my dick with her wet panties. For the first time since I left the bathroom, her eyes leave mine and drop to my hand working up and down. She worries her

bottom lip through her teeth and, when she raises her gaze again, there's an incendiary combination of malice and lust in it.

With a determined lift of her chin, she slides her hand down her body and spreads her pussy. I can't pull my gaze away as her two fingers dip lower and disappear inside of her. "Oh, fuck." My hips punch into her panties with a moan.

At the primal, hungry sound, Reggie's eyes sink to another level of heat and she thrusts her fingers deeper. A gasp gets caught in her throat, only being released when she pumps her digits into her pussy again in sync with the rock of my hips. "*Jesus...* look at you fucking your fingers like a desperate little whore. Is it my cock you're imagining? Stretching you. Filling you."

She nods and bites off a sharp moan. "Not good enough, Cortez," I demand, my voice so low and dark that I sense her shudder.

"Yes," she whimpers.

"You're not lying are you?"

"No."

"Good. Now, would you come on my cock just like that?" My hungry graze drops to her pussy, and I imagine the taste of it, the smell of it, the feel of her fingers while I suck them clean.

"Not like this. No." Her answer surprises me, and I look at her face to find a tease of a smirk on her sinful lips. "You'd need to rub my clit like this."

My abs cave in as she licks two fingers on her other hand and lowers it to join the other. My fist tightens around my cock, and I feel the tendons in my neck flex as she circles her hood while still pumping her other fingers in and out.

"*Oh...*" Her brows draw together. "*Yesss...*" she moans as her eyes flutter back.

I can't handle not being able to touch her, to rip away her hands and impale her on my cock. Watching her pleasure herself and not being able to feel the squeeze of her cunt. "Get up. Get on the desk," I hurriedly order, throwing her panties on the ground and pulling out the desk chair a few feet from the desk. It's a simple, four-legged, wooden chair. Nothing could be further from a throne, but, when she follows my decree, I've never felt more like a king.

She scampers over and perches, knees together, on the edge, looking up at me like a porcelain doll that's begging to be ruined. "Move back and put your feet on the desk." I can hardly get her to do anything I ask any other time, but like this, she's the perfect pet—submissive, compliant, and so fucking desperate to come that I could have her eating out of the palm of my hand.

"Now touch yourself, but don't take your eyes off me. I want to watch every second on your face as you imagine it's me pushing inside you..." She slips two fingers back in, mouth falling open. I spread my knees and lean back, my hard length throbbing in my hand. She starts circling her clit, and my hand wraps around my cock.

"Fuck, you're too big," she whimpers, and a dark part of me ignites.

"But you're gonna take it, aren't you? You're going take it and thank me for every fucking inch."

Her throat bobs, but she nods. "Yes."

"Because I won't stop. Not if you cry. Not if you come. Not if you beg me to."

"God, yes," she cries, and I recognize a matching yet contrasting darkness in her. Where mine screams to dominate and dirty, hers begs to be used and sullied.

I've never wanted to see such a pretty thing break before.

I get so caught up in the fiery swirls in her eyes and the sound of her fingers sliding in and out of her wet pussy that my climax sneaks up on me. “Fuck, I’m going to come.” I strip my cock harder, and she throws her head back, rubbing faster. My balls are getting so fucking tight, pleasure and pressure building together. I refuse to come without looking in her eyes, making her feel, down to her soul, the claim I have on her.

“Eyes—*fuck*—on—*shit*—me,” I growl. Her head rolls forward at the same time her breath hitches, and I come. Furious, hot streaks of cum shoot onto the floor and coat my hand. The breath stuck in her throat comes out as a keening cry, and her legs quake on either side of the desk as her orgasm crashes through her.

She withdraws her fingers, and I get a head rush watching the way her cum glistens off them as she pulls them out. She lets her legs fall over the edge and rocks forward, resting her hands on the desk between her legs. She catches her breath in light gasps and pants while my lungs laboriously try to remember how to breathe.

She slides gracefully from the desk and surveys the mess I’ve made of myself and the floor with a thoughtful tilt of her head. I’m sure if I told her to get on her knees and clean me up, she would. Before I can, though, she slowly lifts her shirt and raises her arms, stripping bare. My poor, spent cock tries to surge back to life at the sight of her supple breasts and soft, inked stomach.

She drops to her hands and knees, never pulling her gaze from mine, even when she takes her discarded shirt and begins wiping up my cum. My throat goes dry, and my mind goes blank. The only thing is the here and now and her pert fucking ass in the air as she drags her shirt back and forth.

When she stands, folding the dirty part of the shirt away and stepping up to

me, I couldn't move if I wanted to. She stops between my knees, her outer thigh brushing against one. She drops her hand with the shirt to my stomach, and I gaze into her eyes as she cleans my spilled seed there.

Sightlessly, she finishes cleaning. I try to memorize every rich shade of brown and chestnut that light up her eyes, feeling incredibly high and unimaginably grounded at the same time. She throws the shirt to the side, and I look down as she swipes up one last drop with her finger and sucks it clean. Then she uses that same finger to tip my chin up and whispers sweetly, “*Good boy.*”

A coy, barely there smile flashes, then she drops her finger and crawls into bed without another word. For the first time in weeks, I climb into bed fully sated and restful. She's curled up on her side facing away from me, but when I flop onto my back, I still shove a pillow in between us.

I hear her laugh softly, then say, “I was, by the way.”

“You were what?”

“Thinking of you.”

“*Fuck,*” I groan, sliding back out of bed. “I need a fucking smoke.”

1. Where Are You?—Elvis Drew, Avivian

2. Cravin'—Stileto, Kendyle Paige



Chapter 18

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Wilson Goyle

Reggie

In the car the next morning, there's a new looseness between me and Roan. Like some fibers of the dangerously taut rope tying us together have frayed, making the tension a little more bearable. The pillow was still between us this morning, both of us acting like last night never happened. No lingering hidden glances. No barbed words or weighty silences.

I turn down the car radio's volume. "Are you going to ever tell me where we are going?" Roan immediately spins the dial back up. "Hey! You can't keep turning up the music any time I ask a question."

"Okay," he agrees amicably.

"Thank you," I huff with a smile.

Then he turns it up again. My next question disappears when I see a big wall of flashing blue and red down the road. There are big, yellow barriers barricading the rest of the road. Behind them, police cars park across the two-lane road.

"Roan, we should turn around." *What if it's a trap?* What if the man that broke into my apartment has tried a more elaborate ruse to get to me?

He doesn't seem concerned or like he's going to stop. "Roan, do you know what this is?"

"Yes." He pulls right up to one of the barricades, and my heart beats faster. The faces of the many cops turn and peer in our direction. Two policemen rotate the barrier so Roan can drive through and up a long, private driveway.

We're in one of the most expensive areas of June Harbor. The Greek revival mansion sitting at the end of the drive must have been a private estate at one point, but now has a large sign reading Wilson Goyle Law. A group of people dressed in suits and formal dresses gather on the lawn across from the house like they'd been evacuated. A few cops are dotted among them.

Roan parks with a sneaky grin on his face that makes me ask suspiciously, "What are we doing here, Fox?"

"There was a bomb threat—"

"*Here?*" My stomach drops, and my hand grabs onto the door handle reflexively.

"Shit—no." He runs a hand over his head. "Well, yes, but not for real." His eyes pinch with worry, like he's only just now realizing a bomb threat might make me a little panicked. "It's the gray-haired man." He throws a hand toward the house.

"Oh my god, was he murdered?" My pulse spikes.

"No." He gives me a crooked smile. "At least, not yet."

He takes the keys out of the ignition, and I frantically ask again, "Then what are we doing here?"

"I thought you might want to ask him a few questions." A pleased smirk tugs on his lips as he gets out. Still trying to piece everything together, I climb out and shut the door behind me.

"Put this on." He hands me a navy windbreaker and ball cap. He shrugs on

an identical one and pulls his hat low down his face. I hold the jacket out to read the big, yellow lettering on the back: JHPD. *June Harbor Police Department.*

“You know, impersonating a cop is a felony,” I tease, sliding the windbreaker on.

“I’ll take my chances,” he says with a smug tone. We walk across the parking lot toward the building. He arches his brow with a devilish lilt in his voice when he asks, “So, what do you think?”

“Hmm. So is he the Wilson or the Goyle?” I ask as we walk up the steps.

“Both.” He chuckles, half amused. “He’s Wilson Goyle.” We pass police at the door and make our way through the lobby. I have to jog to keep up with his energetic steps as he takes the stairs two at a time.

A man in a navy suit standing in front of a door at the end of the landing smiles when he sees us. His suit jacket is unbuttoned, and a gold shield shines on his hip. “Hey, man.” He claps hands with Roan in a friendly shake. “He’s ready for you.”

“Thanks, Quincy.” He pats him on the shoulder. Quincy smiles at me, then walks off, leaving us alone at the door.

I catch a glimmer of anticipation that lights up the blue in Roan’s eyes as he opens the door to reveal the gray-haired man. He has duct tape across the mouth, and he’s tied to a chair in the middle of a plastic tarp that covers the carpet.

That’s when I realize what this is. Not telling me where we are going, not explaining the police presence. He was *surprising* me. When he asked what I thought, it was with the same eager hopefulness of someone who surprised someone with a *gift*.

Somewhere in Roan’s twisted, fucked-up criminal mind, this man, bound

and prepped for a bloody interrogation, is a gift. An offering.

And I'll be damned if I don't find it at least a *little* cute. "*Qué lindo, mentiroso.*"

He walks to the other side of the room where a row of knives, pliers, and fire pokers is lined up on a grand desk. Goyle's wild and frightened eyes bulge above the tape as they hurriedly bounce between me and Roan.¹

He decides on a pair of pliers and walks around to take a testing tug on Goyle's thumb nail. He screams into the tape and tries to wriggle away, but his wrist is tightly tied to the arm of the chair. "Yeah, that should do," Roan says, releasing the nail, and Goyle slumps with a pathetic whimper of relief. "Let me tell you how this is going to work. She asks the questions, and you answer them." He gestures to me with a flick of his chin. "If you don't, I take a nail. Nod that you understand."

His head bobs back and forth frantically.

"Good man." He gives his hand a condescending rap with the pliers, then steps back to make room for me.

A powerful thrill starts at my feet and runs to the crown of my head as I hold the center of the stuffy office. It's not stuffy in size—it's almost as big as the safe house—but in soulless mediocrity. The walls are the most passionless cream color, and equestrian oil paintings that were made to remind the rich of their wealth hang around the room. Shiny awards on polished China plates and framed photos with former Governor Campbell are proudly displayed.

"You don't mind if I smoke, do you?" Roan pulls out a pack of cigarettes and waves it around like he's actually asking for permission. He gets no response and lights up anyway with a shrug.

Face-to-face with me, the terror in his eyes fades away, and a look of

something like relief replaces it. Like he took one look at me and thought the threat was gone.

That makes me mad.

Sexism and misogyny are so rampant that, even tied and gagged to a chair, he thinks he's better than me. My lip curls, and I wave Roan over. "Take the thumb," I say coldly, then watch the fires of hell reignite in Goyle's eyes.

"You really are a menace." He huffs a laugh before putting out the cigarette in Goyle's eye and pulling the pliers from his pocket.

"You know what I love about pulling fingernails?" Roan muses as he makes a show of testing different angles to grip the nail with the pliers, unfazed by the blistering eye and sobs. Goyle mumbles incoherently through the tape between hitched breaths.

"He can't answer with his mouth *taped*, Roan." I purposefully lace my tone with condescension. Roan's jaw ticks, and his lips flatten into a tense line. I hope he understands what I'm doing. "*Tonto*, remove the tape!" My voice cracks with a hint of hysteria. That's what makes Roan give me a sly wink. He gets it now. I want Goyle to know that I'm the one calling the shots. I'm the one he should fear.

Roan rips the tape off with one hard yank, and bits of beard are pulled off with it. "I, I d-don't know," he blubbers.

"I love starting with the nails because it's just the right amount of pain to incentivize." Roan proves his point by wrenching our captive's thumb nail off. Goyle's unrestricted scream rattles the walls. "But if you cooperate early, you'll be able to leave here with nothing too..." He pauses like he's searching for a word. "*Permanent*." Goyle rolls forward with a heaving sob.

I stare at him impatiently, like a parent waiting for their child to stop whining. His sweaty forehead scrunches as he looks up at me like I'm Lilith

personified. “Why were you at the Chariot?”

“I, I wasn’t!” he insists immediately. I groan as if bored and flick my eyes at Roan in a silent order. Roan doesn’t give him a chance to change his answer before ripping off another nail.

“Would you like me to repeat the question, Wilson?”

“No, no...please, I was just there to meet someone.”

I look at him incredulously, “Well, *who was it?*”

“I can’t say. He’ll kill me!” Snot and spit fly as he begs.

I cock my head to the side and regard him like he has two heads. As I step closer to him, he flattens himself against the back of the chair, trying to rear away from me. At this distance, I can see the grotesque way his burned eye oozes. I lift a foot and press my boot into his crotch until his face twists in pain. “Oh, Willy,” I coo. “So will we.”

His watery and ruined eyes plead with me, filling with desperate hope as I lick my thumb and wipe a splatter of blood from his cheek. “*Ponte las pilas*, and tell me what I want to know.” I push off his dick and step back to allow Roan room to work with another finger.

“Wait! Wait! I’ll tell you, I’ll tell you,” he yells, and Roan pauses, hovering over his hand with the pliers at the ready. “I only know him as the Warden.”

“The Warden, like a prison warden?” My mind searches for a connection.

“No, more like a game warden—Oh my god, that’s it,” he gasps, and both me and Roan tense. “That’s where I recognize you from. You were that whore by the elevator!” As soon as that word comes from his mouth, an animalistic darkness comes over Roan, controlled and predatory.

In the flash of an eye, Roan has his gun out and shoots him in the dick. I’ve never heard such blood-curdling screams as I do now. A heavy foot kicks the

chair over, and his head smacks against the ground with a hollow thunk.

Roan descends on him like a dark storm, stomping on his head until there's the definitive sound of his neck snapping. His hulking form stands over Goyle, his shoulders heaving with deep breaths, the veins in his neck throbbing, and his blood-covered hands dangling by his side.

I've seen enough dead bodies and fractured necks to know he's dead without checking for a pulse. "*Pendejo*." I groan. "How are we supposed to get answers from him now?" I throw my hands in the air and storm out. Roan's thudding footsteps follow me, and I spin to shout, "Your tantrum has cost us our only lead, and for what? Because he called me a whore? I've been called so much—"

Chin down and eyes blazing, he crowds me up against the back wall of the landing. His sheer size traps me without even touching me. He plants one hand by my head and leans forward to growl, "I shot him in the dick because he called you a whore—"

"Grow up." I try to move around him, but he slams his other hand on the wall, caging me in. There's a sharp smell of copper from all the blood. For some twisted reason, the way it mixes with his rich cologne makes my pussy clench, and he looks down on me with a smug gleam like he knows it.

"I *killed* him because I'm the only one who gets to call you that." He lingers just long enough for his words to pin me to the wall while he wipes his red-soaked hands on a handkerchief. He walks away, throwing the bloody cloth at my feet. I'm still plastered against the wall with an intoxicating mixture of lust and fright.

"Oh, and Cortez?" He looks over his shoulder at the top of the stairs. "If you ever make me that hard again while torturing someone, I'm fucking you next to their corpse."

1. DECAY—SXMPRA, Teddy Sluz

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Chapter 19

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The One Where They Finally Bang 2.0

Roan

I'm throwing out Reggie's third drink of the night—because she keeps setting them down and I can't keep my eyes on her *and* her drinks—when I recognize a face across the club. My stomach roils when I spot her red hair and fuck-me eyes on the other side of the stage. Madison waves a few fingers, but I look away like I don't recognize her. That doesn't stop her from making her way over to our VIP area though.

Reggie has been hopped up like a live wire ever since we paid Goyle a visit earlier today, so I wasn't all that surprised when she insisted on going out.¹ Like most things with her, I said no, we went back and forth ten times, and then I agreed with my stipulations. My conditions tonight were that we come here, to Peaches. I can keep her safe in my own club. I called Lochlan and had him double security and get the bouncers metal detector wands. Finn set up some facial recognition shit last year on the cameras that runs all patrons against a database of persons non grata in Fox-owned establishments.

Reggie's dancing, seemingly oblivious to her surroundings. As soon as Madison slinks up to the velvet rope, though, her smile drops and she

watches her with a cutting stare. Her body still sways, moving with the music pumping through the speakers, but all of her attention is narrowed in on the redhead. I haven't been able to look away from her all night—what with her wearing painted-on leather shorts and a black, lacy bra with nothing over it except *my* black suit jacket—but especially now as I see the feral possessiveness spark in her eyes.

“Hey, baby!” Madison singsongs. I throw my arm over the back of the couch and watch with sick fascination as Reggie's smile returns with increased smugness the more I ignore Madison.

Lochlan returns from the bar at the same moment and slings an arm around her shoulder. “Hey. Melissa, right?”

I choke on a laugh as she tries to smile through it. “Um yeah! It's Madison, but—”

Lochlan lifts the rope and ushers her in. “Come in, come in. Has my asshole brother left you standing here for long?” His drink sloshes as he falls onto the other end of the couch.

“Aww. You're a very sweet pup, but I'm interested in the big Fox.” She bops him on the nose with a dainty finger and winks at me. *Gross.*

She slides over to sit next to me and trails her hand down my chest. “You remember me, right, baby?” *Pathetic.*

“Sure,” I deadpan as I look around for Reggie. I find her approaching with a glare so poisonous, I'm surprised Madison doesn't drop dead on the spot. The look of pure jealousy on her face sends blood rushing to my cock.

She walks toward us, unbuttoning the suit jacket with her chin held high. “I'm in need of a refill because *someone* keeps throwing out my drinks. You want something?” she says to me while sizing Madison up out of the corner of her eye.

“Whiskey sour. Thanks, sweetie,” Madison answers immediately, and Reggie’s lips tug into a sneer. “Anything for you, baby?” Madison asks me as she glides her hand lower. I remove it from my body, pinched between my thumb and forefinger like it’s a used condom.

I grab a fistful of her hair and look her dead in the eyes when I say coolly, “Call me baby one more time, and I’ll slit your throat.”

She laughs nervously, running her fingers through her hair like she doesn’t know what to do with her hands if she isn’t mauling me.

