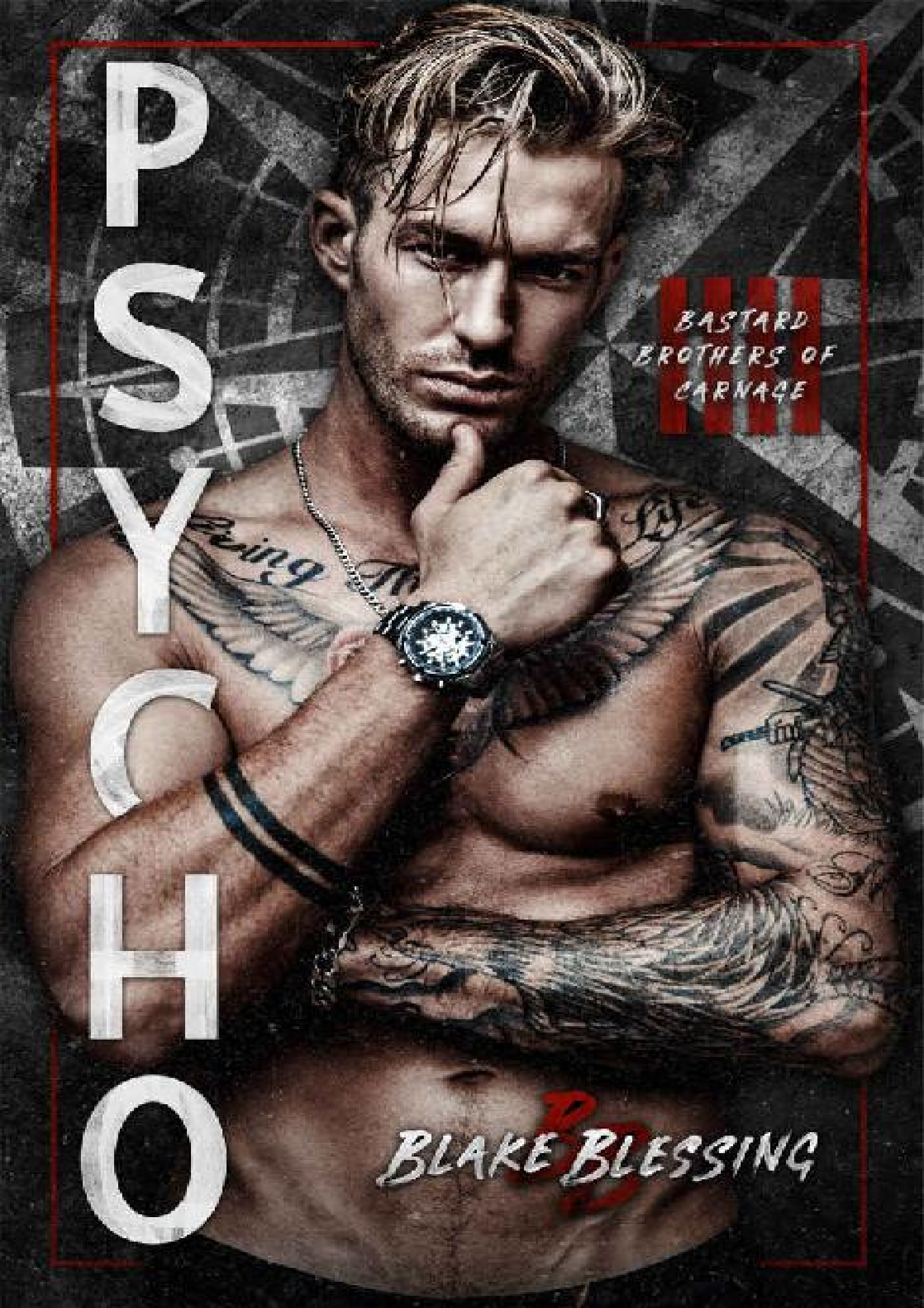


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BASTARD
BROTHERS OF
CARNAGE

BLAKE BLESSING



BASTARD BROTHERS OF CARNAGE

PSYCHO

BLAKE **BB** *BLESSING*

Blake Blessing

Psycho

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Blessing, Blake

Psycho: Bastard Brothers of Carnage #4

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CONTENTS

Foreword

Recap

Prologue

1. Andre

2. Amorette

3. Lafe

4. Parker

5. Amorette

6. Parker

7. Grey

8. Amorette

9. Andre

10. Amorette

11. Grey

12. Parker

13. Amorette

14. Andre

15. Lafe

16. Grey

17. Parker

18. Amorette

19. Lafe

20. Andre

21. Amorette

22. Amorette

23. Parker

24. Andre

25. Amorette

26. Amorette

27. Lafe

28. Amorette

29. Parker

Epilogue

Afterword

Other Titles

Who is Blake?

FOREWORD

That was a fun little cliffy at the end of Killer, huh?

Things are really starting to heat up now, especially as we get close to the end of the series. In this book there are some intense moments, fun moments...sexy moments. ;) I hope you enjoy them all.

There is also a return of some heavier themes that are more on page than in books 2 & 3.

The specific triggers for this book are:

Violence

Bloody violence (I feel like I need to insert this twice)

Rape

Assault

Pedophilia (from the bad guys only!)

Drug use and abuse

I think that's it, but if you've made this far in the series you probably don't have triggers or these aren't an issue!

Anyway, that's enough from me. On the next page is a recap, and other than that, ENJOY!

RECAP

At the end of Killer, in true Parker form, he's an ass and tries to put Mia on her knees for a nice little BJ. Amorette storms off, giving Vicente a prime opportunity to flex his power over the bastard brothers.

He calls for her and another girl to leave with him.

All too soon, the brothers understand exactly how dangerous it is for Amorette to be with Vicente. Before they can act, a girl runs out screaming that Vicente is dead.

The brothers race to save her, but they're stopped by Gonzalez's guards.

Only Matías can make it through.

And he finds Valentina calling for Amorette's death as a man has a knife to her throat...

"Kill her!" Valentina yelled. She raised a finger and pointed right at Amorette. "Fucking kill her!"

"No!" I yelled and dove.

PROLOGUE

GREY, 17 YEARS OLD



“Get fucked, Grey,” Rogerio, one of the newly appointed guards, sneered as he spit at my feet on his way past. He hit Gonzalez’s chest. Those two asshats were going to rise the ranks and be in Vicente’s inner circle. The Institution didn’t work like that. The only way they’d get anywhere was because they’d learned to suck Vicente’s dick. Kiss asses.

“It’s not like he’s going to be around very long anyway. After the way Vicente took out his mother, there’s no way he’d let that arrogant shithead stick around. Anastasia was a favorite and look what he did to her? Strung her up like a fucking pig,” he chortled.

I glared at their backs as they headed toward the edge of the yard.

It had only been two days. Two goddamn days.

That fucking *cabrón*. How dare he spit in my face like this. I might be the bastard, but I was still higher than his weak ass. He was right, though.

My mother *was* Vicente’s favorite. Everyone knew it. And because I’d dared to step in to save her, Vicente sent my brothers and me to the yard for additional training for the trainers to put us through our paces. He’d said we’d needed to remember our place. Yeah, well, our place wasn’t fucking out here.

Gonzalez, another new guard, half-turned, just enough for me to catch the smirk on that motherfucker’s face. He wasn’t a

little shit like Rogerio. More like a starving pup trying to figure out who to follow to get the scraps.

Behind me, Rogerio snickered and whispered loud enough I caught my name and my mother's.

The midday sun beat down on us. Grunts and slaps against flesh surrounded me, inciting the noxious burn Rogerio started in the pit of my stomach.

I FISTED my hands and slowly turned to follow them with my gaze.

“Morozov!” the asshole trainer yelled my name as he pushed through the group of recruits.

This was a joke that I was even here anyway. I'd been fighting since I could walk. We were just blood enough to be envied but not enough to be protected. If I hadn't started early, Lafe would have been whipped weekly. Maybe even Parker too.

Man, I could down any of these men with barely ten percent effort. That Vicente even had us training here today was insulting.

And it gave asswipes like Rogerio the confidence to spew that shit.

“Get back to sparring with Germaine!” The trainer shoved me forward with a rough hand on my back. I stumbled but caught myself. There was no chance in hell I'd let him push me to the ground.

“Yeah, Morozov! You should change your name since it's a reminder to Vicente what a cumslut your mother was.” Rogerio chuckled as he stopped and looked over his shoulder.

That fucking...

I balled my hands into fists and took a heavy step forward. The air was so thick around me that it was like trudging through sludge.

Another hit to the back from the trainer. This time, I didn't budge at all. Instead, I used the pain spreading out from his hit as a grounding point. The pain felt great. Amazing. It could only be better if I was forcing it on Rogerio.

"Get your weak ass back in the fight, or you'll get double duty tonight!" the trainer yelled so hard his voice cracked.

When I glanced over my shoulder, his eyes widened.

Good. He should be scared. I was Vicente's bastard son, after all. It wasn't a secret. More than that, it was well known that I had his temper...and a gift for sparring.

He gulped, then set his face.

I could faintly hear Rogerio whispering. Even though I couldn't make out the words, they had to be about me, my mother, or both. The gathering crowd burst into hateful chuckles.

If I had a torch in my hand, I'd burn this fucker and everyone in it down. They didn't deserve to live. I couldn't trust them. The only thing they were good for was an outlet for my anger.

Anastasia wasn't the best mother. Actually, I think she hated it at times, but she'd tried. Failed, but she'd tried. I didn't blame her for being shitty. This was the Institution where women were only good for blowing off steam by punching or fucking.

I wouldn't treat women like that. Neither would my brothers.

Rogerio was getting louder.

Fuck, I hated the taunts. I couldn't get away from them. And now, when my temper was already short, red-tinged my vision. I'd start swinging soon. Better yet, I needed to test out the knife I'd just finished last night. And this one? I'd added serrated edges.

MY LIPS CURLED as I narrowed my eyes on the trainer. I didn't know his name, but it wasn't necessary. He was just the closest

offender.

I whipped my knife off my belt and sank it into his neck. He gurgled and clawed at my hand with no luck. When I jerked the knife out, the hot spray of blood across my hand and face was liberating.

Why was I holding back for these assholes?

The men around us stepped back, and when I faced Rogerio and Marco, I grinned.

Marco's mouth opened and closed like he was already a dying fucking fish. Rogerio backed up step after step. Each person he bumped into raced to get out of the danger zone.

He was about to die. And he knew it.

I sprinted forward and knocked Marco in the nose with my elbow as I tackled Rogerio. Straddling him, I used my legs to pin his arms to the ground as I jabbed him in the eye with the hilt of my knife.

"Stop, you psycho! Vicente's going to have your head for this!" he screamed, jerking as he tried to throw me off with his legs. But I was too far up his body, and he wasn't that nimble.

I laughed and for the first time in days, it felt like I could breathe again. The release from being able to take out my anger on this asswipe was liberating. The spray of blood was a beautiful thing. "That's fine. He can have my head, since there's certainly no heart left. You know why that's okay?" I leaned forward so I could whisper in his ear. "Because you're going to be dead anyway."

For the next few minutes, I let every pent-up emotion out. I sliced his face just like the local butcher. That man was so good at his job, he'd become a torture master for Vicente. When no one was watching, I learned as much as I could, adding his methodical style to my own.

The flesh on the face was soft, and so thin. My knife cut through it like butter. Even a little flick of my wrist, jerking out the side with the serrated edge, couldn't make this difficult. Blood dotted my forearms and dripped down the sides of his face as he screamed.

I heard it, but it was too distant, and I was too focused on making Rogerio suffer for every fucking word he'd spewed. Next, I removed his eyes. The blade slid through the rubbery texture with barely any more effort.

The scream that came from Rogerio penetrated this time, and I smiled.

That's what you fucking deserve for talking about my mother.

Gaping bloody holes were left where his eyes once were. His screams had tapered off to whimpers, and he weakly attempted to throw me off of him. He was experiencing so much pain that he was in shock.

But I wasn't done. I still had too much anger inside and if I couldn't take it out on Vicente, I could damn well make sure no one in the Institution ever fucked with me again. Rogerio was my example, and I dared anyone else to try me.

Neatly sliding my knife back into my belt, I smashed my fist against his face, and the satisfying crunch of his bones made goosebumps coast down my arms. I reared back my arm and repeated the action again. And again. Until he stopped breathing altogether.

His face was completely crushed in... Almost. I left a little structure, mostly to save my bare hands.

When some of the men finally worked up the courage to pull me off of him, I didn't fight them. I even went along with them as they marched me to the Gallery. My steps light, I couldn't stop the grin from overtaking my face.

I was a bloody mess and probably sounded like a lunatic as I started laughing along the way, meeting the eyes of anyone brave enough to stare.

Of course, Vicente was holding court like some God with Pilar at his side and his weak ass *legitimate* son on his other side.

Andre and Parker rushed through the crowd as the trainers recounted what I'd done. Big brother Andre was going to lose

his breakfast when he heard I'd killed a trainer and one of their puppets.

Vicente listened to the trainers with a smart-ass smirk on his face. Dressed in a tailored suit with his black hair brushed perfectly away from his face, he was the perfect devil in disguise. No matter how much Andre looked like him, he could never be as fucked up as our father.

Raising a brow, Vicente cut a glance at me, acting like *I* was a nuisance, when he had killed my mother right in front of me. But as Vicente sat forward with a bored look while propping his chin in his hand, all I could think about was how much I wished it had been him under my knife instead of Rogerio.

“Grey, that’s quite a mess you made of my men. You think I should let that stand?” His voice was bland, but his eyes brimmed with excitement.

I’d been here before. Everyone knew what was about to happen. Vicente would piss me off. I would take mine back from the *cabróns* who worshipped him. I ended up on the whipping post. Even knowing Vicente lived to see me bleed, I’d never stop. It was my favorite outlet.

I shrugged and spit to the side. “If you’re going to surround yourself with idiots, you should know they’re going to die when they insult the wrong man.”

One side of his mouth tipped up. “And you’re that wrong man? You just hit your...seventeenth birthday, was it? How does that make you a man, let alone the wrong one?”

Glaring, I curled my lip. “They’re dead. I’m not. That makes me the wrong man.”

Vicente twisted to smile at Matías. “You see, son. This is what insubordination looks like. If it’s not quelled, the people start getting ideas, and that’s dangerous for everyone.”

Matías cut his eyes my way. Most people in the mansion couldn’t tell Matías and Andre apart. They were almost like fucking twins. Except I could tell. Andre had a depth to him

that was lacking in Matías. It was like he was a puppet made solely for Vicente's bidding.

Cold. Bland. Pointless.

He was everything Vicente wanted and hated in an heir.

“What do you think the punishment ought to be to keep young Grey in his place?” Vicente asked Matías with all the warmth of a father guiding his son through a life lesson.

All my brothers and I got from him was disdain, unless he wanted something from us. Then, it was slick charm and false approval. I didn't want that kind of attention from him. I learned early that I was barely worth his attention and he only gave it when there was pain involved. At least any envy for Matías stopped burning years ago.

Matías scrubbed a hand over his jaw as he pretended to think it over. He was just like Vicente, taking joy from all the hate and pain he doled out. Except he was cold as ice while he did it. He never smiled, never seemed human at all. He was the ultimate puppet that Vicente took the ultimate care in molding.

A dark head glided through the crowd and then Valentina joined them on the platform. Although Vicente didn't pay her any attention. He never did in these public settings. When it suited him, he doted on her, making her into a pretty trinket for the Institution. It was better than how he treated any other woman, but Valentina hated it.

Between my place and hers, I'd choose mine. Sometimes, if given the choice, I bet she would too.

“The only thing that ever works. Pain,” Matías answered quietly, his attention now solely on Vicente.

Vicente hummed in pleasure as he slapped his knee. “Absolutely. And for Grey, that comes in the form of the whipping post.” Vicente motioned for the trainers to move me to the wooden post ten feet from where we were standing.

Andre was strung so tight, he looked like he was about to come out of his skin while Parker glared at Vicente with cold

black eyes. At least Lafe wasn't here. He hated when I was whipped.

They didn't move closer, sticking to the side. They'd learned that lesson. He'd made Andre hold the whip and that was all he'd needed to never interfere again. Even though they hated it, and hated me for tying their hands, they held their places and their tongues.

I didn't hate the post though. It hurt like hell, but I didn't mind it. I used it to fuel my hatred for the man who thought he controlled me.

Vicente was a dead man. For what he'd done to us as kids. For what he'd done to my mother. Someday, he'd be tortured to his last breath and I would be the one to do it.

ANDRE

W *hat the fuck?*

What the actual fuck was I thinking letting Amorette go off on her own like that? Of fucking course Vicente would try to tear us down a peg or two by taking her. She better be unharmed when we made it to her, or I would spank her ass red as I choked the breath from her pink, plump lips.

With adrenaline racking my body, I raced toward the doors Vicente had taken Amorette through. Then Vicente's men circled us, some with knives drawn, others with guns.

Fucking, *fucking* hell. Every second that passed was a second the guards could be slitting her throat. Or worse.

This wasn't going to be an easy fight. It would barely be a fight at all if they started firing on us. Then who would save her crazy ass? The only measure of safety was that they'd end up taking their own men out at this range if they shot us.

That meant we'd also be using fists and knives unless we got any of these guys on the ground.

My heart pounded so hard against my ribs, the shockwave of the force spread throughout my body. Even my vision dimmed around the edges with each beat. For the moment, any signs of migraines were absent, thank fuck.

Matías met my gaze with a promise. The guards weren't trying to detain him like they were us. He was different. The heir. The trusted fucking member of the Institution. I couldn't

be happier about that right now. And he was promising to save Amorette.

Next to me, Lafe had a dead look in his eyes, while Parker glared at the men in front of him. Both were ready for blood. Grey's top lip peeled back in a vicious snarl as he raised his favorite knife, the serrated one he'd used against Bruno, and brought his arm down in a sharp arc across a guard's chest as Matías slipped through the doors. Blood sprayed us as Lafe and Parker lifted their own weapons.

Shit, I was wasting time. Parker, Lafe, and I followed Grey's lead, mowing down as many men as we could. I alternated striking and slicing the men in front of me. Grunts of pain came from every direction. Warm blood dotted my arms as I switched from guard to guard. As soon as one was down, I went for the next. Dead or alive, I didn't fucking care as long as they got out of my way.

Then Gonzalez whistled and his men stepped back. We let them. Panting, I refused to wipe the sweat from my face. They weren't going to avoid a fight, not when Amorette was in trouble. So what was Gonzalez up to?

The guards edged back and Gonzalez stopped on the dais, looking down on us like we were annoying ants he wasn't sure how to handle. Only fifteen feet or so separated us from the doors to Amorette. The grand ballroom that seemed so large thirty minutes ago was now suffocating. What were our chances of getting past the men and Gonzalez? I glanced around, noting the guards tightening the circle around us as Gonzalez placed himself in our direct path to Amorette.

Impossible. It would be fucking impossible without wasting more time fighting these *cabróns*.

Gonzalez cocked his head. "Your whore attacked Vicente. Surrender to the guards or lose your place within the Institution."

Attacked, like the woman hadn't screamed that he'd died. Like Gonzalez was hopeful Vicente still lived. I got it. The stress of the insurmountable change that was about to come over the Institution was almost buckling my knees.

The way everything was happening too fast for me to navigate should be driving me out of my mind, making it feel like my skin was peeling back.

I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to calm my fucking self so my hands didn't shake but visions of Amorette getting whipped, being raped, or fucking shot were all I could see. Gasping, I opened my eyes. Fear mixed with the adrenaline and my throat felt like it was closing up on me. Like fucking hell, I would let fear stop me from getting through those doors.

Maybe the weight of everything sweeping out of my control should cut me off at the knees, but a vicious streak of adrenaline surged through my body.

They weren't going to keep Amorette from us. No fucking way. She was ours, and we would rip anyone apart who tried to stop us.

That didn't excuse the fact that Gonzalez was overstepping his place. He had no right. He must have realized the precarious line he was crossing because his face lost some of its color as he waited for my response. Did he believe I'd just hand over my brothers? That I'd just let the woman we'd all grown attached to meet a fate that wasn't hers?

Fuck that.

I took a deep breath. I needed to keep my head straight if we were going to find her.

Reading the already high and rising tension, the guards anxiously shifted from foot to foot. One look from Gonzalez and they were clumsily pushing closer, but it was obvious they knew some of them wouldn't survive it. The guard Grey had started on already had a deep, jagged slash down his face.

Adjusting my hold on my knife, I forced my body to relax. My nerves were hyper-focused as I watched for any little twitch to signal they were going to make their move. We angled ourselves so our backs were together.

“You have one chance to get the fuck out of our way.” I bared my teeth and dropped my shoulders, ready for the first

fucker to make their move.

“Andre,” Gonzalez started as he held out a hand to stall his men. “You’re whore is going to be executed even if she gave Vicente as little as a papercut. The smart thing to do would be to distance yourself from that *puta* as quickly as possible. Your family is already on thin ice with the Institution.” His words weren’t kind so much as he was making an effort to reason with us.

Scanning his guards, I knew his real motivation. His people were shit. We’d never been in a fight quite like this one with all of us back to back, but we were all deadly fighters, feared among the Institution for more than being Vicente’s enforcers. Just that little taste before he pulled his men back showed as much. They outnumbered us, but we’d eventually get through. Gonzalez stood to lose a chunk of his guys before the fighting finished. He would be the first one I killed.

Later, I’d have to thank Grey for drilling our asses so hard growing up.

Right now, though? We had our girl to save. Then we’d tie her up and never let her out of sight again.

I smirked, tucking my chin close to my chest. “I don’t give one single fuck what you think. As far as the Institution is concerned, we *are* the Institution. It’s you who should move out of the way before I let my brother slit your throat for attempting to stop us.” Grey chuckled next to me.

Gonzalez’s face darkened as his neck and shoulders tensed. The asshat was probably embarrassed for being dressed down like this. His eyes started to bulge and his top lip lifted. He was going to meet us head-on with his men.

Fucking bring it.

My pulse, which was already thrumming, went ballistic as he snapped his hand out to the side and snapped. “If you want to keep your life and spot within the Institution, knock these traitors to their knees!” he screamed. “Everyone else,” he shot his wild-eyed gaze around the room. “If you succeed in drawing blood, there’s a fifty-thousand dollar cash prize for

you from my own funds. If you maim them, I'll personally work on getting you a promotion and you have my word on that. But they will not cross these doors."

Then to me, "Matías is the Institution. You four are barely important enough to wipe the asses of Vicente's circle. Don't forget that. But we won't kill you. I'll save that glory for Matías when he sees how you attacked his people." Gonzalez leaned forward and lowered his voice. "If Vicente really is dead, Matías will have to earn his place. There are too many nasty sharks hungry for more power to just let him take over. Matías'll do whatever the people want. Look around, the *people* want your heads on platters."

I cut my gaze from left and right, not following his orders but taking note of who was jumping on his asinine offer. A few men straightened and some grinned as they pushed their way forward. All underlings, none of the important men were edging closer. Not fucking surprising, considering they used their employees to do their dirty work for them.

"What I think these men don't understand," Parker drawled as he raised his voice. Not a yell, but enough to project, "is that you don't have the authority to make those promises. As my dear brother mentioned, we are the Institution. You could just as easily be hung for going against us when the dust settles. But go ahead. Come get us. Because I've had a shitty night, and there's nothing else I'd rather do than show you pussy ass motherfuckers why the bastard sons aren't to be fucked with."

His speech didn't affect any of the men. The guards were hesitating, only because they knew they were about to get their asses handed to them. The other members of the Institution who were looking for a fight, a little bit of glory, or both still pushed through the crowd.

I turned my head just a little to speak to my brothers. "These *pingas* aren't going to make the first move. If we have any shot at getting Amorette before someone tries to fuck her up, we need to go now."

“I’m not waiting another second for them to get their shit together,” Lafe grunted as he threw the first swing. The guard’s head whipped back, and he grabbed his nose as blood rushed through his fingers.

“That’s my cue.” Parker shrugged and jumped on the guy in front of him. Grey didn’t even acknowledge he’d heard anything we’d just said outside of the fact he had two of his short knives in his hands, blades facing the ground, as he alternately punched and sliced anyone within three feet of him.

I left them to do their thing as I faced Gonzalez. He was so insignificant in the Institution, I had no issues with him in the past. But now? With him standing between us and our girl, we had a big problem.

He paled and took a step back. That little hint of fear amped me up until I felt like I was going to buzz right out of my skin. He was a useless waste of space and a subpar fighter.

Still, I snagged a gun from the guard in front of me and shot out his left kneecap while I had a clear shot. He screamed as he fell to the ground, but I didn’t waste any more time on him. I had bigger problems to solve.

Three guards dove toward me and I stepped back. Two of the men grunted as they tangled themselves up, doing my work for me. Fucking idiots.

The third man had enough height to his jump that he missed them and caught me around the waist. I stumbled backward and used the butt of the gun to beat against his skull. Two more *pendejos* from the Institution appeared, trying to get close enough to land a hit.

Why the fuck was I beating him? I turned the gun around and shot him through the temple. Blood and brains splattered my suit, damn it. I hated getting dirty.

Finally, he fell to the ground and I turned to the two men who had magically multiplied to four. Three guards and Enoch. The asshole who tried to undercut me at every turn when we were kids.

“What are you fuckers waiting for? The quicker we down all of your asses, the quicker we can keep going.” A small trickle of sweat rolled down the side of my face from the stress and anticipation. When none of them moved, I growled my frustration.

I jabbed a punch toward the closest guard and kicked out at the next one. I caught him in the stomach and sent that motherfucker falling backward. The third idiot got tired of watching his friends go down and blocked my next hit. And my next.

Then Enoch caught me in a headlock. Fuck, but I hated getting choked.

Using his body as leverage, I flipped him while digging my thumb into his eye. His feet knocked into the fourth man but he didn't let go putting me in an awkward bent-over position. That determination needed to go.

Changing tactics, I grabbed his ear, and yanked down as hard as I could. He screamed as warm liquid rolled over my fingers. When he let go, I stood up and drew in a ragged breath. Leaving a small portion of his ear attached, I shoved him backward. There were still five more men.

Grey had a growing pile of death at his feet, as well as Parker. Lafe was far behind as he yelled with every furious swipe of his knife.

Some asshole clipped me in the jaw for checking on my brothers. God fucking damn it! That hurt. Getting back into the fight, I cut down each man. I took a step forward, then another, doing my fucking best to move us closer to the doors.

“What the hell are you bastards doing? We need to get to Killer!” Lafe yelled over the cacophony of fighting.

Grey grunted but his opponent squealed and blood sprayed the side of my face.

“Well, I would say we're teaching them a lesson, but none of my *pendejos* are staying awake long enough for the lesson to sink in. Oh, he's dead. No golden nugget of wisdom for him,” Parker said through gritted teeth, yet the calmness in his

voice was like he wasn't fighting multiple men at once. He almost forced a laugh out of me. Fuck, now was not the time to laugh.

Grey and I took care of our last two attackers as Parker went apeshit on the few guards still aiming their guns at us. It was like they were too afraid to jump in on the fight, but also afraid of running.

Parker snapped a gun out of the hand closest to him, and methodically shot each of the three men in the chest. It happened so fast, they barely moved. They sure as hell were too afraid to actually fire on *us*.

The guards should have ran.

I straightened my jacket, sneering when I saw just how destroyed the entire suit was. It didn't matter. I cared fuck all about the damn suit. I just hated the grimy feeling of death sticking to me.

Tucking the gun in my waistband, I focused on Gonzalez. He struggled to hold in his cries as he scooted backward, leaving a bloody trail from his blown out kneecap. It was good to know he was useless when he was injured.

The room had cleared significantly. No women or higher-ups remained. Only a handful of men who were dumb enough to linger.

What the fuck ever. If they didn't stand in our way, we wouldn't take them out. Yet.

I picked my way over the countless bodies until I stood over Gonzalez.

He glared up at me with hatred burning deep in his eyes. We could kill him. I wanted to, fuck did I want to. But when I glanced around, I couldn't bring myself to do it. If Vicente really was dead, every move we made would be scrutinized. I refused to rule the Institution with fear like he did. And if I killed Gonzalez, even if he deserved it, it could make our rise to the top harder. We'd lose whatever small support we had from the heads and other senior members.

So instead, I aimed at his other kneecap. Then his right hand. Extreme punishment for this kind of retaliation would be accepted.

Maybe he'd bleed out. That would be helpful.

Turning to face the last few men standing, I took a quick breath. We didn't have time for politics but Matías better be doing what he promised he would. Fucking saving Amorette.

“Don't leave this room or you'll be hunted down. The Institution is ours if Vicente is dead. You have until we come back through those doors to come to terms with it.” I nodded toward the doors then looked at my brothers.

Grey was already ahead and on the move. Lafe seemed jittery but determined as he followed on his heels. Parker flipped the men off and smirked before he turned to also follow, then his expression wiped away everything but his intense need for violence. I warned them it would be the four of us who survived.

Now, we were going to get our girl back.

AMORETTE



The man at my back tightened his grip in my hair, and I let out an unavoidable cry. It hurt, but the pain was so distant, my body only reacted on instinct. When he whispered threats in my ear, it sounded like he was across the room.

None of this felt real.

Not Vicente dead on the floor with Valentina crouched over him. Not the guards rushing in and filling the room—including the one maintaining the vicious grip on me with the cold edge of a knife against my throat.

And especially not Matías arriving and sweeping a searching gaze over the room in one glance. Yes, he saw Vicente. But that wasn't what he hunted.

Me.

He hunted for me.

His eyes burned when they landed on us.

Then his gaze zeroed in on me. Making sure I was unharmed? I didn't know. Maybe. The whole world seemed to be just out of reach beyond foot-thick glass. I was in shock. I had to be. My hands, where they gripped this guy's forearm, were cold like ice yet sweat slicked my palms. I struggled to pull in a full breath while everything seemed so distant.

Muted.

“*Matarla!*” Valentina shrieked as she pointed at me. Her eyes were a watery mess, and her face scrunched up in her anger. Or despair? I couldn’t tell, but her words caused the man at my back to yank harder on my hair. The blade bit deeper, like a drop of blood rolled down my neck.

Why the hell couldn’t I tell for sure?

Sweat. It drizzled along my skin and soaked my clothes. I was drenched as chills wracked me.

“No!” Matías lunged across the space until he was right in front of me. He snapped something in Spanish but the man holding me ignored whatever order he’d been given.

Matías’ gaze swept down my body before his gaze collided with mine. There was an apology there, but what was he apologizing for?

Whatever I thought I saw disappeared as soon as he met the gaze of the man behind me. “Steffan, if you don’t remove your filthy hands from her, I will remove them,” he stated coolly, even as he panted. Valentina tried to argue in Spanish but he held out a hand. “Shut your fucking mouth. Vicente’s dead. That means I’m in charge.” He twisted so he could see her.

Mutiny replaced the tears. “It doesn’t mean shit,” she spewed, slapping her palm down on the floor next to Vicente’s body.

This woman was a psychopath. She had to be. She flipped between extreme emotions too fast for any of them to be authentic. Except maybe the anger. She was furious Matías was discounting her position here.

Two of the men in the room moved to stand behind her.

“You wouldn’t know the first thing about running the Institution, Valentina. And your fuck toys don’t stand a chance of making it out of this room alive.”

His pulse visibly thrummed in his neck despite how collected he was. If I didn’t have any context, he could just be having a hateful but harmless argument with his sibling.

“You don’t have any idea what you’re up against, brother. And you’re more pussy-whipped than I thought if you want to have this conversation in English. Our people know why. And it won’t endear them to you. Not when that bitch killed our father.” She snapped her gaze to me.

Pins and needles flashed over my body with each inhale, my fingers and scalp tingling. I needed to get the hell away from this man. When I tested his hold, he yanked me back into him and this time, the blade did cut.

I sucked in a sharp breath at the sting and Matías’ gaze whipped back to me. “Steffan, we’ve had no issues in the past,” he said casually, “and you’re already going to spend time in the chambers for that cut on her neck. If you so much as twitch and harm her in any other way, you forfeit your life.”

“You can’t save her! What part of ‘*she killed our father*’ do you not understand?” Valentina was a wild rage trapped inside a tall, curvy body. She pushed up from the ground, the two men behind her reaching out to steady her but she brusquely brushed them off. “No matter what you want, you *can’t* save her.”

But I didn’t *kill* Vicente.