Reggie sees all this and pulls her bottom lip between her teeth, fighting back a smile, then heads for the bar. I’m only vaguely aware of Madison’s jabbering because Reggie keeps trying to inconspicuously sneak checking glances on us while she orders. When she starts walking back with only one drink in hand, I smile internally.

Reggie stops to lean against a pillar a few yards away, kicking up one of her feet to rest on it. She lifts her drink to her mouth, but doesn’t take a sip. Her tongue flicks out to play with the straw as her eyes darken and smolder watching Madison climb onto my lap. She moves to straddle me, and an icy smile spreads on Reggie’s face.

I push her off me and stand, stalking toward Reggie, who purses her lips like she’s been waiting for this all night. I hear the clack of heels behind me. I step close to her, and she flattens her back against the pillar as if preparing for me to cage her in like at the mansion. Instead, I pause a foot away and tuck my hands into my pockets. “You need something, Cortez?”

A playful smirk tugs on her lips, but she quickly wipes it. Instead, she kicks off the pillar and closes the distance between us to only a few inches, her head tilting back so her nose doesn’t hit my chest. “Not from you.”

“Oh, that must be for me,” a catty voice says beside me and plucks the

drink from Reggie's hand. The immediate transformation on Reggie's face from smug and flirty to cold-ass bitch is mesmerizing, and my chest inflates with hot air and makes my dick throb.

Her hand strikes out to wrap around Madison's wrist holding the drink. Reggie speaks so calmly and low that she has to lean in to hear. "*Mira, puta.* I've disarticulated every joint in the human body. Take your hand off my drink or I'll show you just how many joints there are in your hand."

"*Psycho bitch,*" she hisses and drops the drink, spilling it all over the floor. "Leave my man alone."

Reggie laughs. "*Your* man is fucking ravenous, and it's not for what you're serving. *Your* man would be on his knees for me in seconds, but when he's with you, I bet you're the only one on your knees."

Her mouth hangs open, gobsmacked, then she turns to me with teary eyes. I push up my sleeves and shrug.

"Bu-But—"

She's interrupted by Reggie. "I'll be in your office waiting." She bites her lip and lightly trails her fingers down the lapel of her jacket, brushing over her tits. Before she leaves, she turns to Madison. "Go find someone else's leg to hump."

A smug rush of victory blazes through me as I wave down a bouncer and flick my head toward Madison. "She's done here." *I have more important things to attend to.*²

I take my time walking to the office, savoring the sweet taste of anticipation before gratification. My hand hovers over the handle, my skin buzzing with what's waiting for me on the other side.

Once I finally open the door and enter the room, I close the door behind me. The sound of the lock clicking into place feels like a bass drum in my

gut. “Well, you got me here. Now what?” I ask Reggie, who’s standing confidently in the middle of the office. “Or do you just talk a big game?”

I push off the door, and she slowly swallows as I walk toward her. “I’m not the liar here.”

She takes a step back for every step forward I take until she hits the back wall, the energy crackling between us like two loaded weapons aimed at each other. “Are you giving me permission to touch you?” It comes out raspy and gritty, my dark desire eating me alive from the inside out.

“You know the rules,” she says breathlessly, lifting her chin. “No touching unless I’m in danger.”

I growl in warning. “You sure as fuck aren’t safe around me right now.” My hand, with its tendons flexed, reaches out for her, but stops half an inch from her cheek.

“Well, then...” She raises a brow in both a question and a challenge.

“Are you giving me permission to touch you?” I ask again, rougher, harsher. I glide my hand through the air, down her jaw and over her throat. My hand is vibrating with the need to close the distance, to feel her pulse under my palm.

“Is that what you want?” she breathes weakly, like my presence is a weight collapsing on her chest. “To touch me?”

“No.” I can’t help but scoff darkly, an evil chill in my tone. I coast my hand in the space between her neck and her shoulder, peeling the jacket back without touching her body. “I want my cock to be the only one filling you. I want my hands to be the only ones that know the feel of you. I want my teeth to be the only ones marking you...” The jacket slides off her shoulder, and I move to the other side, stopping to hover above her beating heart. “So, no, Cortez, I don’t want to touch you—I want to fuck you, own you, *ruin you.*”

With a final push, the blazer slips completely off her, pooling on the ground. Its absence bares her bronzed chest and shoulders and stomach and that goddamn tattoo that I've wanted to taste every second since I first saw it in the shower. Airy, little breaths punch from her lips. Her silence lights a flare inside my chest, making my blood burn hot and my control shred to nothing.

My hands shake with my thinning restraint, and I grab her by the belt loops, tugging her to me. "Give it to me before I snap and fucking take it." She rolls her head to the side, as if my words physically rake against her skin.

Her pink tongue wets her lip, and then she says softly yet desperately, "Take it." As if time had stopped moving and only began when she spoke, we erupt into action. I claw at her belt. She rips open the buttons on my shirt. My hands fight to be everywhere all at once. Tangled in her hair. Squeezing her ass. Tearing off her bra. Grabbing her throat. Each inch of her skin feels more electric than the next, and my body is humming with the need to taste the sparks.

I spin her around and push her against the wall, ripping her shorts and panties off in one harsh tug. Kneeling behind her, she gasps loudly as I palm her ass cheeks, spreading them and burying my face to lick her clit to taint. The groan that leaves me is unrecognizable. The sound of a new addiction forming.

"Let me in," I growl, pulling her hips back and nudging her to spread her legs.

"Roan," she whimpers, "You're hurting me."

The taste of her lust makes me delirious, and I don't realize how hard I'm gripping her hips. "Good." I tighten my hold. "You're gonna be wearing my handprints tomorrow."

I press harder, flicking her clit with the tip of my tongue. “*Oh, fuck...*” Her back arches as she moans loudly.

I rise to my feet and fist her long, dark hair to yank her head back. I drag my tongue up the side of her neck to the back of her ear in a long, hot, indecent stroke. My lips brush the shell of her ear. “Did you think I was going to be gentle?”

She keeps her hands firmly planted on the wall. “No.”

“Yet you still gave me permission to touch you?”

“Yes...” I shudder as she pushes her ass back into the cradle of my hips. “So don’t start now.”

“You’re mine now, little menace. I’ll have you any way I want.” I release her hair and flip her around to face me before hooking my arms behind her legs to pick her up. She wraps her legs around my waist, and I carry her to the desk, stepping over our discarded clothes on the ground. I set her on the edge and dive between her thighs, going right back to hungrily sucking and licking her pussy.

“Oh, god...” She laces her legs over my shoulder and locks her ankles. One hand goes to the desk to support her while the other goes to the top of my head. She feverishly claws at my hair, but it’s too short to grasp, so she settles on pushing me tighter to her. Each quake of her thighs, each moan from her lips, each rock of her hips as she presses my mouth to her cunt makes me more and more feral. I start working on undoing my pants when I feel her clit begin to throb under my tongue.

“*Shit, shit, shit,*” she chants, her legs clamping down on either side of my head. “Oh fuck, Ro—” She cries as she comes on my tongue, her nails scraping into my scalp and her heels digging into my back. She’s brutal. And I’m ready to give it all back to her.

I stand, kicking my pants off and fisting my dick. She looks down at my hard cock with this lust-drunk gaze. I use my other hand to hold her thigh open so I can rub the leaking tip of my cock along her swollen pussy. “You’re a fucking vision.”

I nudge the head through her glistening lips, and her hands shoot to the front of my shoulders. “Wait—wait, condom.”

I grip the back of her neck and pull her up to speak against her lips without touching them. “Are you on birth control?” She bobs her chin with a nod, mouth parted like she wants to flick out her tongue to tangle with mine. “Then no condom. I need to watch my cum drip out of you.”

She doesn’t say anything, but her breathing quickens. I search her eyes for any sign of unspoken protest.

I don’t find it. Only scorching need.

I swipe my arm across the desk behind her, knocking everything to the ground with a loud crashing sound. Hooking my arms around her legs, I tug her ass nearly off the desk. “Lay back.”

She reclines but props herself up on her elbows to watch the point where our bodies join, holding her breath as I slot myself against her entrance. I can’t take my eyes off it either as I slowly push in, savoring every inch, feeling her pussy suck me in. I exhale with a shudder as she gives a testing clench around me.

“You look so fucking good with my cock in you. Makes me want to stay here all night just like this to admire how fucking perfect you are.”

“No,” she mewls.

I slide my gaze to hers and lift a brow. “No?”

“No...Please.”

Her desperation is so fucking sweet, I can’t help myself. “Please what?”

“Please,” she whines, her forehead creasing in frustration.

“I thought you didn’t want anything from me?” I tongue the inside of my cheek with a smirk. The fire of a challenge reignites in her gaze, and I love how the flames dance in her eyes.

“I want you to fuck me until I’m coming on your cock,” she says confidently and surely. “Then I want you to turn me around, tell me to grab the desk, and fuck me from behind while you turn my ass red.” My jaw tightens at her filthy words, and my grip on her thighs turns bruising again. “I want it all, Roan.”

“Fucking menace.” I rock my hips back then slam into her, a cry of shock ripping from her throat as her back falls flat onto the desk. “You wanna be used like a whore? Fucked until you can’t walk straight?”

“Yes.” Her eyes light up. “You have permission to touch me, but fuck me like you don’t.”

Her words make the darkest part of me stir. “Give me a word to make it all stop. Give me a word, and I’ll take and take and take until you say it.”

“Serrano.”

“Serrano,” I repeat, a hint of a smile in my tone.

I slide gently halfway out, then pound back in to the hilt. “Hit the desk three times if you can’t talk.” I wrap my hand around her throat and squeeze tighter and tighter with each brutal thrust of my hips. Her pussy flutters around me as I feel her pulse fight and hammer for blood flow.

“Fuck, look at you, milking my cock harder and harder the closer you get to blacking out. How about I only let go when you come?” Her brows pinch together, and her diaphragm pumps for air. It’s truly a beautiful sight. The veins in her forehead become more defined as the rosary on my hand tightens around her throat.

“What do you think? Does an orgasm constitute a prayer?” She shakes her head side to side, as much as she can with my hand pinning her throat. “Don’t worry, *mentirosa*, I was paying attention.”

I shove two of my fingers into her mouth, which is open on a continuous, silent gasp for air, then bring them to her clit and play with it exactly like she showed me. Her head digs harder into the desk, and I know it’s not to escape my chokehold. Her pussy clenches down hard, and her back makes a beautiful arch. When she starts to pulse and flutter around my cock, I let go of her throat so I can hear her scream her release.

I fuck her through the rest of her orgasm, my strokes becoming more and more stilted the closer I get to my own. “*God, Ro. You feel so good.*” Her praise makes me want to draw this out longer.

I pull out, and a protest is on the tip of her tongue until I roll her onto her side. With her body on the desk, I let one of her legs drop to the floor. I move behind her and hook the other in the crook of my elbow. She offers little resistance as I hold her knee up and out. “That’s it, open up for me, little menace.”

I keep her spread and drag my cock up and down her pussy without pushing in. She’s fucking soaked, dripping onto me as I glide back and forth. My length grazes her clit, and her sweet moan makes me hungry for more of them.

I fuck into her then, holding her leg tight for leverage to slam inside her again and again. My hand on her hip slides lower, feeling my cock punch in and out with my fingertips. I drag my fingers through her wet lips until I feel her clit.

She twitches and gasps, “It’s too much—”

“Too much?” I grunt darkly, slamming into her even harder. She begs for

more, for harder, and I give it to her and more. Using her hair as a leash, I hit at a punishing pace. My thrusts are so hard that the desk inches forward with each one. “Still too much?” I growl, then bite her throat.

“Yes!” I feel her clit pulse under my fingers.

I tsk. “Whores don’t get to decide what’s too much. *I do.*” I punctuate my declaration by forcefully pushing two fingers inside her while I fuck her with my cock. “I decide when it’s too much, when you get more, when you get to come.”

“*Mierda—I, I can’t—ahh.*” I cut off her protests with a sharp curl of my fingers, pressing and stroking her swollen G-spot. Her body writhes in my arms, her one supporting leg twitching.

“Jesus, Cortez, your pussy...” I grunt as she clenches hard around me as I rub that perfect spot inside her. “It’s fucking throbbing for me. You can’t help it, can you? You’re gonna come again like a dirty little slut, aren’t you?”

She whines, rendered speechless as she trembles on the peak of another orgasm. “*Unhh...*”

The tide within me rises and rises, and heat courses through my limbs. Something about this moment feels surreal, too fleeting, that I almost dread my coming orgasm. I fear that it will wake me from this dream and this goddess will no longer be in my arms. I need to feel her bouncing on my dick before it all disappears.

Staying inside her, I lift her from the desk, holding both legs open with my arms and carrying us to the desk chair. She settles on my lap, planting her feet on the seat on either side of my thighs as I lean back. “Pump that pussy up and down my cock until I fill you up.”

I wrap a hand around the front of her throat again and pull her into my chest, my words rasping against her ear. “Ride me like the filthy whore you

are, my little menace.”

Her ass claps on my thighs as she rides me, and I snake a hand around her waist to rub her clit. “Yes, yes, Ro—oh, fuck.” My thighs constrict and my abs contract as my orgasm gets ready to crash into me.

“You’re gonna look so good dripping my cum—*Fuuuh*—” I bite down on her neck, and she groans in pain, but doesn’t stop bouncing on my cock. I come hard, my cock pulsing with my release inside her. My fingers never stop, and soon she’s coming again, her orgasm squeezing every last drop out of me.

She flops back, panting on my chest while I lave the drops of blood in my bite mark with my tongue. She sighs, sweet and satisfied, and I encircle her with my arms just in case.

Just in case it is a dream, I won’t let her go.

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1. Gimme—BANKS
 2. Make Me Feel—Elvis Drew



Chapter 20

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Unbelievable

Reggie

I rotate my laptop on its side and turn my head, trying to get a different perspective on these photos, but nothing's working. I slam it closed and toss it on the bed next to me with a groan. "I need to see the bodies again."

Roan picks his head up from the book he's been reading at the desk. "At the institute?"

"I've been going over these photos for two days, and I'm not getting anything new. Maybe I missed something..." Not being able to make any progress is eating me up, like a constant knot of static energy buzzing in my chest.

"Isn't it closed?"

"Technically. But I still have access."

He nods, closing his book. "Okay. I'm going to shower real quick, then we can go." ¹

"Going to fuck your fist thinking of me again?" We've settled into a comfortable routine with each other over the last few days since going to Peaches. We haven't had sex again. The attraction is still there—fuck is it

ever—but there’s not this clawing, screaming need charging between us. The tension that was brewing, causing me to act out and him to lash out, finally broke. Like a dam, it broke, and now the water is flowing smoothly. We can coexist without struggling to decide whether we want to kill or fuck each other.

“I’m not going to put on another show for you.” He huffs a laugh and heads to the bathroom.

The water turns on, and I try to go back to what I was doing on the computer, but I can’t. So, I stop trying. I pull off my shirt and pajama shorts—which are Roan’s boxers since I forgot to pack any. It’s not even for something overtly sexual, it’s just...wanting to be nearer to him.

His eyes are closed when I walk into the shower, head tilted back into the stream as he swipes his hands over his hair. I get caught up in watching his tattoos ripple and move with his muscles. There are several scars that I never noticed before etched on his skin like knife cuts in a butcher block. It makes me realize how much I still don’t know about Roan. He knows everything about me—my job, my family, my trauma, my fucking coffee order and phone passcode.

“I said I wasn’t going to give you a show.” He cracks one of his eyelids to squint at me with a crooked smile. “Are you going to join me or just stand there all day?”

“Shut up, *gringuito*.” I laugh lightheartedly and put some body wash on a washcloth. I step up to him and lather his chest like it’s the most natural thing in the world. I trace the planes of his body, feeling his hard muscles move with his breaths, and realize I’m as comfortable here, naked in the shower, as I would be watching tv or eating dinner with him.

I wash a section of skin with small, circular scars on his pecs and quickly

recognize them as cigarette burns. Unlike any of the other scars, he tenses when I touch them. They aren't new wounds, so they shouldn't hurt him. I rest my palms on his chest and look up at him through my lashes. He stares back with soft eyes but a hard jaw. "What happened?"

His nostrils flare. "My father often confused me with his ashtray when he got drunk."

"Roan...how old were you?" My heart already aches for the young boy before he answers.

"It was mostly in the year after my mother died." He lifts his chin and squares his shoulders, like he always has to stand strong to not let anything hurt him. "He drank a lot that year."

"How old, Roan?" He swallows slowly, and I don't know why I'm pushing for an answer. Maybe it's the urge to learn whatever I can about this haunted, beautiful man. Learn his demons so maybe I can help keep them away.

"Eight."

"*Lo siento.*" I press my lips to the hot, wet skin, kissing each scar from a wound too brutal for an eight-year-old. He relaxes a little bit more with each kiss, fourteen in total.

After the last one, he clutches my face, the fingers of one hand shoving into the back of my hair that's tied up in a bun while the other frames my jaw. The blue-gray of his eyes swirls like dark pools under moonlight. Just as dark as the usual storm brewing there, but still somehow lighter, brighter.

He doesn't say a word as he walks me back against the glass. One hand glides gently across my chest and down my stomach to lightly caress between my legs. My mouth falls open on a breathless moan, and the thumb on my jaw slides between my lips. I rake my teeth over it, feeling his dick grow and press into my stomach.

I reach between us to lightly wrap my hand around his velvet length. He immediately removes it and pins my wrist at my side. "I want to watch you." His words float softly from his lips as if he didn't mean to say them out loud.

He gently works his fingers up and down my slit, circling my clit on each up stroke, and I push into his grip on my hip as my back curves off the glass. He's masterful with light, deliberate movements, bringing me tender pleasure. He never takes his gaze from my face, soaking in every hitch of my breath, bite of my lip, and pinch of my brows. His lips part, and a delighted sigh spills out like watching me is magic.

My release floats in front of me as Roan slips two fingers inside me to curl against my G-spot, keeping his thumb tracing light circles around my clit. Fiery sparks skitter from the tip of my limbs to my core. I gasp in a deep inhale as my orgasm starts its slow but powerful waves through my body.

His thumb caresses my cheek, dragging across my hanging bottom lip. When he speaks, it's with awe. "*Fhíorálainn.*"

He seems content to just remain here, feeling my heartbeat and flushed skin under his palm, and continue to canvas every inch of my face. I'm light-headed with the worship of it all.

I drag my hands down his stomach and over the curve of his muscled ass, lowering toward the tile floor. He clamps me around the shoulders, stopping me. "I didn't do that for something in return."

"I know." And I do. There was truly no urgency on his end. He wanted to watch me fall, knowing that he was the one making me fly. "Will you let me? Please. I want to know how you taste."