I would have. I wanted to have been the one.

Matías slowly twisted around to glance between Vicente and then me. I tried to shake my head, but the man’s—Steffan’s—grip was too tight. Could Matías see what I had planned? What I would have done if given the chance?

But I hadn’t needed to.

I’d been scoping the dais, trying to figure out a way to get closer when Vicente noticed me in the crowd. He’d caught the attention of a young girl passing by with a tray of drinks and sent her to collect me. The excited gleam in his eyes was so bright even from across the room. I knew it for what it was. An opportunity.

“Did you kill him?” Matías asked softly, like he knew the answer. Like he was afraid of my revelation. His eyes screamed for me to lie if I did kill him.

I opened my mouth, but Valentina rushed forward and shoved Matías. “Her word means nothing! I ordered her death. *Steffan*.” She glared at Steffan, urging him to continue the slice, to deepen it enough that I would bleed out.

“Steffan...” Matías warned as he shifted closer. His fingers twitched like he was ready to take him out if necessary.

I didn’t think he could. Actually he could, but I’d already be dead by that point.

“She needs to die, Matías,” Valentina said as she reached for the hand holding the knife.

“Back the fuck up!” Matías knocked her out of the way and pulled a gun from under his jacket. With zero hesitation, he raised it toward us and fired. I squeezed my eyes shut and jumped, taking that final second to prepare myself for my throat to be ripped apart on his way down to the ground.

A sweet and sassy image of Grace flashed through my mind. Then images of the brothers followed right behind it. Grey, Lafe, Andre, and fuck it—Parker.

The knife at my neck jerked away and then I was in Matías’ arms. His heart raced against my cheek as I gasped for air. *Holy shit*.

Holy fucking hell.

That was close. I almost died.

And Matías shot the man who held the knife to my throat. He was either extremely confident in his skills or he was—we were really lucky.

“If anyone is going to kill her, it’s going to be me.”

I froze in his arms as his voice vibrated through his chest.

“And that’s *if* she’s guilty. Where’s the girl who ran out screaming?” He raised his voice as he addressed the people in the room. “Bring her back here.” Footsteps thudded as men ran from this room.

Slipping my arms around his waist, I pressed tighter into his body, if only for the reason that I needed human contact. I

knew this was a thing from working with abused women and children, but I never actually thought *I* would need it myself.

I ached to be held by Lafe, Grey, maybe even Andre, but Matías was still a warm body to remind me that I was alive. I shook but I ignored my physical reactions to angle my head to see what was going on around us.

Valentina filled my sight. Standing several feet away, the magnitude of her gaze made her seem like she took up the entire room. I narrowed my eyes on her and she returned the favor.

The two men were still at her back, not quite pressing up against her, but not allowing her any space either. A newcomer slid into the room, and when he saw Vicente on the floor his eyes widened. He immediately started shouting in Spanish and raced from the room.

Matías cursed under his breath and tightened his hold on me.

The floor seemed to shake with the force of people running through the hallways.

I pushed away from Matías enough to see what was happening so I could be prepared for an attack, but that wasn't what the people were doing. At least not yet.

Women poked their heads in, screamed, then ran back out. Their sorrow and grief pierced my ears. These women...

They were mourning a monster.

I stepped out of Matías' hold altogether. Another woman came through the door, and she looked familiar, but I couldn't place her. She was older than most of the girls in attendance tonight. Very fine lines fanned out from her eyes and one deep line across her forehead were the only signs of age. Even though it was twisted up, her hair was dark and glossy.

She approached Vicente slowly, tears forming in her eyes, but she never moved to touch him, or bend toward him. Her body remained ramrod straight as she clasped her hands in front of her.

Valentina sneered at us, paying the woman no attention. One of the men touched her arm, but she shrugged him off, snapping in Spanish. Then she turned and shouted toward the door. Whatever she said, it was too rapid for me to catch any of the words.

Matías grabbed my arm and pulled me behind him as men flooded the small room. The opulent bed in the corner was shoved to the wall to make room and Matías started to press his back into me as he moved us toward the corner.

The men who joined us raged as they took in Vicente's still form and as if they couldn't contain themselves, they started to jostle and fight. The scene was something from a riot with the way they tried to force their way forward.

A few men called for my death. At least, I thought that was what they were shouting. A few others argued while pointing at Matías then Valentina.

The room was in complete pandemonium as a fight broke out close to the door. I couldn't see it through the throng of men pressing closer to us, but the sound of plaster breaking rose above the yelling.

"Stop!" Matías slashed his hand at the crowd. "*Alto!*" He caught my eye for a brief moment, then tensed his jaw as he addressed the crowd.

I caught a few words here and there, like *we*, *Institution*, *time*, and lastly, *death*.

The rest, I had no idea. Damn it. I edged back to the wall, as I stared at the crowd. What was he saying? Those words could mean anything. He could string them together in over a dozen different ways. But whatever he was relaying, it wasn't having the desired effect because the people were restless, shifting on their feet and pressing closer. The only respect they seemed to have was for Vicente bleeding out on the floor.

Valentina snapped her head left and right, listening intently to what was happening. And she didn't like it. Balling her hands into fists, she approached until she stood in front of

Matías and glanced at the crowd. Then she twisted to point at me.

I stopped breathing and my eyes widened.

What the fuck with these reactions? I hated that I gave anything away. If I was going to help the brothers, I needed to get it together.

I wasn't the one who killed Vicente.

It didn't matter that I would have.

"I didn't kill him!" I screamed over the crowd.

Everything stopped. The bedroom was engulfed in silence except for my heavy breathing. I pressed my fingertips into the wall to ground myself. So many hostile eyes on me was unnerving in a way that I'd never experienced before.

But...fuck this.

Vicente was dead. The brother's biggest obstacle was gone. These assholes? They were nothing compared to Vicente. The power they wielded was a tenth of what he had the access or influence to make happen. And I wasn't going to cower before anyone.

I steeled myself and pushed around Matías. Someone had turned the lights up, highlighting every scowl and sneer pointed my way. The bright light reflected off of knives held in tight fists, like at any moment they would attack. At least twenty furious men were crammed in the small space, all watching me with hatred in their eyes.

Ignoring the sweat rolling down my face and neck, I inhaled.

"I didn't kill Vicente!" I shouted again. This time, Matías repeated the words in Spanish. "He brought me back here with another girl. I had no idea he would do that. I had no weapon." At least I didn't *now*. "The other girl stabbed him as soon as we had the door shut."

I'd done hundreds of speeches through college and my short time at the firm. I excelled at painting the picture I

needed to show to the people, but here and now, I stuck to the facts all while Matías translated.

“I did *not* kill him. The better question you should ask yourself is, why would she?”

Before the last word was out of my mouth, Valentina tried to run forward but one of her men caught her around the waist. She yelled as she kicked and screamed. Spittle flew from her mouth as she tried to get to me.

My back hit the wall. I hadn't even noticed retreating.

An older guard in the crowd joined her in her efforts to fight his way through the crowd, and just like Valentina, his attention was focused completely on me. The hair on the back of my neck stood up from the hatred in his gaze.

I sucked in a breath as the crowd lost control. Matías tried to settle them down, but someone landed against Matías, forcing him to stumble into me. The cloying scent of sweat and the heat of so much hot breathing stuck to my skin.

More people pressed into the room and one brave person tried to reach around Matías to grab my arm. I slapped it down, then Matías threw a fist to their cheek. Without waiting to see how hard his punch fell, he turned toward me and ducked to slam his shoulder in my stomach. I grunted as he hoisted me up. Somehow, very few people touched us as he forced his way through the raging crowd.

I pushed myself up to see what was happening. At least five men were holding the rest back. Valentina never stopped trying to get to us.

Matías shouted back to them and continued pushing through. Once we exited the room, he took another door. This wasn't a room though. He raced down a dim back hallway that must have been for the staff. At the end, he climbed up a set of stairs, his footsteps and our breathing echoing back to us.

The next thing I knew, we were exiting an empty hallway and he ducked into the first room. He set me down with very little care and turned for the door. He froze as he pressed his palm on the wall as his other hand paused on the knob.

“I’m sorry, Amorette.”

Then he was gone.

LAFE



The first step through the doors had me gritting my teeth.

So many fucking people. Too many loud noises. No fucking room to breathe.

This is where everyone had gone when they emptied out of the main room. Both men and women ran in all directions and every single one of them were losing their shit. I couldn't even make out the words over the women screaming.

Vicente had always been worshiped in his city and the homes of his top men. It sickened me. This grief on display right in front of me was absolute madness. My palms itched and the hair on the back of my neck raised as I tried to block out my desire to shake sense into these people.

I didn't give two fucks about them, but people who acted in fear were dangerous. For as long as Killer wasn't with us, these people were a threat.

The initial drive of adrenaline began to slip and my overriding fear for Amorette started to replace it. Fuck, I wished those trays were still traveling around. I could really use a clear head right now.

I should have snuck off when I had the chance. But I hadn't wanted to leave Killer unprotected.

Andre stopped short and we almost trampled over him.

"Either you push these assholes out of the way, or I will." Grey stepped around him, ready to do exactly as he said.

“We’re going together. After this, we’re never fucking separating ever again,” Andre grumbled as he readjusted his grip on his weapons and moved forward. For once, I was with Andre. Killer was never leaving my sight.

No one moved out of our way. They didn’t seem aware of anything happening around them. Small fights and skirmishes broke out when people were shoved against each other and one woman cried out as she was knocked down and trampled. Not one fucking friendly face in sight to help us. We barely made it two steps before Andre was forced back into Parker.

Across the hall, a kid shoved his way through, like his only goal was to escape the madness.

“Vicente’s really dead!” he shouted. No, not a kid, but young in age, and already dressed as a full-fledged guard.

My body started to uncontrollably shake as I tried to push my own way through the crowd before I was shoved back.

This was pandemonium. Killer didn’t have any fucking allies here. Hell, we barely had any allies here, and I wasn’t convinced Matías could actually save her. Or that he wanted to.

What if this was part of his plan? To separate us so we couldn’t reach Killer?

No. *No*. If he wanted to separate us, he never would have called Andre in the first place. I controlled a long exhale through my nose. Getting worked up with ridiculous thoughts would only hurt us.

Matías was on our side. I could at least trust that...for now.

Killer thought he wasn’t the villain we painted him and I internally scoffed at the thought. Why was he so much better than we were? When she first came to us, we’d been the recipients of her hate and scorn.

All while he was the legitimate heir to the evil empire Vicente created. Yet, we were the bad guys.

She never said it, but her expressions when she thought we weren't watching still said she felt that way. And she wanted us to make up with our half-brother who had never been any kind of brother at all.

Another wail pierced my ears and I shook my head.

Focus, Lafe.

I couldn't handle this. My gaze darted from person to person each time someone moved a step closer. Twisting around, I snarled and threw a punch when someone hit my back.

A woman cried out.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

I hadn't meant to do that. Reaching out a hand, I steadied her, but I didn't apologize. I couldn't. There wasn't the time, and I couldn't show the perceived weakness to these *skitstövel*.

“Detain the bastards!” another man shouted as he pointed our way. “Valentina said they might be traitors!”

“What the fuck?” Parker whispered as he knocked out a guy trying to grab him.

“Here we go again,” Grey said, like fighting our way out of a hallway wasn't an issue, just a slight and potentially fun inconvenience.

I raised my hands, dropping into one of the stances Grey had drilled into my head since he taught us to fight, but no one attacked. In fact, the people closest to us stepped back, forming a circle around us.

Giorgio, one of Vicente's head soldiers stepped forward and raised his hands to stay the men, and fuck, they listened to him, immediately stepping back.

Andre's spine stiffened and the heat radiating off of him had to be his anger taking physical form. How were we supposed to command the Institution if no one listened to us? Or respected us? Our only option was to beat the people into submission and rule with fear like Vicente had.

I didn't want to do that.

I wanted to save Amorette and live out the rest of our lives on our island where no one could get to us.

We lowered our hands and fanned out around Andre. I searched the slowly calming crowd—if not calming down, at least stopping enough to turn their rabid attention on us. There was fear in everyone's eyes.

Fear of the unknown, and maybe wondering whose dick they'd need to suck to live—or climb the Institution's corrupt ladder.

Among that fear, there was another emotion that was easy to read in at least half of these assholes. Contempt.

They wanted blood. *Our* blood.

“You will part the way for us to pass and find our fucking woman, or you will regret it. We don't want to hurt you, or kill you. Not when so many changes are about to happen. But we will. If you push us, we will make an example of each of you.” Andre's voice vibrated with his wrath.

When we'd lived in the mansion, Giorgio hadn't held as high of a position. He'd never bothered us, but he'd never helped us either. And there had been plenty of opportunities for any of those fuckwads, including Matías to help us. It had been years since I'd actually seen Giorgio. It was a toss-up if his current position was too much power for his weak ego to handle. We'd find out soon.

“My friends.” Giorgio didn't have any inflection in his voice to reflect the panic rapidly spreading through the people one whisper at a time. “I'm sure you can understand this is a volatile time. Please, come with us until we get everything sorted out.”

“You're in no position to make demands,” Andre snapped. “Even without being Vicente's bastards, we're enforcers and respective heads of our factions. We outrank you by several levels.”

“Yes,” Giorgio conceded with a tip of his head, “but it was your woman who is accused of murdering Vicente.”

I didn't like the way he was using logic against us, using words to make Amorette out to be the evil one.

Parker must have hated it too as he took a few steps forward to place him in front of us. He inspected his jacket, flicking an imaginary piece of lint off. With all the blood staining his suit, it was a ridiculous action.

“Let's be frank since we're among friends.” One side of his mouth curved as he tossed that word back at Giorgio. “Vicente dealt in flesh, violence, and fear. We're all guilty of that in the Institution, no?” He raised his head to meet Giorgio's stare dead on. “That woman—*our* woman—that you're accusing of murder has spent her entire life fighting the good fight. She may not like Vicente, but she'd never murder him unprovoked. She doesn't have it in her.” He smiled, but it was too sharp to be genuine, and his dark eyes were so icy he threatened to freeze Giorgio in place. “Now, me on the other hand? I can't wait to see your lifeless body on the end of my knife for the mere fucking reason that you're pissing me off.”

I glared at Parker. Was this supposed to be helping?

First, we all knew how wrong he was about Killer. She had already shown us just how far she was willing to go when she was forced into a corner. But these people wouldn't know that. How would this play out if her kills ever leaked outside our own men?

Throwing in a threat on top of it? How did this get us to her faster?

“Then how did she end up with you?” one of the younger men asked with his top lip curled. I was right there with him. It didn't make any fucking sense. We lived it and it still didn't make sense.

“Because,” Andre said as he shot Parker a warning look. “We took her.” He hesitated as if he wanted to say more and he wasn't sure it was a good idea.

“We took her from Maikel,” Grey clarified as he cleaned his nails with his knife. This one was clean so he must have

put his well-used knife away. “And if you must know, fucking is a great convincer.”

Giorgio scoffed. “You’re saying you converted someone we would normally never welcome into our society because you have magical dicks? I don’t buy it.”

Feet shuffled and whispers scattered throughout the crowd. There were even one or two nervous laughs.

“Think what you want, but she’s ours. Try to take her from us and it’s the last thing you’ll do.” Grey flipped his knife in his hand and when he caught it, he met Giorgio’s stare.

I scuffed a hand over my face. This was terrible. Parker had to fucking open his mouth. I caught some of the whispers and they were troubling.

They shouldn’t hold those positions.

They’re pussy-whipped—thinking with their dicks.

We should toss them in the chambers until we know what Matías wants to do.

“You can put my head on a stake later,” Giorgio said, motioning for a few soldiers to step closer. “Safety is the first priority here, and you four walking around isn’t helping matters.”

We exchanged a glance.

Fight, it was. One way or another, we were getting to Killer.

Grey double-fisted knives, Parker cracked his neck as he surveyed the hall with no weapons in his hands. Andre had a gun in one and a knife in the other.

I just had one knife. I wanted a freehand in case I needed it.

Lowering into our fighting stances, we dared them to make the first move. But like before, if they took too long, we would dive in.

Fuck trying to take everyone out. I’d fight my way toward the commotion where Killer had to be.

The soldiers started to circle us, seeming to feel safer when they could surround us.

“There’s no need for a fight.” Giorgio checked the clip on his weapon. “Shoot to maim. Cosmetic only.”

Suddenly there were guns pointed at our knees. That wasn’t cosmetic! Fuck, this was going to hurt if we didn’t stop them. I rocked back on my heels, preparing to tackle the closest man to me. If I could get inside their group, they wouldn’t shoot me.

“What the hell is going on?” Matías barked as he rounded the corner. How did he get there? Why wasn’t he in the room that was blocked off? And where the fuck was Amorette?

“Where is she?” Grey asked coldly as he squared his shoulders toward Matías.

Matías turned to Giorgio without answering Grey.

What did that mean? He said he was going to save her, damn it.

And why was Valentina moving through the edges of the crowd with a smirk on her face?

I started forward, but Andre slammed an arm into my chest to hold me back at the same time, he shoved Grey back.

“What’s going on and why are you trying to have my brothers detained?” His face was a mask of ice and his voice was cold enough to match it.

Giorgio lowered his head. “Sir, Valentina sent word out that they are potentially behind the attack since it was their property that killed Vicente.”

Oh hell.

The first thought was that Killer wasn’t going to like that description. The second thought was that Valentina held a lot of sway. At least in the interim while everything was unknown.

I couldn’t stop myself from searching for Valentina. She was much closer to us now, ten or so feet back and only a

handful of people to separate her from us.

The spark of delight in her gaze was obvious. She couldn't hide it. She couldn't stop her lips from twitching, either.

No other words were necessary. Whatever had happened, Killer hadn't taken out Vicente.

"That's not her decision," Matías stated in a lethal tone, contradicting the red blooming on his cheeks. "Who do you take orders from, Giorgio?" The threat of his tone raised hair along my neck.

Giorgio startled, and did his own searching, except he couldn't see Valentina from where he was. Not yet.

"Vicente, sir." He bowed his head again, this time even deeper.

"Vicente is dead. Who is second in the Institution?"

"You, sir."

"Who do you take orders from?"

"You sir," Giorgio repeated slowly as if he understood where this conversation was going.

"Then why are you acting under orders that I did not give? If there's any uncertainty about what you're supposed to do, you come find me."

"Sir," Giorgio tried to raise his head but one peek at the scorn on Matías' face had him dropping his head back down. "Valentina is also part of the Institution. She ordered them detained for the safety of—"

"Bullshit!" He barked just as Valentina pushed through the crowd. "We don't know what happened. Were you in the room when Vicente tried to fuck two girls?"

"No."

"Was Valentina in the room?"

"No, sir."

With each question, Valentina's gaze grew colder and colder.

“Then how the fuck would you know what happened? You don’t get paid to think and you certainly don’t get paid to take orders from Valentina.”

“I’m part of the Institution just like you are,” Valentina snapped as she appeared behind Giorgio.

Matías laughed, the condescending sound grating on my skin. “You’re a trinket that our father liked to parade around. The perfect cartel princess. Pretty, but useless in the running of the Institution.”

Some of the people murmured their agreement while a few of the women looked at Valentina with pity.

“How nice, Matías. Our father’s body is barely cold and you’re proving just how much you didn’t like him. As his daughter, I’m trying to make sure his killer gets the death they deserve. You, on the other hand, welcomed them into your home. Or is it your bed now? You did have her on your arm. How do we know you aren’t behind his death?” So much venom seeped into her words as she scrunched her nose up.

Of all Vicente’s kids, she held the least of his features. But her expressions and mannerisms were all him, as if she’d tried to adopt as much as she could to increase her standing in the Institution.

Except the one thing she’d never mastered was how to hide her rotten core. Vicente could charm the best of them, but somehow Valentina couldn’t hide how much she delighted in getting her way, or how pissed she was when she didn’t.

For a second, I didn’t think Matías was going to answer her. As packed as the hallway was, silence engulfed us.

“Your tantrum isn’t going to win you any favors, sister. I don’t have any love for you, not like Vicente did. You’ll have even less influence over the Institution now that it’s mine.”

Some fool in the crowd decided now was the time to speak up. “The bastards said that the Institution was theirs.”

Flicking his gaze at us, his expression never changed. “My brothers are my right-hand men. If the Institution is mine, it’s also theirs. My sister, however, is a spoiled brat who would

cause chaos just to amuse herself. That's not what the Institution is about and I won't let her run us into the ground."

Valentina's face started to purple as she glared at Matías.

"Just to prove my point, let me show you what happens to men who take orders from Valentina..." He pulled his weapon on Giorgio.

He shot his right thigh, then his left, then put a bullet in his gut.

At first, Giorgio made no sound as he stared at his stomach in disbelief. Then he screamed as he collapsed on the ground. Valentina watched as if she were watching a bug on the window. It didn't even gain much of her interest that he was dying because of her.

"The rest of you get the hell out of here. I'll put out an official message soon. You'll allow us time to grieve our father, and if anyone attempts to harm my brothers or the woman I brought with us tonight, you'll be given the same treatment as Giorgio. If you actually manage to hurt them, your entire family will go to the chambers. I will not tolerate any disobedience. In that way, I *am* my father's son."

Turning, he started to walk toward us, but when no one moved, he shouted, "Leave!"

Soon, we were alone with Matías and Valentina as she continued to glower from her spot. She didn't make any attempt to approach us or help Giorgio on the floor, even as he begged her.

"You said you'd take care of Amorette," I whispered once he was close. My voice wavered and my lips trembled.

"Is this how you keep your fucking promises, Matías? You're supposed to be watching Amorette," Andre whispered, except his voice was much stronger than mine.

Matías grabbed Parker's arm and motioned for us to follow him farther down the hall. At the end, he pushed open the double doors. I twisted to see if anyone was following us.

No one was.

But Valentina still watched us.

This was a more residential area and he pulled us into a study. “I don’t know what’s going on, but Amorette didn’t kill Vicente.”

I released a breath. At least he understood that.

“No shit. That was a cheap set up. But that’s not what I want. Take us to Little Love.” Parker approached Matías like he wouldn’t stop. Grey was right on his heels, but Andre stepped in front of them as he studied Matías.

“Why aren’t you taking us to her? And why isn’t she with you?”

I wanted to add in my thoughts, but so many churning emotions inside me halted my attempt. I was stretched too thin and if I opened my mouth, I was afraid of what would come out. Or how pathetic my voice would sound. So I stepped back and placed my back against the wall and pressed my fingertips into my thighs. I needed my canister. Why the fuck didn’t I plan better for this shit?

“The heads have called for a meeting to know what the hell is going on. I have to take it. Unless we want everything to crumple under our feet, I have to flex some muscle and you’re going to have to *trust* me.” Matías raked his hands through his hair, reminding me so much of Andre it was jarring.

“We don’t have to do shit,” Grey eyed Matías. “Where’s Amorette?” he repeated slowly as if Matías just didn’t understand the question the first several times we asked it.

“As safe as I can make her. She can’t be at this meeting and *all* of you have to be.”

“We want the Institution. The only way I can be certain no one undermines us like Vicente did is to take over,” Andre warned, explaining to Matías exactly what we planned to do.

“Yeah, well, you can fucking have it. I don’t want it. But for right now, I’m the heir. I’m the one they listen to, not you.”

Andre was two seconds from socking Matías, but he held his temper in check.

Matías' phone dinged and when he checked the message, he sighed.

“I won't ask again. You have to make up your minds if you can trust me or not, and you have to make a decision *now*.” He glanced up at us, his gaze stopping on every single one of us. There was so much disappointment like he knew our decision before we made it for ourselves. “This back and forth is giving me whiplash and I won't be constantly forced to the side because you're assholes...At least two-thirds of the heads are on the property. Brace yourself. They're almost here.”

PARKER



Matías paced behind the desk as he waited for the other heads to arrive. He was showing a rare sign of vulnerability. A ploy?

I didn't think so. It could easily be a tactic to earn our trust, but in just a few short days, that didn't seem to be his style. What was his style was watching us with a sick fascination that I wasn't sure he was even aware of.

He didn't seem to be who I thought he was, either. Our dear half-brother still had the personality of the dead fish, but he wasn't some evil genius mastermind. The one advantage he had on us was that Matías currently had a stronger foothold in the Institution. Now I didn't give so much as a shit about that, but Andre did. All of my dear brother's tells were saying just how this was getting under his skin.

That was going to be an issue long-term, but I'd just have to see how it played out.

Taking my jacket off, I draped it over one of the leather chairs. The blood soaking it was still wet enough that it was going to leave a mess behind, but that was an issue for Gonzalez's cleaners. I was more concerned with getting this over with so we could get back to Little Love.

Then the angry footsteps traveled through the cracked door. Matías must have left it open to be able to hear their arrival. It wasn't like we had any conversation for them to overhear. We were stone fucking statues glaring at each other for giggles.

Well, to be fair, we were glaring at Matías while he paced.

As soon as Matías heard them, he took a deep breath and sat in the chair behind the desk, smoothing both hands down his barely wrinkled suit while the four of us took up various spots against the wall. Two on either side of the door.

Fitting that my brothers and I would be covered in blood and gore while Matías appeared barely disheveled. This was very reminiscent of how Vicente liked to operate.

The resplendent door creaked open.

For all the money Gonzalez made, you'd think he could afford some lubricant. Then again, creaking was a good warning. Not that it mattered. Andre left him in a pretty mess in the main hall.

Six men filed in, severe expressions painted on their faces. No sadness or heartbreak in sight for these greedy fuckwads. They showed us just as much distaste in their sneers as we had for them.

Of the entire Institution, there were ten different factions, or companies as I believe we once explained to Little Love.

We, the bastard sons, controlled four of them. The drugs, the fights, the rats, and my personal favorite, the heists. Why Vicente thought putting us in control of almost half the Institution was a good idea, I'd never know. Not when it was obvious we detested everything about the man.

A few of the other factions were just as lucrative, but we didn't want anything to do with them. Take, for example, the pussy peddling. Maikel probably made as much or more in the Galleries as Lafe made in running drugs. Men loved to pay a pretty penny for women to act out their every fantasy.

Hell, some men just liked to pay for a good fucking without any conversation or expectations attached to it. But the ones who paid the most? They were into some sick shit, hence why the Galleries were so lucrative.

Then there was the arms business, gambling, and financial crimes.

The last two pieces weren't so much independent business, but they were essential to the operations of the Institution and helped smooth the way for the other factions.

Security—which needed no additional explanations, and the travel business. As a farce of a shipping company, we had a global foothold to fly and ship our products as we pleased.

My brothers and I didn't use them, though. We liked to build our own connections. At the time, it had been as big of a fuck you as we could make it. Now, I was glad I had that small degree of separation. If this whole plan went to shit, which it still might, we would need the help to disappear off of the radar of these idiots.

Here with us today were the heads of travel, security, and finance—or I should say the new heads of travel and finance since Vicente had spoiled my hard-thought-out plans and spiked their predecessors' heads at the parade—as well as our favorite uncle Maikel. The other two attendees stuck close to travel and finance. I could only assume these were the new seconds.

Tomas was the oldest and perhaps most unpredictable of the men in attendance today. As a finance man who operated on embezzlement and a side of fleecing people from their life savings, he thrived on throwing curveballs as often as possible. In my personal opinion, the man was just fucking crazy.

I bet he was so fucking happy when Vicente promoted him to head, that he licked the shit from Vicente's shoes.

Of the collection of chairs on this side of the desk, he took the seat directly opposite Matías, like he was the one to fear, shoving right past Maikel. Our uncle sneered at him, while taking the next seat.

Maikel was such a waste of space. He wasn't even trying to hide the gleam in his eyes. From the time I could comprehend words, it was obvious to everyone Maikel wanted more power. He salivated over foolish schemes that never worked out for him. I used to think Vicente got a sick kick out of keeping him in line, first on his own, then eventually through his bastard castoffs.

Henry, head of security, was a young Canadian ex-con who excelled at frightening men into submission. He and Vicente had gotten along great. They were both psychopaths and Henry enjoyed the discipline Vicente demanded and the freedom to act on his more...unsavory instincts.

And Jax, the new Mr. Travel extraordinaire, was the most pompous, plastic man I'd ever met. He had tried to force us to use his planes on a few trips, but our conversations being recorded and sent to Vicente was never acceptable.

No, thank you.

Predictably, Henry snapped the chair away from Jax with a crazy-eyed squint. Jax lifted his hands in defeat and stepped back next to a scrawny man with no presence at all.

Why bring a man like that to a meeting with wolves?

The skinny man touched Jax's hip in a barely there gesture. Ah, so they were lovers first. I'd just file that away for later.

The last attendee was a mouse of a thing, barely breaking five feet but with a murderous expression. At least he had a bit of fight in him.

"Is it true?" Tomas folded his arms over his bulging belly.

"Do you think it wouldn't be true with all the people losing their motherfucking minds?" I raised my eyebrows. "For a man so recently promoted, you exhibit an unusual amount of rocks for brains." My voice whipped through the room.

Fuck this. Matías demanded I be here, then he'd get 'pissed-off Parker'. If he wanted complacent Parker, he should have kept Little Love with him. As much as she made my blood boil with her self-righteous attitude, I still wanted her. With me—us. Right fucking now.

Poor Lafe was in the same boat. Standing off to the side, he chewed his lip so hard he was going to bite it clean off. His body was present, but his gaze said no one was home. He was probably running through a million different scenarios of what could be happening to Little Love right now.

Except Matías promised she was safe. But as safe as he could make her was very different from *safe*.

Grey stood on the other side of him as he played with the edge of his blade while glaring down the room. I would say it was just an intimidation tactic to scare the heads with his knife, but I think that was Grey's version of self-soothing. He missed Little Love too and his patience was thin.

"Parker," Matías and Andre both warned like I was some five-year-old to be reprimanded. Ah, Andre, the only one of us who seemed to care about appearances as he wore the reserved mask he always donned while dealing with these fuckers.

Noted. I was to be seen and not heard. I moved away from the wall to the display case holding antique books and artifacts. The perfect position to eye each man down. I jumped and sat my ass right on it. If I wasn't going to be able to participate I would at least be in their faces.

"Vicente is dead," Matías' voice rang out with zero feeling.

Bravo, brother! Set the tone right from the start.

"How the hell did that fucking happen?" Maikel shouted as he shot to his feet. He pressed his knuckles to the desk and leaned toward Matías, who was unimpressed with his attempt to intimidate him.

"Sit down, Uncle, or lose a hand. That's your favorite punishment, isn't it?" Matías tipped his head back.

Maikel tucked his chin and pushed even deeper toward Matías. He'd never had this much gall with Vicente. He wouldn't dare. But this was a new time and the hierarchy was being rewritten with every second.

Our uncle must have believed he had a shot at rising to the top. Or at least getting a seat next to Matías if he could succeed in bullying him into it. Who knew? Maybe Matías had love for our scum of an uncle. It wasn't like I kept tabs on their particular relationship.

"Grey, do you have your serrated knife?" Matías didn't look away from Maikel so neither man saw the devious grin

spreading over Grey's face as he turned it over to show the room the edges that were still stained with blood.

"I sure fucking do."

Immediately, Maikel pushed up from the desk and let loose an unsteady breath. "Is this how you're going to start ruling in Vicente's absence? You won't be at the top long." He took his seat again and shot a knowing look at the other heads.

If he was looking for support, he wasn't finding it.

"Vicente's absence," I laughed. "You make it sound like he's going to pop back up from the dead. We all know you're just *dying* for a seat at the top."

With the stupidity leaking into the room, I just couldn't contain myself.

"Parker!" Lafe hissed.

E tu, hermano? Lafe never got involved in anything. What the fuck?

My nostrils flared. Did they really expect me to not participate in this farce of a meeting? It was more of a dick-measuring contest. Anyone could see this was an opportunity for the heads to see just how far they could push Matías, nothing else.

And here we were, my useless brothers and me acting as pretty sentinels decorating the room.

"Parker does have a point," Matías said drily.

"It was your brothers' woman who killed him," Tomas harrumphed, "why are they even in the room?"

This greasy motherfucker...

All four of us pushed away from whatever object propped us up and stepped toward Tomas. Lafe and Andre were just as outraged as I was, but Grey was already imagining his death by the way he curled his top lip. We only took one step and the fat man was getting nervous. He refused to look at us as his top lip quivered.

Andre looked like he was ready to separate Tomas' head from his body, but when I expected him to lash out, to do *anything* productive, he didn't. He shivered, popped a couple of his fingers and glanced at Matías as if telling him to go ahead with his meeting.

I struggled to hold the surprise off my face. We were not lap dogs. Not even for Little Love would I subject myself to that. I'd rather steal her and go somewhere so far away that no one would ever find us.

"They're in the room because I invited them. The same reason you're here. You're the head of the financial sector because Vicente placed you there—*weeks* ago. No other reason. I can remove you just as easily. Don't test me."

"You—you can't do that!" Tomas stuttered as his stomach shook.

"I can. I don't like you, I never have. You're barely competent but Vicente didn't read the books like I did. I know exactly how much you've skimmed from the Institution before you ever rose to power. Which stops now. Give me a reason to replace you." Matías folded his hands on the desk.

I had to admit, it was amusing watching Matías stay so unaffected while these men attempted to posture.

Tomas suddenly lost his words, so Matías turned to Henry and Jax. "Do you have any grievances you'd like to air?"

The entire time they'd been in this room, Henry's face had been a bland, uninterested mask. Except for the brief snarl when he stole the chair. He studied Matías, then turned to each of us. "I don't have an issue with the brothers, if they don't have an issue with me."

Jax crossed his arms, more in an uncertain gesture than a defensive mode. "No. But if that bitch," Grey and Andre both growled under their breath as soon as the word slipped through Jax's lips. I, on the other hand, just filed it away in the ole memory bank. I'd get my revenge on him in a different way.

As I made eye contact with his lover, he must have seen the truth in my eyes because he hiccupped and stepped back

into Jax's shadow and out of my view.

"If that bitch really did kill him, she can't live."

Every single one of us was taut with a rising fury. Like hell, this slight asshole would demand anything.

Matías made a motion with his hand, and I recognized it for what it was—a sign to let him handle this. To *trust* him. I shot a harsh look Andre's way, and his jaw worked as his gaze seemed to peel away Matías' motives.

Finally, Andre nodded and met each of our stares, silently telling us to stay put.

Well, I guess this was us trusting Matías. Let's hope he didn't fuck us up the ass.

"What makes you think you have any right to have an opinion," Matías mused.

Jax's head shot back and his eyes bugged out. "I, uh, this isn't my opinion. This is a fact on what the public will demand for Vicente's murder."

"Do you think I give one fuck what the public wants?"

At some point, Matías had perfected boredom.

Glancing at Henry, then Tomas, Jax swallowed. "They will riot if they think this was planned. There are already whispers..."

And I knew where those whispers started. Fucking Valentina...

"The Institution isn't a democracy. It's mine to rule and dole out power as I choose. From this meeting, I'm half-tempted to consider replacing every single one of you. None of you have shown the proper deference I'm due."

That was too much for Maikel to take. He burst from his seat. "This is fucking ridiculous! I've been Vicente's top man for decades! I helped him build the Institution! I'll help you, but I won't bow. Vicente wouldn't stand for that." Maikel's chest rapidly rose and fell with each breath.

He thought that little speech did something. *Hoped* that it did.

But Matías raised one eyebrow. “Are you done?”

“Am I—No! Listen here you little shit, I—”

“He’s done. Grey, Lafe? Would you like to escort him from the room? You don’t have to kick him off the property, just remove him from this conversation.”

Lafe twitched as he approached Maikel, but Grey rubbed his hands together as he approached him.

Matías might not want the Institution, but he was doing what we’d failed to do on our own—establish ourselves as a power not to be fucked with. He was keeping his promise the best he could.

Damn it. Now I had to start viewing Matías in a different light.

Maikel tried to kick and scream on his way out, but Grey whispered in his ear and he shut up immediately. It was a glorious sight.

Once the door was shut and locked, Matías turned to the remaining men, pressing his fingertips into the table. “This is not a democracy,” he repeated slowly to these *tarados*. “I am the heir as I’ve always been. I will make changes and parse out power as I see fit. If someone doesn’t like it, they can leave the only way the Institution lets go. Is that understood?” he barked.

Tomas gave a short, hard nod of his head. Jax’s agreement was more timid and it came on the heels of his lover jabbing his ribs. Henry watched Matías for a few long moments through a half-lidded stare. Then he gave a sharp dip of his chin.

“Great. I have a lot of work to do. For now, you’re to run your businesses as usual. Tomas, if you try to play me like my father, I won’t like it. Is that understood?”

Tomas curled a lip but said, “Completely.”

“Perfect. Then I’ll be in touch when your services are needed. If you have a message to send to me, you can contact one of my enforcers.”

They exchanged a glance that wasn’t suspicious at all before turning their gazes to us. I smiled, tickled that Matías was putting us at the top like this. Within two minutes, my brothers and I were left alone.

“Now that that shit show is over, how about taking us to Little Love?” I slapped my thigh and walked up to Matías. We’d listened to Andre and by default him. We deserved to be rewarded and the only prize I was interested in was getting back to her.

AMORETTE



How did I keep getting myself in these situations?

Swinging my arms, I walked circles around the room, periodically stopping to check the cabinets, doors, locks, and essentially whatever I could get my hands on. This was eerily similar to the first time Lafe tossed me into the birdcage.

These torturous experiences taught me something very valuable about myself. I needed to know I could get out if necessary.

But Matías had locked me in. The doors and windows wouldn't budge. If the worst happened, I had a metal sculpture that might break the window. Assuming they weren't reinforced windows. Were those even a thing?

Windshields and bulletproof windows could still be broken with the right amount of force at the right angle.

Taking a deep breath, I closed my eyes. That was a last resort. Right now, no one was attacking me. It was quiet outside the door. Almost too quiet.

There wasn't even a radio to turn on to dispel the maddening silence.

My thoughts were spiraling out of control with nothing else to distract me.

First, what was happening with the brothers? They were going to flip out when they got their hands on me...if they were okay. Just the brief experience with the aftermath I

witnessed before Matías carted me away was probably only the tip of the iceberg.

The other, almost more pressing thought, was why had that girl killed Vincente?

Dripping with charm and easy smiles, Vicente had ushered us into the room. Once we were inside, he shut it with a soft click and turned the lock. The girl and I exchanged a look. I tried to tell her it would be okay, that I was going to *make* it okay, only there was no fear in her eyes.

No acceptance, or disgust, or hopelessness.

Instead, when she met my own gaze, I was faced with what the girls at the warehouse had lacked. Unhinged determination.

Her dark brown eyes shone so bright that they should have illuminated the room.

When Vicente turned around, any faux kindness was gone. His dark brown eyes, eyes that both Andre and Matías shared with him, left a slimy trail on my skin as he took in my body.

“Girls, we might not have that much time before we’re interrupted. Why don’t you two strip while I grab us drinks.” He turned toward the dry bar in the corner, keeping me in his line of sight the entire time, but not the other girl.

As soon as he had his back completely turned away from her, she pulled out a knife, one similar to the one Grey gifted me, screamed and plunged it into his back. He grunted as he fell forward and tried to catch himself on the bar, except he missed. His head banged against the floor as his shaky hand still reached for the wall.

The wet squelch only registered with her third strike. When it was clear he wasn’t going to get up, she left the knife in his chest, stood up and wiped her brow. I was mesmerized by the peace in her movements as she walked to the door. Then, as soon as she had it unlocked and open, she bolted while screaming her lungs off.

I started to follow, but three guards immediately backed me further into the room. I hadn’t even gotten one foot out.

It had to be planned. His murder.

Was I part of the plan or just a helpful convenience?

Ten more times, I walked a circle around the room as my brain tried to piece together all the clues. Even though I had time to process it, I was still fritzing. He was dead. Vicente was actually dead, and I wasn't the one who killed him.

The quickly draining adrenaline left me shaky and lightheaded. I'd have to sit down soon. Water and food would help, but nothing was left in this sterile—albeit comfortable—room.

An eternity passed, and just when I was ready to pull my hair out, the lock on the door snicked.

This was it. Someone was coming.

I took two small steps back and clutched the statue in my hands like a bat. In case it wasn't one of the brothers, I was ready to fight my way out of here. The fight that burned inside me at the warehouse bubbled in my stomach. I'd already ripped my dress on the sides so I could run.

The door opened a few inches, then someone grunted before the door swung wide open.

A disheveled Lafe barreled toward me. He scooped me up, smashing the statue between us. I winced at the sharp edges digging into my chest, but I didn't want to push away from him. The warmth and strength in his hold were exactly what I needed.

I laughed and my eyes watered. I couldn't help it. It was such a short time to be separated, even as so much had happened. So much had changed.

Suddenly, I could actually breathe, inhaling long, deep breaths.

I closed my eyes and buried my nose in his neck.

The others rustled around us but didn't make any comment or try to pull me from his embrace. When I opened my eyes, I was met with Grey's dark green ones as they burned into me. His hands were working out the knot of his tie. Andre already

had his tie tossed over a chair and steadily unfastened the buttons on his shirt.

Andre's complete and utterly devoted attention pinned me in place. The air that I'd found disappeared as I felt like a deer snared in their trap.

They were here. All of them. *Alive.*

"You remember the last time I was so furious with you, *mami?*"

I snapped my attention back to Grey and swallowed hard.

I'm so fucking mad at you, mami. So fucking mad, and you're going to make it all better before I can have a conversation with you.

Slowly, I nodded as Lafe quietly disentangled himself from me. He kept one hand tight on my hip with his fingers digging in, like he just needed to convince himself I was here and that I was safe.

"We need to discuss what happened. I don't know if you saw the look those jackasses exchanged as they were leaving the study but—"

"Later," Andre said, cutting Matias off mid-sentence.

"You can't be serious! This isn't my house—"

"The owner is currently out of commission. You showed us just how much power you have at the moment. I trust you can keep the dogs at bay just a little longer." Andre had his shirt unbuttoned and was pulling the tails out of his slacks. Splotches of dried blood smattered his skin, but he was uninjured. No cuts or scrapes marred his beautiful body.

I turned to Grey, who now had his shirt completely off.

Exhaling a sigh of relief, I slumped forward. They were *safe*. There was some kind of fight. They were covered in too much blood for nothing to have happened. And all the brothers were safe. At least Grey and Andre were completely unharmed.

Thank God.

Andre and Grey started to circle me, and Lafe let out his own beleaguered sigh. My core started to tingle as angry, wild butterflies turned loose in my stomach.

I recognized these looks.

They both wanted me.

And I wanted them.

Even with an audience. I didn't give a damn about anyone else other than them and me, and reaffirming that we were alive.

“Come on, Matías.” Lafe gave me a squeeze and dropped a kiss to my temple before he stepped back. “They need an hour. And I need a drink.”

“Not a drink. He gets water and food or nothing,” Andre interrupted while keeping his focus on me.

“It's not your decision, Andre,” Lafe fired back as he walked toward Matías. Out of the corner of my eye, Lafe motioned for Matías to walk through the door first.

“Water and food only, Matías,” Andre repeated.

“Got it.” Matías waved a hand to the side as he left.

Parker's lips twitched, and he started pulling at his shirt as the door shut. “This is my kind of reunion.”

“Sit.” Andre snapped his fingers and pointed at a decorative chair in the corner. The intense need lifting for just a moment to let burning fury through. It was stiff with a straight back, only there for aesthetics and not for a man as large as Parker to actually use.

“What the fu—”

“You don't get to participate. Not after that stunt you pulled,” Grey murmured as he caught my waist and jerked me against him. I braced my hands on his chest, curling my fingers and pressing my nails into his hot flesh. Grey was a living furnace, and I couldn't wait for him to burn me up.

My arousal wet my thighs in anticipation.

“Fuck this. If I’m not invited, I’ll—”

“I said fucking *sit down!*” Andre roared. I couldn’t see what he was doing because suddenly, Grey dropped his mouth to mine. The first touch of lips was little more than sharing the breath between us. Then he coaxed my mouth open with the sweet edge of his tongue.

Raising on my toes, I slid my hands along his ribs to his back.

They were alive. So was I.

I ached for this connection. I...I needed their hands on me. To ground me in the moment. I needed them in any way they wanted to have me. Because as much as I craved to be in control of my own life, right now I needed them to control *me*.

Let Parker watch. I *wanted* him to. I wanted him to break just a little for trying to push me away with Mia. Maybe later I’d regret it, but all I cared about right then was how much I needed them all as close as I could get them.

I wish Lafe had stayed...

Grey grunted as I was twisted away from his chest. But I wasn’t ripped away. Only turned. Andre slammed my back against Grey’s chest and stepped closer, sliding his hand up my throat.

My eyes fluttered shut as he gave the barest squeeze.

One of my hands flew to his, and the other landed on his bare hip.

Bare.

“Never again. I want you to know that.”

My eyes shot open. Andre pressed his forehead to mine and took a deep breath.

His beautiful, dark brown eyes were all I could see. His rich yet bitter scent was all I could smell. And their hands, God, were all I could feel.

No...

Grey's hands were gone.

Then my dress was yanked back, the fabric ripping. The sensation of the fabric pulling roughly against my skin had my nipples pebbling into tight buds. I jerked with each tug, and then the entire thing fell away. He unsnapped my bra, and out of instinct, I crossed my arms over my chest to stop it from falling entirely.

“No. Don't cover yourself. Let's show our brother how much of an idiot he is. Hmm, Wifey?” Andre hummed as he gently tugged on my arms. The fabric slipped as Grey cut the sides of my panties.

A wave of heat washed over me and sweat trickled down my back. Parker groaned.

When I looked over at him, he scrubbed a hand down his reddening face and slid his ass further down in the seat. His other hand started working on his own pants. “You won't let me *participate*,” he enunciated that word, “fine. But I won't sit here with a raging hard-on.”

Neither Grey nor Andre said a word. I was captivated as he pulled his pants down. However, before he took out his cock, Grey cupped the sides of my face and steered me back to Andre.

“He doesn't matter. This is his *punishment* for acting like a *pendejo* earlier. But you're going to make us feel all better. Reassure us that you're alive. You're going to help us blow off some steam.” Andre's nostrils flared and his pupils dilated as he lowered his head.

I tipped mine up, but at the last second, he swerved to the side and nipped my earlobe. Grey placed wet, teasing kisses on the other side of my neck and my toes curled from the dual sensations.

Their hands stroked my body with so much...ownership. Grey focused on my nipples, rolling the sensitive buds between his fingers. Andre cupped my ass, stroking the soft flesh between my legs and finding that sweet spot.

They worshiped me in a way I didn't think they were capable of, as if they needed the reassurance more than I did.

Tiny, white-hot quakes started to rock through my core, and I mewled as I shifted my hips, trying to ride the wave to completion. I gripped Andre's arms so tight, he hissed. I must have broken the skin with my nails.

Goosebumps erupted over my entire body as I tossed my head back. Yes, I was there.

Waves of unbridled ecstasy swept me up, refusing to release me. My legs gave out and Grey held me up. He turned my head and slammed his mouth on mine, drinking in my cries as the fingers on my clit quickened. I swiveled my hips, prolonging the orgasm for as long as possible.

When I started to come back down, Andre was carrying me to a desk on the far wall. It was standard height yet very narrow, like a small writing desk.

"Wha—" I started.

My back hit the cool top and I hissed. Fuck. I knew exactly why they'd selected this piece of furniture. My ass hung off one end and my head off the other. Grey stood over me and bent down to give me a quick, brutal kiss as he stripped out of his clothes.

"Sorry, Wicked Love. You're not going to get to see me come this time either." His fingers caressed my neck, and I opened for him when the warm, velvety tip touched my lips.

Andre massaged my thighs and mumbled something reverently under his breath as Grey started short, slow thrusts. Then Andre's hand was gone, and the head of his hard cock rubbed through my wetness before he dipped and pushed in.

All three brothers groaned.

I started to choke when I tried to breathe, and Grey and Andre froze.

"Breathe through your nose," Grey said, his voice guttural as he continued to stroke his thumb along the column of my

neck. “Let your head fall back just a little more. You’ll be able to deep-throat me in this position.”

“God yes. I need to see that at the same time her sweet pussy squeezes my cock.” Andre hummed as I fluttered around him. “You like that, don’t you, wifey. You like being a dirty little slut for us,” he cooed.

Ah, God.

I started to pulse from a few words and caresses. They were going to kill me.

Grey grunted as he cupped the sides of my head and started to move in long, firm strokes. “Fuck, she loves it. She’s swallowing around me,” he ended on a moan.

Andre’s hand grabbed my throat and he squeezed. “I can feel it when you thrust,” he groaned in satisfaction.

They found their rhythm as they fucked me. With my legs locked around Andre’s hips and my hands bracing on Grey’s, I was consumed with both brothers and I loved *every*. Fucking. Minute.

A second wave of pleasure so strong washed over me, I twitched and jerked on the table. I choked again, but Grey didn’t slow down this time, taking exactly what he wanted from my mouth.

“So fucking beautiful,” Grey grunted.

“Ours. She *ours*. No one else’s.”

“No one else will ever touch her. Or see her like this. Or I’ll paint the walls with their blood.”

I whimpered from the intense satisfaction that slid through me, filling in all the holes and cracks I’d developed since being taken.

I...

I needed them. And what made it okay, was they needed me too.

PARKER



I —shit.

Rushing from the room, I didn't give one flying fuck about the door slamming behind me. All was clear in the hallway, so at least Matías was keeping the dogs at bay.

I hadn't been to this part of Gonzalez's mansion, but this must be the guest quarters because the very next room was an identical suite. Except a more brighter, airier color scheme. I slammed my back against the door and shoved my pants farther down my hips.

My cock was angry in its unattended state. When I gripped it, giving one firm tug, my eyes almost crossed.

The entire time they fucked her, I clocked every minute detail about our little love. The way her breath caught in her chest, the flush in her cheeks that traveled down to her tits. The way she arched her back and threw back her head when she came. And the sweet way she curled her fingers and toes in ecstasy.

I committed it all to memory. Someday, I'd use it for both our pleasures.

Mm...her reactions had been delicious. Most of my sexual partners were loud and theatrical in the show they put on, but they were in public settings. Those women *were* putting on a show. Hell, so was I. But Little Love was lost to everything except what she and my brothers were feeling. I loved her authentic, unbridled emotion.

She'd always be Little Love. But she could also be our kitten.

Andre had meant the invitation as a punishment, so I hadn't beat myself off during that spectacular show. Though, not because of Andre. Because of my own asinine decisions.

What had I been thinking? Oh, I knew. During the party I'd been so fucking incensed with Little Love. With Matías. With everyone who breathed in my direction.

I wanted her. She wanted me. She couldn't hide her reactions. Little Love had minimal talent in poker faces. Still, she cut me down every time I tried to get closer to her. It fucking grated.

I was an idiot for letting it get to me *then*.

How the fuck had I let myself get so caught up in stupid hurt feelings when Vicente was only across the room?

It had been my fucked up ideas that sent Little Love running. And I couldn't forget that.

So while my brothers had made their own fucked up version of love to Amorette, I gripped my cock at the base and squeezed. The pain was a fun little reminder of how much of an idiot I truly was.

Then they came inside her like she was theirs and I'd never felt so far away from every single one of them. Lafe seemed closer than I did, and he wasn't even in the room.

I didn't like it.

Spitting in my hand, I jerked it up and down my cock in rough, angry strokes.

Four.

It took four tugs before my cum shot out onto the floor. I dropped my hand and rested my head against the door. It was a ridiculous sight, me standing there with my pants down, my cock softening, and the floor disgraced with my pleasure.

Fuck it.

I wasn't cleaning this shit up. I needed to get back to my brothers and hope that no one sucker-punched me now that the dust was settling and Little Love was still unharmed.

Grey was the one I needed to watch for most.

At least on the surface. I didn't put it past Lafe now either, but he'd be too focused on reaffirming Little Love's health and well-being.

Vicente could have hurt her in a different way, but he had only mere minutes before his death. He couldn't have done anything that Little Love couldn't handle.

Yet the thought of his hands on her bubbled something sour and nasty inside me.

Little Love was changing everything about me. Did I want to be this person who couldn't control his own emotions?

I huffed out a laugh. I'd always let my feelings drive my decisions. *Try to fuck me over? I'll fuck you back harder* kind of decision-making.

Except the feelings Little Love incited were more...wild and furious. Alien.

Did I want to be this person?

I didn't have an answer for that as I tucked myself back in my pants and left a dirty floor in the guest room.

And...the other room was empty. Where the hell had they taken Little Love?

I WALKED SWIFTLY BACK to the great room where the party had been, searching for my brothers. Someone had cleaned up Gonzalez and cleared out most of the people. A few of the guards eyed me with suspicion and hatred, but for the most part, Gonzalez's tiny mansion gave off the air of a drunken party after the lights had been turned on and the alcohol shut off. They weren't here, but I didn't expect them to be.

After another few minutes and walking a few more hallways, I found them. All of them. In the study where the de

facto meeting had been held.

Andre and Grey were just peachy as they stood off to the sides. They were relaxed in a way that said another attack could explode in our faces, but they were good.

Lafe was somewhere in a weird state of withdrawal and amusement. He was probably just happy Little Love was back within touching distance. As it was, his hand twitched toward her every few seconds.

Matías, though, was glaring at Andre and Grey, and altogether avoiding Little Love.

Interesting.

“Nice of you to join us,” Andre drawled, his voice missing its usual irritation.

I blew out a breath. Even though I’d just come hard, I was not in a relaxed state. I was in a troubled and restless state. And it seemed I was the only one who felt this way.

Well, to be fair, Little Love didn’t have the after-glow I expected either. She chewed her lip and her gaze moved quickly between two random objects on the desk. I wasn’t sure she even saw them, considering she seemed miles away.

I tried to catch her attention, to gauge how much I’d fucked up, but she was lost in her own thoughts.

“What happened in there?” Lafe asked, bending toward her, giving into his need and placing a shaking hand over her forearm.

She jumped, but once she realized who touched her, she sighed and twisted her arm to thread her fingers through his.

“Hm?”

“What happened in there?” Lafe repeated and enunciated each word.

We all sharpened our focus on her. I couldn’t speak for the others, but I was dying to know the answer to that particular question.

It was as clear as Grey's thirst for blood that Valentina was behind it. Whether we could prove it or not was up in the air. But if we managed to take the Institution over, even indirectly through Matías, it might not be necessary to show proof. It wasn't like Valentina made a habit of shaking hands and kissing babies.

I doubted anyone outside of her fuck toys would care much if she just...disappeared.

Mia flashed through my mind.

That traitorous bitch.

I'd hear what she had to say, but then we were done. She could fuck off with her daddy.

Little Love's avoidance reeled me back to the present. Her big blue eyes went wide for a half a second before she sat upright in the seat. Perfect posture and a lifted chin. This was spicy Amorette, the one the courts saw.

"The girl he'd taken in the room with me killed him."

And...that was anticlimactic.

"We know that," Lafe said at the same time Matías said, "We assumed."

"I believe, Little Love," I hedged, walking closer and rubbing a finger over my eyebrow, "that they want the details. In our world, the details can tell a thousand different stories."

I braced myself for her disdain, but when she turned her attention to me, it was absent. I wouldn't call it affection, although there was a curious thread of heat making its way through her eyes. A slight tremble slid through me. Damn. Maybe I hadn't fucked everything up.

After a few potent moments, she flicked her gaze to Grey before resting on Andre. Her chest expanded with a small inhale, and just when she was about to speak, Andre asked another fucking question.

"Why would you leave with Vicente in the first place?"

How very dense of Andre.

“Like she really had a choice? His guards would have forced her if she hadn’t gone,” Grey scoffed.

“Why would you go that close to the dais?” Lafe asked softly, his brow furrowed as he studied her.

“She wasn’t that close. When he sent that other bitch for her, she was half a room away,” Grey answered yet again. All the while, Matías was content, or as content as he could be in this situation, to watch the conversation unfold.

“It happened,” I inserted myself. Like a masochist, I needed to keep pulling the attention back to me. To determine how badly I’d fucked up at the party. And when it didn’t appear that anyone was going to hold any grudges, I needed to validate, confirm, and reassure myself. That was as much a surprise to me as I’d imagined it would be to my brothers. “The important part is finding out exactly what happened in the room.”

Leaning my ass against the desk, I placed myself that much closer to Little Love sitting feet away. I raised an eyebrow and waited.

Little Love shook her head then started laying it out. She recounted as many details as she could. What Vicente had said. What he did. What the girl had done once the door had closed, and her seemingly bizarre behavior after she killed Vicente.

An odd note clung to her voice throughout her explanation. Only it wasn’t fear, or deception, or any other human emotion that I would have found alarming. I wasn’t sure what it was. However, it didn’t set off any bells, so I let it go.

For now.

“Valentina was the one behind this,” I said, glancing first at Andre, then Matías since he was our temporary leader. Andre wasn’t letting it bother him too badly. Except for the clenched jaw and dark stares when he thought no one was looking.

Matías dropped his head, shielding his expression from us. “I don’t think you’re wrong.”

“I’m sure it was Valentina, but what if the underground movement had something to do with it?” Lafe started rubbing his palms up and down his thighs as he adjusted in his seat—a signature Lafe move when he was about to start looking for his next fix.

I narrowed my eyes on him when he glanced at me. He furrowed his brow in question, but I just watched him. He knew exactly what I was thinking.

Andre made a point before his small fuckfest to ensure Matías watched him. I didn’t disagree with that. We really had been shit brothers, but when it came to policing Lafe, why should I have that power over him?

I certainly didn’t want anyone calling my shots for me.

Then a fun little niggle crawled into my thoughts. If Andre had played his annoying big brother role, he could have stopped me from making several mistakes in the last few weeks.

That revelation was both unsettling and hard to accept. My initial reaction would have been to confront him differently, creating a new headache for us.

However, the situation of helping Lafe get clean required a different approach.

One that would endear Little Love to us, me specifically.

Ah, dear brother, you were about to hate the new barnacle on your ass.

“Even if she wasn’t behind it, she’s going to be a problem for us,” Grey said pointedly.

“For the fifth time, all of the plans I’d been plotting—”

“And failing,” I said with a smile. What could I say? I could only recognize so much self-awareness. At the end of it all, I was still an asshole.

“You fucking *pendejo*,” Andre muttered. “As I was saying, this is the fifth time my plans have gone to shit where we have to start over again.”

A ghost of a smile whispered over Matías' face. "Valentina is going to stir up as much trouble as she can. She likes power. In that way, she's just like Vicente."

"Do *you* think she was behind it?" Grey asked Matías point blank.

"The girl certainly didn't act on her own. If I hadn't seen her here and there over the last several years, I'd think she was an assassin. No one caught her. Someone was behind it and gave her the tools she needed to execute Vicente. Although I think a big piece of tonight was luck." His gaze skated across Little Love. The night hadn't been lucky for her. "I'm not convinced the underground movement would be this motivated. Or try again so soon. There's a very good chance it was our sister. Regardless, Grey is right. She's going to be a problem."

"And if we have to eliminate that problem, you'd be fine with that?" I turned to pin Matías with a stare. Us? No problem. But Matías had grown up as half of Vicente's precious children. He doesn't like her, but since getting to know him, he doesn't seem as hard as I'd have expected.

He hesitated. There it was. Now *he* was going to be a problem.

"As long as I'm not the one to pull the trigger. However, we need a plan because at least half of the heads will try something to earn their deaths."

Andre sighed. "Back to planning. This time, I won't spend so much time agonizing over the best decisions. We're setting a course of action and starting down that path. Fuck it if it doesn't work, we're used to that by now." He uncrossed his arms and his feet and walked over to the desk.

Grey gave in to his baser instincts, picked Little Love up, and arranged her in his lap. She didn't have an ounce of fight in her. In fact, she almost appeared to burrow into him.

A new streak of jealousy whipped against my back. I gritted my teeth and ignored it.

If I wanted my brothers, and wanted Little Love, I'd need to get my shit together.

Because that was what I wanted, wasn't it?

GREY



“I’m going to the hotel. Because of all the other shit going on, I’ve left the repairs to Enrique. With or without you, I’m going to check on my fucking hotel.” I shoved my phone back in my pocket and turned away from Andre. Enrique just sent another update. He said everything was going fine, but there was a strain in the tone of his message that I didn’t like.

The last two hours of planning had killed my brain. Andre was the one who got migraines, but my temples throbbed from all the arguing over how to set up the Institution. While I had been losing myself in Amorette, Matías had already called in some of his men and started weeding through the ones who still remained.

Good thing he did that without Andre. The Institution was taking orders from the “heir” right now, and Andre would have popped a blood vessel.

“We’re not separating. Did you learn nothing from tonight?” Andre threw his hands up as he raced to catch up with me. He didn’t have far to go since I stopped halfway down the hallway and turned to face him. Amorette hovered in the study doorway with the rest of my brothers.

“Vicente is dead. You don’t think I can handle any weak ass threats from the heads or Valentina?” The underground movement wasn’t behind this. Otherwise, they would have taken Vicente out with their explosion. Their planning skills were subpar, and that attack showed just how stupid they were.

I knew there were people ready to put our heads on a platter, but there always had been. There always would be. That was the nature of our lives in the Institution. Like I'd told Andre before, I wasn't going to live in a cage, and he spent too much time trying to stuff us into one.

"Everything's uncertain right now, and I don't give a fuck what you want. We all stay together because I'm not going through that again," Andre gritted out, his nostrils flared and his eyes darkened.

I stopped and looked at him. Really looked at Andre.

He was afraid.

Stepping closer, I lowered my voice so the others couldn't hear. "What are you afraid of? Vicente is dead. Yes, we have to do the work to put ourselves at the top, but Vicente being gone is half the battle."

We never ran with our tails between our legs. We wouldn't start now, no matter what the circumstances were. I couldn't live like that.

Andre closed his eyes, and when he opened them, he turned to glance at Lafe standing with Amorette. "Letting Amorette leave the table was stupid. Aren't you kicking yourself for allowing that to happen?"

A hint of a smile curled my lips when I took in the blatant curiosity on our wicked love's face. She wanted to know what we were saying. She probably, and accurately, thought we were talking about her. Even after what happened, she was rattled, but not so severely that she couldn't come hard on our dicks.

That fire was what drew me to her. I wasn't about to extinguish it.

I'd rather toss gasoline on it and watch the show.

"You try telling her where she can and can't go on *your* time schedule. See how well that works out for you. And remember that when I'm still fucking her brains out and you're brooding in the corner with Parker."

As if he couldn't stop it, Andre searched out Parker. He was still leaning against the desk, barely visible, except for his face. We had a clear shot at his broody ass as he watched Amorette's back.

Yeah, Andre, sit in the corner with that asshole.

"We're going with you. In fact," Andre took a deep breath, "I have an idea. If you're set on going—I don't think it's a bad idea you go, my only issue is separating—then we can accomplish a few items at once." He turned and raised his voice. "Lafe, call your guy. We're going to have a meeting at the Palacio de Hielo."

Suddenly, everyone was crowded around the door, including Matías.

"Oh goody. We're going on an adventure." Parker smirked, but it fell flat. After that grueling session, Andre and Matías were the only ones who seemed like they had a good time.

Lafe nodded and pulled out his phone, touching Amorette's hip as he stepped back into the study. Amorette cut the distance between us but stopped a few feet away.

"What are you going to do about this place?" Her gaze settled on Andre.

He braced his fists on his hips. "Leave Matías' men in place. Get regular reports. We'll have to sort out a schedule to ensure they're not going rogue."

Matías walked up behind Amorette. His gaze briefly touched her before shifting between the three of us. "Send for one of your men—someone you trust. I don't have the same kind of bond with my people, and this way we'll know if something is up."

Jorge was the immediate thought, but I brushed it away. Anton was the next choice.

"Anton," I said, and Andre pulled out his phone.

"Anton, it is." He stepped away and the three of us stood silently while Lafe and Andre did their thing. Amorette took a few steps toward me but stayed outside of touching distance.

Fuck that. I snagged her elbow and pulled her closer. She wasn't pressed against me, but the intimacy of the lack of space between us felt good. Right.

On our way out, I eyed every man, woman, and, unfortunately, the two children in the place. Everyone was suspect until they were dead.

A woman, one of the servers, glared daggers at Amorette, yet when she caught me staring at her, she turned away.

That must have been a cunt who had the opportunity to experience Vicente's sweet side. She was lucky. Most never got that from him. From what my mother used to say, most of the girls in the Gallery only saw the back of his hand before they were bent over the closest piece of furniture.

Andre never said anything about Pilar. I doubted she even told him. Hell, who knew? As one of his favorites, she might have seen both sides of Vicente, but she was too proud to complain.