He exhales through his nose and lets go of my shoulders, letting me sink to my knees. I'm equally as curious and thorough as he was, learning his body lick by lick. His cock fills my hand perfectly, the skin soft and veiny. I swirl

my tongue over the red tip, and his thighs flex. I can feel him physically holding back the natural urge to thrust into my hand.

I roll his balls in my hand while I wrap my lips around his length. “*Fucking hell...*” I peer up to see him speak through gritted teeth, the tendons in his neck flexing as I bob forward until he hits the back of my throat. “I’ve thought about filling your smart mouth so many times. Imagined how you’d look on your knees just as many. But *fuck*, the fantasy can’t even compete with the reality...I feel like I should be the one on my knees right now.” His words are strained and half swallowed by a gravelly groan as I swallow around his tip.

I can’t help but smile as this hulking beast of a man’s face writhes in restraint, his hand smacking out to palm the glass and the other digging into my scalp. His fingers scrape and pull tightly as he fists the top of my hair, but he doesn’t control my movements in any way. He lets me set what I’m sure is a painfully leisurely pace, savoring this moment.

There is no taking. Only giving and receiving.

And it’s so fucking sweet that it splits my heart open.

I stand, replacing my mouth with my hand and wrapping the other around his neck, tilting his face toward me. “Now let me watch you.”

I find him equally mesmerizing. The knot of muscle at the back of his jaw. The purse of his lips followed by a harsh exhale. The feel of his hand, so large and strong, gripping my hip. The lines and curves of his tattoos. I say softly, with amazement, “There’s nothing I don’t find beautiful about you.”

He winces, as if the compliment struck him sharply, like an arrow to the chest. And I suddenly know with certainty that I’m the first person to ever call him beautiful.

He swallows like there’s a barb in his throat. “You know what I was

thinking when I grabbed you by the elevator at the Chariot?”

I pause my strokes to rub circles at the base of his cock’s head. “What were you thinking?”

“How it would feel to have you coming on my fingers while I ground my cock against your ass. And I remember thinking that even with all the layers of clothing between us, that was the hottest fucking thing I’d ever imagined.”

I smile, feeling a blush warm my cheeks. As if he knows, he lifts a hand to cup my cheek, and his fingers that were on the glass are cool and welcome. I continue to pleasure him, his breaths becoming punchier and more desperate. He keeps his hand on my cheek like he needs the connection to stay on his feet, but smacks the hand from my hip onto the glass by my head.

“Come for me now,” I whisper. His abs contract tightly, and a deep rumble builds in his chest, only releasing with the first spurts of cum.

“*Fuhh—*” He presses his forehead into the wall above my shoulder, breathing against my throat.

“That’s it. Good boy.” I massage the back of his neck and slow my strokes until he begins to soften.

He lifts his head and frames my face with his big hands. Nudging my forehead against his, he sighs against my lips. “I can’t believe you’re real.”



Chapter 21

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Fuck or Fight

Reggie

I re-examined every body not yet in the field from DSM Transports, scrutinizing each inch of skin for some clue I missed. I came up empty. Now we're back in the lab, and I'm spinning in my desk chair while staring up at the fluorescent lights.

It's hard to think with Roan telling me it's time to go every few minutes. "Come on, there's nothing new to find."

"Fuck, there has to be something I'm missing," I groan.

Roan sounds equally frustrated, but for different reasons. "There isn't. Let's go."

"What happened to you being the patient one, huh?"

"I—" His phone rings and he answers, putting it on speaker. "You're on speaker."

"Hey, Reggie." I recognize Cash's voice. "I've found someone who has information on the Warden."

I jolt up, planting my feet excitedly. "What's their name? When can we talk to them? What—"

“It’s a good news, bad news situation,” Cash interrupts my eager rambling. “Good news, we found someone. Bad news, it’s the Oracle—but hey, I gotta go—”

“Text me the details,” Roan says, and Cash ends the call. He looks at me expectantly. “*Now can we go?*”

Back in Roan’s car, I watch trees blur by like streaks of green paint on a canvas from the passenger seat with my knees tucked into my chest. Roan’s been silent so far, until now. “How much do you trust your brother?”

“I guess that would depend. What are you thinking?” I turn in my seat, angling my bent knees toward him. His hand leaves the gear shift to rest on my thigh. The gesture is so small but feels so big, the impact of which terrifies me.

Oblivious to his effect on me, eyes on the road but thumb tracing circles on my skin, he continues casually, “What if you showed him the faces of the women? If they’re cartel members, he might recognize them. We could get a lot more information if we knew their names.”

I consider this. It’s a risk, showing our hand, especially if he’s involved somehow. The connection to the cartel is what’s eating me up. I know my father and brother have done monstrous things, but it’s still hard for me to accept that they might *be* monsters, through and through.

“When I was little, maybe five or six, I had to wear these eye-patch stickers to correct a lazy eye.” I don’t know why this memory comes to me, but I feel the need to share. Roan hasn’t outright accused him of anything, but I still need him to know the kind of man my brother is.

“Kids made fun of me the first day I wore it to school. I cried to my brother on our walk home. He told me to man up.” I laugh at the memory, and Roan’s mouth tugs in the corner like he’s recalling similar memories.

“But the next day, he and all his friends showed up to school with eye patches covered in princesses and pink butterflies.

“I know he’s not the same person he was at nine, but I can’t—or I don’t want to—believe that little boy isn’t still in there somewhere.”

“We always want to believe the best in family.”



“This is spooky,” I say, and with perfect timing, the weak streetlight above us flickers. Abandoned office parks and businesses with apartments above them line the streets.

“A few years back, the previous mayor had the city buy up all the buildings in these few blocks for a ‘multi-disciplinary arts and recreation community center for the enrichment of June Harbor.’” He makes quotes with his fingers. “Of course, that’s just the sweet-talking name he gave the project to get the communities to go along with it. He got the city to pay his buddies millions for some of these properties, and all they had to do was cough up a percentage of that windfall back to him.”

“And they’ve just sat here unused for years?” I pass a shop with boards behind what’s left of the shattered windows. A sad barber pole has lost its protective glass. The colors are sun-faded, the white stripe now brown and dirty.

“Pretty much. The city couldn’t afford to buy the property *and* develop it, and no one wants to buy back the buildings in a deserted part of town.” Roan’s arm sways next to him as we walk down the empty sidewalk. It

swings toward me like he's reaching for my hand. He then shoves it in his pocket. *Does he want to hold my hand? Do I want to hold his?*

Placing his hand on my leg earlier was the scariest thing he's ever done to me. Above pinning me to the kitchen island. Above carrying me hanging upside down up a ladder. Above choking me while he fucked me and called it a prayer. All of those situations elicited fear for the present, but touching me so casually intimate elicits fear for the future.

Each time the sexual tension grows too much and we snap, it's magical. I can write it off as an experience. I glance at his hand in his pocket. Holding hands, though, is mundane, too accurate of a glance into what life could be like after this job. A life that isn't possible.

I'd rather save myself the pain.

We approach a grand bank with granite steps leading up to regal classical columns. A figure in a long, olive-colored coat walks out from behind one of them. I startle at their sudden appearance and the big hood obscuring their entire face. Roan automatically steps in front of me, positioning his body between me and the person. They're wearing ratty sweatpants, and their boots are scuffed and worn.

"We're here for the priestess." Roan's tone is commanding, and the person stands taller, revealing the bottom half of their face. A neatly trimmed beard is nothing like what I expected given the state of his clothes.

"Have you already paid?"

"She hasn't given us her price yet," Roan responds tensely.

The man snickers and offers a mocking, "Have a good night." He opens the big wood-and-brass front door. "Welcome to the Temple."

Roan wraps his arm around my waist and pulls me protectively to his side as we enter. Two masked men meet us, the exaggerated smile and frown on

the tragedy and comedy masks they wear grim and creepy. Unlike the man out front, these two are obviously security, based on the bulletproof vests and guns on display.

Roan pushes me behind him and holds his arms out at his sides as one of them approaches, swinging his rifle behind his back. He waves a metal detector around Roan in a T-shaped pattern. He steps to the side to let the guard scan me. Roan watches like a coiled snake ready to react in a split second while the man's hands hover over me.

Once cleared, the man gives his partner a nod to open the second set of doors for us. Instantly, the sound of a roaring crowd slams into us. The former bank floor has been cleared out, and in its place are a thrumming crowd and elevated stage with two men grappling. The stage is enclosed with a giant metal cage that's attached to the ceiling by a thick chain.

"That's her, the Oracle," Roan shouts, trying to be heard over the crowd, and points to a woman dressed in a drapery silk...toga? She's perched above the crowd on what looks like a lifeguard chair made of gold and decorated like a throne.

"Are you going to tell me who she is now?"

He pulls me farther from the crowd so he can talk. "The Oracle, a priestess who delivers *prophecies*." I look up at the woman in purple, and I guess if this underground fight club is a temple, she would be the priestess.

But I know there's more to this than a delusional MMA fan. "And what does she really do?"

He glances to each side before leaning closer, then says in a near whisper, "For the right price, she'll find anything—an organ, a safe house, a whore, or..." He stands up. "Information."

"On the Warden," I say, nodding.

“Stay close to me.” He sweeps up my hand and starts weaving in and out of the throng of people, leading us toward the priestess. I try to fight the feeling of instant safety and comfort his hand wrapped around mine brings, both sweet and bitter.

There are three rows of men surrounding her, all in tactical pants and what looks like a Roman breastplate painted a matte black. “What the fuck,” I say under my breath.

There’s a huge uproar from the spectators. One of the fighters stands, spitting blood, and raises his hands in victory. His opponent is face down. I can’t tell from here if he’s breathing or not. The cage begins to lift with the sound of groaning metal. The loser is dragged away by his arms as the winner skips down the steps of the stage, pounding on his chest.

Roan turns to one of the priestess’s guards and says something into his ear while handing him a stack of cash. The guard speaks into an earpiece.

“I thought you didn’t know the price?” I ask.

His eyes slide to mine. “That’s just for the audience.”

The priestess descends from her throne, and half the men guarding her now fall into position to surround her while she walks to the back of the bank. The man Roan paid gestures to us, and we are escorted behind her entourage.

“Listen.” Roan drapes his arm over my shoulder in what looks like a casual gesture, but I can feel the tension in his muscles. His voice is low and serious as he speaks, barely moving his lips. “She has a reputation for demanding insane *prices*. Don’t agree to anything right away.”

A nervous energy crackles in my chest as we are led through the entryway of the old safety-deposit-box room. The door is thick metal, like a vault’s. Roan’s jaw is set tight as he studiously observes and takes in the situation.

The Oracle folds her arms across her chest while facing us, her men

flanking her. She exudes power as she lifts her chin. “I was expecting your brother.”

Roan’s face lights up with a charming smile, but his voice is cold and flat. “Sorry to disappoint.”

She waves a hand, her long fingernails painted an obsidian black. Her sharp green eyes latch onto mine. “I’ll survive. Now, you’re here for information on the Warden, correct?”

Roan answers, “Yes.”

“I didn’t ask you,” she says cuttingly, then tilts her head and narrows her gaze like she’s trying to read my thoughts. “You’re the one who wants to know.”

“Yes.” I step forward, not wanting her to think I’m hiding behind Roan. “Name your price, and I’ll pay it.”

An evil smile spreads on her lips. “Excellent.” I feel Roan behind me itching to put himself between me and her.

“Given tonight’s event, I would usually offer you the choice to fuck or fight, but all my men would wipe the floor with you and ten-second fights aren’t much fun. So, that payment option is off the table, which leaves fucking.”

“No. No, absolutely not,” Roan barks, tugging me toward the door. Two men draw their weapons, blocking the exit.

“She already agreed. Payment is owed, and I will get it one way or another,” she says, her voice a chilling mix of sweet and sinister.

I balk. “I didn’t agree—”

“Name your price, and I’ll pay it,” she parrots my earlier words. My stomach drops like a stone. I didn’t mean it as a blind agreement, but I can

tell it isn't worth arguing semantics. Roan warned me not to agree to anything right away, and my stupid choice of words...*fuck*.

"So you want to fuck me?" I ask, trying to understand.

"*She* doesn't want to fuck you," Roan says through gritted teeth, his fists clenching and his feet shifting into a fighting stance. "I'll do it."

"That's not how it works." She tuts with a smug smirk. I look between the two of them trying to grasp what I'm clearly missing. "I have some absolute beasts lined up for the night and you're so..." She eyes me up and down. "*Dainty*. The crowd will go crazy watching them tear you apart."

"*Them*?" I squeak, my stomach roiling as I process her words.

"Over my dead body," Roan growls, shoving me behind him.

"We can arrange that," she says superciliously. The sound of a cocking gun makes my blood go cold. One of the men at the door has stepped up to my back and holds a gun to the back of Roan's head by reaching over me.

"That's unnecessary, I'll do it!" I shout, jumping out from between Roan and the gunman, trying to draw everyone's attention to me.

"Like hell you will," he snarls and lunges for me, but stops when the barrel reconnects with his head.

"I didn't say you could move," the man says gruffly.

"You don't know what you're agreeing to." Roan's voice is strained, and his eyes plead with me.

"I do. You want me to fuck men in front of the crowd. And if I do it, you won't kill him, right?" I hate the small bits of panic and desperation that leak into my voice.

"I don't want you to fuck men. I want you to get fucked *by* men. People paid good money for a show, and I will give them one." She twirls a strand of her raven hair around her finger like I'm on the verge of boring her.

I swallow deeply and try to stand tall and straight. I can't bear to look at Roan. "Okay, I'll do it."

"Wait—wait!" For the first time since I met him, Roan sounds frazzled.

"One more outburst, and he's pulling the trigger, Mr. Fox," the priestess snaps, and Roan moves his hand in a settling motion like he's trying to defuse the situation.

"You said the option is usually fuck or fight, yeah?" He keeps his tone calm and even. "Let me fight. Your people want a show? I'll give them a damn bloody one."

She swings her eyes up to the fluorescent lights and sighs as if in thought. After a beat, her shocking green eyes shoot back to Roan with a new, devilish sparkle. "Deal. But you're fighting with Lady Luck."



I listen to the crowd stomp and clap their hands, anxiety swirling in my gut as I tape Roan's hands in a back room. His face is a stone mask. "We could run," I blurt out.

He looks up at me from the bench he's sitting on with a crooked smile. "Don't get soft on me now, Cortez."

I wind the tape around his hand once more. "Don't let your ego get in the way. Tap out if you have to."

"No win, no information." He shrugs, flexing his fingers to test the wrapping.

"We'll find another way—" ¹

He pulls me between his knees, his hands roving down my hips with a tenderness that makes my eyes prick with hot tears. When his eyes come back to mine, there's a distant sadness in the blue, but it's gone in a flash and is replaced with a grim laugh. "And tapping out isn't an option, little menace."

My heart skips with a sickening realization. "You mean..."

He rolls his neck from side to side, stretching the muscles. "If I'm not walking off that stage as the winner, I'm not walking off at all."

My throat feels halved in size as I try to swallow down the truth. Turns out I can't stomach it, and shake my head vehemently instead. "No, no. We can call your brothers, I'll call my father, and they'll get us out of here."

He grabs me by the wrists, stopping my hands from wildly gesticulating. "This whole block is jammed. No calls are getting in or out."

"You're up." A guard pops his head inside the door.

This time when we walk through the crowd, I don't hesitate to hold his hand. I don't think about the dead women or the Warden or what happens when this is all over. All I think about is how perfectly my hand fits inside of his and how right it feels to not shy away from a future that may never come.

When we reach the bottom of the stage steps, I stop him and cradle his face with my shaking hands. So many things run through my head. I want to tell him that if he gets himself killed, I'll kill him myself. I want him to know that if this is the last moment we have together, I will thank a god I haven't talked to in years for the time we did have together. That he's never felt more like mine than right now when I might lose him. Instead I say, "I'll be waiting right here when you win."

The guard urges him along and I stretch on my toes, pulling his face to mine for what I realize will be our first kiss and very well might be our last.

His hands on my waist hold me back before I get the chance. “See you soon, Cortez.”

The first words he ever spoke to me echo again as he turns his back to climb to the stage, and I think a small piece of me cracks inside.

The biggest, burliest man I’ve ever seen walks on from the other side of the stage. He’s a goddamn mountain with a beard. His fists are almost as big as Roan’s head.

A man in a suit stands in the center, adjusting his tie before speaking into a microphone. “Along with Gora”—he holds a hand out toward the giant—“Lady Luck is participating in this fight!” The crowd goes crazy over his announcement, and I look around, confused.

“Each fighter will roll a pair of dice. Whoever rolls the highest gets his first choice of weapon.” He swipes his hand out, and a woman dressed in a skimpy version of the priestess’s purple dress circles the stage, showing off a tray of items.

A machete. A mallet. A length of steel chain. An axe.

I feel dizzy, and my heart is racing so fast that jitters wrack my body.

“If either fighter rolls snake eyes, Lady Luck has looked unfavorably upon him. He will have to forfeit his right to a weapon.”

I fight the urge to scream, glancing up to the Oracle in her chair. She drums her talon-like nails on one arm of the chair while raising a golden goblet to her lips. *Eccentric, sadistic bitch.*

The woman with the tray of weapons walks up to Roan’s opponent with a smaller silver tray. The referee huddles around him as he plucks two dice from the tray before shaking them in his giant fist. The crowd holds a collective breath, the buzzing space falling eerily quiet. So quiet that, when he releases the dice, you can hear them clatter onto the metal tray.

“And he rolls a three!” the ref shouts into the microphone, and excited yells shatter the silence.

A three. I inhale my first full breath since leaving the room with the safety deposit boxes. Roan’s odds of rolling higher are good. Really good.

A hushed quiet falls over the crowd again as Roan rolls, and optimism pulses through me.

“Snake eyes!” My body is rocked like I’ve been sucker punched. The other fighter pounds his chest and roars, then pumps his fist into the air. The ring girl lets him peruse the tray of weapons, and I can’t breathe as he picks. He lifts the axe above his head, and nausea knocks at the back of my throat.

I recall the body of a murder victim from a few years ago. Killed with an axe, their body was broken in ways I’d never seen before. Unlike a stab wound, an axe shatters the bone as it cleaves through skin and muscle, splintering the human body like a block of wood.

I try to focus on Roan, alive and whole...for now.

He bounces lightly on his toes, his black jeans slung low on his hips, and he rolls his shoulders up and down. His back piece is extra haunting under the harsh lights trained on the stage.