We took the plane to the mainland, and I stuffed myself on the corner couch to sleep. With the schedule that Andre was pushing, we wouldn't be able to grab any rest before the following afternoon. The party was already a day ago. Right? Fuck, I didn't know. So much was blurring together.

I would have stolen Amorette, but Lafe beat me to it. They sat hip to hip on a couch toward the cockpit. With the way his hands shook, I let it go. He could have her to himself for a while. Maybe he deserved it for moving Matías out so Andre and I could fuck our stress out on Amorette.

It took two minutes before I knocked out, and then a rough patch of turbulence killed the much-needed rest.

Now that I'd had a nap, the headache mainly had receded. I propped my head on my hand with one foot resting on the floor. Amorette was sleeping with her head on Lafe's lap. He had his hand tangled in her hair, but he wasn't sleeping. He stared mindlessly at the wall. The dark circles under his eyes meant he hadn't slept at all. This was what, close to forty-eight hours awake?

It was the most still I'd seen him since we went to that fucking party, but something about the downturn of his lips or the droop in his eyes had me sitting up in a heartbeat.

He looked my way with the movement and whatever bothered me, disappeared.

"We're almost there," he whispered.

I nodded. Parker and Matías were sleeping, too.

Andre was going to be a bear since he'd been piloting. No rest for him either.

The ride from the strip over to the hotel was somber. I even had scenarios of best and worst cases fighting for dominance in my head. What the fuck was this?

I *was* the fights. The fights were my life. Everything else was just noise.

It was simple that way.

Only now, we had Wicked Love. We had a brother on the verge of an overdose if no one stepped in. And we lived under constant threats where proper rest didn't exist. Even my nap on the plane barely did fuck all for me.

When we lost her, I'd decided I needed to be involved. It was just more exhausting than I anticipated.

Fuck it all. If I needed to be this person to keep Andre from losing his shit and locking us away, I'd do it. I was already halfway there.

The second we rounded the corner to the street leading to my hotel, I stopped breathing. Everything in the car fell away. The building was getting closer, but I had no concept of actually moving.

I'd taken the front seat next to Andre, though I shouldn't have. It gave me a clear view of exactly how Vicente had fucked me over.

My hotel was large. One of the largest in the city. It had to be to tout the ego of the Castillo Cartel, or the Institution as

Vicente called it. The fights were held in the basement, among other attractions we'd cultivated over the years.

The fights had started out as the Institution until they slowly became part of my identity. But I'd bought the hotel and renovated it before moving the fights to the basement levels. This was the one thing in my life that had been mine alone.

Not my brothers'.

Not my father's.

Not the Institution's.

Mine.

And half of the fucking hotel was gone. Scorch marks stretched out from the emptiness like a nasty reminder of how it was destroyed. My chest tightened and the air became too thin. Even my eyes burned as I lost the ability to blink.

As the building loomed taller, I couldn't fucking do anything but stare at its destruction. A crane was staged at the corner and new building materials were stacked on the sides. Enrique had done what he'd been ordered to, but the construction was slow and it didn't hide the fact that before Vicente was dead, he took the one thing I'd loved.

He rained destruction on my hotel.

And he didn't die with my hands around his throat. No, some cunt took that honor away from me.

"Grey," Andre said quietly. I shook my head once.

Not fucking now.

Enrique had worked on the basement levels first, checking the structure and stability of the building and making sure the gyms were renovated. The fights were the highest income earners. It was smart.

I'd go there before we met Ricco—fucking *pendejo*. Something was going on with Lafe and that group. I just didn't know what it was. I didn't even care outside the fact that Ricco

and the movement were taking time away from what I needed to be doing.

At the gym, I would open sparring to whoever was there. I need the blood. I needed the violence.

I needed the *pain*.

“Your rage is bleeding out of you,” Andre continued. Great use of words. “We don’t have time for you to disappear. Meet with Enrique while we wait for Ricco and his colleague. Sit through the meeting. Then you can beat the shit out of someone. Maybe Matías will volunteer,” Andre said wistfully. “He’s never been subjected to your form of training.”

“That’s an excellent idea,” Parker snickered.

“I’m sure I can handle it. I’ve trained with the same men who trained you.” Matías leaned forward, gripping the back of my seat.

“I’m sure you can. It will still be a fun experience for Grey to whip someone’s ass other than my own.” Parker laughed, his low chuckle filling the space inside the SUV.

“I don’t think Grey appreciates the banter,” Amorette added.

I fucking didn’t. So much hate and regret for not going after Vicente myself bubbled inside me, and they were fucking laughing?

“I’m sorry.” Amorette placed her tiny hand on my bicep. And I still couldn’t look away, even as Andre parked on the curb. “I’m sorry your father was such a fucking asshole. I’m sorry that he tried to take away the one thing that was yours,” she said quietly, as if everyone inside the vehicle wasn’t hanging on her every word. “I’m sorry that I wasn’t the one to plunge the knife into his chest.” What started out as a soft, saddened voice steadily started to buzz with her own anger.

Andre turned off the car but no one opened the doors. A truck drove by, blocking my view of the building, and I took the opportunity to close my eyes.

“You didn’t deserve that. None of you do. I want to change the Institution just as much as the rest of you. I promise I will do everything I can to make sure you’re on top, and no one can hurt you all like that again.”

Somehow, Amorette knew the right words to bring me down. What had angered me with my brothers—with her, the sheer level of indignation amused me enough to cut through my blazing thoughts.

Amorette, five-foot-nothing, dainty and sweet, promised to make it all better.

I still needed to punch something. But I could wait.



THE STALE SMELL of smoke clung to every single thing in the gym. I wiped my hand down a railing and couldn’t even bring my fingers close to my face; it was that strong.

Enrique hadn’t wasted resources cleaning more than was required for the construction, but it still lit a fire under my ass. When this was done, I was going to take a torch to Vicente’s corpse.

Fuck, we should have asked to see it. To make sure he was dead and to piss on him.

“They’ll be here in one hour.” Lafe waved his phone as we entered the club floor. This level, at least, had been mostly restored. Enrique had men working around the clock to get shit done. The new smell of the flooring and paint almost overtook the lingering smoke.

The glass windows up to the offices were gone. They were set to be replaced in a week.

“We’re not meeting them here.” I turned to face the group.

“This is home territory. This is the best place to meet them.” Andre furrowed his brow.

“I don’t give a fuck. We’re not doing it here.” I threw out a hand to encompass the room. “I don’t want anyone I don’t

trust in this place. I'm not giving anyone else another opportunity to fuck me over until the construction is done and I have better security measures in place."

Each person would be screened and I'd have metal detectors up. I'd also have security patrolling a block out to make sure no asswipes got within a hundred feet with arson materials.

If we made this our city, we could ensure we ran the streets.

We could do that. Vicente showed us just how easily we could be run off our island. Why not make the new headquarters here?

"There's a restaurant down the street that I like. We can go there," Parker said with his hands in his pockets. He was more subdued than usual, and he made sure to stay at least ten feet away from me the entire time we were in the hotel.

Smart of him. Otherwise, I'd use his face as a punching bag. His idiocy caused this.

He shifted his gaze away when I glowered at him.

"We don't know that the underground movement is on our side, right? That's what you're trying to figure out?" Amorette tapped her finger on her lips as she walked toward the ring.

We followed.

"There are no sides, Little Love."

"There are, but everyone is on their own side," Andre finished for Parker. A few construction workers started filing in, but they bolted as soon as they saw us.

"Okay. So we know they're in their own corner, but we don't know what their agenda really is?" She persisted.

I nodded. She glanced at me like she expected me to participate. Normally, I'd humor her. Before we arrived today, I'd have even insisted on inserting myself. Right then? I had no patience for it.

Still, since she looked at me like I was one of her trusted inner circle, I gave her the quick and dirty answer, “We know they wanted Vicente gone. We know they can’t be trusted. I doubt we could believe anything out of their mouths past that point.”

“That’s not true. We know they want to change the way the Institute is run. Most of the members were screwed over by Vicente in one way or another and they’re tired of living under that cloud.” Lafe reached into his pocket but pulled his hand out quickly. Did he have his powder in there?

I wasn’t the only one who noticed. Andre narrowed his eyes on our little brother too.

“We need to know what they’re trying to achieve before deciding how much to involve them in the Institution.” Amorette swung around, her hair lifting around her shoulders before settling alluringly around her face.

She was trying to lead us somewhere. Her tone said she had a plan.

“What do you propose?” Matías asked, raising one eyebrow. Of course, he would take her at her word with no issues. He hadn’t seen her struggle with herself when we got her.

But after she killed to keep me safe, I believed her too.

“We need to set it up so we can see exactly what they want. We need to put them in a position to discuss it where they won’t think we’ll hear. Or maybe to someone they won’t believe is in your camp.”

“I hate to break it to you, *mami*, but that’s not you. Everyone knows you’re ours.” I hated to burst her dreams, but there was a difference between clipping her wings and teaching her to fly. She needed realistic guidance and setting her up as bait, wasn’t it.

She shrugged. “I know I’m recognizable. Even without the clout of being the one perceived to have killed Vicente. I have a better idea.” She tucked her chin so she watched us through her lashes.

When did Amorette start to leave her moral compass behind? I almost smiled.

I liked this new side of her.

AMORETTE



When Parker said the restaurant was close by, he literally meant it was on the next block, on the same street. As we walked, anytime we turned just a little, we could still see the hotel and the damage. Andre and Lafe kept me between them, while Grey constantly looked back. He wouldn't let his gaze linger long. When he would snap back around, his jaw was always clenched as he stared at the ground.

This was devastating to him. It tore him up and I didn't think he knew how to handle the emotions traveling throughout him. The guys had each essentially told me their lives were nothing except one tragic event after another and that they were unfazed, but I didn't believe that for a minute.

One look at Grey showed just how off-balance he was now that he was face to face with Vicente's tantrum. Lafe could barely cope with life, so he turned to drugs. Parker was a smart-ass, and Andre craved control of all things around him.

I didn't know Matías well enough yet. Although if I were a psych major, I'd think he disassociated through his life, which was why he held himself on the outside of the brothers.

I could help fix this. I could help them mend their relationship with each other. I could help watch their backs and mold the Institution until it was theirs. I could do this—I wanted to, for them.

Edging closer, I slipped my hand into Grey's, providing the smallest amount of comfort. If we were out of the public

eye, I would have hugged him, yet I didn't think he'd appreciate that in public. Not that he didn't love public displays of affection. He did; it was practically his love language, but I didn't think he'd want to be seen as *needing* comfort. He gave me a quick squeeze, then we broke apart.

He started checking the street like the others. The alcoves, alleys, and especially the people standing around in pockets. We were in a city Grey was very familiar with, but they were on guard.

As it was, my fingertips tingled and my mouth was dry.

This was my idea, my plan for how to vet the underground movement. Every single brother, except maybe Matias, had been surprised when I laid out my thoughts on how this should go. Even more shocking, they all agreed with little argument.

We approached La Boca Dolce, an upscale hole-in-the-wall. The outside was unassuming and clean. There were no windows where patrons could show off and be seen, but as soon as you passed through the front door, elegance dripped from the place. Soft classical music drifted from the speakers, and the architecture had sleek lines and modern finishes. We were coming in at an off-peak time for restaurants even though the place was still mostly packed.

That wasn't hard given there were only ten tables and a small bar in the corner, but La Boca Dolce gave off an air of *if you know you know*. It wasn't really my thing, but Grace would love it. No one would ever guess from the street this was such a sought after place.

The food smelled delicious. Too bad I was too nervous to actually enjoy any of it.

The people at the tables stopped eating with their forks midair and stared.

At the parties I'd been to, and the other places the guys had taken me, the brothers always garnered attention. The people at those places, both men and women, had stars in their eyes as they watched the brothers move through the crowd. They were

almost worshipful even if there had been a healthy touch of fear.

Here, the patrons knew exactly who the brothers were, that was clear in the way their gazes tracked their every breath without trying to make it obvious. But the hero worship was absent, and the fear—there was plenty of that. Stark, acidic fear that was heavy on the tongue.

They knew exactly who the brothers were and they didn't seem to like that they were here.

Well, everyone except the one lone waiter rushing between the tables. She was somewhere around my age with a long, full ponytail and a slick black uniform and an apron to match. When the bell on the door chimed, she tossed us a quick, beaming smile before helping the table next to her.

Parker nodded with a slight grin and ushered us over in front of the aquarium by the small hostess stand. It took up one whole wall and added to the expensive aura.

When she came over, Parker spoke in rapid Spanish. I mentally cursed and tipped my head to better hear them. Parker wasn't speaking very loudly yet so I was able to catch a few words.

"table...friends...private..." Not enough to actually understand the context but close enough.

I hadn't been able to study at all the last few weeks, but I needed to make that a priority. It could save my life, or more importantly, someone else's.

The woman asked him to hold on a minute, I think, and went over to speak to a man who just stepped through the kitchen door. He was older, maybe mid-sixties, but the detail in his suit said that he was either the owner, or longtime manager.

She whispered to him, and when he turned his head down to her, his mouth pulled down into a severe frown. He shook his head and started filling her in on what everyone but her picked up. The more he whispered, the more her friendliness

dimmed. Then he had one more word to say, this one loud enough for us to hear. “No.”

He absolutely did not want us here.

Andre responded in a raised voice but it was much too fast for me to do anything other than pretend I knew what was going on. I kept my face straight, haughty even, another moment to make Grace proud, and folded my hands in front of me.

The man hesitated and Andre started again, jumping on the opportunity to soften him. Andre’s voice was quiet even though it was loud enough to bridge the room, and his manner was humble. The man returned a few words that were delivered like a warning.

Dipping his head, Andre thanked him.

When the waiter approached us this time, she was blank-faced and timid in her movements.

She motioned for us to follow her and she led us to the back where a few rooms led off from the short hallway. The one she picked for us was a decent size for the establishment. The table seated ten or twelve people, partly in a corner booth but five chairs sat in front.

It was exactly what I’d thought it would be. A few paintings on the wall, a standup plant in the corner, and the table. That was all the decorations.

I let out a slow breath.

This was our chance to figure out if this group was a friend or an enemy with only twenty minutes to spare.

When the waiter stepped out, I ducked down to check out the table. It was long, maybe six or seven feet. It was also sturdy with two posts on either end, and a small shelf connecting the two sitting about an inch from the tabletop.

Perfect.

“Lafe,” I said and held out my hand. He dropped his phone into mine. This was a burner, and after I shared my plan,

Andre said this one was fine to use. If we lost it, there wasn't any information that mattered stored on it.

I opened the recorder app and started it, then I placed it on the shelf, close to the corner of the booth. If Google was right, we could get up to four hours of recordings on this, although we wouldn't stay longer than an hour. Thirty minutes would be better.

One thing Parker was happy to explain was that we shouldn't stay here longer than we had to. Once their location was out, they were at risk when they didn't control the security.

I hated that that was how they had to live, constantly on the move because their safety required it. Their life was so different from any reality I could have imagined in the States. But if I had my way, they'd never have to live like this again.

Well, that wasn't exactly possible, they'd always be targets, but maybe we could build something better. A place where they weren't at the mercy of anyone else.

"Mmm, you down on your knees with your ass in the air is giving me ideas," Grey murmured in my ear.

My breath caught in my throat and my eyes fluttered shut as the deep timbre of his voice slid over me. When I glanced back, he was crouched behind me, balancing himself with a hand on the edge of the table.

His normally cool green eyes were now a seafoam green. Not quite warmer, but softer. Maybe more vulnerable, if Grey could ever be described that way. "You already have too many ideas," I breathed.

His eyes smiled as he dipped closer. "I do. And I can't wait to try more of them out, *mami*." Nuzzling the side of my head, his fingers whispered over my hip until he dug his fingers in, gripping me tight.

The ghost of his hand on my throat started a wave of heat washing over my body. Andre and Grey together had almost been too much to handle. But they knew exactly how to remind me that I was alive and we were together.

“Later,” I croaked, then cleared my throat and dropped my gaze before I got sucked under his spell. “First, we need to meet with this man, Ricco.”

Some of the heat cooled and he sat back on his haunches. “I prefer my ideas over those, although I’m surprised by your participation.” His voice had no sarcasm, but his inflection said he was confused.

Why wouldn’t he be? I’d expect this more from Lafe, but all I’d taught any of the brothers was how much I despised their world. Except now it was my world too. It had taken a while, and acceptance was sometimes a hard pill to swallow, but the brothers and this world were starting to feel like *mine*.

I wish it had happened sooner. A sliver of guilt coasted down my spine. “Like I said before, I want a different life for you all. I’m going to do what I can to make it happen.”

A wry smile twisted his lips. “Are you going to save us, Wicked Love?”

A hot blade twisted in my chest. He wasn’t mocking me, but that was what it felt like. “I am a hero. Maybe not the same as I was before, but I still want to save you and your brothers. Does that make me an idiot?” I huffed out a laugh.

Grey didn’t laugh, though. His gaze darkened and he pressed his forehead to mine.

“No. That makes you *ours*.”

“All right, love birds.” Parker clapped his hands together. “If my clock is right, we only have about fifteen minutes before they get here. Let’s roll.”

Grey climbed to his feet and held out a hand to help me up. When we exited the room, the woman stood to the side and watched us leave through the back with somber eyes. The back exit dropped us in an alley, and the smell of trash and sewer seeped up through the grates.

I had to cover my nose, but as soon as we were around the corner it disappeared with the scent of the ocean breeze.

“That was rancid, wasn’t it?” Matías smiled as he fell in step beside me.

I grinned. “That definitely wasn’t a great smell, no.”

“They’re early,” Lafe mumbled and my attention whipped to the sidewalk in front of the entrance to La Boca Dolce.

Andre quickly shuffled me between him and Grey as Lafe took the lead. It was strange to see him put himself out there when Andre was here, but it fit him.

Like a chameleon, his nerves melted away and the jitteriness smoothed out into a cool confidence as he approached a man who must be Ricco. He was about Lafe’s age but where the brothers had a mixture of lighter and in some ways European features, Ricco had a dark complexion with black hair and eyes to match.

That spoke more of Vicente’s tastes than anything else, except it made the brothers stand out. Even Andre and Matías had bright amber eyes and a slightly fairer tan.

Ricco caught sight of us not even a minute after we spotted him. He didn’t jolt with recognition, but his shoulders pulled back and the air around him electrified like he expected...I wasn’t sure. Not really a threat, but like he was ready for anything. Three other men accompanied him, and out of the four, he was clearly the leader.

Lafe waited until their feet almost touched before greeting him, then he held out his hand. What I was surprised about was the Spanish. I shouldn’t have been, it was probably odd to others that they’d made as many concessions as they had at this point.

Ricco’s gaze weighed each brother, snagging on Matías as he frowned, before coming to rest on me. He asked a question, but Lafe was quick to shoot down whatever he asked.

It was the closest Lafe seemed to losing his cool, but he took a slow, barely noticeable breath, and relaxed. Then he held out his hand, and Ricco and his companions preceded us into the restaurant.

The patrons still stared, but as if prepped, they dropped their gazes in a matter of seconds. Unlike before, the same waiter approached with a brittle smile. She didn't seem to be letting on that she'd just helped us, but she wasn't the bubbly personality she had been before.

Lafe still remained in control and when he asked for a private space, the waiter led us through the back to the exact room we'd been in before.

Some of my confidence slipped as Lafe slid into the back of the booth and Andre followed. I wasn't even sure why. I was never this nervous in the courtroom. The only thing I could think of was that this mattered more and the stakes were higher. From everything I learned, it wasn't out of the realm of possibility that if the discussion didn't go as planned, it could end in bloodshed.

Ricco and two of his men took the chairs directly in front of them. Parker slid into the corner and Grey started to move to the other side of Andre, leaving me and Matías standing in the middle of the room.

My heart pounded.

If they had planned the seating arrangements they hadn't shared with me or apparently Matías. With the way all eyes turned to us, this felt very much like Matías and I were unwanted, or at least an afterthought. Grey rounded the table, but before his ass touched the seat, he saw me standing and came back for me.

He didn't say anything, he just pulled me to the end and sat me in the chair. Under the table, his hand rested on my knee and I curled my fingers around his. The skin-to-skin contact boosted my confidence back up.

Matías was another matter. He remained in the center of the room for a few more uncomfortable moments. Ricco and his men glared openly, not making any effort to welcome him to the table. With Lafe, and to a certain extent, the rest of the brothers, there at least was a level of respect from Ricco—the opposite of how our meeting had gone with the Dirty Dogs.

Finally, Matías swiped a hand through his hair and took the seat at the very end.

It was the first time I'd seen Matías uncomfortable. He always came off as cold and unfeeling. No one seemed surprised, though.

Lafe kicked off the conversation. I tried to follow, but I didn't understand a word. I did pick up on body language. Absorbed in the moment, their voices faded into the background, and I just *watched*. Lafe seemed to be the only one Ricco liked. The respect I thought was there for the other brothers in the beginning diminished slowly. Andre jumped into the conversation, and Ricco gave him a flat stare. Parker's sarcastic quips were met harshly so he held up his hands and sat back with a smirk.

Of the two men with Ricco, one was older by at least a decade, and the other was probably closer to my age. They quietly participated but allowed Ricco to run the conversation on their side. The deference was apparent, but Lafe hadn't said anything about Ricco running the Movement. That would need to be researched later.

The exchange was eye-opening. Lafe presented in a way I hadn't seen before. There were little signs that he didn't like it, like the skin tightening around his eyes, the way his fingers flexed on the table before moving to his lap, and the periodic shift of his body weight. It was nothing like how he normally moved and I was positive the guests didn't realize anything was off.

But I did.

Every so often, Ricco would glance my way. Finally, Grey snapped at him.

The men sat back and apologized, then conversation resumed like Grey wasn't seconds from losing his cool on them in a physical way. I was fascinated.

Then, after the conversation seemed to drag on, I grew nervous. Tapping the screen on my phone, I rolled my lips together. We'd been here forty-two minutes. This was taking

too long and we were entering the danger zone. There weren't any cues that the discussion was close to ending.

I pushed my chair back, and when it scraped against the floor, conversation halted. Either my interruption would speed up the end, or they were all about to be very angry with me.

"I have to go to the restroom," I said as I slid my chair back under the table.

"Not out of my sight," Andre barked and I jumped.

Matías stood and used one hand to close and button his jacket. "I'll walk her out."

Grey curled his upper lip but didn't jump in.

"Shall we?" Matías waved his hand toward the door and when I started walking, he placed his palm on the small of my back. Neither of us glanced back to see who was watching, although the burning on the back of my head with the screaming silence was enough of an indicator.

Once in the hallway with the door shut, Matías deflated, sighed, and nudged me farther down the corridor toward the restrooms.

There was only one, and when I opened the door to make sure it was empty, I snagged Matías' arm and pulled him in behind me.

"What's going on in there?" I asked softly as I twisted the lock and placed my back against the cool wood of the door.

His gaze swept down my body, and he didn't answer immediately. When he did, he took a step closer and tilted his head to the side. The heat of his body raised the temperature.

"Politics. Time wasting, posturing, and vapid digs."

I nodded. That was pretty much the impression that I got. They were going around and around the important items.

"What's your impression of them?" I asked, as he took another step closer.

"Are you sure my opinion matters? It certainly didn't to them." His voice dropped and he touched the door next to my

hip.

My heart sped up. What was he doing? Matías had never made a pass at me. Ever.

“Of course it does. That’s why you’re here. Because we can trust you.”

He laughed softly, his rich voice echoing in the small bathroom. “Really? Is that what this is? Trust? Because it feels like I’ve forced my way in and they’re only tolerating my presence because it benefits them. Keep your friends close, enemies closer... You have that saying, yes?”

Matías raised his other arm and rested his elbow above my head.

There was too much heat. Too much going on for me to *think*.

“Your impression?” I pressed, because he was about to do something that would get him killed.

“That Lafe is their buddy and fuck the rest of us. Especially me, because of what I represent.”

“And me? What are they saying about me?” My voice was raspy and uncertain. Fuck.

His dark eyes took up my entire vision. “The old man wanted to know if you were a toy or a hostage. Grey said you were *their* toy and if they mentioned it again, he’d put his knife in their throat.”

I wanted to laugh. That was exactly Grey.

“I’m certain the young man thinks you’re being held against your will.” His nose drifted down the side of my face, his breath tickling my hair.

“Wait!” I shouted and he jumped back. “I have an idea.”

I relayed it and his immediate response was, “No.”

“No?”

“You’re not getting into any more trouble. Andre really will kill me.”

“You’ll be there. As close as you can be without tipping your hand. Let’s just see where he is.” I was close to begging, and he twisted his lips to the side. He was wavering...

“Just a peek. The minute you think something is up, you can cart me out or back to the brothers.”

He shook his head. “I have a death wish,” he muttered, then pointed at me. “Like Andre said, you stay in my sight the entire time.”

“Absolutely,” I grinned.

We walked back to the front of the restaurant and I spotted the third man immediately. I hadn’t realized it before, as his hair was much longer, but he was related to the young guy. He had to be. They were nearly identical from the side profile view. Brothers or maybe cousins.

He sat at the tiny bar off to the side, nursing a drink.

Steeling myself, I held my breath as I weaved through the tables and took a seat two stools over. I avoided looking at him, and the owner behind the bar ignored me, too.

I started tracing patterns on the counter with my shoulders hunched. It didn’t take long before the man noticed me. Out of my peripheral vision, I saw him twist my way, then twist enough to check out the room.

He would see an angry Matías glaring at me from the corner.

Leaning forward he whispered, except I had no idea what he said.

“*Hablas inglés?*” I whispered back, cutting my eyes to him. I wanted to make sure it seemed like I wasn’t supposed to be talking to him.

Nodding, he said, “You okay?”

I sighed and nodded quickly, then shrugged.

“Okay, I guess.”

“You no want to be here?”

This time, I did turn toward him, just enough to see him directly. “I was abducted from my home.” Truth. Let him make his own inferences from that.

“You want to go back?” His brows dipped low. “The bastards won’t let you go?”

Shit, how much could I tell him? What would hurt or help our cause? I grimaced, more for thinking this was a terrible idea without matching stories with the brothers, but he wouldn’t know that. “They saved me from Maikel. But they said letting me go is too much of a liability.” I had no idea how much he understood of that, but he nodded again.

“My cousin is at the Gallery. I am sorry.” His eyes were clear and steady on me with sorrow in their depths. He was actually sad for my situation.

I sucked in a breath. How terrible. The people here weren’t immune to the havoc Vicente caused and the lives he ruined. Could I have seen his cousin when I was there? Could I have saved her? No, I couldn’t have, and it was stupid to entertain those kinds of thoughts.

“Life sucks sometimes, doesn’t it?” A very Grace thing to say.

He tried to smile, but it didn’t quite work. He was too serious.

“Why are you all here? I couldn’t understand a word they were saying?” I dropped my hands in my lap and faced forward again.

“You don’t know? I’ve heard the bastards are fond of you.”

“Fond of fucking me.” I smiled tightly, but it was also true. “I don’t speak Spanish. If I’d have known I’d one day be here, I would have studied up.”

He chuckled, seeming to come to some kind of decision. “Vicente is dead. That is what we wanted. Ricco knows Lafa from when they were children. We see if we can have a truce.”

“Why wouldn’t you?” I furrowed my brow. “If Vicente is dead, what else is there?”

Glancing from left to right, he barely leaned closer. But when he did, his dark gaze pierced me. “We don’t just want Vicente dead. We want to erase the Institution. No more Gallery. No more stealing our women and killing our men. We want total change. Then maybe you could go home.”

I couldn’t stop my eyes from widening.

Oh, shit.

ANDRE



I slammed the door shut from the small balcony.

After meeting with that fuckwad, Ricco, we found a hotel we were all satisfied with. The owners weren't connected to any crime groups, and they weren't easily swayed. They were also happy to let us bring in our own surveillance and security. It helped that they knew who we were and we might have played on that fear just a little bit.

"Are you going to continue to be an ass to him?" Parker crossed his arms and leaned against the doorway. The hotel gave us the penthouse suite, which was a decent five bedroom place, but the walls still felt like they were squeezing us in. It was stifling.

"Like you have any room to talk. You're the biggest asshole I've ever met. It's like you save your worst asshole ways for us." I sneered and started to brush past him.

"Hey," he said quietly and pushed on my shoulder. Not enough to force me back, but enough to stop me from passing him.

I raised my brows, waiting to see what he wanted. He'd been quiet since Vicente died. Maybe Amorette getting blamed for his death because he forced her to run was the crippling event he needed to shake some sense into his thick head.

"He didn't let her out of his sight. I spoke to him about it. And Little Love got some good information. Better than what Ricco gave us." He glanced toward the balcony where I'd just left Matías. He'd been following me around the last few days

and like a civilized person, I said whatever scathing comment was on the tip of my tongue and bolted.

If I stayed in his presence too long, I'd pull a Grey and cave his face in.

"He was across the room from her. We were across the room from her at the party. You know any number of things could have happened and he would have been too slow to get to her." My voice was thin and tight. I rolled my shoulders to try and release some of the tension. Was he really this dense?

I ran my thumbs over my fingertips and started back at the pinkie just to stop the urge to take my anger out on Parker.

"She wanted to help. This was her idea and he watched over her while she did it. Shouldn't you want her to be invested in us?"

I narrowed my eyes. "Invested, yes. Putting her life on the line for information that might or might not help? Fuck, no. I would never have let her out of that room if I knew he was going to pull that shit."

Parker smiled like I was the stupid one. "Matías wasn't doing us any favors in that room. Ricco never would have opened his mouth at all if he'd stayed in there. We should be thanking him for leaving. And you wouldn't have let her out of the room if you didn't trust him with her." He bunched one shoulder up to his ear in a half-shrug. "He has kept his word. He saved her and watched over her when we couldn't."

A glass shattered in the kitchen. I jumped and Parker flinched as we both turned our heads toward the sound. "All it takes is one fuck up and someone dies. I'm not going to lose anyone."

"Is that why you're sweating just talking about this?" Parker pushed away from the doorframe and moved past me toward the kitchen. "You're scared shitless? And still you've kept Matías around?"

He didn't wait for me to answer, he just disappeared. Bastard.

I kept Matías around because as much as I hated it, the Institution was answering to him right now. It was safer for us to stay together, which meant with him too. He was all too happy to accept the unoffered invite.

Following Parker, I tensed when I entered the kitchen. Blood ran down a cut on Lafe's hand that was shaking so badly he couldn't even grip a large piece of glass.

"You idiot, don't pick that up with your fingers. I'm calling housekeeping. They can clean this mess up." Parker left to go make the call.

"What fucking happened?" I tried for calm, but my irritation at Matías and then Parker bled through.

"Nothing," Lafe snapped, and turned his back to me. He reached up to the counter and grabbed a cloth, wrapping it tight around his hand as he pushed to his feet.

"Look at me."

"I'll get this cleaned up and go check my hand out—"

"I said look at me." I grabbed his shoulder and twisted him around. He had dark circles under his eyes and he was mashing his lips together.

"Amorette slept in your room last night." Grey hadn't wanted to give her up, but he hadn't protested her choice. And what right did I have to tell her where to sleep? Although I almost stole her in the middle of the night to get rid of some of my excess energy.

Tying her down and choking the breath out of her as I watched my cock disappear inside her was exactly what I needed.

"Yeah, so?" Lafe jerked out of my hold and ran water in the sink, sticking his hand under the spray. The white ceramic sink turned pink.

"Why didn't you sleep?" I demanded, raising my hands to grab him. Fuck. I forced them back to my sides. Trying to shake sense into him would only make me feel better and the situation worse.

“Who says I didn’t?” he griped, as he shut the water off and aggressively started wiping it out.

“I’m not a fucking idiot. You hit the powder again, didn’t you?” I lowered my voice.

Over the years, Lafe had sampled everything, but cocaine was always his go-to. He liked the energy it gave him, that it made sleep elusive, and how alert he felt. For a long-term user, the benefits were all in his head.

“You know I can’t function in a foreign place without it. I tried. I really did, but this isn’t our place. I’ll stop as soon as we’re safe.” He ducked his head and stepped away from me. As if he needed to stay moving, he opened cabinets looking for something, maybe a first aid kit. Who the fuck knew?

Sighing, I went to the hall closet and grabbed the kit. I’d found it during my first check of the place. When I entered the kitchen, he was still going at the same exhausting speed.

“Let me see your hand.”