“To your corners until the bell.” The announcer points to opposite corners, waits until each fighter is in one, and then hustles off the stage as the cage is lowered.

The sound of the heavy metal sinks into the pit of my stomach as I realize they’re not lifting the cage someone is dead. A bell rings out, and the air is snatched from my lungs. Both men stalk slowly toward the center. Gora’s eyes are big and wide as he licks his lips like an animal salivating at the sight of his prey.

They circle each other, neither making a move, and the crowd jeers for

action. Gora lunges with a roar, swinging the axe in a broad stroke. Roan just barely sidesteps his attack. When his opponent is barely past him, he spins and slams the butt of the axe between Roan's shoulder blades.

Roan flies to the ground. Unlike a boxing ring, the stage is hard and unforgiving. My own heart skips a beat seeing him facedown, but he quickly scrambles back onto his feet, shaking out his shoulders.

The next time the man swings, Roan grabs the wooden handle and uses the leverage to land heavy kicks to his groin. The man's knees buckle but he doesn't fall, and he forcefully shoves the axe they are both holding, knocking off Roan's grip as he staggers back.

I try to scream to warn him, but the back of his head smacks into the metal cage before the words can even leave my mouth. His neck jostles like it's boneless and his eyelids flutter, eyes rolling back. He grabs onto the cage behind him to keep himself upright.

The man stalks closer, dragging his axe sinisterly against the stage. This is going to be a cold-blooded murder. I'm going to watch Roan be killed.

I run along the perimeter, pushing my way through the mass of people to be at Roan's side. I reach him just as the blunt end of the axe slams into his jaw. His head whips to the side, and his eyes glaze over me as his hands slip on the cage. His body slumps as he spits out blood, his tongue tracing his teeth.

His eyes lock with mine for a brief moment, and my whole body feels weak when he gives me a crooked smirk. He pushes off the cage and laughs. "Wrong end, idiot."

The man's grizzly face twists into a menacing snarl and he roars, swinging the axe. Roan rolls out of the way, and the axe gets lodged in one of the squares of the cage. He drives a strong uppercut in the man's elbow and

there's a sickening snap of bone as his elbow is forced the wrong way. He yells in agony and releases the axe.

My heart is beating so fast watching it all unfold, a dizzying combination of adrenaline and hope and utter terror. Roan dives for the axe handle, but the man knocks it away and buries his fist into Roan's ribs so hard he's lifted off his feet. He falls to the floor in a gasping ball and receives a rib-breaking kick to his side.

I rush to get as close as I can, yelling at him through the cage as he gets pummeled with powerful kicks. "Come on, Roan, get up, get up!" He collapses flat onto his chest, cheek on the floor. His tired eyes find mine, and I grab the cage. "I told you I'd be waiting when you win. Don't make a liar of me."

That sparks something in his eyes, and I see a new resolve form in them. When the next kick comes, Roan shoots for his standing leg and yanks it out from under him. He topples back, his giant body shaking the cage as he lands like a pillar of stone. Roan dives for the abandoned axe and gets his hands on it just as the man grabs onto his ankle with his unbroken arm, trying to pull him away. Roan uses his free foot to smash his heel into the man's nose. Blood instantly rushes from it, and Roan's able to jump to his feet, axe still firmly in his grasp.

His opponent is still on the ground, pushing himself up to his hands and knees, when Roan stomps on his back and flattens him back down. Pinning him to the ground, he lifts the axe above his head and brings it down with all his strength, a feral scream tearing from his throat. He strikes with enough precision and force to sever his head clean off.

Sprays of blood cover Roan's heaving chest. He raises the axe to point at me, a primal ferocity in his eyes, then he lets it drop, his arms hanging heavy

at his sides.

The crowd is going absolutely wild for the upset and decapitation. People knock into me and the noise of their cheers is deafening, but I can't take my eyes off the bruised, bloody, and beautiful man staring at me with cold and wild eyes as the cage slowly lifts.

1. Lion—Saint Mesa

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Chapter 22

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Brutalized

Roan

The adrenaline doesn't wear off until we're halfway back to the car parked almost a mile away. Then the pain starts to set in. Each breath painfully stretches my bruised—probably broken—ribs. My jaw throbs, and the coppery taste of blood is a constant on my tongue.

“Let me drive,” Reggie begs, guilt so thick in her voice that it drills into my chest like a screw. She reaches for the keys in my hand, but I tug my hand away. “Please let me help you.”

I clench my teeth together, holding back the reply clawing its way up my throat. I push it down, yet my reply is stilted and harsh. “Get in.”

“I will when you give me the keys.” She places her hands on her hips, trying a different tactic to get what she wants. *It's always about what she wants.*

“Get in the fucking car.” I pound my fist on the hood. “Now, Cortez.” She flinches, and the brave lift of her chin falls. I hate the way she scampers around the car like she's scared I'm going to hurt her. I'd never hurt her—not unless she wanted it—and that's the fucking problem. The absolute need, the

deep instinct in my soul to protect her is going to get me killed. And I can't bring myself to care about my safety, not when it comes to her.

My nerves are too frayed to deal with this. My body is exhausted and screaming in pain, and my soul is soaked in blood. My mind just wants to shut off and ignore all the feelings grappling inside my chest. Their mere presence feels toxic, weakening.

She picks at her nails, her hands in her lap the entire wordless drive to the safe house as she steals timid glances at me. I want to grab her by the chin and force her to look me in the eyes, hoping she'd see everything I can't put into words.

Even the smallest movements—bracing my core as we make a turn, changing gears and pedaling the clutch—send splitting pain through my sides. That's the bitch about rib injuries: they feel like they're all over your body. Anything that causes your abs to tense, from sneezing to shitting, squeezes your broken bone like a vice.

Back at the safe house, I hesitate for two fucking seconds at the bottom of the ladder, and Reggie asks, "Can you do it? Do you need help?"

"I'm fucking fine," I grumble, then force myself up the rungs, glad I'm facing the wall as I grimace the entire climb. I go straight to the window and light a cigarette, trying to distract myself by going over what the priestess told us after the fight.

"The Warden hosts hunting parties, and women are the prey. It's incredibly secretive, near impossible to get information or an invitation without a previous guest vouching for you. I don't know where it takes place, but it's somewhere secluded and isolated. You're not going to stumble upon it by chance."

Something for Reggie seemed to click—I could see her thoughts shuffling

with this new information—but she filed it away as soon as I said it was time to go. I was so worn from the fight, I was barely registering the information. Since then, all her nervous attention has been on me.

Even now, I hear the soft padding of her bare feet as she approaches me like I'm a feral animal in the wild. I don't turn around or even acknowledge she's there. I take another drag, savoring the calm of nicotine over the pain my expanding lungs cause.

Her silent presence shatters any semblance of peace one lousy cigarette can bring. I feel her soft, pity-filled eyes on my back like spiders crawling over my skin. "If you have something to say, Cortez, say it."

"I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry." Her voice is thick with emotion, but it never cracks. "You could have died. No information is worth that."

I spin on her, fury like a furnace burning me hot. "You think I'm mad that I had to fight? Let me make you understand something."¹ I stub my cigarette out on the windowsill and stalk toward her. "I operate in the world constantly at threat of being killed. There is never a single moment when that threat doesn't exist. Sure, tonight the odds that I died were considerably higher, but that's not why I'm mad."

Her brows pinch. "Then why are you mad?"

Mad. What a wholly inadequate word for this fucking tornado raging inside me.

I run my hand over my hair, trying and failing to articulate what I'm feeling. I was taught to bury that shit deep. Trying to explain what's going on in my head and my chest and my fucking heart is like trying to speak a language I've never heard before.

I push hot air out through my nose and start speaking, still scrambling for the right words. "You—I—Why do you have to make it so fucking difficult

to protect you?” There’s catharsis in raising my voice, pinning all my rage and frustration on the source of it. “Agreeing to get brutalized in front of a rabid crowd? You’re delusional if you think I’d sit back and let you do that.”

She shouts defensively, “I’ve been protecting myself long before you came along!”

“That’s the problem,” I shout back. “You think the bad guys in this world are the same as the bad guys in your world. *They aren’t*. They’re fucking monsters. You’d think you’ve seen enough dead bodies to know how to avoid becoming one, but you don’t have a fucking clue.”

I crowd into her space, but she refuses to step back, looking up at me with fire in her eyes.

“I could’ve handled it,” she says adamantly.

I scoff, shaking my head.

“Don’t scoff at—”

My gun is out of my waistband and pressed into her forehead before she can finish her sentence. “You think you’re so tough, huh?” Her forehead relaxes under the pressure of the barrel, but she swallows deeply and clenches her jaw. I lower the gun to her sternum and say as I walk her back, “You think you could’ve handled them?”

I have her up against the desk and flick my chin for her to sit on top of it. “They wouldn’t have given a fuck about you. They don’t give a fuck about your pleasure. They would have taken what they wanted, not caring if it hurt you, if it *broke* you.” I trail my gun between her breasts, getting high off the way her nipples harden under her dress and her breath hitches as I drag it lower, down the path of her thigh. “I wasn’t going to stand by and let someone do that to you.” My knuckles whiten around the gun as I dip it

under the hem of her dress. “The only person who can make you scream is me. The only person who can hurt you is me.”

I’m not sure she’s even aware she’s inching her knees apart for me. “Because when I do it, you’ll love it.” Her thighs shake as I trace the inside of her bare thigh with the cool metal of my gun. Her breathing deepens, and my cock hardens as her lace-covered pussy comes into view. “Nobody is going to care about your pleasure like I do, little menace. *Nobody.*” I nudge the muzzle against her wet panties, groaning at the way she sucks in a sharp little inhale. Her chin lowers, looking at where my hand disappears under the skirt of her dress.

I grab her by the throat and force her to look up at me. “Now pull those panties aside for me.” Her eyes are big and wide as she does. I can’t look away from her face as I glide the metal up and down her slick cunt, captivated by all the tiny expressions flashing across it as she realizes what I intend to do. Continuing my thoughts out loud, I say, “And you’re gonna love it, you twisted little slut.”

Her mouth hangs open like a response is dancing on her tongue, but she snaps it shut, digging her teeth into her bottom lip as she leans back and uses her hands for support. I push the barrel through her folds and tease her entrance. The crease between her brows deepens as I slide the weapon into her. The barrel fills her pussy, causing the hard edges to drag against her inner walls, and her mouth falls open on a gasp.

I glide my thumb from her throat, over her jaw, and slide it between her lips. She bites down, a throaty moan wrapping around it as I glide the gun in and out of her. “*Fucking filthy,*” I breathe, dragging my nose up her cheek.

I continue to fuck her with my Glock, and I withdraw my thumb to tighten my grip on her throat, pinching the sides of the smooth muscle. “You think

they'd know how to choke you, just enough to bring you that thrill of fear while bringing you closer and closer to the edge?"

She shakes her head, and her eyes begin to water. The sight stings, but not enough to make me stop. It's more like the snap of a rubber band, sharp but fleeting. I fuck her harder as I ask, "Why are you crying?"

I loosen my hold so she can talk. "I. Don't. Know." She speaks through gasps as I plunge deeper into her.

"You remember what to say to make it stop, right?"

She nods, her bottom lip trembling.

"Say it."

"Serrano."

"Good. I'm not going to stop until you come on this gun or you say that word. Understand?"

"Yes." She snuffles, but there's a renewed strength in her eyes, a new fight in the set of her jaw. She surprises me when she leans forward to tug on my belt and jeans. My cock is out seconds later, throbbing and glistening with pre-cum. My skin burns waiting for her touch. Before she wraps her small hand around me, I spit on my length, and she licks her lip hungrily.

I throw my head back, rocking into her fist and finally releasing the groan that's been building all night. The light tug of her hand gliding up and down makes my body quake and my ribs scream, and I never want her to stop. I move my hand from her throat to cup her cheek, wiping the stray tear with my thumb as I speak through gritted teeth. "Don't think for a second that you aren't the one in complete control. That you don't have total power over me."

Telling her this breaks something inside of me.

Breaking is often equated with ruin. But this doesn't feel like ruin. It feels like the tired, weary pieces that were trying so hard to stay together are now

relieved of that burden.



Reggie

I feel it. His heart. In the air. In his words. But I want to feel *him*.

I let go of his cock to frantically tug and pull his shirt. I need to feel the heat of his skin, the beat of his heart, anything to assure me he's alive, that he's here and not growing cold and lifeless on that godforsaken stage.

He pulls my hands away, and I think I might die.

"Please. *Please*." Tears I still don't understand spring back up, my eyes stinging.

"You can make your demands once you meet mine." His voice is somehow both stone cold and raging with heat. I feel like screaming, confused and so hot I'm burning up. "Come for me, little menace. Show me what a good little whore you are and come on my gun."

I understand now and flip my dress up, reaching between my thighs. The rough shape and hard edges of his gun scrape against my G-spot in the most uniquely delicious and dangerous way. As soon as my fingers meet my clit, tension coils like a flaming rope in my core.

"*Oh, god—*" I moan. "I'm gonna co—*oh fuck, fuck—*" I dig my heels into the sides of the desk, my pussy squeezing around the metal.

A wicked smirk dances across his lips. "Next time you think about putting yourself in danger, fucking anyone else for any reason, remember this moment." A cry is torn from my lungs as my muscles contract, painfully yet

blissfully, in rapture. “Remember how nobody can make you shatter like I can. On my tongue, my fingers, my cock. Even on my fucking gun.”

Tears spill as my climax pulses through me. Roan sees them, but doesn't stop fucking me until my orgasm is done wrecking me. I wince as he withdraws the weapon, my nerves heightened and raw. He raises the gun, and my stomach knots at the sight of my release coating it.

He brings it closer to my face, and I go completely still, holding my breath. His head cocks to the side as if struck by a sick curiosity. He tenderly uses the wet muzzle to wipe away my tears on one cheek, replacing it with the evidence of my own depraved lust.

He leans closer and licks the trail from my cheek to whisper in my ear. “I like the way your fear tastes.”

He stands back and steps out of his jeans, handing himself over to me now. I toy with the hem of his shirt, hypnotized by the way his breath seems to get rigid and tight each time my fingers brush his skin.

Don't think for a second that you don't have total power over me.

He called me out for thinking I'm tough, but I've never seen a bigger lie than him trying to remain unaffected as I glide my hands up his sides, pushing up his shirt. He raises his arms for me with a shuddering breath, and I pull the material over his head.

I take in his beaten body with a heavy swallow, brushing my fingertips over the swells of purple and blue. “Do you think they're broken?” I ask, lightly dusting over his ribs.

“Maybe.” He rolls one shoulder in a half shrug. “Probably.”

I look from his mottled skin to his hard erection. “Can you still...”

“Fuck you?” He lifts a brow. “Turn around and find out.”

My heart beats a little faster as I turn around. I rest my palms on the desk,

back arching slightly as I bend over. His hand grips the back of my neck and pushes me flat against the hard surface.

He flips my dress over my ass and circles my exposed cheek with his palm. The movement is too slow, too gentle, and it puts me on edge, waiting for a sharp slap or strike. I can't help the shaky exhale I release as his dick slides between my legs. "*Oh fuck...*" Anticipation grips me.

He laughs. "Scared?"

I shake my head as much as I can with my cheek pinned to the desk. He finds my entrance with his thick head, and I clutch the air in my lungs.

"You should be," he says darkly as he thrusts fiercely into me with a grunt. The breath I'd been holding comes out as a breathy moan.

He sets a ruthless pace, the desk squeaking and banging against the wall. He has me pressed so firmly over the desk that I'm constantly in a state of breathlessness. Grabbing one of my wrists, he pins it behind my back and uses it for leverage to fuck me harder and deeper with each punch of his hips. His other hand is still heavy on the back of my head, fingers fisting in my hair. With each thrust, he groans roughly in a mixture of ecstasy and pain.

He fucks like he fights—for something past the point of brutality or victory. His goal isn't to simply win, it's to completely dominate. He possesses my body with the same mercilessness and unrelenting determination he had when swinging that axe.

Suddenly he's releasing my wrist and using his fingers tangled in my hair to lift me up and twist my head to look back at him. "Eyes on me. Watch me fill you up."

I plant my hands on the desk and watch his abs ripple and contract as he pounds into me. His grunts become pained and choppy. "*Fuh—Fuh—*" He snaps his hips one last time, burying himself deep inside me. "*Fuuckk.*"

His hands fall to my hips, and he rests his forehead between my shoulder blades. “Thank you,” he sighs, so quietly I almost don’t hear it.

He presses a soft brush of his lips to my skin, then trails a hand down my spine. “Stay.”

A few moments later, he returns with a warm washcloth and takes his time cleaning me, completely at ease and unhurried. When he’s done, he gently encourages me to turn around with a hand on my waist, then he undoes each button down the front of my dress until it falls off and pools at my feet.

Wordlessly, he reaches out and drags light fingers over the tattoos on my stomach with a divot between his brows, his eyes soft and deep.

I take his hand in mine and lead us to the bed, urging him down first then sliding in after him. My hand finds its way to his chest, palm over his heart. It’s deeply comforting to feel it beat under my hand. I watch his face, and his eyes fall to my lips.

I am expecting him to kiss me, but then I realize something. “You’ve never kissed me.” I remember how he stopped me from kissing him before he fought. “Why?”

He sighs and narrows his eyes at the dark corner of the room. “At first, it was because I fucked for release, not intimacy. There was no reason to kiss the girls I was with, and it was too...vulnerable.”

I place my hand on his cheek. “Do you think you can't be vulnerable with me?”

“I don’t mean that kind of vulnerability.” He covers my hand with his. “It’s just being so close to something, eyes closed, defenses down. I don’t feel safe. It’s too vulnerable—”

“To attack,” I say following his logic. “When do you feel safest?”

“Never. But being able to keep you safe makes it all worth it. The

paranoia, constantly being on edge, never letting my guard down. I might never feel safe because of all the ways I'm fucked in the head, but I can sleep at night knowing you are.”

1. Apartment—BOBI ANDONOV. Play until end of chapter

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Chapter 23

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Fallen Angels

Roan

*“**Y**ou’re the man of the house while we’re gone.” Dad pats me on the cheek with his crooked smile that makes me feel like I’ve already made him proud. “That means you look out for your mom and brother, yeah?” He flashes me a wink, then kisses Mom on the cheek. She squeaks when he pinches her butt, and she hits him on the arm. ¹*

“Get outta here.” She laughs, holding the door open for him. I look out the door and see Cash behind the wheel of his new car—he just got his permit. Apparently that means he’s a safe driver, but I think they’re wrong. Mom says he drives like a bat out of hell.

Finn reaches around from the back seat and honks the horn before Cash can shove him back. “Yeah, yeah, I’m comin’,” Dad hollers back.

Once they’re gone, Mom asks me if I want to play with my trains.

“I’m hungry. Can we go to the Den?” I like their meatloaf best, especially when Miss Martha puts it in a sandwich with ketchup.

“No, it’s Lochlan’s naptime, but I can make you something here.” She picks him up from his bouncy chair and he instantly starts pulling her hair,

giggling.

“Hey.” I smack his chubby little thigh. “Don’t pull Mom’s hair, that’s bad.” I gotta protect her. I’m the man of the house.

“Play with your trains while I put Lochy down, then I’ll make you a snack. Okay?” Mom never yells, not like Dad. But he yells to make us strong. Mom loves us, but she’s just a woman. We have to be strong for her. Her boys.

“Can I come with you?” He’s just a baby, but I still have to make sure Lochlan doesn’t try to hurt Mom again.

“Sure—” The doorbell rings. “Can you get that, Roan? I’ll just set Lochy in his crib and be right back.”

I nod, turning to face the door, but there’s a problem. The window is too high for me to see who is outside. Dad says we always have to make sure we check who it is before we open the door. But Mom asked me to, so I need to.

I jump as high as I can, but I still can’t see. Someone knocks on the door twice while I’m dragging a chair from the dinner table over. “Roan, the door,” Mom shouts from the back of the house, and I abandon the chair.

Something doesn’t feel right in my stomach. Like when you tell a lie. Mom wants me to open the door, but Dad says always check. I swallow down the bad feeling and unlock the door.

As soon as the metal of the lock clicks out of place, the door is slammed open, knocking me off my feet. Three big men step inside. My head hurts where I hit it on the shoe rack.

“Roan.” Mom’s voice is scared. “Come stand behind me, baby.” She’s come back from the bedroom and now stares at the big men. Her eyes are wide and watery, and I realize I’ve already failed her.

My feet feel like they are stuck in mud. I try to move, but my legs don’t work. Maybe this is a dream? Weird stuff happens in dreams sometimes. But

when one of the men laughs, I know it's not a dream. He's here. He's real.

"Hello, Mrs. Fox." The gun he raises is real.

And the shot and the bullet and the blood and...

I should have never opened that door.

My fist stops smashing into the wood, but it's not because I stopped punching. I feel resistance holding me back, and I yell, trying to deliver the punishment I deserve. My dream begins to fade, but that goddamn fucking door—

"Roan, Roan!" The concern in Reggie's voice continues to pull me. *She's concerned. What's wrong? Is she safe?*

I breathe against the resistance around me, and my ribs scream in pain. I can't remember who was talking, what they were saying. Suddenly the weight squeezing me is gone, and I feel myself already balling my hands into fists again, ready to continue, but—

There's a soft pressure against my lips. Something light and wet prodding at the seam. Something clamps down on either side of my face, but I'm still in a daze, my wobbly attention on this sensation against my mouth.

"You're safe." The pressure's gone, replaced with feathery air. "Come back to me, Roan. It's safe."

Reggie.

My fists uncurl, and find her hips in front of me. My eyes fight the pull to remain shut and open to her face. Her beauty hits me like a train in the center of my chest.

Her eyes, vibrant and rich, gaze into mine like she's searching for something. Her nose kisses the tip of mine. Her hands frame my face, cradling it like something too precious to lose. Her relieved breaths flutters against my lips.

Words I've never said before, foreign and new on my tongue, reach out to her. "Kiss me."

She hesitates, and my heart stops beating in that moment, only restarting when she stretches on her toes to crash her mouth into mine. Her lips are soft but firm in what they want, leading and guiding me. I pull her into me, my body lighting on fire as ours press together, still naked from the night before.

I don't close my eyes. I keep them open and watch as her long, dark lashes brush across her cheek. I try to kiss her like that, soft and featherlight, familiarizing myself with the shape of her lips and flick of her tongue. I part my lips, and she moans sweetly at the invitation. Her tongue teases mine, and she rolls her hips against me as she sucks my bottom lip, lightly dragging her teeth over it.

I'm lost in all the bright and full sensations that such small movements create. A tug on my lip, and I feel my stomach drop. The vibration of her moan into my mouth, and my whole body feels doused in gasoline.

Draping her arms over my shoulders, she murmurs, "Take me back to bed, Ro."

Ro. She only calls me that when we're like this, dazed and distracted, lost in each other's body. I think I like it.

I pick her up, and she wraps her legs around my waist, never letting up her kisses. I find it hard to walk and kiss, like my brain short-circuits with every brush of her lips. Somehow I manage and lay her onto the bed, climbing on top of her. She pulls me down, and I swallow down the taste of her, baptizing myself in the feel of her.

Her legs cling to me, and my cock slides over her pussy as she rolls with each kiss, like her mouth and body are all part of one wave and I'm about to be swept out to sea.

Adrift, surrounded by nothing but her.

She trails her hands down my back, and chills ripple down my arms. I bite into her lip, and she makes an encouraging sound, so I do it again. This time, her nails dig into my back. My tongue dives into her mouth, and I drag my hard length up and down her slit. “*Dame más.*”

Her hand slinks between us, and the air is snatched from my lungs when she strokes my cock. I react without thinking, grabbing her wrist and pinning it above her head.

“*Fuck, I don’t think—I can’t—*” I stumble over my words, my thoughts scrambled by the live wire coursing through me that sparks when she touches me. “I’m hanging on by a goddamn thread just kissing you.”

“Okay.” She runs her thumb over the hard crease between my brows. She holds my jaw with her other hand and brushes soft, chaste kisses on my lips while rolling her hips into me. My cock leaks as her arousal makes it glide, just like when I’m in her hot, wet mouth.

“And if you keep rubbing that pussy on me, Cortez...”

A taunting smile that makes her eyes crinkle in the corners flits across her lips, and just her smile has my balls drawing tight. “A little kissing got you all flustered, huh, Fox?”

I lower my head to rake my teeth up her neck, then suck her ear lobe between them. “A little kissing? No. But kissing you?” My body feels light, my head feels high, and my heart... “I feel like I could float away. I’m fucking untethered.”



I'm feeling particularly murderous toward whoever is calling Reggie's phone on repeat right now. She fell back asleep on my chest, and the thought of waking her up makes me irrationally mad. I've been running my hand over her silky hair and listening to her breath for the last hour, replaying every minute of our morning.

She sleeps like the dead, so even though her phone has been vibrating on the nightstand like a goddamn jack hammer, she hasn't stirred. I hate to be the one to do it. By the third time, I wake her up, gently rubbing her back and planting a kiss on her forehead.

She stirs, her nose scrunching as she hums softly.

"Someone's calling you nonstop."

She mumbles something intelligible and rolls away from me to grab her buzzing phone. She squints with one eye closed at the screen, and whatever she sees makes her sit up and answer right away. "Santi?"

She puts him on speaker. "You need to get to the Chariot as soon as you can."

Her hand tightens around the phone. "What happened? Is Papá okay?"

"He's fine. It's Ángel. He killed himself."



Reggie

An hour later, we're walking down the hallway to Papá's suite in the Chariot. Daniel is stationed outside the door, doing a great job of pretending like he can't hear the belligerent shouting coming from the other side.

“How is he?” I ask with a grimace.

“As you’d expect,” he says flatly, opening the door and stepping aside to let us in.

A lamp whizzes past our vision and shatters against the wall. Santiago is slouched in an armchair, his head propped on his hand as he watches our father rage, like a mother waiting out her child’s tantrum. My father gulps down the rest of the liquor in his glass, then hucks it at the wall to join the smashed remains of the lamp.

“Santi.” I grab his attention, and he looks up, not having heard us enter over the violent yelling. He walks over while our father drops onto the edge of the bed and pours another glass of tequila. *Jesus, this is bad.* “What the hell happened? Did he leave a note?” I ask frantically.

“Yeah.” Santi’s lips flatten into a hard line. “Apparently he’s been stealing from the organization for years and couldn’t live with the guilt anymore—or the fear of being caught. He’d killed those women when they found out what he was doing, and then you started looking into their deaths.”

“No, that’s crazy. He wouldn’t—” I face my father, asking in disbelief, “You don’t believe this do you, Papá?”

I look at Roan and can tell he’s not buying this either. It’s too neat and yet leaves too many unanswered questions.

“People betray those closest to them all the time. I made it too easy because I trusted him.” His knuckles whiten around the glass before he slams it back.

I reach for the bottle when he goes to pour more. “You need to calm down. Look at this logically,” I plead, waiting for him to see some sense beyond his rage.

His nostrils flare, and he rips the bottle from my hands. “Don’t you dare

tell me what to do, *cabrona*—”

Roan bristles. “Watch how you speak to her—”

“What are you still doing here, Fox? Your job is done. Threat’s over.” He stands, rolling his shoulders back. “That’s the only reason you’re here, right? My daughter is a *job* to you and nothing else, remember?”

I can quickly see this getting out of hand, so I urge Roan back toward the door. “Come on, I’ll walk you out.” His jaw tenses, and he storms out the door and to the elevator.

We step inside, shoulder to shoulder. The tension rolling off him is so thick it fills the entire elevator. As soon as the doors close, he spins on me and growls, “This is fucking bullshit and you know it.”

“I know, but what are we supposed to do? We knew this was going to end sooner or later.” There’s a crack in my voice, giving away that I’m not just thinking about the threat. I’m thinking about *us*. Is there even an *us* outside of this job?

“I’ll tell you what we’re not supposed to do.” He crowds me up against the hand rest, energy crackling around him. “We’re not supposed to believe some shitty frame job and delude ourselves into thinking you’re actually safe.”

When the elevator stops, we walk into the lobby and I grab his arm, silently begging him to not make this more difficult than it has to be. “Whoever the Warden really is wants us to believe it’s Ángel. So right now, the safest thing we can do is go along with it. Let the Warden think we’ve stopped looking, and he’ll stop coming after us.”

His lip curls. “Is that really what you want? You want to buy some charade and give up because it’s the easier option?”

“No, of course not—”

“Then what *do* you want, Cortez? Because I’m not a fucking mind reader.”

He lashes out like he can sense the impending hurt. When I think about what I need to say next, I'm fucking hurt too.

My throat tightens as if my body is trying to stop me. "We need to go back to our separate lives." I drag my hand up my forehead and chew on my lip. "At least for now."

His stony eyes turn black as coal. "Fine. As long as you admit this isn't about the Warden or Ángel, but you being too cowardly to face your father with me on your arm." His words are poison arrows slicing through my ribs and stinging with pure venom. It hurts the most because it's the truth.

Still, I swallow down the urge to tell him he's right and steel my spine. "I'm not a coward."

He jabs a finger at his chest. "I *know* that. That's why it's so disappointing." *Fuck*. The venom leaks into my bloodstream, burning like acid.

I watch him walk away, knowing he's right but too stubborn and scared to do anything about it.



Chapter 24

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Three Days

Roan

Three days. Three fucking days of following her around, crawling out of my skin with the need to know that she's safe when she isn't in my bed.

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Chapter 25

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Keep Me

Reggie

I knew it was a mistake as soon as I watched him walk out of the Chariot three days ago. I knew that any rules about what we can be are arbitrary and based on fear. I've never been one to believe something just because someone says it's true, so why start now?

I've had enough of playing by my father's rules and am ready to write my own.

I sling my purse over my shoulder, then throw open my front door to leave.

I stutter to a stop with a scream when I nearly collide with a person standing on the other side of my door. My heart jumps.¹

"Jesus Christ, Roan. You scared the shit out of me. What are you even doing here?" I don't mean to sound accusatory, but my blood is still pumping from being spooked.

He holds up his hands in concession. "Just hear what I have to say, and if you don't like it, I'll leave."

I cross my arms, feeling a little bare and exposed for some reason. "Okay."

"You drive me fucking insane, Cortez—"

“Gee, thanks—”

“But, I’ve become addicted to your unique brand of madness. Three fucking days of—” He groans a sigh like he’s frustratedly searching for his next words. “Do you remember when you called me a dog—”

“Roan, I didn’t mean—”

“But it’s true. I feel like a stray just hoping and praying you’ll decide to keep me.”

His words wrench my heart strings. I step aside and hold the door open. “Will you come in?”

He runs his hands over his hair and can barely look at me when he says, “I gave up on hope a long time ago. It never did me much good. And this—” He flattens his hand over his heart, his eyes rising to mine full of swirling emotion. “This hope is eating me alive, Cortez. So please,”—he drags his hand over his mouth, nervous in a way I’ve never seen before—“*please* don’t invite me in unless you’re planning on keeping me.”

“I was just leaving—”

“Oh.” He shuts down as he looks me over, as if just realizing I’m in heels and carrying my purse. I can feel him drifting, locking down all the openness he just poured out to me. “I’ll let you get on with your night.” His jaw clenches as his eyes rove my bare legs to mid-thigh, where my dress hits. He turns away, but I grab him by the sleeve.

“To see you, *tonto*.”

His eyes jump to mine. “Me?”

I laugh lightly and shake my head. “These three days weren’t any easier for me. I missed you and wanted to see you, *be* with you.”

He’s motionless. Not breathing or blinking, not a muscle twitching. I’m about to ask him if he’s good when his throat bobs on a deep swallow. “Fuck,

come here.”

He cups my face, pulling me to him as his mouth crashes into mine. There’s urgency and yearning and something else I can’t quite describe in his kiss. *Maybe it’s our unique brand of madness.*

His body curves over mine as he hungrily kisses me, walking me back into my apartment. Without breaking our rhythm, he slams the door shut and scoops me up. Heat crawls up my neck and blooms in my chest when I feel his erection against me where my legs are wrapped tightly around his waist.

He carries me to the kitchen island and doesn’t waste a second before reaching up my dress to pull down my panties. “I need to be inside you,” he says, out of breath and hurried. As soon as my panties are gone, he returns to feverishly kissing me while working on his belt. “I need you. *Fuck, I need you,*” he repeats, like a man in worship.

I am completely swept up in his rush, letting him tug me to the edge of the island.

He drags two fingers over my pussy and groans, biting down my neck. “Always so wet and ready for me.” He wipes his fingers off on his cock, then hooks both his arms under my knees and holds me open for him.

There’s a manic and frantic energy coursing through him, and it only increases when he thrusts into me. It’s like he’s fighting for something inside of me, trying to fuck it out of me or into me. I can’t tell, but I don’t care. I feel like the epicenter of an earthquake only he can feel.

I rake my nails through his short hair, taking everything he’s giving with brutal intensity. His tongue lashes with mine, and his fingers dig into my thighs. There’s nothing gentle or slow, and I don’t want it any other way.

“I’m yours now, you understand?” he says between grunts and deep thrusts.

“Yes, yes,” I cry as he hits a spot inside me that makes light burst behind my eyelids and my clit throb from the inside out.

“Say it,” he bites out, jaw tight and sweat sliding down his temple.

“You’re mine,” I gasp. “Mine.”

“Fuck, I don’t want to be anything else,” he groans, like I’ve given him a cherished gift. His eyes, screwed tightly closed, open and meet mine with a deep sense of pleading. “Will you come for me, little menace?”

“Yes.” I nod desperately. “Hold my legs wider and lean forward a little.”

He makes the adjustments, and the next time he pounds into me, his pelvis slams against my clit and I keen, “Oh, god—that’s it, Ro. *Just. Like. That.*” I moan between the sharp punches of his hips, the friction grinding where I need it most.

I feel my muscles begin to throb and contract. Roan’s grip on my legs gets firmer as they fight to close, tension making every inch of my skin hum. My breaths become sharp and hitched as my orgasm comes closer and closer, my body barely able to contain all the tortuous pressure.

My pussy begins to pulse, and the tendons in Roan’s neck flex as he groans. “Christ, strangling my cock like such a good little whore.” The filthiness of his words and one more thrust against my clit send me tumbling over the edge, the tension snapping and uncoiling from my core outwards with hot bursts of light.

“So fucking beautiful.” He peers down at me with a crease between his brows and adoration in his eyes. “I could watch you come all day.”

My head lulls back, blissed out and exhausted. He wraps my legs around his waist, then tilts my head back up as his fingers twine into my hair. “Tell me, little menace, was calling you a good little whore what did it? Is treating you like a filthy little slut what makes you come that hard on my cock?”

“Mmm.” I try to nuzzle into his neck, but he tugs me back by his hand in my hair. There’s a crackling heat and something fierce like gratitude in his eyes, demanding my answer. “Yes.”

Desire and appreciation flashes across his face with a smirk. “You’re not done.” He steps back, letting my legs fall, and flicks his chin at the kitchen floor. “Clean me up.”

I have no problem dropping to my knees for him, but something else crosses my mind. “You first, *mentiroso*.”

He licks his lips as a dark chuckle rumbles from him. He swoops down onto his knees and palms my legs apart. His dark and hooded eyes look up at me as he drags a wide and lascivious path up my pussy with this tongue. My body twitches and arches at the contact, especially when he plunges his tongue into my cunt and swirls it inside my entrance. He laps up my cum like a thirsty dog, and it’s the hottest thing I’ve ever seen. His stony and determined gaze never leaves mine.

I trail my fingers over the curve of his ear. “That’s a good boy.” I squirm as he licks my slit and sucks my swollen clit into his mouth, gently raking his teeth over the sensitive bud. “*Oh, fuuck.*”

He stands with an arrogant tilt of his lips, then pinches my chin, kissing me savagely and spreading the taste of my release into my mouth.

I swallow down the salty, sinful flavor, then swipe my tongue across my lips for anything I missed. His dick jumps as he’s watching me. “Take off your shirt and sit on the couch,” I order, sliding off the butcher block.

He walks backward, tugging his t-shirt over his head and tossing it aside. Then he sits naked on my couch, arms spread out along the back and his cock hard, jutting and beautiful. His inked abs contract with every heavy breath as

I slowly walk toward him, shedding my jacket, my dress—strap by strap. I lose my bra, but leave on my heels.

His hands dig into the back of the couch, and his jaw tightens as he watches me with unblinking eyes. He slumps down and spreads his knees wide, and I watch him swallow deeply as his eyes bounce between me and the spot between his legs.

I settle on my knees in front of him and glide my palms up his thighs before wrapping his length in my hand. A gravelly rumble comes from his chest as I flick my tongue out to wipe at the broad head. I tease him with a few more testing licks, and he growls, fisting my hair.