Lafe peeked over his shoulder and when he saw the supplies I was laying out on the table, he resigned himself to my attention. Trudging over, he fell down into the chair I pulled out and flopped his hand on the table.

I picked his hand up and moved it from side to side. It was just deep enough to bleed easily.

“You can’t go on like this anymore,” I murmured, dabbing antiseptic on it.

“Like you all care. This is the way I’ve made sure no one stabbed me in the back. It’s not new. You bastards have always turned the other way.”

I stopped what I was doing and stared at him. He didn’t say it with bitterness but as a fact. And the sad truth was, that was our life. He did his thing and we were happy to let him drive himself into the ground as long as no one was after us and he was still able to do his part.

How fucking pathetic. The more Amorette’s words hammered into my brain, the more I was disgusted with

myself.

“Yeah, well. We were shitty brothers to let you do that. I thought—I thought letting you cope with our fucked up life the way you wanted to was better than the reality. I was wrong.”

His head jerked back and he eyed me suspiciously. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“That you can’t hit the powder anymore. We need you present and not in a grave.”

He scoffed. “I know the product and myself well enough to know when I’ve had too much. It’s literally what I do in the Institution. Anyway, if you wanted me away from the drugs, I shouldn’t be running the business.” *That* was bitter.

I clamped my lips shut. That wasn’t a problem I had a solution to yet. I could outsource the business to someone else, but drug running was a huge money maker. We couldn’t afford to give someone else that much access to our money.

Amorette needed something to do, but she’d burn it down before distributing drugs to the common population. I snorted, drawing another strange look from Lafe. She had already started to dig herself deeper with us, and I didn’t want to look a gift horse in the mouth.

Matías would probably balk at the idea of doing actual work. He’d sat on top of the Institution for so long, I doubted he would know how to run an actual business.

“As soon as I can figure out another solution, I’ll take you off of that business. I just can’t yet.”

“Right,” he snarked.

I raised an eyebrow. “You’ve been hanging out with Parker too much.” I finished bandaging up his hand. “Empty your pockets.”

“What?”

“You heard me. Empty your pockets.” I didn’t give him a chance to react. I dove forward and shoved my hand down his

right pocket. There it was, the little fucker, that canister he always carted around with him.

Shoving me off, Lafe balled his fists like he was about to hit me, but he stopped himself. It didn't matter. I had his supply and I'd check his room later to see if he had brought or acquired any more. That was the issue with Lafe. He was connected enough that he could get more at the slightest whim.

If we were serious about getting him clean, we'd have to constantly be on his ass.

"Fuck you, Andre." He stormed out, knocking Parker sideways as he was showing a maid to the mess.

"Had a nice little chat with Lafe?" Parker asked.

"Fuck you," I responded and pulled out my phone. One of my contacts was in town, and I needed to see what he'd found out.

"Nice to see the insolence runs in the family," he called after me as I left the kitchen.



"REMINDE me again why we all needed to come?" Matías asked as he picked lint off of his shirt.

We sat at a restaurant, waiting for my contact. Not entirely on the patio, but not in the back either. Jo had been an informant for me for years. A son of one of the guards but not quite man enough for those *cabróns* to put to work.

"Because our dear brother says we're better together. Hence, why we've now been locked at the hip for days," Parker grinned over at Matías, but it lacked any actual warmth. He looked like he wanted to stab his fork through Matías' eye.

"What time was he supposed to be here?" Amorette checked the burner phone she now carried with her.

I checked the time on mine. "He should have been here by now."

Jo had always been prompt. It was one of the things I liked about working with him. That and his intel was always spot-on.

“How long do you wait for no-shows before calling it?” Matías asked like he was interested in the answer.

“Not that long. Maybe another five minutes. But he’s been at the mansion until this morning. He’ll have the information we need about what’s really going on there.”

“You mean which head is trying to take over? I put my money on Maikel.” Grey tapped his fingers on the glass tabletop.

“I’m going to make sure no one has shown up at the hostess stand and was led elsewhere.” I pushed back my chair and started around the table.

Three steps away, and glass shattered. A bullet whizzed in front of me and lodged into the wall. Dust sprayed over me.

“Fuck!” I turned and started diving, but another shot made me fall backward. “Shit, shit, shit. Get Amorette out of here!” I yelled to the guys.

Once I was on the ground, I went the opposite way of the table. Two more bullets destroyed the floor seconds after my feet had been there. The tablecloths were long enough that they dragged on the floor. There was only one person this could be, and he was known for his gut instincts.

At the corner of the room, I was finally out of view of the window. I jumped up and raced through the restaurant, shoving servers out of the way to get to the kitchen and sliding over the island to reach the back door. Now that I was out of firing range, sound rushed into my ears. Women screamed, men shouted, and dishes broke. There were no more shots though, only the aftermath of an attack.

The restaurant staff moved out of my way as they watched me pass with wide eyes and open mouths.

I reached the back door just as an SUV whipped around. Somehow, in my slow trek under tables, my brothers had

managed to get our car. “Get the fuck in!” Grey shouted through the crack in his window.

Matías threw open the back door and I dove in.

“What the hell was that?” Amorette screeched from the back seat where she and Lafe were stuffed. She got to her knees and stared out the rear window, searching for our hidden attacker. Or I should say *my*.

“That...” I huffed, “was Danny. The hitman who I had hoped had conveniently forgotten about the hit on me now that Vicente was dead.” Sweat poured down my face and I yanked my suit jacket down my arms and tossed it on the floor. It was too hot for that shit.

“The hit...” Amorette repeated as if she’d actually managed to forget about what Vicente had done at the warehouse.

I hadn’t. I’d known Danny for most of my life. He had the memory of an elephant and a twisted enough work ethic that he’d still carry out the hit if Vicente had paid his fee upfront.

Parker turned his head in the front seat to give me a wide, beaming smile. “I guess this means we’re fucked now that he’s found you.”

I flipped him the bird and dropped my head back against the seat. “Which means we have to find him first.” Which was going to be tricky.

And impossible.

AMORETTE



We didn't go back to the same hotel.

We couldn't. If the hitman knew where we were at lunch, he could have followed us. He could have found us at the hotel and then followed us to the restaurant. The scariest part of it all was not knowing.

When we ran from our table, Grey and Lafe hovered over me as Parker and Matías covered our backs. It was all in an effort to make sure we—or I—got out safe. The few short minutes it took to get to the car, I was completely turned inside out. I needed to breathe, but my chest was constricted. I needed to move, but I was frozen in place.

Which was ironic. I was more crippled with fear now than I'd been the entire time at the mansion. There, I'd been scared, sure, but I was resolved. Vicente had to die and no one had actually shot at me.

However, someone had shot at Andre. Almost killed him.

And I...couldn't take that.

He was unharmed. Physically—although he was shaking.

"I'm not sure about this place." Lafe ducked his head so he could see outside the window. His hands had periodically patted his body down, and then he'd freeze and force them down. It was like he was looking for something and forgot he didn't have it.

I had a feeling it was the drugs. I hadn't seen the small canister that he usually kept on him today.

“Really? Because after Grey’s expert demonstration of Fast and the Furious driving, you should be. I don’t think anyone could have followed us after that,” Parker said absently as he braced his forearm on the dashboard and peeked over at the small hotel.

I had whiplash from all the sharp turns Grey had taken to get here. He’d changed lanes, directions, and exits for over an hour. Unless the hitman was working with other people, he couldn’t have followed us.

Matías turned around in his seat. “This hotel is out of the city. There are no tall buildings around, and the isolated terrain only makes it more challenging for Danny to hide. We’ll be safe here.”

Lafe studied Matías like he wasn’t sure if he should believe him, but then he nodded.

“Anton just landed with a few of our people,” Andre murmured. Grey pulled right up to the door and Andre was the first to open his. He rushed out of the vehicle and inside the entrance.

“You’re not sending him to Gonzalez’s?” Matías asked as he climbed out of the SUV. He pulled the seat forward and Lafe exited first, then held out his hand for me. Once I was out, he kept hold of my hand, gripping so tight it hurt.

“Lafe,” I murmured as I tugged on his hand, and he loosened his grip.

“No,” Andre answered curtly. “We can send men there later, but he’s best used here with us.”

They naturally fell into a formation around Andre, putting me in the middle as well. This place was the complete opposite of the other hotel. It was old, a little musty smelling, and deserted.

An old woman, who had to be at least seventy, sat behind a desk. Parker went over to book our rooms while we moved with Andre off to the side. He kept his back to the front desk the entire time.

Parker returned within a few minutes with a handful of tarnished keys on beat-up plastic key rings. “It’s not ideal, but we have three connecting rooms. Anton and our guys can take the third.”

The walk to our rooms was a decent trek, considering it was at the farthest end of the wing. This place reminded me more of a motel than an actual hotel. Hopefully, it was the perfect place to rest for a few days before we had to face the world again.

The brothers might be used to this level of danger, but after today, I needed a minute.

Lafe still clutched my hand and when Parker opened one set of doors, Lafe rushed inside, pulling me with him.

“Okay then, I guess this is your room,” Parker said drily.

“You get one hour since you had her last night. Then it’s my turn,” Grey warned. When I glanced over my shoulder, he was focused on me, not Lafe.

“Get in line.” Andre clapped him on the back and disappeared out of sight.

Finally, Lafe let go of my hand to shut the door and lock it. It took a minute for my eyes to adjust. The curtains over the windows were shut, probably to keep as much heat out as possible. We’d need to turn on the air, assuming there was air conditioning, although I couldn’t tell in the dark.

During that entire thought process, Lafe pressed his forehead against the door and stayed there.

“Are you okay?” I asked softly as I touched his back. A light tremble shifted through him.

“Fuck. No,” he groaned. “I hate this.”

“Hate what?” I whispered, stepping closer and wrapping my arms around him. The room was muggy and a drop of sweat rolled down my spine, but I didn’t care. Lafe needed physical touch. It seemed like he craved it, and I wanted to give it to him any chance I could.

A desperate noise escaped his throat and he gripped my arms against his chest, like he didn't want to let me go. Like he was afraid to.

“Lafe, you can tell me.” I pressed my cheek against his back. So much heat was escaping him, I was going to burn up.

“Can I?” He shifted in my arms until we were chest to chest, then he cupped my ass and lifted me up. On instinct, I twined my legs around his waist and moved my hands to his neck.

“Why wouldn't you be able to?” As soon as the words left my mouth, I wished I could take them back. Because I was a judgmental ass. That was why.

He raised a brow and one side of his mouth twitched.

“Yeah, I know. But I'm trying. You all are teaching me as much as I hope I'm teaching you.” I wanted us to take the good from each other and toss the rest away. And even I realized that would leave us somewhere in the murky gray.

He didn't acknowledge my words, instead, he slammed his mouth down on mine. The kiss was brutal and beautiful. As our tongues tangled and danced together, stars exploded, lighting up the dark recesses of my mind.

These men, they were changing me—training me. As long as I had their touch, their desire, and their attention, I was fine. These things were becoming as essential to my being as oxygen.

He dropped me on the bed and it creaked with our weight. Then he tugged my dress over my head while I worked on his shirt. Together, we kissed every second we could.

We kissed like we would never get the chance again.

In this life, maybe we wouldn't. I was learning that dangerous love was the most beautiful of all. You never knew how long you'd have it in your grasp, and I wanted to experience everything I could with Lafe before it was too late.

He fell back over me once we were naked. The slide of his hot, slick skin brought my senses to life. My nipples pebbled

from the sensation. I almost wished he could cup my breasts, or better, squeeze them until that first pinch of pain.

I started to rise up, but he put more of his weight on top of me, pinning me to the bed.

“No,” he gasped, raining sweet yet devastating kisses on my cheeks, temples, and then the side of my neck. His hands moved from my hips to my ribs, then back again. He constantly shifted on top of me like he couldn’t figure out where he wanted to be, or how he needed to touch me. Like he needed too much.

Then he caught me under my arms and moved me farther across the bed, and this time when he landed on me, his cock rubbed against my clit, sparking that familiar, erotic pleasure.

I moaned, bringing my knees up to his ribs, before sliding one foot over the tight muscle of his ass then down his thigh. I craved the constant movement too.

“Killer,” he groaned as he started to pump his hips. He wasn’t inside me, this wasn’t sex, not yet, but the sensual connection we shared was life changing. In the dark of the room, nothing existed except us.

“Lafe,” I gasped, rocking my hips, trying to get that much closer.

He wedged his arms under my shoulders then somehow managed to catch my hands in his. They were locked beside my head, and the angle forced me to arch my back.

“I need more...” I whined as I continued to move against him.

“I just need you,” he whispered. His words were so heartbreaking, so desolate. For a moment, I started to come back from the pleasure, but he dropped his hips and thrust inside.

We both moaned. There was no time to enjoy that first stroke. He kept a steady rolling motion, the slide of his cock hitting the best spot each time. There was no space between us. None. We touched from pelvis, to stomach, to chest. He brought his mouth back to mine and caught my lip gently

between his teeth. The way he held onto my lip was like another way he tried to hold onto me.

“Killer...Am...” Lafe whispered. “I can’t get enough of you like this.” His words were strained, but I understood exactly what he was saying. “I hate you were there, but I’m so fucking glad I found you.”

I sucked in a breath and my eyes rolled back from the soft orgasm rolling through me. He kept going, doing his best to prolong the ecstasy pulsing through me.

“You can’t leave me. Ever. Promise you’ll never leave.” He picked his head up enough to stare into my eyes, his brimming with unnamed emotion. When he let my hands go to cup my head, I wrapped my arms around him, digging my fingers into his sweat-slicked back.

He moaned, the long throaty sound curling my toes. I loved the noises he made. The quick pants, the soft moans. They were raw and just him. I loved how out of control he was for me.

Different from Grey or Andre. And I loved that even more.

“Amorette.” He shook my head just a little. “Please. Promise you won’t leave me. No matter what. That you won’t leave us and go back home.”

“Wh—” I couldn’t even get the word out before he crashed his mouth against mine. He acted as if he could change my mind with his lovemaking. But he didn’t understand. I’d already decided they were mine. The moment I resigned myself to kill Vicente for them so they wouldn’t have to...they became mine.

“Promise,” he grunted, his hips picking up speed. Each push forward was more aggressive, more powerful.

“Lafe...” I gripped his face in one hand, pulling him back down for one more kiss. I could feel the next wave starting to wash over me and I wanted to get this out there between us. “I won’t leave you.”

His hold became unbearable as he shuddered and started to come inside me. Burying his head in my neck, most of his

words were lost in the haze of our shared pleasure.

As he slowly pumped his hips, his cum wetting my thighs and dripping down to the bed, I registered what he was saying.

“You’re mine. I won’t let you go. Not fucking ever. I’ll follow you. Even if you didn’t want me, I’d have no choice but to follow you.”

He didn’t soften at all, and he started to thrust harder. Lafe lifted up to his knees, shoved mine to my chest, and stroked me so good I couldn’t keep my eyes open.

“This is my favorite place, with my cum leaking out of you. Fuck, if I had the willpower to stop, I’d lick it up, but I can’t. I need this too damn bad. I need to see you full of me.” He continued to coo an endless stream of dirty words and declarations.

I’d be sore later. I didn’t give a damn.

The way he worshiped me, the way he fucked me, being right here with him was the only thing I needed in that moment.

“You’re mine. Mine and my brothers’. I’ll share you because I can’t keep you safe on my own. They need you too, but you’re never escaping us. Okay, Amorette? You can’t leave, or we’ll hunt you down and bring you back. I couldn’t handle it if you left me.” His voice cracked at the end.

I reached up to him, but he ignored my hand and just fucked me harder.

GREY



I stepped closer to the door. Amorette's soft moans resounded every few seconds. Lafe's breathing was just as intense, with his gasping inhales. Then, there was the rhythmic slap of skin. The two adjoining doors did shit to muffle it.

"They're still fucking at it." I unlocked the door and opened it. The sounds were instantly louder and my dick hardened in my jeans. Glancing down, I glared at the fucking thing.

"Or at it *fucking*," Parker mumbled.

"It's been over an hour," Matías said as his eyebrows shot up in surprise.

"He's also coked-up. Or on his way down," Andre muttered as he studied something on his tablet. He'd brought it with him, and I guess it was a good thing he had.

"What's that got to do with this?" Matías stepped closer to the door. He didn't have to be this close to hear them, but I still shoved him back. Amorette was ours; whether we let him in our circle or not, he didn't get her.

She was *ours*, and my three bastard brothers were the only ones I was willing to share her with.

Matías scowled, his eyes icing over as he pulled himself up to his full height. He even stood like fucking Vicente. Andre was just as much his mirror image, but he was nothing like the man.

Not Matías, though. As much as he was different, sometimes he acted just like him. The way he swiped his hands, smiled, and acted like he was better than everyone else.

“Don’t tell me you’re that naive.” Parker twisted around in the chair by the window, putting more of his weight on one arm. When Matías turned his cold gaze on Parker, Parker rolled his eyes. “Fucking hell, you are. What was Vicente training you for?”

“Fuck you,” Matías returned, tugging on the bottom of his jacket to straighten it out. Why he was even wearing the goddamn thing, I had no idea. The air unit barely worked and seemed to be blowing out lukewarm air. The three of us had stripped out of our jackets and button-downs, leaving only our tanks on.

Then there was Matías, sweating to death in his full suit.

“Cocaine is an upper. A stimulant,” I started and Matías stiffened like he was offended.

“I know that.”

“Then why don’t you know that a lot of people take that drug to enhance sex. Men specifically. It keeps their dicks harder for longer.”

“Until it doesn’t,” Parker snickered. “We should tell our dear brother if he hits the powder too often, he won’t be able to stick his dick in Little Love at all.”

The tops of Matías’ cheeks darkened, and I pursed my lips. I hoped he wasn’t fucking blushing. When he glared at Parker, it made more sense. Parker was irritating the shit out of him. Good, Matías could take his turn.

“Try to call Danny again.” I pointed at Matías’ phone gripped in his hand.

“He didn’t answer the first three times. What makes you think he’s going to answer this time?”

Fuck, he wasn’t wrong. We were stuck inside this hotel room until we sorted out the hit on Andre. We were idiots not

to worry about it before now.

At the desk, Andre sat in another cheap-ass chair that we'd pulled from one of the other rooms. He pored over a spreadsheet, typing in notes and pinching the screen to move around the different columns. The tendons stood out in his neck and his brows were furrowed.

While Andre tried to work out a plan and Lafe fucked Amorette's brains out, we had sat here with our thumbs up our asses. I flopped back on the bed and the light smell of dust wafted up.

Matías had at least attempted to reach out to Danny, but the fucker wasn't picking up. Part of that could be because he was "on a job." Which was typical of our men when working. There was every chance he'd left that phone at home and only had a specific burner.

Did he know Vicente was dead? Or did he care?

I'd met the man half a dozen times, and each time had left an unremarkable impression. No personality. No expressions. Just a blank-faced man who might as well have been a statue in the corner.

He had connections, though.

If we could just draw him out, I could take him down. I'd love to get back to what I loved. But who was he connected to? I twisted my head to look at Parker. He was still having a stare down with Matías. It was barely a tenth of the attitude Parker usually displayed.

"Parker. Didn't you set Sebastian up as the head of the arms?"

"Well," he drawled. "I wouldn't necessarily call it *setting him up*. More like I took out his family and he was the only one left." He did a full spin in the chair, making it creak with the shift of his weight.

"Didn't we hear that Danny bought his weapons from him?"

Parker sat up. “I think you’re right. How the hell had I forgotten that? I can’t be the one to call him, though. He’d never help me.”

Andre glanced up as I pushed myself into a sitting position. “I think it should be you. You put him there, purposely or not. It might help to remind him that you could take him out just as easily.”

Parker rolled his eyes. “I actually like Sebastian. He’s not a pussy like some of these other men. He gets his hands dirty and is just as good with weapons as we are. I still don’t think he’ll take my call, but I’ll try.”

Matías rubbed his jaw as Parker started dialing. He left it on speakerphone so we’d be able to hear Sebastian as well.

He picked up on the third ring.

“Is this who I think it is?”

A smirk took over Parker’s face. “If you mean the bastard who put you in power, then yes.”

“I think that had more to do with your insane father, but sure, we’ll say you did it out of the kindness of your heart.” Sebastian was every bit as much of a smart-ass as Parker. No wonder my brat of a brother liked him.

“Potato, potahto.” Parker made a face like, *I told you so*. “Listen. We need to get in contact with Danny. Do you have any of his numbers or details?”

“Why would you think I had his details?”

“Because you’re his supplier. Your weapons are like crack to the man.”

“Hmm,” Sebastian hummed. “I’ve been contacted by some of the other heads about the state of the Institution. I’m not one to play politics,” Parker flipped off the phone. “But I am a survivalist. Vicente’s gone; if the other heads have anything to say about it, so will you and your brothers. You four have been playing too loose for too long. I like you as much as I can like anyone in this business, but I’m afraid the heads have more

power than you four. They've tried to make friends instead of pissing people off."

Like that was up to us, we were ordered to enforce Vicente's rules and that made us feared. Wouldn't that be the kicker if Vicente chose us for those jobs specifically to alienate us?

Another wave of blistering hate washed over me. I wished I had been the one to choke the fucking life out of him. A quick stab or two was too quick, even if it was bloody.

"Sebastian," Matías said as he stepped closer to Parker. Parker peered up at him, his jaw clenching. Andre braced his elbows on the table and glared at Matías.

We all knew what was about to happen.

Matías was going to flex some muscle, get what we wanted, and then we would be left in the same position we always had been. At the mercy of someone else. Instead of Vicente, now it was our half-brother who'd trained his entire life to take over.

But fuck. His knowledge of the businesses was subpar. What had Vicente really taught him? Who was who, and how to torture? I almost laughed. That was all the foundation Matías needed to rule just as Vicente had.

"Matías?" Sebastian couldn't fake that kind of confusion.

"I'm afraid the heads and I are about to be at odds," he said drily. "Which ones called you?"

"Henry and Tomas."

I exchanged a look with Andre. Not Maikel?

"Tomas is so new to the role; he needs to be careful before his head is put on a spike like his predecessor," Matías warned. "Is he really the one you want to back in a fight, Sebastian?" There was so much hatred and condescension in his tone.

"When gambling, you should never put all your chips on the same bet. I'm not backing anyone. Nor am I sticking my head out for slaughter."

“The next time they call you, let me know and relay what they said. I’d consider it a favor.” Matías waited for Sebastian to acknowledge the order, but Sebastian remained silent. “And before we let you go. Danny’s details.”

Sebastian sighed. “You didn’t get this from me.” He rattled off some numbers and hung up.

“Here you go!” Matías swiveled back to Andre and me with a beaming smile like he was proud of himself.

I didn’t return it, and neither did Andre. He turned to Parker to gauge his reaction, but he got no help there. Why would he even consider it? Parker had done nothing except be an ass to him since the party.

“Oh, come on. You can’t seriously be angry over that.” Matías tossed his phone on the bed next to me and stomped over the window. His jaw worked and his brows dipped over his eyes. He leaned his hands on the walls next to the window and glowered through the sheer curtains. We left them closed to ensure no one could see through them, but we’d opened the heavier drapes.

“Is this what our new life is going to be?” Parker asked Andre and me. “Same shit, different master?”

“I don’t want to be your fucking master,” Matías grated out.

Andre shook his head slowly, not that Matías saw it. “You don’t have to. Every single interaction we’ve had since Vicente’s death proves that you’re the heir. The heavy players in the Institution will always defer to you first.”

“You’re acting like I had a say in that. I was born into my shit life, just like you were born into yours.”

Parker snorted. “Your life has been shit? Please tell us how your life has been worse than ours. Was it your mother you watched murdered in the courtyard? Your mother you found with slit wrists? How about your mother, who died trying to leave you? Those are just our mommy issues.”

“This isn’t a competition.” Matías flexed his fingers. If he were stronger, he’d dig holes in the plaster. “I’m not saying

my life is worse. I'm not saying it's been the same. It's an equally yet different pile of shit that I had no control over. If you believe differently, then fuck you. I'm so fucking tired of trying to prove myself to you *pendejos*. Everything I do is questioned, scrutinized, and flipped over."

Andre stood, planting his palms on the table. "Whether it's your decision or not, this is still the cloud we must live under."

Matías opened his mouth, but I cut off his response, "We trust you."

He swung his head my way. Parker and Andre were equally shocked.

"We trust that you're not trying to kill us. And we trust you with Amorette. We would never let you be alone with her or stay with us if we thought you were going to fuck us over."

The light brightened in Matías' eyes, then it dimmed. "But I'm still on the outside. I grew up in the same house; we share the same blood, but I'll never be accepted."

"You never thought you'd be here with us like this either, did you?" I shrugged. He wasn't as bad as I thought he was. When we needed help, he was there. I wouldn't soon forget that. I didn't even want to think about what would have happened to our wicked love if he hadn't been there and we were fighting those asshats again.

He could be trusted.

But the issue was Andre's fear for our future; some of it had to do with his ego. He kept trying to take the reins, and they kept getting jerked out of his hands and laid at Matías' feet. If he wasn't on our side, Andre would be setting up a takedown with his contacts. That he was still here with us was a testament to that.

"I don't even want this! I don't want the Institution. I don't want this bullshit." He tossed out his hands then laced his fingers behind his head as he tipped back toward the ceiling.

"This is where we're at. As long as you're at the top, we never can be," Andre said softly.

PARKER



“**T**his is the dumbest shit I’ve ever had to deal with from you, Andre,” I spoke lightly as I tugged the ball cap lower over my eyes and slunk down against the tiled bench. They’d hear me. The earpiece was of exceptional quality, considering they were parked only fifty meters away.

“Yeah, well. Danny wasn’t the easiest to deal with. As much as some of the Institution bows to Matías, Danny apparently prefers to listen to no man who’s not a complete psychopath.” Andre had calmed down a very small amount after catching Danny on the phone. It wasn’t the most comforting response, but Danny had finally agreed to put this job to ground considering Vicente was dead and wouldn’t be collecting.

Still, Andre would run himself into an early grave if he wasn’t careful.

I snickered. Andre was probably the only one out of all of us who expected a long life. I didn’t think I was going to die tomorrow, and I had been working on plans to extricate myself for years, but when I thought about the future, five—ten years from now, I didn’t see anything. Just a black canvas in the mind.

That was why he was so stressed-out all the time. It wasn’t that he was wrangling cats with the three of us, and now our savior-syndrome friend. It was that he was fighting for something that had such a low chance of success.

I mean, look at Lafe. He wanted to get clean. Anyone could see that with the way he was around Little Love. But he was an addict. Lafe quite literally couldn't kick the stuff. And he still ran the drug business. Just this morning he was on his laptop sorting out issues with shipping.

“And it's only been a week. I wouldn't put it past him to let us get nice and comfortable before shooting me.”

“Why would he?” According to the records Matías practically had to beat out of one of the financial rookies, Vicente had already sent payment in full.

“Being that he has this warped sense of honor. He didn't say as much but I got the feeling that he feels he should complete the job no matter that the person who ordered it is dead.” Andre sighed and I pictured him rubbing both sides of the bridge of his nose. “Didn't you get the same feeling?”

“No, *hermano*, I can't say that I did.” Partly since I was only half paying attention. The conversation had happened over speakerphone with everyone in attendance, even the two fresh out of their fuckfest.

My eyes had been glued to Little Love. They had to have fucked for over an hour. Maybe two. She moved gingerly like brother had literally fucked her raw. Yet she touched him every time she moved. Her fingers would trail over his shoulders, touch his side, or the back of his neck. And each time, Lafe seemed to sit a little straighter.

Of course, Grey and Andre got the same treatment, just a little less intense.

I'd been so entranced with her, I zoned out for most of the meeting. There were six of us in that room, for fuck's sake. Someone else could pay attention for once.

“You're sure you're ready to meet with her?” Lafe asked. Bleeding heart Lafe.

“As sure as I'll ever be. She said she had information for us. I might as well see what it is before I chuck her away and never look at her backstabbing face again.”

“That’s so kind of you,” Mia, the woman of the hour said as she rounded the bench. I’d picked a park that was outside of any city. Lush, with plenty of trees and bushes to shield the activity within. I’d even picked one with pretty tiled benches that represented the rich culture of the country.

“I thought so.”

“Aren’t you afraid of someone overhearing our conversation?” Ah Mia. My childhood best friend. My partner in crime until recently. Since she’d started trying to fuck with Little Love, I’d effectively cut her out of my businesses. I didn’t call on her for tasks. I didn’t reach out for help or request her opinion.

Then I found out she fucked Valentina. Matías would have been a better choice for her. He was trying to kiss our asses. Valentina was a completely different story. She would shove us in our graves and spit on our rotting corpses for a good time.

Mia looked like she wasn’t losing any sleep. She was still the same beautiful woman she’d always been. Her hair down in waves and a wrap dress to accentuate her curves. Her makeup was even done to the nines like she was heading out for night in the city.

“You’re the only one who could overhear.” I waved a hand at my ear. “You’re actually the eavesdropper. My brothers are here with us. Say hello to Andre,” I teased.

She glared and her nose seemed to scrunch in ire.

“What? No greetings for our guests?” I acted affronted.

“Stop goading her,” Andre warned and I sighed.

“Why do you need them?” She perched her ass on the edge of the bench next to me.

“Ah, well, I’m sure you realize with Vicente’s death, life is a little—” I tilted my head from side to side in an exaggerated motion, “crazy. We’re just taking some extra precautions until the dust settles.”

Her face softened and her body deflated. Aw, her feelings were hurt. This, at least I knew, was genuine. I knew all of her tells. It was a bitch being on the outside, wasn't it? I knew the place intimately.

"I'm now someone you have to take precautions with." It wasn't even a question.

"Why wouldn't you be? I've heard the rumors trying to take off in the Institution that my brothers and I—the bastards, of course. Not the rightful heir—are responsible for Vicente's take down. How we're going to run the Institution into the ground and take everyone with us. Or my favorite, how we're so full of avarice, we're going to start stealing boys from their beds and plucking girls from their families for our own use." My top lip curled. "Who do you think is behind those?"

"Parker—" Fire ignited in her eyes.

"No, no. That's not a guess. I'm certainly not the one spreading rumors." I shook my head. "Anyway, you took too long. Valentina can be thanked for those little nuggets."

"What happened with her—"

"That's not why I called you here today. You said you had information that we desperately needed. What is it?"

"Just—Fucking listen to me!" she screeched as she pounded her fists on her knees.

I peered around the park. I wasn't concerned with anyone hearing her, not anyone who would come running our way. An hour before the meeting, Anton worked with a few men to clean it and check for surveillance and mics. Still, she was trying to burst my eardrum.

"You always did have a set of lungs on you, Mia. I bet Valentina got very acquainted with that fact."

"Don't even act like you're jealous." I reared my head back. Who the fuck was jealous? "We were never lovers. You were only attracted to women who fucked in public and I always saw you as a brother. I'm sorry, okay? You are my best friend and I wanted to tell you I am sorry. I was at a party and

drank way too much. Valentina was there and I love a tall feisty woman. You know that—”

“Mia,” I said, raising a hand to stop her. “I’m not interested in that. I’m interested in what information you thought we needed.”

She practically begged me with her eyes, but I didn’t budge. Mia knew me well enough to know that once I’d decided on something it was hell to change my mind. Right now, it wasn’t worth her time to make her argument.

“Stop pushing her buttons,” Grey griped in an unusual fashion. I was still getting used to him wanting to do more than paint the walls red. I’d decide how to deal with Mia. She was my problem, not his.

“Part of it isn’t as important now that Vicente is dead,” she started, leaning back against the bench and facing the park. “He had recruited a maid from your island. That slut, Blanca,” she spewed her name.

Damn it. Did everyone know about that? I tried not to let things like this get to me but it was extremely difficult not to feel the fool when everyone in the Institution seemed to know about that but us.

“We already have that sorted. What else?”

She paused, then hesitated. “Before I tell you the second part, I want to hash out this conversation. I need you to listen to me, if for no other reason than because I’ve been your friend my entire life.”

I nodded, setting my expression in a pensive one. “So you want me to listen to you make excuses on why you fucked one of my biggest enemies so you can feel better. Because you’ve been *my* friend for decades?”

“You’re such an asshole, Parker. But yes. Do you realize that I don’t have any other friends outside of you, and maybe Grey?”

“Like fuck, we’re friends...” Grey mumbled in my ear.