“Clean up the mess you made, or I’ll have you choking on my cock.” He’s so close to the edge, painfully close.

I cup his balls and lower my mouth down his shaft at the same time, and he releases an animalistic sound of pleasure. “Show me what a good girl you can be, little menace.”

It doesn’t take long until his thighs are flexing and his grip in my hair becomes tight and stinging. “*Oh, fuck,*” he snarls. “I’m gonna paint the back of your throat.” A few more shallow bobs down his length, and he’s coming hot on my tongue and down my throat. His dick pulses in my mouth, and I revel in making this beast of a man wither before me.

I pull off him, careful not to spill any of his seed. His chest heaves with deep breaths as I stand and straddle him. I clutch his face and lean over him. He’s so handsome like this, eyes hazy and sated, cheeks flushed and ruddy.

I force his head back and thumb his chin until his lips part. From my upright position, I spit his cum from my mouth to his. The last stringing bit falls from my lips, and I lean down to kiss him as he exhales harshly through this nose, his hands splaying on my hips. A dark, husky sound reverberates

from his throat as he swallows. I let my lips linger, licking the taste of him and me from his lips. *Cleaning him up just like he asked*, I think with a smirk.

“Goddamn.” He shakes his head in disbelief as I sit back on his lap. He looks at me drunkenly. “What am I gonna do with you?”

“Order in Thai?” I say with a smile. He laughs, hugging me tight to his chest. I soak in his embrace and realize that the future I thought was impossible might have already begun.

1. Stay—Khalid

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Chapter 26

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Regular Life

Roan

“Why do you look so lost?” Reggie laughs as I push the shopping cart toward an aisle, any aisle. This place is a goddamn maze. ¹

“Because I am. They only have five things listed on the aisle signs, but there’s hundreds of things in each aisle. What idiot decided that?” I grumble as we pass a shelf of canned vegetables, which is *four* aisles over from the rest of the vegetables. Makes no damn sense.

“Roan...” She eyes me cautiously. “When was the last time you went grocery shopping?”

“A few days ago,” I huff. “I give a list to whatever foot soldier has been annoying me most that week.”

Her lips press tight together, clearly holding back a laugh, the smile clear in her eyes. “No, I mean when was the last time *you* went? Like actually stepped foot in a grocery store.”

“It’s been awhile,” I admit. “But I’m pretty sure it shouldn’t be this hard.” I scowl at the Rice-a-Roni.

“Okay, tough guy.” She laughs and steps between me and the cart to stand on the back, hands wrapping around the bar. “I’ll lead, you push.”

“That I can do.” I place my hands over hers on the handle. “Where to, boss?”

She points to the end of the aisle, and I give the cart a big push before releasing it. The sweetest squeal spills from her as she flies down the aisle with the cart. Ever since telling her how my mother died, the guilt and the reason my nightmares result in bloody knuckles, there’s been a new playfulness sparked in me. As if by shedding that weight, no longer keeping my deepest shame hidden, I’m getting to experience the whimsies of a childhood I never got to have.

I race to catch up to her before she takes out a row of boxes containing every shape of pasta you can imagine. I grab on to the handle, and her body jolts back. A small little punch of air comes from her as she hits my chest, and I wrap one of my arms around her waist and hold her against me.

My nose grazes her neck, and I’d bet her cheeks are burning when I teasingly trace my lips over the skin. “Roan...” she whispers in both a warning and a plea.

I can’t help but grab her by the chin, twisting her head to steal a desperate kiss right here in the middle of the aisle. She sighs hungrily, but pushes me away with a chastising look.

Maybe grocery shopping isn’t that bad after all.



Reggie swipes most of the pineapple she just chopped into a Tupperware and hands it to me. “Can you put this in the fridge and grab me the jalapeños?”

I take the plastic container, but give her a warning look. “As long as you keep them away from my dick.”

“Deal.” She smirks, and I swap the pineapple for a jar of pickled dick-killers, setting it on the island where she’s topping half of the pizza with the rest of the pineapple.

“Does pineapple belong on pizza, the most divisive debate in history,” I joke as I give the sausage and mushrooms with garlic on the stove a quick toss.

She starts to layer on the jalapeños. “With the right combination of toppings, it’s not bad. But I don’t make it my whole personality.”

The utter mundaneness of this conversation, *of this whole day*, strikes me like a train to the chest. It nearly knocks me off my feet with the realization that this—waking up tangled in each other, grocery shopping together, cooking dinner side by side—is my new reality.

We don’t speak while we work around each other while finishing up the pizza. I spread out my sausage mixture and add black olives, and she sprinkles some fresh cilantro over the top of her pineapple and ham. I watch her do the simplest things in awe that she is mine.

She brushes a lock of hair out of her face with the back of her hand when she stands back up after putting the pizza in the oven. I want to freeze this moment, capture it like a polaroid picture—memories I never want to forget.

“You’re giving me that look again.” She lifts a brow.

I slide my hands into my pockets. “What look?”

“Like you want to take me to bed and never leave.” She steps up to me, tilting her head back and letting me see the heat swirling in her eyes.

I place my hands on her hips and tug her to me, swaying slightly to the music playing in the background. She wraps her arms around my neck and moves with me. “I always want to take you to bed and never leave.”

“The pizza would burn...” she says with a teasing smile, like she doesn’t really care if the whole building burns to the ground as long as she gets what we both want.

I glide my hands up her shirt, her soft skin like an electric shock to my system. She rocks into me, her body rolling against my cock, stiff and hard in my pants. “You’re such a naughty little thing,” I say under my breath before bending down and throwing her over my shoulder.

She screams and giggles, out of breath by the time I toss her onto the couch. Her eyes are wide but daring as she gazes up at me from her back. “This isn’t the bed.”

“You know I like a challenge.” I climb onto the couch between her legs and pull off her pajama shorts. I tug one of the throw pillows under her hips, and she bites her lip as I slink lower, my lips grazing down her stomach and above her bare pussy. “Let’s see how many times I can make you come before we burn the pizza.”



Reggie

The next morning, I wake up to find the spot next to me in bed is empty and cold. I’m not surprised; Roan’s probably been up for hours. I grab an oversized June Harbor School of Medicine sweatshirt from my closet and tug

it over my hair, which is an absolute bird's nest after a night of fucking. My legs are sore in a way that makes me flush with memories of last night.

I open my bedroom door to the smell of bacon and recall the last time I strolled out of this room to the same. I feel much the same as I did then: giddy, hesitantly optimistic, and a little scared. Except this time when I turn the corner into the kitchen, Roan has made *two* plates.

“Morning,” he says, carrying them to the table, and I change my mind. I’m certain waking up to a shirtless Roan in my kitchen serving me a mouthwatering plate of bacon and eggs is the hottest thing I’ve ever seen.

I sit, tugging my knees under the big sweatshirt and biting a piece of bacon. He pauses before sitting, watching me with a smug satisfaction.

“¿Qué?”

“I like feeding you.” He shrugs with a soft smile and pulls out his chair to sit. It’s such a pure and innocent confession that it makes my stomach swoop, and I look down at my plate feeling my cheeks flush.

“Is the institute reopening?” he asks.

“Yeah, on Monday.” It feels strange that in two days, life will restart like nothing’s changed. Yet everything has.

He pushes a forkful of eggs onto a piece of toast. “What are you doing today?”

“Skydiving,” I say plainly. He drops his fork with a clatter, and his eggs fall off the bread. I look at him with mock annoyance. “That was a perfectly good bite.”

He presses his lips together and cracks his knuckles. “We just got past the whole somebody trying to kill you thing. You’re not gonna start jumping out of planes.”

“Sounds like it’s time for the next adventure.” I wiggle my eyebrows.

“The adventures will have to wait. I’m meeting with my Mexican mercenary contact today.”

My heart leaps, hanging in midair and frozen mid-beat. “Does he have information on Sofia? Let me come, please.”

“I have to meet him alone, but meet me for dinner tonight at the Den and I’ll tell you everything, yeah?”

“Okay.” I chew on my inner cheek.

He slides a bite off his fork and points it at me. “And no jumping out of planes until then.”

I laugh lightly. “I’ll try.”²



The Den is busy tonight, packed with tables with big, boisterous parties. It’s full of chatter and good spirits, but I am growing colder by the second. I check the time again, a ball in the pit of my stomach. He’s almost an hour late with no word.

I down the rest of the pint I’ve been sipping on for the last thirty minutes and stand up from the booth I’ve been waiting in. I’ve been anxious all day, my old wounds coming to the surface while waiting for news on Sofia.

I know Lochlan is here—he sat with me for a bit while I waited—so I head to the back where I remember the office is. I knock on the open door and lean in. He kicks his legs down from where he’s lying on the couch and tucks his phone away.

“Reg, hey.” He smiles warmly, and it only makes this sick feeling in my gut twist more. He reminds me of a sunny version of Roan. “What’s up?”

“Something’s happened to Roan, and I can’t reach him.”

“Wait, what do you mean—I’ll call Cash.” He must see something on my face that makes him believe me instantly, and I accept it with relief. Because I know, *I know*, Roan wouldn’t leave me hanging while waiting on news about Sofia. He understands, maybe better than anyone, what this meant to me.

“Yeah, okay. We’ll come right up.” Lochlan wraps up his phone conversation that I was barely able to pay attention to. He places a hand on my shoulder. “Come with me.”

I follow him out of the pub and into the foyer of an apartment building right next door. We take the elevator to the top floor, and he greets the two men guarding the door, then lets himself in with a code on a keypad next to the door.

We step inside what I assume is Cash’s apartment. Harlow waves to me from the couch. “I’d get up if I could,” she says wistfully, her feet propped up on an ottoman. Her belly seems like it’s twice the size it was last time.

She hollers for Cash, and Lochlan starts perusing the kitchen counter that’s covered in at least twenty jars of pickles. I look at them with a slanted head, and Harlow laughs behind me. “I was craving pickles but didn’t specify a brand, so Cash bought them all.”

I crack a smile. “For some reason, that doesn’t surprise me at all.”

“Please take some with you before the baby’s amniotic fluid turns to pickle juice,” she says, and I notice the bowl of pickles she already has on the side table next to her.

“Reggie.” Cash comes out of the hallway and swipes out an arm for me to come sit at the counter. He pulls out two stools, and Lochlan leans over on

the other side of the island. “I saw Roan’s car down the block when I was coming home. I assume you didn’t drive it here because he would never—”

“Let anyone else drive his car,” I finish, and he nods.

“I pulled the footage from our street cameras, and it’s not good.” My stomach drops. “Three dudes tased him and threw him in a van.” Despite the casual tone of his voice, his words still carry the weight of their meaning. *Abducted*. My lungs struggle to pull in enough air.

Cash continues, “I tracked his location—”

“Did he turn his phone back on?” I jump eagerly, digging my phone out of my purse to check if any calls or messages have come through.

“Not exactly...” He eyes Lochlan while he says, “We all have implanted GPS trackers.”

“What do you mean ‘we all’?” Lochlan gapes.

“Dad had them put in when Finn and I got our wisdom teeth out, so I did the same for you and Roan.”

“Jesus fuck, Cash! You didn’t think to tell us that?”

Cash shrugs indifferently. “It didn’t come up. And lower your fucking voice. It’s not good for the baby.”

Lochlan pushes off the counter and paces, running his fingers through his long, blond hair.

“Ignore him.” Cash waves off his brother and turns to me, holding out his phone. There’s a green blinking dot surrounded by a little beige and a lot of blue. “Do you know why Roan would be on an island way out in the bay?”

2. Stop playing She Burns—Foy Vance

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Chapter 27

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Chameleon

Roan

8 *hours earlier*

I spot Javi immediately, but to anyone else he'd be unremarkable, blending into the bustle of a Saturday in the park. He wears a generic June Harbor Pirate's baseball cap over his dark curls and a hoodie to a university I know for a fact he didn't attend. He's neither incredibly handsome nor particularly hideous. He looks average in every sense of the word. Athletic and medium build, not noticeably tall or intimidatingly buff. His ability to be practically unnoticeable without hiding is part of why he's the deadliest assassin in the Americas.

I approach where he's sitting on a park bench reading a book that I recognize from its sheer popularity. I swerve around a child learning how to ride a bike and pause to let a father with a stroller jog past me.

I sit down next to him, and he sets his book down as I shake his hand. "Hey, man, appreciate you meeting me."

"Of course. Sorry it took me a while to get up here. I was on a job," he explains.

“So what have you got for me?”

“I recognized the name as soon as you gave it to me.” I perk up at this and let him continue. “The bomb that killed Sofia Álvarez was truly a wrong place, wrong time situation. The car that exploded was meant for someone completely unrelated to her or the Cortez cartel, but it detonated early.”

I lean back, frustrated. That’s what everyone already believed happened. “If it was an accident, why is she even on your radar? Was it your bomb?”

He fakes offense. “You wound me, Fox. You know I’d never be that sloppy. I recognized the name because you’re not the first person to come asking about her.”

“Who else?”

“Her brother. He was convinced it wasn't an accident and was trying to prove it.” *Daniel.*

My pulse quickens as I soak in this new information. “When was this?”

He uncrosses and recrosses his legs, nose scrunched like he’s racking his mind. “About eight years ago. Apparently she was pregnant with *El Jefe*’s child—”

“*Rafael Cortez?*” My head swivels in surprise, and Javi takes out a granola bar from his pocket and peels back the wrapper with a shake of his head.

“I know, right? Messy shit, man.” He takes a bite, and I am again shocked by how absurdly unsuspecting this man is as he snacks like a kindergartner. “Bro was convinced Cortez was behind it, and made it look like an accident to take out his mistress and his bastard.”

My mind starts racing with realizations, and I stand abruptly. “Thanks, I owe you one.” I pat Javi on the shoulder and walk off, mind still reeling.



I wait across from the Chariot, my eye on the semicircular path used for pickups and dropoffs, and go over all my thoughts again. Like sorting through flash cards, I cross off what I know and how it connects.

Daniel was convinced Cortez killed his sister to hide their affair, and, like Javi, he could hide in plain sight. Nobody gives the driver a second glance. He has ultimate access without ever being invited. He's in the background of every conversation and meeting.

Reggie said all the body donations correlated with dates her father was in town, which means Daniel was too. Anything that points to her father or Ángel could also point to him. Daniel was staying at the Chariot when Goyle came for his meeting with the Warden. Daniel knew where Reggie lived and had easily gotten keys to her apartment.

I haven't quite figured out what he was doing hunting women—maybe for money, power, or revenge? Regardless of the reason, it makes more sense than a low-level cartel member discovering the second-in-command was embezzling before anyone else had.

A black town car drives out of the hotel garage and pulls up out front. Daniel's in the driver seat. I cross the street, checking my gun's magazine and clicking off the safety as I take sure and quick strides toward the car.

I crouch as I scurry behind the town car and yank open the passenger door. Gun raised, I slide in and warn, "Don't do anything stupid, Daniel."

His eyes widen in surprise, but his breathing remains steady as he places both hands on the steering wheel. "It's Roan, right?" he asks with a fake

warmness.

I snort at his attempt to play dumb. “Right. And do you prefer Daniel or the Warden?”

His entire demeanor changes in the blink of an eye. His spine straightens and his lip curls, gaze hardened and narrowed. “Took you long enough to figure that one out, huh? Too distracted getting your fill of Cortez pussy,” he scoffs.

I cock my gun and press it under his chin. “Watch your fucking mouth, or I’ll cut off your tongue and make you choke on it.”

He moves his jaw as little as possible when he speaks, clearly pissed with the muzzle digging into his skin. “What do you want, Fox?”

“What do I want?” I huff a laugh and move the barrel to press against his temple. “I want to put a bullet in your brain.”

“Then do it,” he snarls.

“I would if it wouldn’t hurt Cortez. But she loved your sister and you—”

“Cortez is a back-stabbing bitch!”

My vision blurs with red. I push the gun so hard into his temple that the side of his head hits the window. “*Doctor Cortez.*”

I suck in a heavy breath and lighten the pressure so he can lift his head back up to center. “You have until tomorrow morning to disappear. I want Daniel Álvarez wiped off the face of this planet. If I ever hear whispers of the Warden mentioned again, I will hunt you down, skin you myself, and mount your head on my wall.”

His lips press into a tight line. “And if I don’t?”

“You have five seconds to agree or I pull the trigger. Five. Four. Three—”

“Fine,” he grunts.

Not good enough. “Two—”

“Okay, okay.” He claps his hands against the steering wheel. “You have my word.”

“Atta boy.” I give his cheek a patronizing tap with my gun and climb out, slapping the hood as I walk away.



I have some things I want to run by Cash, as well as fill him in on the developments with Daniel. I park down the block from the Den since there's no closer street parking. I could park in our private underground garage, but I don't like the idea of one exit, one entrance.

A black van skirts around the corner and my hackles instantly raise, but not quick enough to spot the side door being pulled open and three masked men jumping out. The shock of a taser strikes through me with crippling pain and crumbling muscles. The last thing I remember before my head slams into the concrete is nearly biting my damn tongue off and the taste of blood filling my mouth.



Chapter 28

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The Warden

Roan

Cold water splashes on top of me, and I'm jolted awake. My head throbs, an intense pounding at the base of my neck, and I try to blink the water out of my eyes while sputtering. I roll into a seated position, even with my hands tied behind my back, as I try to place my surroundings.

I'm in an enclosed space made of metal, judging by the smell of rust. My vision is blurred by the throbbing pain, but I think I'm in a shipping container.

"So, how'd you figure it out?" a bored, cold, and faceless voice asks from the darkness. I spin toward the sound, and the flick of a lighter illuminates Daniel's face. He keeps the zippo lit after lighting a cigarette, casting the container with foreboding, flickering shadows.

I flex my hands, trying to determine what they're bound with. *Zip ties, fuck.* "You were sloppy killing Ángel."

"He got what he deserved. My only regret is that I didn't get to make it hurt." He takes a heavy, angry drag. I can sense he's riled up and on edge. For him to lead this elaborate double life for so long, he must be incredibly

meticulous and methodical. A wrench in his plans like me must be shaking him.

I swivel my head in a circle. “You had ten years to make it hurt. Why all this?”

He pauses, as if debating the answer, then sniffs apathetically. “I guess I can tell you. You’ll be dead soon anyway.” As if to prove what little worth I have to him, he steps closer to flick his ash onto me. “You said ten years, so you must know about Sofia.”

“That she was killed in an accident—”

“No!” he yells and squats down to my level to snarl in my face. “No, she was murdered. By Rafael Cortez.” He stands and paces the short width of the container. “He was fucking her, despite the fact that he’d known her since she was a child and was our *dead* parents’ best friend. And when he got her pregnant, he thought the best way to get rid of his ‘*secreto vergonzoso*’ was to blow her to pieces.”