“That’s ‘cause no one wanted to talk to the girl who was friends with the bastard son. When you moved to the island it got better, people seemed to forget we were close, but I’ve never been able to make any other connections that weren’t fuck buddies. Not in the Institution.”

“Please. Your father has enough influence that it doesn’t matter if you were my friend or not. His in with Vicente is why were you able to hang around the mansion anyway.”

Closing her eyes, she drew in a deep breath. Once she’d exhaled completely, she opened her eyes. “Maybe I’m an idiot but I care about you and your brothers. You’ve been like family to me. I want to try and fix this relationship if you’d stop getting your feelings hurt.”

I laughed, shaking my head. “Mia, you haven’t hurt my feelings. But I have very clear standards on who I let close to me. I thought you knew that, but if you’re fucking people who’d rather see me dead, then...you’re not as bright as I thought you were.”

She rolled her tongue over her top teeth keeping her lips shut. It was a signature look that meant Mia was about to blow. Good. Then maybe she’d tell me what the fuck she wanted me to know.

“I was drunk the first time—”

“Wait. I’m going to stop you right there. First you tell me you fucked Valentina because you were drunk, now you’re telling me that was just how it all started. You’re a real piece of work. I knew you could be a snake, I just never realized that you would be one *I* had to guard against.” Absolutely ridiculous.

“She had a different perspective on the Institution. It was in our best interest for me to keep up the fling. Where do you think I heard about the rat?”

Not surprising since Matías was the first one to tell us about Blanca. It seemed Vicente had loose lips with his legitimate children.

“I’ll play your game Mia. If it was beneficial, then why did I only find out when you brought Valentina to our island. Which, I’m still pissed about by the way.”

“Because I was backed into a corner and that seemed like the best option. Let me tell you something Parker Adair,” she leaned forward as some of her hair fell in her face, “I have never done anything that would harm you or your brothers. Definitely not on purpose. I’ve always seen us on the same side. I didn’t tell you because I didn’t need to. I was handling it. Every decision I’ve made has been with the goal of getting us further ahead.”

“I wish I could believe you, Mia. I really wish I could. I just don’t.”

An unintelligible groan sounded right in my ear from the earbud. They could fuck the hell off.

She sat back, devastation dimming her eyes. “That’s it. You’d throw away our friendship because I had a fling with your sister and used it to our advantage.”

“It wasn’t to my advantage if you did it behind my back and didn’t tell me about it.”

“I’ll repeat, you’re willing to throw away our friendship over this?”

“Mia, I quit this friendship when you started to fuck with Amorette.” I didn’t call her Little Love. Not this time, and not to Mia.

“You’re serious?” She raised her leg in the seat and leaned against the arm of the bench like she couldn’t get far enough away.

“Why wouldn’t I be? You know better than anyone else how I am about who I surround myself with and the offense I take when someone fucks with something that’s mine. I never thought that would be you. Then again, you hit on her numerous times. I told you she was ours.”

“Right.” Her face mottled with red splotches. “Yours and your brothers but I wasn’t invited to the party. I guess I’ve

always been on the outside.” There was that stupid word again. She pushed up from the seat and started to strut past me.

I caught her arm. “What else were you going to tell me?”

She tossed her head back and cackled. The sound was unhinged and bitter, nothing like Mia. Maybe I didn’t know her as well as I thought I did.

“You know what, you can go on without this information. You’ve been managing just fine without me and the information pulled from pillow talk with your *enemies*. Have fun trying to keep Amorette safe.” She waltzed off while shaking her head.

“You pissed her off and her information was about Amorette,” Grey’s incensed voice crackled over the line.

“Fuck me. I guess I did.”

AMORETTE



This last week, we'd been on pins and needles. Andre and Matías were attempting to work on a plan together, but Andre didn't want to let go of control and Matías had the bigger pull so he felt it necessary to put in his opinions.

At least, that was how it seemed.

We flopped between tentatively going out in public and holing up in different hotel rooms before we ended back at the hotel we'd initially stayed at.

For the most part, life seemed to go on.

Grey disappeared a few times to take calls with his hotel staff. Andre and Matías had heated discussions over whatever table was available and usually ended in an argument. Lafe worked on his business too. I tried to manage my expression, but it was hard.

I hated that Andre still had him in that business. There had to be something else Lafe could do to help. Except the one time I'd brought it up, Andre had lectured me on how integral the drug business was to the Institution.

"It's true," Matías had added. "The drug business brings in a lot of money, and it's a powerhouse in the businesses under the Institution. To give it to someone else is to give them power over us."

"Then why was Lafe ever placed at the head of that business if Vicente didn't want you all to have power?" I'd argued.

“Vicente was a master at giving the illusion of power. Believe me, he did enough to undercut that power. Unless you’d like me to follow in my father’s footsteps, giving it to someone else isn’t an option.” Andre had tossed his pen on the table and rocked side to side in his chair.

His gaze burned into me and the temperature in the room raised considerably. His body language said he was ready for this argument and I wouldn’t win, even if he had to bend me over the desk and fuck his opinions into me.

I cleared my throat. Matías seemed oblivious to the small cues playing out between us. Or he purposefully ignored them for my sake. Thank God.

Back home, I’d be embarrassed for the way I reacted to these men. We were planets in orbit around each other. My mind recognized what was happening to my body, but when one of them was near me, I couldn’t help but gravitate closer. Who knew if we would balance each other out or someday end in a fiery crash.

The one redeeming point was that they seemed just as mesmerized by me as I was by them. Maybe that was part of the draw. I’d never had men so in tune with me. Which was hilarious considering the only language we seemed to share was a sexual one. My morals—while I could admit were rapidly evolving—were vastly different from theirs.

“Fine.” I had pivoted on my heel before I lost control and dropped to my knees to show Andre just how powerful I was. And to get my fix of watching the pleasure roll over their faces. It was my downfall.

Parker was the only one who seemed...off.

Since the mansion, he’d been subdued from his typical antics, but especially after his meet with Mia, he was just depressed.

It was time for lunch, and I was finishing up some sautéed vegetables and chicken. Rice was in the rice cooker. Our penthouse was stocked with everything I could want in a

kitchen. Lafe tried to make lunch, but there were only so many times I could eat a BLT.

Parker walked in, his gaze immediately finding me behind the counter before heading straight through the kitchen. The lack of acknowledgement was...I wouldn't say hurtful, but I guess in a way it was.

Since I'd been with the brothers, Parker had taken every opportunity to pick at me in one way or another. It always seemed like he got off on getting my temper up. Of all of them, he was the most unpredictable—the most dangerous.

Burning down the club was a prime example, setting off the chain of events that led us to now.

Although the voice of reason said that was Vicente's fault. Not Parker's. He certainly hadn't made it better, but Vicente would have messed with them without his interference. The man had been too much of a psychopath not to.

I just forgot that sometimes. Watching the way the rest of the brothers were with Parker, they probably did too.

I blew a piece of hair out of my face.

Parker wanted me; he hadn't made a secret of that. It wasn't that I wasn't drawn to him, but something held me back. I had to laugh to myself. Where the other brothers were concerned, they certainly were not safe.

Devoted might work. The other brothers had a sense of devotion about them. Parker seemed like the fun-time guy who wanted to fuck his problems away and then would have no problem tossing *me* away—while simultaneously causing trouble that would mean a change in location and extra security.

But the way he ignored me now, I found myself edging closer to him. I didn't even realize it until I was next to him at dinner or in the living room. Then, I would quietly make my way somewhere else, hoping he hadn't noticed.

"Lunch is ready!" I yelled through the doorway to the rest of the suite.

One by one, the brothers filed in. Matías right in the middle of Lafe and Andre.

I hid my smile. Whether they realized it or not, they were bringing him into the group. Matías saw it, but he seemed to hold himself back, probably expecting the others to yank their friendship out from under his feet.

I didn't blame them. They were so hardheaded they'd give Grace a run for her money.

"Smells delicious," Grey whispered as he gripped my side and pressed a kiss to my temple.

I shivered from the light contact. He was becoming so domesticated that it messed with my head sometimes. It's like I was getting a Grey from an alternate reality.

"Thank you, Amorette," Andre said as he kissed the top of my head on his way by.

Arms curled around my chest and Lafe's woodsy, dark scent circled me. He rocked me from side to side, pressing his face into my neck. "I would have helped you if I'd known you were in here."

Parker came in last with a quick empty glance at me and Lafe, then started making his plate.

Matías stopped filling his and watched Parker with a disapproving glare before turning to me. "Yes, thank you for lunch."

Lafe let go to get his own food, and once we had our plates, we settled around the table. It was very stilted. There was no conversation, and uncomfortable looks were tossed around.

Had I missed something while cooking?

"What's going on with you all?"

Each of them jerked. "What do you mean, Little Love?"

I settled my gaze on Parker, and for the first time since the early days on their compound, his black eyes were so cold.

"What's up with you?" I redirected my questioning.

One side of his mouth twitched. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“He’s sulking because the meet with Mia was a fuck up.” Grey speared a broccolini and brought it to his mouth. His gaze locked on Parker as if daring him to deny it.

They’d had the meeting on speakerphone. I’d heard her parting shot just like the rest of them. Where Andre and Grey had made it clear they were angry with him, even now they glared at him; I wasn’t so sure it was that simple.

I could be wrong, but I was turning a new leaf. Letting go of my need to judge a person or situation so harshly.

“Was it?” I asked. Parker’s gaze shot to me, like he couldn’t tell if I was trying to goad him or if I was being genuine.

“We didn’t get the end result we wanted. That’s always a fuck up in Andre’s book,” Lafe added as he pointed his fork at Andre. He had color in his cheeks today. Andre had also raided his room and took all the canisters he could find. Which were two. Grey grudgingly helped, and Matías did his best to keep Lafe from losing it.

Parker set his fork down on the plate. “We can’t all be perfect in the eyes of Andre,” he sighed with resignation. Lafe and I shared a glance. This wasn’t like Parker at all.

“I’m with Amorette. I’m not sure it was a failure.” When everyone turned to Matías, he shrugged. “What?”

Andre leaned his chest against the table and opened his mouth. It didn’t seem like whatever he was about to say would be kind, so I jumped back in.

“Look. Mia is a woman.” That got a few confused stares and I smiled. “A woman raised in the Institution. I don’t know what that was like. In fact, I can hardly imagine. But I can draw conclusions. I’ve met Valentina, and just from both women, I know enough to assume there are other possibilities than seeing the meeting as a failure.” When no one spoke, I continued. “There’s a chance that the second piece of information had nothing to do with me, if there’s a second

piece of information at all. You hurt her with multiple digs and snarky comments during your conversation.”

Parker’s lips flattened, and he shifted back in his seat.

“That doesn’t feel good. Right or wrong, you hurt her feelings even if she’d never admit it. I’m the,” my cheeks started to burn from the uncomfortable point I was about to make, “only thing that you’ve ever gone against her on. So it makes sense that she’d lie about me to make you regret treating her that way.” I tapped my fingers on the table. “Have you ever treated her like that before?”

“Before recently? No,” Parker answered grudgingly.

“Then let’s say there’s a chance that she does have some information about me. We’re all on someone’s radar because of who you are. I’m the easy target because I’m just learning the rules of your world. That’s nothing new. So we remain cautious, and as Andre said, we stick together. But we must admit there’s also the possibility that she lied to make you angry.”

Matías and Andre shared a look that immediately got my hackles up. They weren’t on friendly terms despite spending the most time together. But that look said they knew something I didn’t.

“Why are you two acting like you have a secret?” Lafe eyed them both.

Parker, who had just started to relax, narrowed his eyes on them. “I get the feeling they have more information than the rest of us.” He glanced at Grey, who shook his head. “Well, out with it? What have you got that’ll condemn me even more?” His bitterness soured the air. I tried to catch his attention, to try and let him know this wasn’t his fault, but he avoided everyone but Andre.

Matías started to open his mouth, then firmly shut it after a quick glance at Andre. Even though it wasn’t in his nature, he was deferring to Andre. Andre skated his gaze over all of us before stopping on me.

“After the meeting with Mia, Matías and I discussed the possibility of her information being legit.”

Heat rolled off of Grey. He crossed his arms and studied Andre like a predator watching its prey.

“Because of the nature of my connections, I started putting out feelers to see if there had been any rumors about you recently. Or ever.” He met Matías’ stare once more. “And I’ve realized how big of an idiot I’ve been the last few months. All of us, really.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Lafe’s fork clattered against the plate. Not that anyone was eating anyway.

“That means there might have been more to Amorette’s abduction than we realized.”

Parker shook his head. “We did think of that. We discussed it, but chalked it up to her small size and appearance being the factors leading to her abduction. That and the incompetence of the men on the ground.”

“Think about it, Parker.” Andre dropped his elbows on the table. “Even if the men had taken her by accident, they could have dropped her off any number of ways on their way over the border. She was from fucking Virginia. They had time. She was an up-and-coming attorney in the public eye. Her sister is a hot name in the fashion industry. An *identical* twin. Just from that alone Amorette was too much of a liability for them to consider taking. Put them both together? That’s an absolute nightmare that Maikel wouldn’t stand for.”

Silence descended between us, and I quietly set my fork down and pressed my back against the chair.

The conversation carried on around me, but I couldn’t focus on it. The way Andre spoke about my former life, and me in the third person, stirred up a lot of emotions I thought were behind me. I’d felt them, dealt with them, then shoved them in a box in the recesses of my mind.

But hearing who I was on his lips was akin to watching who I could have been through a filmy lens. I closed my eyes and struggled to pull in air.

Why did this hurt so much? It shouldn't. I'd had months to come to terms with this, but like grief, a random trigger, it was fresh all over again. I blew hot and cold as flashes of the life I should have had flipped in front of me.

Making partner. Saving women. Becoming someone *Maman* would be proud of.

And most importantly, Grace.

"Killer?" A warm hand gripped the back of my neck and steered my face to the right. When I opened my eyes, Lafe's beautiful light blue ones filled my vision, brimming with concern.

No, I didn't miss that life. I thought I did. I thought I should. But this is where I was supposed to be. These brothers needed me. Saving them, creating a life with them, was just as important. If they gave me the chance to walk out the door and never see them again, I wouldn't be able to do it.

Because I needed them too.

I'd changed. I could never go back to my old life with everything I'd seen and done here. The old me was dead.

"I'm okay. That was just a painful reminder of stuff I'd rather forget."

Andre cursed and I reluctantly pulled my attention from Lafe.

"I'm sorry, Amorette. I didn't even think—"

"It's fine," I said, ignoring how my voice had thickened. "Why would you? This is the drawback to growing up in a well-adjusted family." I gave them all a watery, self-deprecating smile. "I'm over it. I just needed a minute. Now tell me what you were just saying. I zoned out."

He chewed his lip as he seemed to think it over. Andre clearly didn't want to tell me, not now that I'd had a momentary relapse, but he slowly nodded.

"Valentina's part in the Institution has been sparing, but she dabbles here and there. Vicente didn't mind in small amounts as long as it kept her out of his hair. She deals a lot in

the US.” He paused, and I wanted to shake him. “Part of what she does is manage the men on the ground for Maikel. Valentina is no fool. She wouldn’t have taken you without a reason.”

Shit. But why?

ANDRE



“I’m surprised you’re the one who wanted to sit up here with me.” I glanced over at Parker. I’d already gotten us to the cruise control part of the trip so I could sit back and relax. I hadn’t had nearly enough time with Amorette, and I had hoped she and Grey would have come up here like that one time...

“Grey and Lafe are all over Amorette. I don’t want to be a fourth wheel if I’m not invited. It grates on my ego. Matías seems just fine with it.” He rested his head back and closed his eyes.

“Matías wants her.”

“Yes, and he’s closer to getting her than I am. Maybe I should just give up. I fuck up less when I’m not chasing her.”

“You fuck up less when you aren’t acting out because you feel slighted. She doesn’t owe you a fucking thing.” I didn’t want to lecture him right now. Parker was already beating himself up, although I couldn’t pass up the opportunity to tell him what an idiot he was. Since he met with Mia, he’d seemed to have toned down the idiot and ramped up the moping.

“Yes, I know that. I’ve learned that Little Love will do what she wants, and unfortunately, that doesn’t seem to be me.” He turned his head in my direction, and the afternoon light highlighted the soft purple bruises under his eyes from lack of sleep.

Parker must really have it bad. And, fuck, if that didn’t make *me* feel bad for him.

“I tried to give her the presents and attention a woman like her deserves, and she flung it back in my face. I’m fairly confident that that means she’s not interested.”

Fuck. I scrubbed my eyes. Was I really about to do this? Were *we*?

“Are you giving up?”

He shrugged, the action reminiscent of the brat he was.

“Is she a piece of ass to you, or do you actually want *her*?”

He sneered, some of the life leaking back into him. “You think I’d try and fuck the woman the rest of you have lost your mind over for a few minutes of fun? I can do that anywhere. Literally anywhere with a multitude of beautiful women.”

“I wouldn’t phrase your thoughts like that to Amorette.”

“Hardy-fucking-har. This isn’t to her, it’s to you. You’re the asshole who insulted me.”

“So you insulted her. That’s great,” I needled. He was perking up with each little jab. We needed the old Parker to be on his toes in order for us to come out on the other side. “If you want a future with her, then don’t give up.”

“I’m not embarrassing myself for her again.” He shot me a dirty look.

“Then don’t, but don’t give up. And if Mia did have information we could use—” I faced forward and gathered my own courage. Changing old habits was hard. An even harder one, was not immediately kicking his ass. “It’s not your fault. Mia’s a bitch. I’ve always thought that. However, at least that conversation got us searching down the right road.”

He didn’t acknowledge me at all, the bastard. I go against the grain to offer him an olive branch and he pouts. *Fucking figures.*

“How do you think Little Love will react when we see the first-hand devastation Vicente instigated on our island?” Parker slid his thumbs under the seat belt straps.

That was probably the second thought ruminating through my head since we started this journey. It had been weeks since we were back. We'd lost a lot of people, in some cases whole families, although unless she went into the town and found some English speakers, Amorette would never know that.

Anton had given us a briefing while Amorette had gone for a bath at Lafa's urging, so she hadn't been there for it. Just to make sure, we had the entire conversation in Spanish.

The compound was wrecked along with some parts of the village, but they were working on rebuilding the island. I was almost to the point of saying 'fuck it' and moving to another island. This location was known but not widely. Except now, for my peace of mind, I wasn't sure I would be able to feel safe here again.

Not to mention, it was a bitch to repair due to the isolated location.

"You know, having a woman not afraid of us on at least some level is eye opening." I gripped the top of the headrest and my cock twitched from the memory of her in my lap.

Parker quirked a brow.

"She's teaching me that women are never fucking predictable."

He hummed. "And what about Matías? What if he wants to join the cartel harem Little Love is building?"



ANTON WAITED for us as we exited the plane. The landing strip was mostly undamaged. Even though a fire had burned down some of the trees. We stood in a row as we took in exactly what happened after leaving. There was already a vast amount of damage when we fled, and Vicente supposedly stopped when we were gone, but this...

"There's no fucking way we can live in the compound. Not like that." Grey spit on the ground and cracked his knuckles.

“Fuck, we can’t,” I whispered. Normally, the trees blocked the view of the compound from the landing strip. But not anymore. The compound seemed to be crumbling from the inside out. They’d hit the place with bombs and they did a fuck of a job.

My brothers—and now Amorette—were the most important things in my life. This—the island and our home, it hurt. It wasn’t a death blow, but it was still a fucking setback.

“I can’t believe—” Amorette pressed her fingers to her lips, her eyes shining bright in the afternoon sun. “He was your father. He couldn’t have known that you’d make it out of here. He could have killed you and he wouldn’t have cared at all.” Her voice trembled as I snagged her waist and yanked her into my chest.

Grey had his arm up to do the same, but I beat him to it. I needed her right then. Not him.

She burrowed into my chest and her hands fisted in my shirt. I squeezed her tight, probably too tight, but she didn’t complain.

Sighing, Matías stepped away from us like he was going to head to the compound, then he stopped and looked back over his shoulder. “Vicente didn’t want you all to die. It wasn’t part of his plan, although he didn’t care if you did. It would have been a mild inconvenience for him, but that was all.”

“Fucking asshole,” Amorette seethed against my chest. “I wish I had stabbed him. I wanted to. I fucking—” She pushed her head and shoulders back so she could see the others. “I wanted to, you know. That was my plan. I knew he had to die, and I wanted to put myself in a position to get to him. I just never thought someone else would get there first.”

“Wait. Wait a goddamn minute.” Parker charged forward, stopping a few feet away. “You didn’t storm off because of what I did with Mia?”

Amorette’s expression was serious as she met his gaze. She gave one slow shake of her head. “I would have found a reason to leave. You just made it easier.”

“What the fucking hell?” Parker cursed and stormed several feet away. He laced his fingers behind his head as he stared at the ocean. Then he turned around and stomped back. Every few steps his dark gaze swept over Amorette as if he wasn’t sure he should be angry with her or kiss her.

This whole time, he’d been blaming himself for sending her off—he’d landed on anger. The devastation around us did little to stop my smile from breaking free. If he was like Grey, he’d fuck his anger out on her.

If he could catch her.

“Our men are waiting on us,” Anton said quietly as he nudged my arm.

Yeah, I wanted to get this over with.

The walk to the compound was a slow one. I took in every piece of our property that was damaged. The motivation to take our revenge out on someone, or something, whipped through me. I ground my teeth and clenched my fists, but those small acts of aggression did fuck all to help.

At least Anton didn’t urge us to go faster. If he had, I’d have put him on the ground just because he was here.

Inside the commons, at least half of the glass had been cleared away in preparation for new panes to be brought in. The thoughts I’d had circling my head on the flight over continued to batter at me.

Was repairing this place even worth it? I’d never feel at ease here again. This might as well be the mansion for the way my nerves were frayed.

No sooner had we stepped through the doors, our men started filing in. As far as spaces went, the commons was the biggest area we had on offer unless we wanted to go to the courtyard. After the recent events, that felt too much like sitting ducks for my tastes. This would be the best place to address them all.

The guards were the same, if a little worse for wear. Most were covered in dirt and dust like they’d been part of the construction crew. The only difference was the way their eyes

burned. They were invested now. But were they invested with us or against us?

Fuck.

Women came in behind the men. Then a few children. *They* were affected. Swollen eyes from crying, a few bruises that hopefully were from falling and nothing else. It was the haunting feeling hanging over them that was difficult to swallow.

I avoided Amorette like the fucking plague. If I didn't acknowledge the heavy weight of her stare, I could pretend she wasn't about to do something stupid. But the way these women and children looked...

For all our faults, our island had protected our women and children. They were nothing like the brainwashed shells in Vicente's strongholds. I was proud of that. Except now, they were getting a taste of what life in the Institution was truly like.

Our carefully crafted dream had crumbled. The island would never be the same.

Anton's soft footsteps warned me of his approach. He kept his voice low so his words wouldn't travel past us, "A lot of the town was destroyed. We've moved our families to the spare rooms here. I hope that isn't an issue."

"Why *the fuck* would you think it was an issue?" I shouted, rearing my head around. My eyebrows skyrocketed as I stared at him. Was he delusional? Was I? Were we so awful to work with that they actually feared moving their families into the compound?

His eyes shone bright and he dipped his head. "We weren't sure, but it seemed like the best place. I thought we should act first and ask for forgiveness later. I would have told you before, but..." But as much as we allowed them to know us, we still held ourselves back.

Hell, maybe we had given off the impression that giving their families a place to sleep was cause for punishment, but I was glad Anton had taken matters into his own hands.

Every decision I made was to keep my brothers safe, no matter the sacrifice that came with it. Those bastards would always be my priority, so nothing had changed, but I wouldn't needlessly cause others to suffer to get ahead. We would do what we could to help. I just wasn't sure our home was here anymore.

I turned and grabbed his shoulders, lightly shaking him. I spoke quieter this time as I met his gaze. "I'm glad. We're not our father."

Those four words resonated so deep in what was left of my blackened soul, then it continued to vibrate throughout my body as I faced our people. Because this was who they were. Ours.

"I'm sorry we've been away, but more importantly, I'm sorry we left you to defend the island on your own." Even with our extensive weaponry and technology, we'd still sustained massive damage.

That was so fucking difficult to stomach.

"You had to," a woman called from the back.

I searched the crowd until I found a young woman pushing through. She was less haggard than the others. Her chin jutted forward and she pulled her shoulders back. A guard, a young one who I think I'd seen training a few times, rushed after her, scrubbing a hand over his face.

"What do you know of that?" I asked, more curious than accusing.

"Whe—" The guard caught her arm, but she yanked away with more venom than I expected. My eyes widened at the exchange. "When you left, the attacks stopped. We all know they were here for you, and we all know it was Vicente."

"Good riddance to the fucking *cabrón!*" someone else shouted.

The girl ignored it and continued, "I hate that we lost our home. I hate that I lost my mother, only I'm not sorry you left. We could have lost more."

“Kat!” the man hissed, then to me, “I’m sorry, sir. My sister’s a strong-willed bitch.”

Another little fighter, just like Wifey. I could practically feel the wheels turning in her head where she stood at the other end of our line. She was going to try and make a friend.

“She’s right,” I agreed. There was no use mincing words, not when she spoke the truth or when it was in our favor.

“I want to fight.”

That was...unexpected. Only our men fought. Women were usually sent to the Gallery or hoarded away for safekeeping.

“You want to fight?”

“Hell yes. I want to be able to defend myself. Defend my family,” she said, her voice cracking over the last word. Her brother whispered furiously in her ear.

“Do you know how to fight?” Grey asked, crossing his arms over his chest. Shit, he was about to recruit a woman.

“No. But I want to learn.”

“Done.” Grey shrugged. “I’ll teach anyone who wants to learn, man or woman. Parker can teach weapons. But it won’t be easy.”

“I don’t care about that.”

“Then when the dust settles, I’ll open up the gym. In the meantime,” Grey said as he eyed her brother, “have him teach you.”

The young guard dropped his head and sighed at the ceiling, exhibiting all the exasperation of an older brother. Then he grabbed her arm and pulled her away from the room.

“I’m not sure this is the home for us anymore. We certainly can’t live here, not with the place in ruins,” I started. That got more foot shuffling and doubt than anything that had been said so far. “We’re not abandoning you. If we leave, you have the option to come with us. Or we’ll help you rebuild your

homes.” I hadn’t meant to offer that, but the warmth of the moment was getting to me.

Damn it.

“For now, know that we are here, and we’ll do whatever we can to keep you safe.”

“What about him?” An old man called, pointing at Matías. He had to be in his seventies. When we took over the island, he had been too old to be a guard, but he had always been supportive. Now, I wasn’t so sure, considering he was Jorge and Blanca’s uncle.

“He’s our brother,” I returned.

“No, he isn’t.” The old man spit on the ground. “He’s Vicente’s puppet. Now that Vicente’s gone, he’s going to try and be your master.”

“That’s not who I am.” Matías stepped forward, his anger clinging to his skin. “I am not my father, either.”

The crowd started to shift in the back, and light murmuring arose. It wasn’t kind, either. Then the reason appeared. Jorge and Blanca were joining the group.

Fuck, I’d half-expected Blanca to run when we left the island.

“Yeah, right,” their uncle sneered.

The crowd had lost interest in the exchange, paying more attention to Blanca and Jorge now. Mostly Blanca from how they curled their lips and spit at the floor as she passed. They didn’t come to the front. Instead, they stopped halfway. Enough to be visible and in our faces, but not enough to reach us.

Blanca was the driver, with her chin held high in stubborn obstinance and Jorge silently supporting her.

“What’s that about?” I whispered to Anton.

“The secret got out on why they were locked up. The people are angry with her, but they didn’t let it stop them.”

“Stop them?” I kept eyeing the crowd and how they reacted to the pair.

“Stop them from helping. Jorge joined us on the front line and Blanca helped get our people to the hospital, then she helped care for them even when they spit on her.”

It was the least she deserved for being a traitor.

Ready to wrap this up and get to work, I raised my hand to get the attention of the crowd. “The Institution is ours for the taking and our *brother*, Matías, is going to help.” I shot him a glare to make sure he understood he didn’t have an option.

A cheer went up and the oddness hit me when it didn’t echo the way it should have if the building hadn’t sustained an assload of damage. This was unacceptable. We’d fix the damage, and I’d make sure we were never hit like this again.

“Are you with us?” I yelled, standing taller than I had in a long time. A deafening scream almost had me stumbling back. “Then let’s get to work!”

There was one last call of support before the people started to disperse. I finally allowed myself to seek out Amorette, and I wasn’t even surprised when I found her.

She and Blanca were locked in place, their gazes glued together. Whatever happened to Blanca, Amorette would have to accept it.

I wasn’t sure that she would.

LAFE



The best thing about being at the compound was having access to my stash of drugs.

I shut my apartment door behind me and waited for any sound. No one had been behind me in the hall, I checked. My heart thudded in my chest like I was doing something wrong.

Sampling the product had never been wrong. Ever. Not until Killer.

And I...loved her for her concern, if I could even feel that emotion. Except for when I needed a fix to get me through. I used to be able to go long periods without any kind of hit while at home, but there was so much going on I wasn't sure if I was coming or going.

And I needed to stay alert. To protect myself. To protect her.

Walking through the apartment on silent feet, I headed straight to my closet in the spare room. For the most part, I kept a few small canisters in the kitchen drawer, but Andre had swept the place after we left the commons.

The residential wing hadn't been touched at all, and Anton and Jorge had kept people away from our apartments. Probably feeling he was pushing it already by bringing people into the building without our permission.

Honestly, I was shocked Andre had been as...benevolent as he was. Killer had to be rubbing off on him. Except, in our

world, I wasn't sure that was good. Kindness led to attachments, and attachments led to disappointment.

Even my own mother had purposely destroyed my childhood. Not that I'd had much of one anyway.

I opened the closet door and pulled up the carpet in the corner. Underneath was a loose board. That came up, too. Three canisters. I'd placed these here a year ago. I'd been coming off a high and fucking paranoid, so I'd stashed a few around the apartment. Once I'd sobered, I hadn't thought I'd ever use them, or need them.

But here I was, with shaking hands, lifting one of the cool canisters. I twisted the cap off and shook off most of the powder from the spoon. Raising it to my nose, I took a quick sniff. Not enough to get me wired or bug-eyed. But sufficient to stop the shaking and clear my mind.

Already I felt better. Just that initial zap was amazing.

I studied the small canister in my hand. If I put it in my pocket, how long would it be before someone realized I had it? Andre and Amorette were set on getting me clean, but they didn't understand. I *needed* it.

When I didn't have it, the world was black and every single fucking thing was too heavy, pressing down on my shoulders. It fucked me up in a way I didn't like. Look at when I'd made love to Amorette. I couldn't stomach any space between us and demanded her promise to never leave me.

Like a pussy. A weak-assed pussy.

She hadn't said anything, but I fucking hoped she didn't think less of me for it. If I'd had my canister, that never would have happened.

Sighing, I put it back under the carpet and set everything back to how it was. Then I headed to meet my brothers and Killer. We'd just had breakfast and I'd told them I needed to take a shit before we started our work for the day.

I was disgusted with myself that I had to resort to that to sneak away. Yet, it was better than the alternative.

I found them in the offices and Andre was on the phone with a contact while Matías and Parker texted on their phones. Grey had Killer on his lap in the corner, occupying his time with her as they waited for instructions.

We'd spent the last two days working alongside our people to clear the island. Although, any mention of returning to the island was met with an energetic silence from Andre. That didn't even make sense to me, but it was the best way to describe the way Andre locked up and avoided the answer.

"What part of the compound are we working on today?" I shoved my hands in my pockets and leaned against the wall.

My heart stopped as Andre turned to me. I felt like a fucking teenager again, hoping Vicente's torture masters didn't find any offense to whip me for.

Andre's gaze skated over me to rest on Grey and Killer in the corner. "There's not a lot left to do. They've already done most of the debris removal and cleaning. Right now, we're just waiting for the materials to rebuild the place." He turned back to his computer so his back was to us.

"Then we need to go to the mansion," Matías said as he raised his brow.

Parker scoffed. "That place holds nothing but bad memories and brainwashed nitwits. I'd rather head to the States to work on a few deals with my own people. I need to if we're still supposed to be running our own businesses."

Killer perked up, and a seed of guilt unfurled in my gut. As much freedom as we wanted to give her, returning to the States would never be on the list. It was too risky for her and us, even with Andre's connections.

Matías scowled as he turned his head to stare directly at Parker before shifting his gaze over the rest of us. "Either we all go, or I go. It was stupid of me to stay away this long anyway." Matías dropped his phone in his lap and leaned back. He seemed to be waiting for Andre to blow up at his inference about our decisions since Vicente died.

He didn't have to wait long. Andre's shoulders hit his ears, then he slowly swiveled to face Matías. "Are you planning to take your rightful place as the heir?" Andre asked carefully. It was Matías' place. Vicente had set that up nicely within the Institution, but he didn't seem to want it. At least not without us.

Matías pursed his lips. "I think it's the only possible outcome at this very moment. The longer I stay away, the more I lose my foothold at the top. I don't think you or I want that. Do we?" The way he asked was like a dare. He wasn't quite shoving our lack of popularity in Andre's face, but it was close.

"Why do we need you?" Parker mused. When everyone turned to him, he rolled his eyes. "I don't mean that in a cutting way. I'm legitimately asking why we have to go this route. What's wrong with a hostile takeover? Remove the heads and set our people in place. Squash any resistance harshly and swiftly. Our people here on the island would be perfect for the job. They have enough rage and hunger for revenge to be loyal to the end."

I glanced at Amorette. This was the kind of talk I expected her to balk at. The killing on a mass scale. The potential collateral damage. She watched Parker, so much clearly working behind her beautiful, intelligent eyes.

Then she nodded and turned back to the rest of us. "I think we should do both. If we just follow Matías and hope for the best, you're setting yourself up for a long, dragged-out fight. That would cause more damage and casualties than a swift takeover. But I want to change some things while we're at it."

Now, she was setting the challenge on the table.

"And those are?" Andre inhaled slowly, seeming to dread what she was going to demand.

"Cut the human trafficking out of the Institution and take the drug business from Lafe," she rushed out like she wanted both ideas on the table before we had time to balk.

It didn't work like that. I was speechless, but my eyes were locked on Andre. He was the one who made these kinds of decisions. We had our opinions, but if it meant our safety, Andre put his foot down.

Andre's lips pulled back from his teeth in a grimace. He didn't want to shut her down, but that was what he was about to do. "Amorette. You realize what we are, right?"

"A criminal organization. But there are no rules on what crimes you have to partake in."

"We're a cartel. The Castillo Cartel, although for polite company Vicente trained everyone to refer to it as the Institution. It opened more doors that way. Right now, we're the most powerful crime organization in South America. If we kick out those two factions of our businesses, we won't be the most powerful for long. I've explained this to you before."

"Shut the fuck up," Grey said, gripping Amorette's hips and tugging her closer on his lap. "We don't want the skin business anyway. The Gallery can burn for all we care. We've never liked it and never wanted any part of it. That's an easy fix. And there are other people who can run drugs."

I held my breath. If they had any idea what I'd been working on, they'd shit themselves.

"It's not that simple, Grey," Andre argued.

"Make it that simple. If we're in charge, there are a number of ways for us to make it happen."

"And for it to blow up in our faces."

Matías moved his head back and forth as he followed the discussion. "I'll take over the drug business."

Helvete. That wasn't going to work either. Sweat started to collect on my forehead, but I held my tongue. At one point, Parker seemed to be watching me, but I wasn't sure since I refused to look his way.

"Have you ever run a business before?" Andre asked, only a slight bit of condescension in his voice.

“I can learn. I’ve studied the way the Institution has run my entire life,” he returned stiffly.

“And yet, you don’t even know some of the basics about drugs,” Parker added, but it still felt like he was watching me.

That caught my attention, but I was more interested in why Matías wanted it. He wasn’t a user. That was obvious without knowing about his lack of knowledge of drugs. Why this business? It would be more efficient for him to pick off one of the other heads and take over a different faction.

“So, why?” Parker insisted, leaning forward and clasping his hands between his knees.

Matías shot me a look out of the corner of his eyes then looked back to Parker. I wasn’t going to like what he had to say.

“Because then maybe you won’t have to search the house for drugs anymore.” Then, as if it was decided, Matías smiled and slapped his knee. “Now, let’s go to the mansion.”



I HATED THIS. The entire trip, Killer and Matías kept sending me pitying looks. Although, Amorette also had determination set in her face. The other three were just as disgusted with me, but they weren’t making it obvious.

They didn’t have to. I had enough self-hate for all of us. As we walked into the mansion I felt two inches tall. I couldn’t even pull my shoulders back or look anyone in the eye. It was too much, and I fucking hated it.

Why did they even bother trying to help me? They should just let me run myself into the ground. At least then I wouldn’t have their disdain shoved down my throat.

I tried to ignore my problems by focusing on the mansion. But I didn’t have as much energy as I needed. We’d left right after giving orders to the men on how to continue their efforts rebuilding the island, and even if I’d had time, after Matías’

verbal shot, I didn't have the courage to go collect a canister. I'd have one of my people meet me if I could sneak away.

Already, I could tell I was too tired and too foggy. This was when mistakes could be made. What if someone got a hair up their ass and tried to take Killer again? We'd brought a healthy number of our own guards, but they weren't in *here* with us. I could fuck it all up because I wasn't in the right headspace.

As we passed the guards at the door, I could believe the last few weeks had been a dream. They didn't blink when we entered, but that could be because we were trailing behind Matías.

He walked us to the great hall where Vicente liked to hold his meetings. The glass chambers lining the hall were empty, thank fuck.

I didn't want Killer to see where she might have gone if she'd been compliant.

Our steps echoed around the room and when we were close to Vicente's throne, some of his top men stormed in. Their weapons were drawn, and we immediately had ours up. The second we stepped foot out of our vehicle we kept one hand on our weapons.

"This isn't the welcome I expected," Matías said lightly. His entire demeanor transformed, and his tone frosted over. *This* was the Matías I'd grown up with. This sudden change was eye-opening on just how different Matías had become with us.

"What did you expect when you neglected your duties as heir?" Valentina waltzed in with two men at her back. "You take off with the very men and woman who orchestrated our father's death. Is it because her pussy's sweet? Is that why you're suddenly unconcerned with your responsibilities?" She came closer as more of the residents—both guards and upper-tier employees—entered the great hall.

It was like she expected Matías sooner or later and had this all planned out to discredit him. My heart hammered, and I

shifted my gun between the guards closest to us. Even with shaky hands, I was a good shot. Maybe better than I was at fighting.

“I had other business to attend to. Is this what you’ve been doing here? Spreading lies, hoping to gain a little power for yourself? Tell me, who’s dick is better—Juan’s or Roberto’s?” The two men at her back stiffened. “If you can’t decide, there are several guards standing behind you who could tell you. They get around often enough. Or did you think you were their only lover?” Matías gave her a mocking smile.

Fisting her hands, Valentina had murder in her eyes. “What they do or don’t do doesn’t matter. What’s important is that you’re a mistake. You can’t even be bothered running the Institution. Why would we want you here?”

“Is that what you think? That I haven’t been running it? Believe me, I’ve kept up with all the duties required of me. The only one I’ve neglected is letting some of the *cabróns* here suck my dick.” Matías waved his gun toward the crowd of favorites lingering in the corner. “Vicente was always better at letting people blow him for their own personal gain. That’s not how I plan to rule though,” he said, shaking his head. He made a slow show of cocking his gun.

She started to look nervous as we tightened our circle around Killer. “What are you doing?” There was a thread of hesitance.

“Making an example of those who try to fuck with me in any way.” He aimed and shot Juan between the eyes, then Roberto. Neither man had time to react before they collapsed to the ground.

But the sound of their bodies hitting the ground was masked by the shrill pitch of Valentina’s screams.

GREY



A h, fuck.

I stepped in front of Amorette in case any of these *pendejos* got any ideas. No one seemed to be looking her way, yet, though it was only a matter of time.

Either Matías was going rogue, or he and Andre had a plan they hadn't filled the rest of us in on. If that was the case, I'd have a bone to pick with my fucking brothers.

I was the last person against shedding a bit of blood to get the point across, except for when Amorette was unprotected. He should have fucking told us or gave us some kind of warning.

I gripped my serrated knife in my left hand and my gun in my right. I preferred knives over guns, but sometimes, guns had the bigger advantage. In this pit of vipers, I needed my gun.

Valentina's screams tapered off as she speared Matías with a hatred so intense, the air between them sizzled.

"What were you saying?" Matías asked, seemingly unconcerned with the unrest building within the crowd. At any moment these assholes were going to take off running. It was an effective way to set the tone, but Andre had just said we weren't going to be our father.

I peeked over my shoulder to check on our wicked love. Something had snapped inside her recently and she was changing. From the moment I met her little fighting ass, I

knew she had potential. I loved it. She was who she was, but each step in our direction meant she was firmly planting herself in our world.

The fight in her really got my dick hard.

Matías raised his weapon again and when he glanced up, several of the men closest to us jumped back. Valentina was so deep in her rage, she didn't appear to see anything around her except Matías. Then she swiveled her head slowly over our group.

She was searching for our weakest point. It was Amorette; even though our wicked love wouldn't want to ever hear that.

I hoped *mamá* was ready for fighting lessons again. We hadn't had a chance to hit the gym together, but this shit with Valentina made the back of my neck itch. Andre brushed my shoulders with his, and Lafe came up on our other side. We'd created a barrier around her. She was so short; no one would see her if you didn't know she was there.

I glanced back again to ensure no one was sneaking up on our asses.

Parker was behind her and gave me a nod.

Good. She was covered.

"Valentina, I believe your issue is with me. Why are you glaring at our brothers?" Matías took a few relaxed steps toward her, carefully placing another wall between Amorette and the Institution.

I narrowed my eyes on him. Did he realize what he was doing?

"They aren't my brothers. And you aren't either." Her voice was low, with more emotion than I expected. Valentina must have felt something for those fuck toys.

"That's just too bad. Only the family of the leader gets princess privileges."

"You can't fucking talk to her like that," a kid said behind her. Well, not a kid. He had to be twenty at least but had the

face of a baby. And the intelligence of one. Valentina didn't make a move to stop him from walking straight into his death.

He ran up to Matías with no weapons in his hand—first mistake. You don't run at a man with a gun empty-handed.

Too easily, Matías caught the kid by his throat and held him off the ground. “Valentina, is this another one of your mutts? Have you been working your way through the guards?” He glimpsed at her in question.

“Fuck you, Matías.” Valentina struggled with speaking through clenched teeth. She vibrated with anger but didn't make any other moves.

“I have to say, I wouldn't think you'd act like such a slut. Not Vicente's pride and joy. Maybe you'd be better suited to the Gallery?”

I braced myself for some kind of retaliation, but it didn't come. Instead, the kid started to kick his feet and his face purpled. Matías was going to choke the life out of him. I froze when Amorette's tiny hand touched my back. She wanted to see what was going on.

No fucking way.

Three minutes later, the kid stopped breathing and Matías *still* held him up in the air. When he dropped him to the ground, he addressed the hall with a smile. “Now, where were we? I am the head of this Institution. My brothers are my right-hand men. Their word is as good as mine. My sister? She's a fucking slut who stirs too much trouble. If you listen to her, you'll join these assholes on the ground. Is that clear?”

I inspected every face and committed the ones glaring to memory. Or the ones looking at Valentina like lovesick puppies. She must have a golden pussy to make men want to kill themselves for her.

A smile broke out over my face. If it was her or me, I'd die for Amorette. No questions. Although she wasn't a cunt like our half-sister. And I wouldn't be an idiot like these guys.

Valentina straightened her shoulders and pulled her head up high. Without a word, she turned and carefully walked out

like it was taking all her effort not to stomp and rage on her way.

Most of the men followed, probably not wanting to chance angering Matías, Especially while death was still so fresh in the air. Two of Vicente's best men stepped forward. They weren't heads, but they were high enough up in the running of the mansion that I recognized them.

"Sir." They bowed their heads. Their expressions were blank, and their tones neutral. If they were against us, I couldn't tell. At least they'd never been present when I was at the whipping post. Then I might kill them just because I could.

If it was suitable for Matías, it was good for us. And maybe a little psycho would do well to keep us safe.

"Can I trust you men, or are you like these fools?" Matías swept out a hand.

"We have no allegiance to your sister." Both men kept their gaze on the ground. "The family wing has been cleaned out. We knew you'd be back at some point. All suites are ready for you and your brothers to use as you see fit."

"Where is Pilar?" Andre called out.

Shit, that was right. His mother slept in the family wing more than in the harem wing growing up. It was not an invitation that was extended to Andre.

"She's kept her main residence." So the harem hall.

They bowed and hurried away, leaving us alone in the hall. Each of us searched the room for any new threats before lowering our weapons. Matías sighed, his shoulders drooping as he turned around.

"That was fun."

"What happened? I couldn't understand any of it." Amorette pushed between us. She froze. For a brief second, I expected her to gasp or cover her mouth but she just steeled herself as she took in the bloody scene on the floor.

Lafe looked seconds from trying to whisk her away. Andre had a similar look, but I would fight them over it.

Maybe this would give her nightmares. Maybe not. But, she was coming to terms with what we needed to do to stay alive, and she was a fighter. A killer.

She didn't run, scream, or cry as she put two and two together. *Mamá* did a damn good job of holding it all together.

That's my girl.

"What now?" she asked.

"Now I need to meet with the household staff, see what's been happening and squash any rebellion." Matías wiped the sweat off of his face. Amorette nodded, eyes to the ground with a placid expression.

"While you do that, I'll take Amorette and pick out a suite in the family wing." I touched her arm, then slid my fingers down to link with hers.

Parker pulled a face. "I hate that wing. It's nothing but bad memories."

Andre grinned. "Like the time you put grease or something on the floor to take out that guard?"

"You mean the mess I cleaned up before the guard got there, saving your ass a beating?" Matías suddenly caught us off guard. What was he talking about, and when had he ever cleaned up our messes? "What? Did you think it just magically disappeared?"

"No..." Andre said slowly. "I knew it was gone when we went back, only I thought a servant had cleaned it up."

Parker had a pensive look on his face as he watched Matías. "Are you serious or are you fucking with us?"

"Why would I lie about that? It wasn't the first time I saved you all either. I threw out the climbing ropes that had itch cream on them. And the washcloths with menthol. I knew Vicente would have sent you to the whipping post, so I did my best to take care of it."

"Why?" Lafe asked quietly. Tremors were racking through him again like he was coming off a fresh high. He must have had a stash at the compound Andre didn't know about. Not

surprising considering it was our home and Lafe was paranoid. He better not steal Amorette again. He already tried to hoard her time. “Why not ever tell us?”

Matías quirked a brow as a sardonic smile crossed his face. “You mean the four of you who hated my guts because I was on the dais when you were stuck in the crowd or on the post? I wasn’t that desperate for friendship.”

Yeah, he was. He just didn’t want to admit it. Why else would he try to push his way into our group now?

He looked over his shoulder at the doors. “We can have this conversation later, when there aren’t ears around us.”

“Right, I’ll see you assholes later.” I pulled on Amorette’s hand until she was closer then I wrapped my arm around her shoulders. I wanted to make sure she was close enough to me that I could shift her out of the way, if needed.

“Anton is just outside the door. Take him with you to stand guard! And don’t be shocked when I join you later!” Andre yelled.

I flipped him off over my shoulder. She was mine. I made the decision to share, but they were getting on my last fucking nerve by sliding into my time with her. I couldn’t remember the last time we’d been alone.

Anton and another of our guards were walking our way when we stepped out. Some of the mansion guards were stationed along the hall. For the most part no one gave them any issues, but a few did sneer. When they saw me watching, they readjusted their faces.

It didn’t matter, I saw. And I’d be finding them later.

“Where are we going to stay?” Anton asked as he strolled alongside us. Our men had M4s held in front of them. It was excessive for the halls of the mansion, but it was an intimidation tactic. The guards here only had handguns.

Vicente hadn’t liked the appearance of such heavy weaponry inside. That was reserved for the men patrolling the grounds.

“There’s a servants’ wing next to the family wing. Our men can go there. I’ll send a message to Matías. There’s an extra suite in the actual family wing you can take with a shift partner.”

We reached the end of the hallway and one of the guards opened the door to the private staircase. Everything here was wide open with high ceilings. Lafe had hated it when we were kids, but I didn’t mind it. It was just the way it had always been.

White shining marble for the floors and walls. Gold accents. Crystal chandeliers. If it was expensive, Vicente wanted it.

I walked up the staircase I hadn’t walked up in more than a decade. Maybe more.

We passed the harem wing first. The double doors were closed and no sound escaped from inside. It wouldn’t, because Vicente hated sound traveling when he fucked. Or tortured. Or killed.

“What’s that?” Amorette asked, tipping her head toward the double doors. She studied me, probably picking up the importance of that wing.

“That’s the wing where we lived as kids. Pilar was the only woman allowed in the family wing who wasn’t his wife or kids. Our mothers were there for the most part. Except Parker’s.”

Her brows bounced up to her hairline. “There’s a wife?”

“Not anymore. She died when I was twenty. It was a political marriage. He didn’t hate her, but he didn’t love her either. She was Matías’ and Valentina’s mother.” It was never discussed but it was unspoken that he grew tired of her and staged her death.

“Could he love?” she asked sourly. Our guys dropped back a few feet, probably to give us privacy. Amorette might need it, but I didn’t give a fuck.

“Can we?” I wasn’t sure we could, not the way Amorette did. “We’re his sons and grew up in his house. Who we are is

because of him.” Good or bad.

She scowled as we reached the family wing. Two mansion guards stood outside these doors, and they didn’t blink when I reached for the handle. The two servants must have called ahead, or word traveled fast. Knowing how this place ran, probably both.

“We’ll stand guard here. A few more of our men will join us in a few minutes,” Anton said.

I paused at the threshold and looked back at him, “Call Andre if any problems come up.”

“You got it.”

We entered the wing and I shut the door behind it. So many suites on this floor. The one at the very end was the biggest and Vicente’s. Matías would take that one if they’d cleaned it out. Which one would be the last place they’d look for us?

It was sad I’d resorted to scheming to gain a few extra minutes, but I was greedy.

“How about this one?” I picked a suite not quite in the middle of the hall. Depending on which end they started from, they’d have to check a few before they found us. Amorette didn’t say anything as I opened the door.

The fresh lemon scent hit my nose and soft light traveled through the sheer curtains.

“This place is pretty,” she said, like she wasn’t sure how she felt about it.

“Sure. If you like this kind of thing. I prefer the dark, sleek colors in my apartment to these frills.” I ruffled the curtains as I walked by the windows. Stopping, I backtracked to shut them. The room was immediately steeped in darkness.

“Uh, Grey.”

“Hold on, Wicked Love.” I walked to the bathroom and flipped on the switch and left the door cracked.

“What are we doing now? It’s the middle of the day.” She stood in the center of the room and spun in a circle to finish checking everything out. Her eyes were probably adjusted enough to make out the artwork by now. Parker had stolen these pieces when he first started his business.

“Escaping all the *cabróns* running around this place. Resting. Fucking. Take your pick.” I put my gun back in my holster and unbuckled it, then set it on the table. She watched as I began stripping out of my button-down shirt and slacks.

“You’re not wasting any time.” She grinned.

I shrugged. “I hate suits. I’d rather be in shorts and tanks, but sometimes you must make an impression.”

“So you didn’t stay in this wing?” She toed off her shoes and removed her clothes down to her camisole and panties. It was a cute look. I didn’t tell her that, though. She’d probably start spitting at me like an angry kitten.

“We snuck in a few times just to see what it was like. My mother was also called here a time or two, but we were assigned our own wing.” I crawled on the bed and fell on my back into the pillows.

She joined me and curled up against my side with her hand on my chest. This wasn’t a fucking kind of vibe. I sighed. She wanted to ask something. Her fingers trailed over my pec, making random, nervous shapes.

“Can you tell me about your mother?”

“Why?” I hated talking about that shit. It didn’t bother me, not like it would someone like Lafe or Amorette. But I could tell by her wide eyes she expected it to.

“Because I want to know you better. You and me? We fuck. And that’s about it.”

I grinned. That wasn’t a bad thing. “I’m not complaining.”

“Grey,” she chastised and slapped my chest. I caught her hand and didn’t let it go. Relaxing my head into the pillow, I stared up at the dark ceiling. What the fuck were we doing? This was so domestic. I’d never had this with anyone.

I'd never wanted it, but I needed it with her.

"I know you, *mami*. And you know me better than you think you do. Knowing the events of someone's life isn't actually knowing them. It's understanding how they are when no one is around. You've been in my apartment when I'm relaxing. You've seen me fuck." Her soft inhale made my cock twitch. That was all it took from her. "You've seen me kill. And you still walk into my arms. I'd say you know me pretty fucking well."

I didn't wait for her to speak before I continued, "I know you have a hero complex." She harrumphed. "You want to save people and it drives you to make crazy stupid decisions. You feel things big, and when you do, you immediately want to take action. I know you're just as fierce as you are kind. You have a backbone that's not very common for women in the Institution. I can understand all this without knowing your middle name or your favorite color."

She had slowly melted into my side and now rested her chin on my chest. "You're not wrong, but you're not completely right either," she said on a soft sigh.

"Yeah? Then tell me what you want to know, and I'll tell you."

"Did you know your mom?"

"Yeah, of course I did. She wasn't killed until I was in my later teen years." I shoved one hand under my head and curled my other arm around her.

"Did you like her? Do you miss her?" She peppered. She stopped like there was more she wanted to say, but when I didn't immediately answer her questions, she stayed quiet.

"I don't know. I was raised mostly by maids. She was there and tried to be a mother, but she had a lot of anger. She was one of Vicente's favorites too." I closed my eyes, remembering some of my childhood. "It didn't really get us or her the favor she thought it would. The more time went on, the more bitter and spiteful she turned. But she didn't show it to him."

She was tall and rail thin. A model from Russia. She was never an expert in affection or mothering. But she did try.

“Did she do anything nice for you?”

I opened my eyes and tipped my head toward her. “Yeah. Every year on my birthday, we would have a nice dinner. My brothers were invited and their mothers, not that the mothers came. Then, when they would sing happy birthday to me, she would tug on my ears, once for each year.” I smiled. I’d grown taller than her when I was thirteen, and she’d made me sit for the tradition.

I’d forgotten about that.

Amorette swallowed. “How did she die?”

“Vicente killed her in a rage. He found out she’d wanted to return home, to see her grandmother’s grave. She’d died while she was here. And he flew off the handle. Slit her throat in the courtyard and made a mockery of her death.”

She nestled against my chest and spread her fingers out over my stomach. “You talk about it like you talk about the weather. I couldn’t...I couldn’t talk about *maman* like that. She meant too much to me.”

The way her voice cracked, I believed her. She was like Lafe. But she was a little like me too, she just didn’t see it.

“Life happens. Shit happens. You let it break you or you push past it. I can talk about it like this because it doesn’t bother me. Did I like it? No, I had a lot of anger for a long time. But I found other ways to direct that anger.” I’d shared a similar message before, but I reiterated in case she was too shell-shocked to remember, “The Institution. The fights. I love it. I love the life. It’s danger and adrenaline while living in the present. I don’t ever want to leave it, even if I could. I just fucking hated Vicente.” I blew out a harsh breath. “The way he thought he could just take you, even though you were ours, I could have skinned him alive at the party.”

“It’s good you wanted to kill him, *mamá*. I wanted to kill him too. It just shows me that we’re the same. When people are so evil, and they don’t deserve to exist, you and I, we can

take care of it. If you weren't who you are, you wouldn't be on my chest."

"I...I don't know what to say. That's not part of a normal love declaration."

I snorted out a laugh. "Is this love? It feels too wide, too angry, and too greedy to be love. Whenever I look at you, all I can think of is *mine*. If that's love, then yeah, Wicked Love, I love the fuck out you."

I rolled her over and spread my body over hers. "Now, I want my time before my brothers come in and try to steal you from under me...or join in. If you're good, you can watch me come."

PARKER



Walking around the mansion was like something out of the Twilight Zone. It was still one danger pit after another, but there was a lack of...violence I had expected.

Matías had made a nice show when we arrived, and that might have struck a little fear and hesitation in the hearts of so many here, but there was always that one village idiot. Maybe we won the lottery and he cleared out the only three village idiots in the form of Valentina's lovers?

Valentina was going to continue to be a problem though. I could tell by the hate radiating off her. Before Vicente's death, she at least tried to hide it. Well, not really, but she at least put in the tiniest amount of effort. All that was gone now.

"You're going to be late for the meeting," Anton said quietly. I paused in my strolling of the courtyard to glance over my shoulder. It was a shock that he was the one who followed me out here. Andre had ordered the guards to make sure at least one of them was on our asses at all times. Like glue. After our little excursion together in the States, I'd have thought Anton would have wanted to avoid any more mishaps that could put him on my brothers' bad sides.

Not that they held it against him anyway. My dear brothers saved all that ire for me.

"It's suffocating in there. I just needed a minute before I saw those fuckwads." All the heads were here, and we were about to commence a meeting of the idiot minds. I was firmly

in the camp of hostile takeover and killing everyone we didn't like. The only issue I saw with that was the complexity of the head roles. We might not have enough competent people to trust who could both thrive and not stab us in the back after they got a taste of power. "All right, let's go."

I marched back inside with Anton right on my heels.

The agenda for today was packed. The heads had submitted their issues for discussion and demanded a meeting. Matías, the budding leader he was, buckled and accepted. Even after Andre advised against it.

That was what should be occupying my mind. Instead, every step raised a different issue. Two actually.

Firstly, Amorette was a little shit for letting my brothers and I believe I was the reason she ran off.

I still wanted her. Every time I caught the sweet scent of her hair or heard the smooth cadence of her voice... And watching her get spit-roasted? Fuck, I clamped my lips together and forced an inhale through my nose so I didn't groan at the memory. That was my new spank bank material.

But hell, I'd tried. The woman shot me down multiple times, and if she didn't want me, I could take a hint. For the sake of my ego, I was willing to throw in the towel. Then Andre urged me not to give up. What the fuck was that about? Big brother had never given off the sharing kink vibe.

Now, for the first time in my life, I had no idea what to do. Give it another shot and let her make a fool of me, or give in and be happy to be the brother on the side? Fuck, I was as wishy-washy as our grandmother's laundry. If we'd had that kind of grandmother.

Then Matías dropped a bombshell on us, making me look at him in a completely different light. He'd wiped up the floor when I was a kid? Knowing what I knew now, I would have been beaten within an inch of my life, literally, and Vicente would have just laughed. I wasn't old enough to actually have any value to him yet.

Hell, Matías might be what he said he was—a man who just wanted a relationship with his brothers. We were a pretty shitty lot for him to want to be a part of. As much as I loved my brothers, I recognized that we were all bastards in the literal and figurative sense, and we barely tolerated each other.

Although, since Little Love came into our lives, we'd been circling closer and closer together.

So I had an out-of-reach woman who I couldn't get out of my head, and a man I'd despised my entire life trying his best to take care of us while never saying a fucking thing.

That right there was out of character for anyone in the Institution. If he'd been malicious with his intent, he would have rubbed our faces in his efforts and tried to extort favors from us. Except he hadn't. He sat on his damned secrets for decades. There was a chance that he was lying about cleaning up after us, but I believed him.

He knew about tricks we'd tried to pull as kids that had never come to light.

“Sir,” Anton said softly, and I jerked my head out of my ass.

“Hmm?”

“You almost ran into a wall.”

So I did. I smoothed a hand over my jaw. I was off my game. A first. And the meeting hadn't even started.

The hallway was empty except for the guards and I slipped through the double doors as quietly as possible. For all the wealth, Vicente never oiled the hinges. Anton remained outside with the other guards like a good boy.

“Nice of you to join us,” Tomas sneered from his seat. The old man had his arms resting over his potbelly stomach, which shook as he spoke.

“The meeting hasn't started yet,” Maikel returned, taking his seat with a fresh glass of whiskey.

What the fuck? When had he ever taken up for us? Did he suddenly think he could be in our good graces if he kissed our

asses?

“Yet, he’s the last one here,” Tomas shot back, twisting in his seat to glare at Maikel. It was a little theatrical. I wouldn’t put it past the both of them to have planned this out to make Maikel seem like the good guy.

“Gentlemen,” Matías started us off in English, clearly setting the tone, “my patience is lacking today, and I’ve been spending too much time with my brothers. They stab first and ask questions later. Don’t push me or them.” Matías finished fixing his own drink at the wet bar and then took the seat at the head of the table.

There was one spot left between Andre and Henry. Lovely. The Canadian psycho was always my top pick for table mates. I took my seat, ignoring all the stares. But I did take note of them.

Sebastian and Lucas, the gambling head, were the only ones who seemed to lack any kind of animosity. Sebastian was expected, but Lucas was a surprise. Although he was an gambling man to the core. He wouldn’t show his hand unless it suited him, or he had already won. In this case, that meant keeping his business and his head.

How long had it been since *all* the heads had been in the same place? At least a few years. And those meetings were never actually meetings. They were just a gathering to boost Vicente’s ego or to entertain him.

More often, he’d bombard us at our place of business and make impossible demands with a shark’s grin.

From the curious and cunning looks traveling through today’s attendees, they probably felt this was going to go a very different way.

“So we don’t waste your time or mine, let’s get down to business.” Matías leaned back and tapped his fingers on the table. “Andre?”

Andre had his trusty laptop in front of him as he clicked away on the keys. It gave off a very administrative assistant vibe, and my lips quirked. Andre would hate it, but now

wasn't the time to bring it up. Or ever, really. He seemed to be trying to make all this work for our sakes, so who was I to pick apart appearances?

As recent events had shown, I could do better.

Much better if I wanted to stay with my brothers and Little Love. I snuck a glance across the table where she sat between Grey and Lafe. They'd managed to seat all of us at one end and the rest of the Institution at the other. A nice little message.

She had her hands folded in her lap and her expression was serious. Little Love was paying attention to every minute detail in the room. The idiots on the other end of the table probably had no clue of how dangerous she could be to them.

But I knew. When Andre and I had done our research, I'd reviewed some of her cases. The ones that helped her become such an up-and-coming name in her field. I'd been impressed. She didn't miss much. Her mind was sharp, and she wasn't afraid to use it.

I think that was what had drawn me to her in the first place—knowing what was underneath the doll-like exterior. She must have felt me staring at her, being that when she glanced my way, for the first time in days, I didn't take my eyes off of her.

Instead, I held her stare in something of a challenge. She met it and my stomach started to heat and my cock began to harden. The air seemed to sizzle between us. Pink slowly rose in her cheeks and her chest started rising just a little quicker. God, it reminded me of her with my brothers. Then she dropped her gaze to my chin, breaking our connection. Shifting in her seat, she rolled her lips together before moving her attention back to Andre.

You see, Little Love? There's something here. Why do you insist on ignoring it?

"Tomas wants a larger cut in profits for growing the business by twenty percent this last year. He also wants to eliminate a step in the decision-making process," Andre read

from his laptop without adding any sarcasm or loathing from his tone. I couldn't have done it.

Matías, who I knew had already reviewed the list, leveled a hard glare on Tomas. “You're telling me, *you* specifically grew the business twenty percent since you took over after your predecessor had his head on a stake at the parades.”

“Wha-Tha-I—” The fat man was full of bluster as he stumbled over words that made absolutely no sense.

“Stop. Just fucking stop you greedy little *maricon*.” Matías grimaced like he couldn't even stand to look at him. For our own parts, the rest of us held it together. Me just barely. Andre had given us a hard talking to before the meeting to make sure we didn't fuck this up by making worse enemies than we already had.

It was my opinion that they were going to fuck us over regardless and we should be able to express our real selves. That had just gotten me a nice and silent reprimand.

“You've done fuck all—” Matías was picking up Andre's favorite phrases, “—for the Institution. Vicente only promoted you because you were good at sucking his dick. I don't like you, nor do I have the patience for this shit. You are alive and for now, I'm happy with you in this position. But make no mistake. We don't need you. I can replace you with any number of men I actually trust. Demand something this stupid again, and I'm going to toss you over the wall and let your body rot there for the town to see.” He tapped his fingertips on the table a few times. “You know, if the fall didn't actually kill you, there's a few packs of wild dogs Vicente never bothered to take care of.”

“That—Tha—I helped build that business over the last twenty years! I wasn't at the head but I might as well have been!” Tomas tried to push to his feet but his chair didn't push out all the way. He lost his balance and fell backward, but his legs hit the table which lifted an inch or two off the ground before thumping back down. His cry of pain was comical as he flopped on his back like a turtle unable to flip over.