I don’t waste my breath telling him he’s wrong. He heard the same thing I did from Javi. He’s too far gone with his commitment to revenge. “Why not just kill him?”

He scoffs. “I don’t want to kill him. I want to ruin him. Dismantle his organization and destroy his legacy. And to do that, I needed money and allies. You wouldn’t believe how much money people will pay to live out their most sadistic and depraved fantasies.” *Oh, I believe it.* I’ve seen the darkest parts of humanity, and the only thing that surprised me was how close to the surface it was.

“Speaking of which.” He tosses the cigarette butt inches from me, grinding it with his boot toe, and says with glib excitement, “The show’s about to begin.”

I try to keep him talking while I look for a way out. “There are a lot easier ways to make allies.”

“Allies isn’t exactly the right word.” I can hear a sick pleasure in his voice. I bet I’m the first person he’s ever been able to voice his evil plans to. “It will take more than a good time to convince these men to choose my side over Rafael when the time comes. But footage and documentation of them torturing, raping, and killing?” He chuckles sinisterly. “That will be quite convincing.”

“What you’re doing to these women is a thousand times worse than what happened to Sofia.” I don’t disguise the disgust in my voice. He’s a heartless monster.

I sense him bristle, but he puts on a false bravado. “Sacrifices have to be made.”

“What about your own women? What’s your excuse for killing members of your own cartel?” I know the bastard has no sense of loyalty to Cortez, but those women weren’t part of what happened to Sofia.

“Some of them were Rafael’s whores and were going to meet the same fate as Sofia. I just made it sooner rather than later. The others? Well, I needed fresh meat for the hunt. Like I said, sacrifices.” He waves his hand like he’s bored.

He snaps the zippo closed and makes his first mistake that I’ve been waiting for: Turning his back to me. I launch to my feet and body-slam into him. I fall on top of him and grapple on the dirty floor, going mostly by feel in the dark, until I get his head in a leg lock. His legs sprawl and kick repeatedly on the siding. I realize he’s alerting guards outside with the commotion, and I probably don’t have much time.

Despite my ribs still feeling like hot fire poker in my sides, I put all my

strength into twisting in an attempt to break his neck. He wriggles and lashes, and I try to use his momentum against him to help further rotate in opposite directions. There's a moment of give when his body relaxes, and I think I'm almost there, but then a terrible, splitting pain tears down my calf.

My sight has adjusted some, and I can barely make out the cause of the pain—a knife torn down my calf. My eyes lock on the sharp metal, and I quickly release Daniel and contort my body in an attempt to grab the knife with my bound hands. He scurries to his feet at the same time the wide doors swing open, sending in blinding sunlight.

I count at least four men surging into the container. I may not be able to walk out of here, but if I can get the blade and my hands untied, I might have a chance of taking at least one of them out with me.

Three of them descend on me, shoving me onto my front and pinning me to the floor. I scream in agony as the blade is pushed deeper into my muscle and twisted viciously before being ripped out. Two men yank me to my feet and hot, sticky blood drips down my ankle.

I'm dragged out, the men holding my arms taking no great care to let me adapt to hopping on one foot. Each time my wounded leg drags against the ground, searing pain shoots all the way up the limb. It's only when we're outside that I realize the guards aren't wearing black hoods pulled low down their faces. Instead, their faces are completely obscured by what look like Guy Fawkes masks in solid black.

"Cute costume," I taunt. The one holding my left arm lets go, but before I can react, his elbow slams into my nose. The hit makes my eyes water and my already aching head pound. I lick my upper lip, wiping coppery blood with my tongue.

I remain quiet the rest of the way to wherever they are leading me, letting

them think they've tamed me while I observe as much as I can. The ground is an unexpected mix of sand and dirt covered with thin, wiry shrubbery and tall, untrimmed pine trees. We pass a couple more shipping containers, red and weathered, and when there's a part in the trees, I see that we are surrounded by water.

The fact that we're on an island doesn't bode well for me, but I'm comforted by the isolation. Reggie won't be able to find me here, and I want her as far away from this place as possible.

The trees clear to an open sandy circle, wooden stands wrapping around half of it like an amphitheater. More people in black masks fill them, and my stomach twists as I notice a row of women.¹

They're lined up along one side of the pit, dressed in dirty white dresses that look like night gowns. Their feet are shackled and attached to a ball and chain. They all look to be in various stages of abuse and neglect. A few are only dirty, but still healthy looking with full cheeks and few bruises. Others look like they've been starved in one of those shipping containers without seeing the sun for weeks. Their skin is gaunt and gray, their hair matted or thinning. All of them have cuts and bruises on their limbs and faces.

Seeing them makes me seethe, and harsh breaths skate in and out of my nose. The sense of being useless to help them cripples my lungs. I am led across the pit to two wood piles sticking out of the earth. Rusty chains hang off the sides of them. The iron wristlets attached to the chains are clasped around my wrists, and my zip ties are cut so that my arms are stretched out between the two poles.

A man steps into the center of the circle wearing the same mask as everyone else, but in a matte silver. I recognize him as Daniel by his voice

and clothes. “Welcome to the post-hunt festivities. Let us celebrate our bounties.”

The men in the stands stomp their feet in hollow beat as Daniel welcomes one of them down by the code name Hunter 421. Cowards, hiding behind masks and anonymity. The only thing worse than reveling in depravity is not being man enough to own up to it. Only weak men need to harm and hurt women, and only the weakest need to do it behind a mask.

Two men push one of the women forward. I deduce the men in simple black clothes are the guards, and then men with the same masks but dressed in various styles are the hunters. One of the guards kneels down to unlock one of her ankles, but keeps the one attached to the ball in place. He stands and kicks the ball into the center of the circle, and the woman stumbles to catch up with it.

She stands dejected and broken, chin lowered and eyes barely open, as the hunter stalks back and forth in front of her. He takes a switchblade from his coat pocket, and she flinches when he flicks it open. The men in the stands have stopped their stomping, and it’s quiet enough that I can hear her soft crying and the sound of crashing waves in the distance.

My chest burns with the need to do something other than stand here, useless and lame. I remember something Reggie said after we met with the priestess.

There wasn’t a single gunshot wound. If they’re hunting for sport or entertainment, it would explain choosing a weapon with more personal involvement like a bow and arrow or strangulation.

I mentally note that I haven’t seen guns on any of the guards either, and Daniel stabbed me rather than shot me...

“Takes a big man to fight a woman in shackles,” I jeer, and the stands

sound behind me with heckling laughs.

The hunter's head whips around toward his peers that are now laughing at him and barks at the guard to uncuff her other ankle. Life returns to her eyes, and they flit around like she's looking for an escape route. Her gaze lands on mine, and I try to give her an encouraging, but subtle, nod.

My heart pounds in anticipation as the guard returns to his position on the edge of the circle. She looks like a deer in headlights as she notes the distance between herself and the nearest guard. *Come on, come on, you can do it.* My chest rustles with agitation, wanting to shout at her to run.

The hunter lunges for her. She jumps out of the way, and he trips, falling to the sand.

"Run!" The order is ripped from me without conscious decision, but it spurs her into action and she sprints away. Excitement floods my bloodstream watching her bare feet fly and her tattered dress whip behind her.

It happens so fast. I don't even see who fired but a gunshot rings out, a flock of birds taking off from the surrounding trees in a flurry of wings.

"No!" My yell is guttural, my arms thrashing in my chains.

The bullet hits her between the shoulder blades, red exploding against the white fabric. Her knees give out first, and she topples face down.

"No, no. Goddamn it," I cry out and hang my head. Her body lies still and sprawled on the forest floor, and it's all my fucking fault.

Someone behind me barks at me to shut up, and then kicks my good leg out from under me. All my weight comes crashing down on my torn-up leg.

The pain is excruciating, but I welcome it. I deserve it.

I did worse than fail her.

I killed her.



It feels like time has stopped moving, but I know the hours are passing by the sun's path overhead and the woman's lips turning purple. After they shot her, they dragged her lifeless body through the pit, her heels leaving tracks, and propped her up against one of the poles chaining me. At one point, her body tipped over and she fell across the ground in front of me. They left her there for a while, her hollow eyes staring up at me like bridges into the underworld.

One by one, the women are pushed into the center as another hunter is called from the stands to enjoy the *spoils* of his hunt. There's a time in the beginning when I'm able to numb my emotions, detach my thoughts, and keep what I witness out of arm's reach of my soul.

I watch women brutalized in every imaginable way. For sport. For the sick pleasure of men. Unable to do anything but stand strung up on chains and watch. There comes a point when my defenses crack as the shield I'd built around myself splinters, and every horrid deed comes rushing in, strangling my heart and tearing at my humanity.

Every time I find myself wanting to close my eyes, to block it out for just a second, I can't seem to do it. A woman's scream is earsplitting as a hunter lowers a red-hot brand onto her skin. I want to look away. I don't want the imagery to go along so vividly with the smell of burning flesh. But I can't.

Not watching, not bearing witness to their torment when I'm so helpless to offer them reprieve, feels like a betrayal. They are suffering the physical pain. I should at the very least be there to share the mental pain.

A guard comes running over and says something to Daniel. His eyes, dark and cruel behind the mask, turn on me, and my stomach sinks. He walks over to me with confident strides, and my skin bristles the closer he gets.

I can hear the smirk in his voice as he tilts my head up. “You’re going to want to pay extra attention to this. Just got word that Reggie is coming.” I wrench my head from his grasp and growl. “You’ll want to save that fight for when she gets here.” He laughs, a chilling and heartless sound.

“Bring her closer,” he commands the hunter, who drags the woman by the hair to a few feet away from me. Daniel grabs my head again like a vice between his hands and forces my gaze to lock with hers. “Look in her eyes, Fox. Look her in the eyes knowing you can’t do anything to save her, and you won’t be able to save Reggie either.”

The woman’s eyes are the same deep brown as Reggie’s, and I feel my chest compressing as the hunter holds a blade to her throat. Her eyes swim with tears and resolution. She is ready to die. She doesn’t beg for mercy or scream for help. She simply stares into my bleeding soul and sees nothing that can save her.

I’ll never be able to forget how her eyes spring wide open in pain as the knife first breaks her skin. I’ll never be able to forgive myself for standing by, unable to help, as a wicked path is carved across her throat. There’s a split second where I blink as the woman falls over, and she transforms into Reggie—golden skin, raven hair, beautiful fucking heart. And I finally break.

I collapse onto my knees with an agonizing howl, my shoulders pulling in pain as the chains barely allow enough slack. My ribs scream, and my chest shatters.

I’ve been broken ever since I opened that door twenty-three years ago. Reggie, though, showed me that healing was possible. Now, I’ve broken

beyond repair. Whatever remains of my heart is fractured into too many pieces to ever be whole again.

1. Human—Rag'n'Bone Man until end of chapter

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Chapter 29

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Into the Deep

Reggie

The dingy I stole from the harbor bounces over each wave as I push it as fast as it will go, praying there's enough gas to get me to the island. ¹ The waves are choppier out here, closer to the mouth of the bay and the open ocean. The sun setting over the horizon with pastels is a contrasting beauty to the dark reality of the situation.

I don't have much of a plan, but I wasn't waiting around for Cash's idea. Objectively, his plan to gather reconnaissance and devise a methodical attack is much smarter and more likely to succeed than stealing a dingy and satellite GPS, then boating to an unknown island with nothing but a handgun.

But I couldn't wait. I've been breathing with one lung and living with half a heart since learning Roan had been taken. It has to be the Warden. A remote island would be the perfect place for his sick games. I've seen firsthand what happens on that island, and there's no way I was letting Roan spend a night there alone.

An outcrop of trees comes into sight, and, going by the coordinates I memorized from Cash's phone, they're on the island Roan is on. June Harbor

Bay has several small, rocky islands that are barely more than seabird nesting grounds. The one I am now approaching with my heart in my throat is the furthest, most isolated of them all.

The sun is quickly disappearing the closer I get, and I make out flickering lights dotting one edge of the island. I slow the engine to cut some of the noise and creep along the water. I'm considering my next moves while slowly pattering closer to the lights when a loud noise comes ripping around the island behind me.

Blinding spotlights shine on me, and I realize they're mounted on two jet skis that begin to circle me. I hold my gun tight in my hand, but they're moving too fast and the lights are too bright for me to lock on a target.

The rapid pops of a semiautomatic fill the air, and bullet-sized holes are ripped through my metal boat. My adrenaline spikes as water quickly begins to fill the hull. It will take a while to sink with such small holes though. Even so, I bale as much as I can with my hands while trying to track my circling attackers.

"Toss the gun!" a voice orders through what sounds like a megaphone. I only grip it tighter and cock the hammer. "Toss the gun, and we will take you to him."

Him. I don't need specifics to know it's Roan. I'd sacrifice my life for him, and, as I throw my gun into the bay, I realize that I may be doing just that.

And there's not a single part of me that regrets it.

The men dim their lights, and I can now see they're wearing creepy black masks as one pulls up on either side of my slowly-sinking boat. "Put these on." I'm handed zip-tie handcuffs and slide them over my wrists. The man that handed them to me reaches over to tighten them until they bite into my skin, then he orders me to lay over the back of his jet ski.

I hold Roan in my mind's eye as I do as he says, pulling up every detail of his smile this morning when he watched me eat the breakfast he made for me. I think about the slight slant of his lips with pride. His auburn stubble meeting the tattoos on his jaw. The way he pointed his fork at me and told me not to jump out of any planes with life and light in his eyes.

The ride on the back of the jet ski is short. With my head dangling over the side of the seat, I see the reflection of flames on the inky water. My pulse races. I twist my head as much as I can, but I can only see the legs and planks of a dock, not what's on it.

Something clamps around my ankles, and then I'm hoisted off the jet ski and dropped on my hands and knees on the dock. There is a row of bare feet with shackled ankles next to my head, and I swallow. *These are the women. The women they hunt.* ²

I'm pulled to my feet, and my heart beats like thunder as I take in the scene before me. Rows of people in black masks face me. Torches light up the platform, and there is a man in front of the people who wears a silver mask. It's something straight out of a horror movie, and my stomach roils.

Women in white slips are lined up next to me, chins hanging and eyes on the ground. Their feet are locked to a ball and chain, as are mine.

The circumstances have changed so suddenly that it almost feels like a dream. One minute I'm chasing the sunset, and the next I am surrounded by darkness and evil, chained and lined up like cattle for slaughter.

A figure is pushed to the front and stumbles next to the man in the silver mask. His hands are handcuffed behind him, and he wobbles like he's unsteady on his feet. When he lifts his head, my heart stops as Roan's eyes find mine. There's a dark bruise under one eye and dried blood coming from

his nose, but the scariest part isn't his injuries. It's the soulless way his gaze reaches out to mine like an apology.

My breathing stutters as the man in the silver mask begins to speak and I recognize his voice immediately. "You have gotten in my way at every step in the name of protecting her." Daniel speaks to Roan, but his hand flies out to point at me. "The great protector," he mocks.

My mind swirls like a storm as I realize Daniel is the Warden. I feel sucker punched, and breathing becomes physically difficult, like there isn't room in me for this truth and oxygen.

"You've seen what happens on this island," he continues, and Roan remains passive and dejected at his side. "So, I will give you one last chance to protect her. If you choose, you can walk off this dock with her and I will provide safe passage for you two back to the city, unharmed—well, not *further* harmed." My skin grows cold from the smug chuckle that comes from behind his mask. "And the hunt will continue as planned. These fourteen women will meet their fate. Or you can save all fourteen. All you have to do is kill Regenia Cortez."

"You sick bastard," Roan erupts, headbutting Daniel with such force that he stumbles backward. Two men grab Roan and drag him back as he yells and thrashes.

I can't take any comfort in his resurgence of energy because as I look at the women to my right, I find they are all looking at me too. The flames dance in their eyes like a promise of the hell to come. My heart breaks for them, and my heart breaks for Roan.

He's spent his whole life trying to make up for his mother's murder only to face a choice like this. It's the most cruelly crafted torture for a man like

Roan, whether Daniel knows his history or not. Either decision will break what's left of him.

Roan's manic gaze catches mine, and he fights against the men holding him. "I won't do it. I won't choose," he bellows across the dock. His voice is hoarse and gravelly, worn ragged from the decision holding him down.

"I won't choose," he repeats, his voice choking, and I believe him. I believe he will fight until he has nothing left to give. He will never stop trying to protect and redeem.

So, I make the choice for him.

I heave my ball off the dock, clutching it in my arms, and run the two steps to the edge of the dock before jumping off.

Just as I sink below the water, I hear Roan yell my name.

Not Cortez. Not little menace or *mentirosa*.

Reggie.



Roan

My chest cleaves in two as soon as I see her reach for the iron ball. I lunge with everything I have, breaking free of the men holding me as she clears the dock.

"Reggie!" I yell for her with my whole heart, the destroyed and broken organ still fighting to beat for her.

Daniel buries a kick in my stomach, and I fold in half, collapsing onto the ground. I scream like a wounded animal as the seconds tick by, knowing

Reggie is underwater losing air with each one. I barely register the hands pulling me up and immediately disappearing at the sound of gunshots. I barely register the screams of panic or the women dropping to the ground, hands covering their heads.

The one thing I register with utmost clarity is Daniel's shoulder spraying blood and the keys in his hands flying. I sprint for them like half my leg isn't sliced open. I vaguely recognize the faces of my brothers at the start of the dock, guns trained and firing.

I leap into the water in the same place Reggie disappeared without a second thought. It's dark and murky, and I'm nearly sightless. I swim deeper until I find her. The ball has sunk to the bottom, and she's suspended in the water at the end of the chain.

My lungs scream for air as I struggle to slot the key into the lock, my fingers numb from the frigid water. As soon as the shackles fall away, I wrap her under one arm and kick toward the surface.

There is no pain. There is only her.

As I break the surface and swim to the shore, I feel nothing but her head resting heavy and still on my shoulder.

When I crawl on my knees, cradling her, I feel nothing but the weight of her in my arms.

As soon as I am on dry land, I lay her on her back and press my cheek to her purple lips. "No, no, *no*," I chant through broken sobs when I don't feel any air coming from them. I check her pulse and heave a gulping breath when I feel one.

I tilt her chin to the side and kneel beside her to do compressions on her chest. "Come on, Cortez. Don't you fucking leave me." Her eyelids flutter

from being jostled, but she's still unconscious and not breathing. "*Breathe for me Reggie, please!*"

I continue to press the heel of my palms into her cold, wet abdomen. Pushing and pushing, my heart shreds like ribbons with every thrust that she doesn't breathe. "Wake up, please, I need you. If you wake up for me I swear I'll fucking marry you. I'll take you skydiving. I'll love you with every breath I breathe, every second of my life. *Please*, just come back to me—"

The first cough is so small I think it's just my compressions shaking her. The second cough is definite though. It's sputtering and weak, but she's coughing. "Yes, that's it! Come on, breathe, baby, *breathe.*" Hot tears stream down my cold cheeks as water dribbles from her mouth, more and more with every compression.

She coughs hard and bodily, her neck retching, and a gush of water comes from her mouth. Her eyes fly open, and she gasps in scratchy but unobstructed breaths. My body feels high. In fact, I can't feel it at all with the rush I feel at seeing color return to her cheeks.

I scoop her into my arms and cradle her face with my hand. "I love you, I love you, I love you," I chant, shock and relief wiping my mind clear of any thoughts that aren't my love for this woman.

I'm incapable of saying anything else for a few moments. But when she lets out a raspy *Ro*, I finally find the ability, my throat raw and twisted. "I'm fucking marrying you, Cortez."

Her eyes struggle to stay open, but her mouth twitches in something resembling a smile. "Do I have any say in this?"

"Absolutely not." I sob and laugh at the same time as I clutch her to my chest and kiss the top of her wet hair. "You're mine, Reggie, and I'm never losing you again."

“You didn’t lose me,” she says softly into my shirt.

“I thought I did, and that was enough.”



Our medics finish checking out Reggie, and all I want to do is take her far away from this island and let my brothers and Daniel’s men deal with the bloodbath and surviving women. But there’s still one more thing to do.

Moonlight, rather than sunlight, streams between the break in the trees, but the pit still feels the same—like hallowed ground and contaminated wasteland at the same time. Nausea rolls in the back of my throat as the fresh memories batter my mind.

The moon has replaced the sun, and Daniel has replaced me. His injured shoulder hangs at an unnatural angle. It feels surreal to walk onto these sands with Reggie, alive and safe. Especially as we pass the stain of blood in the sand from the woman I saw Reggie in when her throat was slit.

I explained everything to her, and she was in agreement about what had to be done. But now, as we stand in front of Daniel, there’s conflict written all over her face.

“I don’t know what to say to you—”

“Then don’t say anything. There’s nothing I want to hear from someone who set their best friend up to die anyway,” Daniel sneers, then spits at her feet. I push forward, but Reggie’s arm shoots out to stop me.

“I had nothing to do with Sofia’s death, and neither did my father.” She impresses me with how even-keeled she is, how steady her voice is. “It would have broken her heart to see what you’ve become.”

“Don’t you dare speak for her, *puta*.” She doesn’t flinch at his words, only closes her eyes with a heavy sigh.

“You deserve so much worse for everything you’ve done.” She swallows once, then continues with something lighter in her tone, like acceptance. “But for Sofia’s sake, it will be a quick death.” Then she holds her hand out for my gun.

I see the shock flash across his face that she’s really condemning him. But then it’s gone as he armors himself in the hatred that has gotten him this far. “Go ahead, kill me like you killed her. At least you’ll be honest about it this time.”

She glances up at the sky and blinks away the tears I’m sure are welling in her eyes. *She’s not a killer.*

She composes her face into a stoic mask and looks at me. “Your gun, Roan.”

She’s not a killer. But I am.

I pull the trigger.

His head snaps back as the bullet kills him instantly. Her hands fly to her mouth, and she sucks in a shaky breath before letting out a wailing sob. It sounds like grief and relief, both mourning the man he could have been and relieved that who he became can never hurt anyone again.

She presses her lips together, and her brows furrow as she turns to me. “Thank you.”

I tuck my gun away and pull her into me. “I’ll always be your monster, you only have to be my light.”

1. Even If It Hurts—Sam Tinnesz
2. Atlantic—Sleep Token until end of chapter

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Chapter 30

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Sweet Love

Reggie

O *ne week later*
A piece of Roan died that day on the island.¹ Whatever he witnessed sawed a bit of his heart off, and it was left there in the sand. Along with the blood and the bones and the tears.

He's broken but beautiful, shattered but whole. And when the nightmares come that remind him of what he's lost, it's my job to remind him of everything he still has.

Sometimes he punches the door. Other times, like this morning, it's a thrashing like he's still chained.

"Run!" he yells in his sleep. "No!"

I try to wake him gingerly, but his eyes slam open, wild and dazed. He rolls on top of me, and in hurried, rash movements, he pushes up my sleep shirt. "Roan—"

"No talking." His voice is harsh but quiet, and he pins my hand that reaches for him above my head and collars my throat with this other hand. "I just—I just need you, Reggie."

He shoves my knees apart and roughly drags his hard cock over my bare pussy. This isn't the first time we've fucked like this since the island. Rushed, impassioned, harsh. Roan may fuck like he fights, but what drives him to fight is also what drives him to fuck. It's a release, a way to control something when the emotions inside him feel uncontrollable.

I can't help but wonder if maybe what he needs isn't another reminder that sex and violence go hand in hand. "Roan—Ro, look at me." His gaze, fixated on where our bodies are about to meld, jumps to mine. "Are you going to fuck me hard?"

"No." He tightens his fist around my neck. "I'm going to fuck you mercilessly."

I use my free hand to palm his cheek. "Is that what you need—"

"What?" He's beginning to get agitated, his jaw clenching.

"If that's what you need, you know you can have it."

He shakes his head like he's trying to clear his thoughts. "I don't know what you mean."

I give the hand on my throat a testing push, and he allows me to remove it. I urge him onto his back, then climb on top of him and press tender kisses to his chest. "Let me love you sweetly. Will you let me do that for you?"

His brows fret together, and there's a vulnerability in his eyes, but he nods. His arms are ramrod straight by his sides. I lift his hands to place them on my hips, giving them an encouraging squeeze before I slowly peel my shirt off.

Without an ounce of urgency, I run my palms up and down his torso, slowly rocking on his lap. He grimaces like he's in pain. "Breathe for me, Ro. Just breathe and feel." He squeezes his eyes shut and nods again. I cover his hands with mine and trail them up the curves of my body, over my breasts and back down.

I feel his hard cock against my ass and grind gently into it. His fingers tighten on my hips, and then relax. “You’re doing so good, baby.” He opens his eyes and looks at me as if to say, *really?*

He’s so raw and brutal, gentle and shy. His heart has been broken more times than anyone I know, and yet, it’s still the biggest of them all.

I lift my hips and reach between us to tease his cock at my entrance. “Feel how wet I am for you, Ro?” His teeth dig into his bottom lip as he gives me short, sharp nods. I lower myself onto him, and he hisses through gritted teeth. “You feel so good, fit me so perfectly.”

I keep my hands on his chest while I begin to ride him in slow, undulating movements. “Fuuck,” he sighs, digging his head into the pillow. I lean down to kiss him, swiping my tongue lightly across his lips and then sucking his bottom lip between my teeth, giving it a grazing tug.

I moan as I take my pleasure sweet and slow, feeling it bloom in my core like a warm summer breeze. He clasps his hands on either side of my face to hold me while he kisses me back, delving his tongue to caress mine, teasingly slow one moment, then deep and sensual the next. It makes my head swim, incandescent desire lighting up between us.

He sits up, wrapping his arms around me. I lace my arms around his neck and press our foreheads together as I glide up and down his length. Bliss coils tightly around my abdomen, and my pussy begins to throb as he tenderly thrusts up to meet me.

My orgasm comes sweet and slow, just like our loving. It builds and builds without pressure or haste, and I sink into the layered feelings.

“Oh fuck,” he groans, burying his head in the crook of my neck as his thighs flex and tense under me. My pulsing inner walls pull his release from

him at the same time I come. He bites the tendons of my neck, then quickly laves the spot with his tongue to soothe the sting.

“Oh, yes, yes.” My climax crests and spills over like warm honey through my limbs.

“You saved me, Reggie,” he breathes into my skin. I clutch his head to my chest, my heart overflowing with emotions that no words can do justice.

I brush my lips over his hair. “Only because you saved me first.”



Roan

The mid-morning sun cuts through the trees with golden light, spilling out on the lawns and fields as people go about enjoying their Saturday morning. This routine has become a weekend ritual for us before I meet with my therapist for walk-and-talk sessions in the park.

I tried the whole office-visit thing. I sat in the chair, but all it made me want to do was punch my therapist in the face. When he suggested we could do sessions walking, I figured some fresh air and somewhere else to look other than his pity-filled eyes while I reopened every wound, old and barely healed alike, couldn't hurt.

We stop at a coffee cart next to a playground, full of kids running and climbing and playing and laughing. I watch them while Reggie orders our drinks. Something I've heard a dozen times before, to no comfort, rings again in my head: *You were just a kid.*

“Thank you. Sit with me.” I pull us over to a bench where we can watch the chaotic play. A toddler runs after a butterfly and trips, tumbling in the wood chips. Another kid goes down a slide and flies off the end, scraping his knee. A bigger kid, maybe seven or eight, pushes a little guy to the ground. *What the fucking hell is he thinking?* The kid he pushed barely reaches his chest. My blood thrums as I imagine this playground bully growing up to be the kind of man who hides behind a black mask...

I jump up and stomp over to them.

I pick the smaller kid up off the ground, then smack the baseball cap off the other’s head. “You’re twice his size. Don’t be a jerk.” I want to do more. I want to shake him and shove him to the ground and see how he likes it.

But when I look down in his watery eyes, his bottom lip already trembling, all the hot air deflates. *He’s just a fucking kid.*

I stalk back over to Reggie, shaking my head. “Fucking kids.”

“Bet that boy is going to think twice before picking on someone half his size again.” She gives me a warm and proud smile, like I’m some sort of hero. That familiar guilt and crushing sense of failure comes knocking. I take a deep breath, then try to count the colors around me, a mindfulness technique Dr. Wong taught me.

Green. Brown. Yellow. Blue. Red. More green.

“God,” Reggie scoffs a laugh. “Look at them, they’re tripping over themselves, falling over nothing.”

I swallow and tilt my head, staring at the playground with a new perspective. Two kids playing tag run in opposite directions around a climbing wall to hide from the other, but then collide face-first. An unexpected laugh comes from me. “Damn, they can barely breathe without hurting themselves.”

For the first time, *you were just a kid* finally strikes a part of me that just might believe it. I take Reggie's hand in my lap, lacing her fingers with mine.

She turns to me with a softness in her eyes, as if she can feel the shift in me. "What's in your head?" She brushes an eyelash off my cheek with her thumb and holds it out for me.

I blow it away with a silent wish. A wish for the strength to face my demons and a prayer of gratitude that I have her by my side while I do it.

I pull her thumb to my lips and press a kiss to where the lash used to be. "I still got a lot of shit to work through, but I think I'm starting to get it."

1. Get You The Moon (feat. Snøw)—Kina, Snøw until end of chapter

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Epilogue

Reggie

*F*our months later
“Are you finally going to take the *Sold* sign down before people get here?” I ask Roan, who is setting up the grill in the side yard of our new house. He turns around, wiping the sweat off his forehead with his shirt, and I temporarily forget my question.

“I like seeing it.” He shrugs, then tugs me into him with one arm around my waist. “It reminds me that this is real.”

My heart squeezes, and I look up at him wondering how I ever thought he didn’t have a heart. “Okay.” I give him a quick kiss, and then pull away because I have an idea I think we both will like.

I head inside, looking for the drill. I know it’s around here somewhere since we’ve been hanging curtains and art over the last few days to get ready for our housewarming party. I find it along with a box of screws on the dining table. The vintage photo of McGregor’s is on the wall behind the table. Looking at it stirs something sweet and nostalgic in me. This photo is

of the past. Not only the past history of the Den, but also Roan's previous isolation and struggles to forgive himself, to feel worthy.

Next to it is a framed photo of the current pub. Stella snapped it one day after a family brunch. The brothers are lined up along one wall, smoking, and Effie, Harlow, and I are laughing about something at one of the bistro tables. This is the future. Happiness, laughter, family.

I grab the drill and screws and head out to the front lawn. It's easy to unhook the *Sold* sign, but it's harder to pull out the post buried into the grass. By the time I wrestle it out and toss it on the curb with our trash cans, I'm sweating and ready for a cold beer. But I have one more thing to do.

I gather up my supplies again and cut through the house to the backyard so Roan doesn't see me with his precious sign. There's an old garden shed out here with heavy doors and thick walls of wood that have weathered the test of time. It's where we keep our "boring suburban yard equipment" that Roan likes to pretend he doesn't love using, and is only occasionally used for bloody interrogations.

I drill two heavyweight screws into the wooden doors and hang the sign on them, then step back to check out my handiwork.

"Lookin' good, Cortez." I jump at Roan's voice. He wraps an arm around my shoulder, handing me a cold Corona. I lean into him despite our sweatiness, and we clink our bottles together before taking a sip in unison, admiring the new sign location.

A few hours later, the back is swarming with our friends and family, the smell of *carne asada* fills the air, and reggaeton plays loudly from our outdoor speakers.

"I can't believe you were faking it that whole dinner! You sure convinced Stephen and me," Matt says in disbelief.

“Yep, we hated each other.” I laugh, remembering how angry I was with Roan and my own flustered reaction to his performance.

Stephen comes over to where Matt and I are standing by the pool. “Hey, Santi wanted me to tell y’all *vamos a cenar*.” Matt’s eyes light up, and he hurries back toward the grill with his husband.

I scan the crowd, feeling so full of life, when my eyes catch on Roan and my father standing shoulder to shoulder. Even though I’m across the yard, I can tell they are talking in hushed tones by the way they both barely move their lips and keep their eyes fixed on the drinks in their hands. They finish their conversation with my father offering Roan a firm handshake and clap on the shoulder. It’s the closest thing to an embrace I’ve ever seen between the two of them, and I’m even more confused.

I wouldn’t say they’re buddy-buddy now, but after everything that happened with Daniel and on the island, my father quickly realized that no one would love and protect me more than Roan Fox.

But this weird clandestine chat is making me suspicious.



The next day, we’re thousands of feet above the ground about to jump out of a plane. ¹

The instructor pulls the door open, and the open air rushes into the cabin. Roan and I stand up and do one last safety check of our gear, though he has to crouch to fit in the small plane. Roan and I have been learning to skydive for months, and today is our first solo jump.

It helps that we have Bartlett Farms as a drop zone whenever we want it, and Roan hired an entire crew of instructors and pilots to give us private lessons.

My heart races, and I look at Roan, who looks equally excited if not a little nervous. I bite my lip when he gives me a comforting smile. I hold out my hand. “Ready?”

“Almost.” He looks to Cash, who is riding with us so he can be the first to know if his “idiot brother gets himself splattered like a bug on a windshield.”

Cash remains against the back wall but clears his throat to shout over the sound of the engine and wind. “You know, if you guys keep making me do this, you’re gonna have to start paying me.” Roan rolls his eyes, and I assume this is some Fox brother cryptic meaning I’m missing.

Roan squeezes my hand and parts his lips, but then swallows like words are stuck in his throat.

“You good?” I ask as loose strands of hair whip my face.

He chuckles with a soft smile and brightness in his eyes. “Better than good.”

“Alright, let’s get on with it,” Cash shouts. I twist toward the opening, but Roan holds me back. “Do you, Roan Fox, take Regenia Cortez to be your wife—”

My heart jumps. “Wait, what?!”

“I promised to take you skydiving, to marry you, to love you for the rest of my life—”

“I was unconscious, Roan!” I can’t help but laugh, feeling overwhelmed yet so fucking happy that I don’t know what else to say.

Cash looks between us skeptically. “So, uh...Are we doing this or not?”

I sweep up Roan’s other hand. “Hell yes we are.” He smiles then, so full of

hope—something he'd once written off as a useless emotion, but now I see he believes wholeheartedly.

“Do you, Roan Fox, take Regenia Cortez to be your wife, to love and to hold—”

He cuts him off. “I do.”

“And do you Regenia Cort—”

“I do,” I pledge, staring into his eyes that are as blue as the sky surrounding us.

“Protecting you is the greatest honor of my life,” he says, leaning down so our lips almost touch.

Emotions choke my words. There's so much I want to say, but only one thing matters. “Loving you is the greatest honor of mine.”

“By the power vested in me, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss your bride!” Cash cheers.

Roan closes the small distance, and our lips meet. We pour everything unsaid into our kiss, knowing we will have the rest of our lives to say them. When we pull apart, we soak in each other's gaze, breathing in the moment.

Then we dive headfirst into our future together.

The End



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Dear reader,

Thank you for sticking through to the end! Reggie and Roan have weaseled their way into my heart, and perhaps yours too. If you enjoyed their story, it would mean the world to me if you could take a minute to review this book on Amazon. Even a one-sentence review helps! Reviews are truly the best way to support indie authors, and I appreciate every single one. I know other readers do too.

The fun doesn't end with this book though...To read the *spicy* extended epilogue, visit SummerOtoole.com/familybrunch. There's also a clue to who the next woman to steal a Fox brother's heart will be. Can you find it?

Feel free to reach out to me to share your theories, reactions or anything else you liked (or didn't) about this book on Instagram and TikTok: @SummerOtoole. Or we can go old school and you can shoot me an email at hello@summerotoole.com.

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Acknowledgments

This was the hardest book I've ever written. Reggie and Roan challenged me every step of the way, and I wouldn't have been able to do it without my incredible support system.

Thank you to my alpha readers, my lifelines aka group chats, and Kristie from Between the Wines Consulting for getting me through all blocks and supporting me when I hit the "I just want to curl up in a ball and cry" stage of my deadline.

Val and Isabella, I appreciate your thoughtfulness in sensitivity reading and helping me bring authenticity and respect to Reggie's Mexican heritage. And to Naomi and Aldo, thank you for always answering my off-the-wall questions without hesitation.

To my Patreon tribe, your support and excitement has been such a bright light and source of inspiration. Thank you for loving this world and my crazy characters.

To my editors, designers, and PA, thank you for helping me turn the story in my head into a book in my hands.

To my Gabby, I love you. Let's jump out of a plane together.

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ASIN: B0BVSSY4TG

ISBN: 9798393311087

Editing by Saxony Gray, Editing by Gray

Proofreading by Lauren, The Eclectic Editor

Chapter art and ornamental breaks by Val, Turning Pages Design

Cover by Acacia, Ever After Designs

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