I couldn't hold it any longer. I laughed so hard, I snorted. My brothers joined me, even Matías. Amorette pursed her lips, fighting back her own smile. It was like her sensibilities said it was rude to laugh but she hated the fucker too.

“Someone help me up!”

“No. You can stay there for having the impudence for that fucking ridiculous request. There are three more just like that on the agenda. Should I address those as well?” Matías eyed Jax, Henry and Maikel. All heads that wanted more money and power expressed their desire with a healthy dose of disrespect for the new Institution.

Resounding *no*'s echoed around the room.

“Perfect. Is there anything you'd like to discuss that won't result in bloodshed?”

Jax cleared his throat. “I'd like to discuss the potential of adding routes to Cuba.” For the most part, we'd stayed away from there. Vicente had never gotten along with their leadership. Not surprising.

“Now this is more like the requests that should have been submitted.” Matías grinned. The other heads weren't as pleased. Except Sebastian. He was mostly a silent observer and hard to get a read on. The man was a survivor and he was going to take the side that won.

We should count it a good thing he seemed to be leaning our way.

Three more items that seemed to be plucked out of their asses were raised. They were pointless and were probably more to appear like they legitimately had business to discuss rather than intent to strong-arm power away from us.

By the end, there were more frowns and glares than when we started, but no blood was staining the floor. Pity. I could have used an outlet, and Grey was always up for a good time. Tomas had eventually figured out how to get himself off the floor. Everyone ignored him as he stood his chair up and fell into it, huffing with a blistering red face.

“Now. Let me set a few new rules, just in case you *cabróns* decide to get any ideas.” Matías stood up, and my brothers, Little Love and I followed. “No one breathed a word during this meeting, but I’ve been informed of the rumors. *No one* is going to be persecuted for Vicente’s murder.”

Oh, Maikel didn’t like that. Neither did Tomas. Both men had sour expressions as they glared at the table. Only Tomas was ballsy enough to raise his gaze to Matías every few minutes.

“My brothers have always been the enforcers of the Institution, but as of now, those positions are ranked higher than the heads. They also just so happen to run their own part of the Institution. Assume them doubly more important than your sorry asses.” That got zero approval. “And Amorette is off limits. You look at her, you lose your eyes. Grey and Andre have made that abundantly clear. You touch her, you lose your hands. You do anything to cause any kind of harm to any of us. You die and you are made an example of. Is that clear?”

No answer, but none of us expected one.

Matías rocked back in his chair and relaxed as a slightly mocking grin slid over his face. Where before he’d been firm and unbending, now he exuded an air that said *he wasn’t to be fucked with but it didn’t even matter because these men weren’t a true threat*.

“Now that that’s settled, these meetings? They’re not going to happen anymore. You need something, you reach out to Andre. He makes the decision. If he wants to consult our brothers, he will. If not, you accept it with a smile and a kiss to his ass. Understood?” Matías asked in a way that said otherwise wasn’t an option.

There was the fury I’d expected. It was silent, but these assholes couldn’t school their features to hide their emotions. Jax had a wrinkled nose like he smelled shit, Henry’s eyes flashed as he refused to blink while he stared at Matías. Maikel and Tomas were both still busy being petulant little gits. I grinned, not even trying to hide it. Andre kicked me

under the table but I ignored him. I was finally starting to feel like myself and this was fun.

When it was clear no one had anything else to add, Matías pushed his seat back, stood up, and eyed the table with contempt.

“The only power you have is over your own lives and barely over the businesses you run. Consider yourselves mid-level managers. Welcome to the new Institution.”

Matías left first, then my brothers and I slowly filed out. I was last, tossing a cheeky grin over my shoulder. The heads were speechless. A novelty to be sure, but I reveled in it. The reality was, these men were biding their time because they were dirty-assed weasels, but there was at least a little fear there. It would be interesting to hear the audio later when we replayed it. After getting ourselves situated, Anton had taken our men and cleared then bugged the mansion. Nothing would be said within these walls that we wouldn't know about.

In the hallway, I was right on Little Love's delectable ass when she stopped and I almost ran her over. I grabbed her arms to steady her, but she didn't react at all.

I followed the direction her head was facing.

One of Maikel's men leaned against the wall with a sickly-sweet smile plastered on his face. His arms were crossed over his body like he was somebody, and he gave off the impression that he was ready to move at a moment's notice. A coiled snake in more ways than one.

I knew him, but I couldn't quite place him.

Little Love's skin grew clammy, which almost prompted me to ask what was wrong, but Lafe suddenly blocked her vision and whisked her down the hall.

“What was that about?” Andre asked quietly as we continued after them.

I still watched the man. What was his name? I'd seen him a time or two over the years, but nothing stood out about what he did.

“I don’t know.”

“Isn’t that Maikel’s torture master? The one who breaks the girls?” Grey said, then started to pivot on his heel.

“Not here.” Matías caught his arm.

Fucking hell. I got it now. I’d never asked what happened at Maikel’s Gallery. The thought never crossed my mind. I knew she was there and that Lafe had saved her. It wasn’t out of the realm of possibilities that some of his men had fucked with her.

It was actually naive to believe she’d walked away without being touched.

Who was I kidding? In the beginning, even if it had crossed my mind, I wouldn’t have cared. She was a toy then. An amusement. No wonder I couldn’t get anywhere with her. I’d have to rethink my entire approach.

Lafe recognized him, then carted her off to save her the reminder of whatever happened.

I looked over my shoulder, and the guy grinned, dipping his chin. Oh, he was ballsy. And Maikel was playing a different kind of game in bringing him here.

The question was, what was our best move? That required some contemplation and a discussion with Little Love. I bet that was going to go over well.

Yet I gained a little pep in my step as I played out the potential scenario in my head.

This time, I wouldn’t fuck things up. I’d make sure of it.

AMORETTE



“**W**hy was he here?” My voice shook as I splashed cold water on my face.

“My honest opinion?” Lafe’s voice sounded strained. I hadn’t said anything but I was pretty sure he’d been using. The nights that I slept with him, he was awake when I went to sleep, awake when I woke up. I hadn’t seen him nap at all.

There were even dark circles under his eyes like he’d had when I’d stayed in his apartment.

Unless he was sleeping when I was in Andre’s or Grey’s room, he wasn’t sleeping at all. That was impossible, right? He’d have to sleep periodically even if he was using drugs.

“I always want your honest opinion.” I ripped the hand towel off the wall and scrubbed my face. It felt like I had a million nasty spiders crawling over my body and I couldn’t stand it. I thought water on my face would be enough, but it wasn’t.

Fuck! I needed a shower. Just the sight of that damn man made me want to slide under the mattress where it was dark and compressed. Like I could hide from him.

What the hell was this? I hadn’t reacted like this at the warehouse. Why was I doing this now? I was stronger than this, yet my hands trembled as I brought them against my chest.

I turned on the water and set it to the hottest temperature possible. Cold didn’t work. Maybe hot would do it.

“Killer. Amorette.” Lafe spun me around and crushed me to his chest. “Stop. Okay. Stop.” Then he grabbed my shoulders and pushed me away so he could look at me. His eyes softened and he pressed his lips together. He didn’t say anything for a long time. I didn’t, either. The sudden movement was enough of a distraction that I could breathe for a second.

“You’re crying,” he whispered. He raised a hand and brushed his thumb under my eye.

I was. I hadn’t even realized. Dashing away the hot tears, I laughed, but snot bubbled in my nose. Gross.

“What’s wrong with me? I’m never like this.” I started toward the shower but he stopped me and pulled me back into his arms. The heat of his body was just as cleansing as I thought the water might be. I clung to him, but it wasn’t enough. I wanted skin to skin contact. His skin. And mine.

I just needed to forget. If he didn’t want me to shower, then maybe he could fuck this...agh... I didn’t know what this was. I just wanted to stop it.

Sticking my hands under his shirt, I pushed it up until he raised his arms, then I raised up on my toes to slide it over his head. I went for my shirt next, but he stopped me.

“No. Stop.”

I did. “I need you,” I breathed but the sound was so wet from emotion clogging my throat. Not the sounds of a woman needing physical intimacy.

His brows dipped low and his eyes clouded with concern—not desire.

“No, that isn’t what you need. What happened there? With Randall?”

That name. I hated that fucking name. And I was going to be sick. Yanking myself out of his hold, I dove for the toilet and just got the seat raised in time before I lost my breakfast. It hadn’t been much. When my stomach was empty, I dry heaved.

I couldn't stop.

Eventually, the heaving turned to sobs and I rested the side of my face on my arm. Some of the urgency left me, like with the coffee and eggs gone, so was the craziness that had attacked me. Now I was just an emotionless shell.

A warm hand landed on my back. Gross. This was so damn gross. I flushed the toilet and closed my eyes.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes.” But don't ask me any questions...

“Will you...will you tell me what happened?” Lafe was hesitant. He was the most feeling of the brothers, but this was even more than his usual. Like he wasn't sure he *could* ask. Or maybe he didn't want to know what the answer was.

“You never asked me before,” I pointed out. I wasn't trying to be mean. It was a stalling tactic. I didn't want to talk about it. The rush of emotions after seeing him slammed into me like a Mack truck. I wasn't sure how to process it other than knowing I wanted to forget it ever happened.

He must have turned the water off, because the only sounds were our breathing and the toilet filling back up.

He made an ugly sound in the back of his throat and I couldn't let him think he was the bad guy. Not after everything. “Your brothers never asked either.”

“Here.” He handed me a warm washcloth.

That at least had made it to the shower. I sat up and used it to wipe my face, then my mouth.

“You're right. I didn't ask; I'm not sure why.” He chewed his lip and furrowed his brows together.

“Because you hated me. That's why.” It had been pretty obvious. Had he even told me? I couldn't really remember those earlier days. They were a blur. Except...I was pretty sure he regretted taking me from the warehouse. That caused a different kind of mild sting in my chest. He didn't feel that way anymore, I knew that, but that he once had...

He tugged me back, took the cloth from my hand and tossed it in the corner, then used a fresh one to wipe my brow and under my eyes. Once he was satisfied, he sat against the wall and pulled me onto his lap.

“I did hate you, but not for the reasons you might think.” He tipped his head back to stare at the ceiling as he rubbed his hand soothingly over my back.

“I think I was a pain in your ass. You still saved me though, since you’re a good guy deep inside.” The words just slipped out.

Did I want his validation that he didn’t regret it?

“I’m not though.” He laughed and shook his head. “I’m really not. I was the one who was responsible for policing Maikel the most out of the brothers. You know how many women I passed by over the years and didn’t save? Too many. I’m sure there’s a fun place in hell for me when I die.” He closed his eyes.

I couldn’t say he was right for that, though I also couldn’t say he was wrong. He’d been shaped by Vicente and taught saving people would only be more hurt for him and them. So why would he have made things worse? This wasn’t the US where there were policemen and neighbors always ready to save the day. This was a different world and he’d done the best he could to survive. That wasn’t something worth faulting someone for. Not when they struggled with it and had shown the capacity to be a good person.

Having the knowledge of everything I did now, I saw the brothers in a different perspective. They were victims of Vicente’s sadistic ways. Maybe just a different kind of victim that I’d worked with. Were there different kinds? I couldn’t wrap my head around that right then.

“You’re wrong. You tried to save that girl. You told me that.” I placed a finger over his lips when he tried to speak. “And you did save me. Even against everything that had been drilled into you, you still took a chance and saved me.”

He smiled, and it spoke of nostalgia. As much as this Lafe warmed me, the reason for his nostalgia was ice in my veins. The early days that were so hard for me could be the only thing he was thinking of now.

“I did. There was this pull that I just couldn’t ignore. But the reason why I hated you, was because you were so strong. Too strong. You were everything I wasn’t and I knew you’d die there if I didn’t get you out. And I couldn’t live with that.”

That...wasn’t so bad. It didn’t hit me like seeing the man I refused to name in the hallway.

“I try to be strong.”

“Strong-headed. You’re stubborn. I love that about you. You know that, right? I love you. It’s the one thing that feels good in my life. You’re just so good.”

I sucked in a breath and my eyes started watering all over again. Only this time, it didn’t make me feel unclean or like I was crawling out of my body.

“I love you too. I can’t imagine what life would be like without you, so let’s never find out.”

His smile took on a hint of sadness. “That’s fine with me. Now,” he said, opening his eyes and spearing me with a determination I hadn’t seen in Lafe before. “What happened in the chambers?”

“I don’t—”

“Yes, you do. You need to talk about it. I’m sorry that my brothers and I are such *skitstövels* that we didn’t ask. However, it’s important because it shouldn’t have happened to you in the first place.” His arm around my waist tightened.

“I wasn’t raped.” Or was I? I was an attorney for abused women. It might not be rape in the traditional sense of the word but it was still an act done without my consent. An invasion of my mind and body.

“I never said you were. But something happened that’s upsetting you. I saw the bruises when I took you the first time. Remember? When you left me in the room to try to save the

guard's sister? The woman who helped me clean you up didn't see any tearing but there are other ways to hurt a woman."

I blinked and another splash of hot tears rolled down my face and collected in the corners of my mouth. The salt burst over my tongue and I hated the taste of my own tears.

Closing my eyes, I steeled myself. If one of my clients asked me for advice, I would tell them to be honest with their partners and that they did nothing wrong. It wasn't that I felt like I did anything wrong, but I felt weak for letting this get to me. Why now?

Keeping my eyes shut, I told him the bare bones of what he wanted to know. Maybe later, I would want to share the details. "When I was taken to the chambers, he told me he would enjoy breaking me and that he enjoyed mind games the most. Then he...he made me orgasm with his fingers." *That's it*, was on the tip of my tongue, even though I refused to say it.

I wouldn't make light of what he did. It was terrible and heinous and vile. Even if it hadn't been painful and bloody.

Cursing came from the next room, and I started to turn but Lafe caught my chin and kept me facing him. "They came in while you were throwing up." He hadn't had a reaction, not like I expected. Then he explained why, "And I need you to sit with me for a few minutes. If you get up, I'm going to track Randall down and shoot him in the fucking head."

Grumbles of assent came from the bedroom.

I wanted to be irritated with them for eavesdropping, except I couldn't. This just saved me from telling each of them separately. Assuming they'd want to know.

That was a stretch, though. They might never have asked. Grey wouldn't have. He lived in the moment and as shitty as the past was, it didn't touch his future. But Andre might have. Parker...I wasn't sure or if it even mattered to me. That was a lie. It did. It mattered.

The door opened slowly and Andre appeared. His eyes were lit with a fire so intense I almost flinched. "There's someone here to see you. I said fuck off at first, but after

hearing that and realizing how dense and stupid we are, I think it would be a good idea. Lafe, come sit with us in the next suite. We'll make sure you don't do anything stupid."

"Like hell, I'll help. I'd rather go shut the asshole up for good," Grey said, his words barely audible. It sounded like Parker also grunted, but I couldn't tell. "Matías, go have the guards grab him."

"Already on it."

"Fine. Then we can discuss why Maikel brought him here in the first place." Andre turned and glanced at someone in the suite.

"We know why he brought him here. To fuck with us through Little Love. That makes him enemy number two, after Valentina." Parker's words were accompanied by loud stomping, like he was angrily pacing just out of view.

"I don't want to see anyone." I shook my head. I was raw on the inside and just wanted to climb into bed for a few days. That wasn't a possibility, but I could get away with at least an hour.

"You'll want to see her." Andre nodded to someone, then the door opened and light footsteps traveled toward the bathroom. Blanca poked her head in with a timid smile, except she immediately started yelling at the brothers in Spanish when she saw me on the floor, a crying mess.

They took it. None of them seemed offended in the least.

Then the door slammed open and Jorge started yelling, probably at Blanca.

"No, it's fine. We *are* stupid, and we deserve this. You can come sit with us while Blanca visits with Amorette." Andre moved away from the door, and Lafe stood, helping me to my feet.

"Do you want to shower first?" Lafe asked.

"I do. Since now I feel pretty nasty." I peered up at Blanca and she smiled.

“Go right ahead. I’ll be on the couch.” Each of the brothers’ suites had their own sitting room, so there was plenty of space without her to wait for me.

Lafe dropped a sweet kiss to my forehead and left. I went as quickly as possible through the shower, and when I stepped out, I felt like a new person.

A tired one, but a new person.

Blanca was on the couch, right where she said she’d be. Her big personality that I’d grown so used to was dimmed significantly. Her small smile was back on her face as she patted the seat next to her.

“Now, do you want to tell me what they did to make you cry on the bathroom floor?”

I sighed. “It wasn’t them. But first, how are you? I haven’t gotten to talk to you since the island...”

“Since it came out that I almost made the biggest mistake of my life? Well, my family thinks it was the biggest mistake of my life, even if I didn’t tell Vicente anything. I’ve shamed them, and they aren’t afraid to let me know about it every day. Yeah, that conversation can wait. It embarrasses me. So, as long as you’re not angry with me, we can return to that later.”

Pulling one knee up to my chest, I hugged it and used it as a chin rest. “I never held that against you. I remember quite clearly what you said to me in the bathroom. You were afraid for the people you loved and made the decision based on the information you had.”

She canted her head. “You really do have a hero complex, don’t you? If you’re not careful, it will get you hurt, or worse. I made a bad call—and I should have known better. But we can talk about that later. What the hell happened here?”

Biting my bottom lip, I weighed the decision to tell her the truth. The whole truth. I mean, I might as well. I’d kept it bottled up inside, though look where that had gotten me. Starting at the beginning, I recalled to her what had happened from when I woke up in the cages to when Lafe took me. And how that evil monster was here today.

“I don’t understand it. If I’d had this reaction when it happened, that would make sense to me. But why now? The memories came with emotions so...big, I threw up.”

She twisted her lips to the side. “I’m not a psychologist. My family doesn’t believe in stuff like that, but it makes sense. Think about it. When you were first taken, up until recently, it was a lot. You were in shock. Your life had been upended so rapidly and you were shoving trauma in boxes left and right to cope. It probably helped that you hadn’t seen him since you were at Maikel’s.”

That seemed fair, although even sitting here, I felt brittle. Like I was tired and fragile all at the same time. My stomach still rolled and if I thought about it too much, I’m sure I could work myself into throwing up again.

“Yeah, you’re probably right.”

“You do look tired. Why don’t you drink some water and take a nap. I’ll see if I can find us something for lunch. I’m sure after this morning, the brothers aren’t going to be looking for you for a few hours.” She glanced at the bed that had been made by the staff. That was weird. It was like housekeeping, except it felt like I had to check the closets and under the bed to make sure no one was trying to get to us in our sleep.

“Food is the last thing on my mind, but I am tired. That whole episode really drained me.”

She reached out a hand and placed it on my thigh. “It wasn’t an episode. That diminishes what happened. It was a big deal, and while that and so much more goes on under Maikel every day, what happened to you isn’t okay. It’s why I didn’t like you at first. Andre and the others always kept our island safe and away from all that. You smacked me in the head and they still kept you. I thought you were going to take everything I loved away from me. I’m sorry.” Her voice shook and her eyes welled up. The apology was so strong in her eyes. Then she looked up at the ceiling as she struggled not to blink and let the tears fall.

I appreciated that, and I would take a nap, but first...

“Are you okay? I saw the way the people treated you at the compound.”

She shrugged, but it was stiff, now looking everywhere except at me. “It is what it is. Most of our people are upset, rightfully so. But they’ll come around. A few days ago, Andre cleared my name, which helps. It’s just going to take time.”

Time. That was both the answer and the problem.

We needed time to heal, and to settle into the new normal. Only how could we do that when we didn’t even have enough time to figure out who our enemies were before they struck?

It felt a lot like we were waiting for the other shoe to drop. I just hoped it wasn’t devastating when it did.

LAFE



I gripped the canister in my hand as I walked through the halls of the mansion. I hadn't taken a hit in a day. Which wasn't anything crazy, but I'd been taking little bumps here and there to keep myself afloat.

It was fucking weak and I couldn't stop. Even now, my body was screaming for it. The way it consumed my thoughts while everything plummeted around me was driving me out of my mind.

Still, after holding Killer in my lap as she cried, I'd made a promise to myself that I wouldn't be this person. I wanted to be better. It was a stupid dream. The very nature of our lives meant I would never be her knight in shining armor. I wasn't even a hero, though she'd said I'd saved her.

Fuck, we hadn't even been able to find Randall. He'd escaped like he knew we'd be looking for him. My brothers and I were no heroes at all.

But, I was hers. That was enough for me to want to be someone she was proud to be with. Which was a stupid fucking pipe dream too.

The only way I was ever going to get rid of this side of my life was if I removed my access from the drugs. I'd already ordered my runners within a fifty-mile radius to start moving toward the coasts. When I ordered them to dump their products in the water or toilet, would they actually do it?

I could be setting the drug business up for a small war of small dealers. There was no way to avoid it. But I couldn't do

this anymore.

The idea that I would be surrounded by drugs for the rest of my life was bleak. I wanted Killer to look at me the way she had when she was in my arms. When she said she loved me back.

I almost didn't believe her. But she wasn't the type of person who would regurgitate the words just to make me feel better. She loved me. And that amplified everything I was feeling by leaps and bounds.

Ducking into a wing reserved for servants, I checked the doors until one was unlocked. I slipped inside and shut the door, pressing my back into it.

It was almost time. Ricco would call any minute.

When we met with them, it hadn't gone exactly as I had hoped. They weren't behind us, but they weren't against us either...yet.

As soon as they found out that we planned to take over the Institution, we'd also have to go to war with them. Thanks to Killer finding out that intel.

I raised my phone and stared at it. There was the typical background photo with the digital clock. Nothing personal. Then it buzzed and a number flashed over the screen.

Anton had bugged the place, and there was a good chance this room was being recorded. Hopefully, it would be a while before anyone realized there was audio.

The bed was stripped and the closet was bare. Then again, who would check the servants' quarters? Any intruders would go straight for the family wing, business hall, or supplies.

Answering, I held it up to my ear and moved toward the window. "Yeah?" I barked into the phone. Fuck, I was too on edge.

"Shit, man. Why are you so hot?"

"Sorry. My brothers don't know I'm doing this, and I need it to go the way we planned before they find out."

“I told you,” he reassured me. “We got this.”

“Yeah, you had the event in the mansion too, and all you did there was make security tighter.”

“That wasn’t our finer moment,” Ricco grumbled. “We should have thought bigger. My partners thought it would be enough to show you it was possible to get inside. The event happened so close to him; we could have planned it to take care of him.”

The right irritation was there. But I didn’t trust anyone outside of my brothers and Amorette. As much as I wanted to believe Ricco for the very fact that he remembered I’d saved him when we were kids, I couldn’t put any weight on it. Everyone had their own motives and I could only trust him far enough to handle this. And it didn’t come free.

“How do I know you actually have this kind of reach?” It wasn’t the first time I’d asked him this. And he never had a good answer.

“I guess you’ll just have to trust us and be ready to deliver,” he said stiffly. I’d offended him. I should care, but I was too nervous to consider what that meant for future favors. “The show starts in five minutes.” The angry click ending the call was loud against my ear.

Breathe, Lafe. Just breathe. This is exactly what you wanted.

Andre was going to fucking kill me. There was no way around that. If Parker going rogue pissed him off, there was no telling what he was about to do to me. Did I want to hide in here to wait it out, or at least be with Killer so she could hold my hand?

Killer. I wanted Killer to hold my hand, damn it.

That helped my breathing some. I’d been reaching for her hand since the bathroom and she seemed to need it just as much as me. Pocketing the phone, I cracked my neck. Goosebumps traveled down my arms from the sensation.

Then I headed out.

When I left a few minutes ago, all of my brothers were with Amorette in the study. Why did they all have to stick together so much? Couldn't they, for once, find their own shit to do?

Fuck. This was going to be rough.

But worth it. There wasn't any other alternative.

I opened the study door and slipped inside.

"We can't continue to stay here!" Andre slammed his hand down on the table where he stood by Matías, who rocked back in his chair.

This had been Vicente's favorite study, although it was more of a library. Bookcases lined the walls with five rows of shelves on the other side of the room. Parker was perusing the bookshelves while Grey stared out the window, completely done with the conversation.

Where was Killer?

"There are still things we have to sort out. This is the home base for the Institution. What are we supposed to do, just abandon it? It will take time to set up somewhere else, and as much as I'm spitting on Vicente's memory as it is, we can't just leave. The people really would revolt." Matías tossed up his hands then scrubbed them over his buzzed head. "Fuck," he growled. "You're insufferable to deal with."

Parker grunted yet made no other comments.

"This is cool!" Killer called, and I beelined for her. She was back in the stacks somewhere. She'd picked up studying Spanish again and had a field day when we brought her here.

She sat on the floor flipping through a book that looked to be about a hundred years old. It sure had the dust collection for it.

"What's that?" I whispered as I sat beside her and reached for her hand. I linked my fingers with hers and she gave me a squeeze then continued flipping through the pages with her other hand.

“I have no idea, but it’s old, and it seems like a journal or history book of some sort. It has pictures.” She tilted the book for me to see, only I was too busy gazing into her eyes. They held a spark of humor that beckoned me closer.

Moving in, she tipped her head for me to steal a kiss. I breathed as much of her in as possible. Any second now, my life was going to change. Hopefully for the better.

“You have to stay here. We don’t,” Andre argued.

There was a healthy pause, then Matías spoke so quietly I almost couldn’t make out his words. “Are we in this together or not? If you all leave, are we on opposite sides again?”

“What? Of course not. Why would you even think that?”

“Because that’s how you’ve always been.”

Andre’s breathing was heavy, as if he was trying to control his temper. “Things are different now.”

“Are they?” Matías shot back. “Sure, I’m with you almost all the time, but you three at least burrow yourselves away at night. Or you pass Amorette between you. I’m still very much on the outside, and I don’t know if standing at the window is any better than being across the fucking street. Just a better view of how much I’m not family.”

“Are you fucking insane? You must be insane.” I could just imagine the expression on Andre’s face. This was going to give him a migraine. Hell, he’d have one today, regardless.

My phone vibrated.

First warehouse cleaned.

It was happening.

“What’s that?” Amorette leaned over. I could have hidden my phone from her, but I didn’t. The truth would come out soon, and I had no intention of lying about it.

I didn’t answer as she read it. A wrinkle appeared between her brows as she tried to figure out what it meant, especially since it was in Spanish. I wasn’t any help.

Other phones in the room started to buzz just as my phone went off a second time.

Second warehouse cleaned.

Then, a third message came in.

Third warehouse cleaned.

“What the fuck!” Andre yelled, and then something crashed to the floor.

There was so much buzzing going on that the room sounded like an angry swarm of hornets had taken over.

“Lafe! Are you seeing this?” Andre was incensed. His voice hit that higher tone it only did when he was about to lose his shit. “Lafe!” Each of his footsteps were shattering earthquakes as he sought me out.

When he appeared around the corner, he shook his phone. “Someone is attacking your business. We need—”

“No.” I tried to keep my voice steady, but I couldn’t do that and hold eye contact. It was one or the other. I held his gaze.

It took less than a second for him to figure out something was up.

“What the hell is going on?” Parker yelled from the front.

Andre gave me such a look of betrayal that it flayed my heart open in my chest. Then he turned smoothly on his heels and walked away.

“What’s going on?” Amorette asked in a hushed whisper.

I shook my head; I couldn’t speak. The weight of his disappointment hit harder than anything I had expected. I thought he would yell at me. Berate me. Act like he always acted with Parker. Not fucking *walk* away and leave me here without a word.

“What happened?” Grey asked.

Their whispers started and I couldn’t make out anything else. I dropped my gaze to the floor and just sat there.

Killer removed her fingers and when I reached for them, she grabbed my shoulders, similar to how I'd held her in the bathroom. She shook me lightly and waited for me to meet her gaze.

"What happened?" She asked softly. No judgment was in her gaze. Only concern.

I didn't answer. I didn't want to. Would she be disappointed in me, too? If she wasn't, would they hate her for it?

"Lafe, you better get your ass out here," Grey called. "Bring Amorette with you."

"This is about to be a shit storm," Matías groaned.

I slowly climbed to my feet and Amorette followed. Then she grabbed my hand and I clung to it as we moved toward the front. The closer I got to them, the smaller I felt.

Maybe I'd been irrational. I wasn't thinking straight while coming off the drugs. This stuff fucked with my head so bad and I knew that. The disappointment pounding at me was a foreign feeling. I knew they weren't proud of me. We didn't have that kind of relationship. They probably didn't like me or each other, even though we had a blood bond tying us together.

I stopped us in the middle of the floor. I wanted to stay out of reach just in case one of my brothers decided to solve this with his fists. It happened sometimes. But not with Amorette here. She wasn't going to be a casualty for something I did.

Matías was still seated, but now his back was ramrod straight and his face was mottled almost purple. Andre stood by the window with both hands braced around it as he refused to look back at me. Parker and Grey were between them. They must have had an idea of what I had done and why.

The act might have surprised them, but the motive wouldn't.

"Taking a page out of my book there, Lafe?" Parker sighed. "I have to say, after the last bit of drama, I don't

recommend following in my footsteps.” He walked over to the table, pulled out a chair, and fell into it.

“All of your warehouses have been targeted and are now gone. Wiped off the map. Were there people inside?” Andre asked, his voice dead.

“No, they were evacuated.” I would never have worked with Ricco if they would have killed my people.

“Are you sure? Can you trust whoever did this?”

I curled my fingers in the hand that wasn't clasped in Amorette's. “Ricco organized this on my behalf. It was a stipulation of mine that no one be harmed. I negotiated with the families, and they made sure the places were empty.”

“I assume all the supplies are gone?”

“The materials, machinery, recipes. It's all gone.” I destroyed every-fucking-thing. The families could always try to start up new businesses with their knowledge, but they seemed happy enough to get out with the paycheck offered to them. It was the last three months of profit for the business divided between the families. I'd wait until Andre cooled off to tell him that.

“Why? Why do this when someone else will just take over? We'll have to hold the market somehow.”

I shook my head. “The movement will help keep the market closed.”

“And the price for this?”

“The release of the family members who are in Maikel's gallery. And Ricco's niece who was taken last week.”

Amorette gasped. She knew what would have happened in the last week.

“I don't even want to ask.” Andre dropped his head. “How old is she?”

“Thirteen.”

“Fucking hell!” he screamed.

“We’re going to shut that business down anyway.”

“On our terms, Lafe! We were working on our terms! Are you going to walk into Maikel’s place and abduct those girls? Are you going to cause a war with the heads who already think we shouldn’t be rising to the top?”

“That’s not wh—”

“Of course it is!” Andre whipped around, his lips pulled back from his teeth and the cords of his neck bulged out. “Did you even think about what would happen to us? What would this force us to do? The drugs have fucked with your head so much that you’re trying to drive us into the ground!”

I pressed my lips together, afraid of what words would spill out if I opened them. Andre continued when I didn’t respond.

“We’ve explained to you how it has to be. I don’t like it any more than you do, but this is the world we live in. Do you know what you’ve done? You’ve taken moves for us, pressed our hand, put bigger fucking targets on our backs than we already had. And for what? So you can stop running your part of the Institution?”

“No!” I dropped Amorette’s hand and marched a few steps forward. “Is that what you think? That I did this to shirk my responsibility? Fuck you, Andre! Fuck you, fuck you, *fuck you!*” I screamed and gripped my hair, pulling to feel the pain. I twisted to the side and doubled over, then fell to my knees.

This was so fucked up. He thought I had backed us into a corner, but I hadn’t. This just changed the rules. I made it so the drug business was a nonissue. At least for six months or more. Yet, he didn’t see that. All he cared about was that we were breathing. Nothing else fucking mattered to him, not our health, happiness, or fucking sanity—nothing.

This had been my only move. Because *I* cared about all of that. Plus, my soul, if I even still had one.

When I glared back at him, tears clouded my vision. “I’m so fucked up. I can’t be off the drugs for a day before I need them again.” I ripped the canister out of my pocket and pelted

it at him. “I hate this life, I hate this addiction. It’s ruined me from the inside out. And you wanted me to keep running it for an advantage that may or may not help us hold power over the other heads? You didn’t even look for another solution. It wasn’t part of your plan. How many times have I told you I wanted out? That I needed out, and you fucking ignored me?” I pulled in a deep breath. “I found my own way out, Andre, with as little collateral damage as possible. I did this for me, I did this for Amorette. Yes, someone will eventually try to build that business again. But I’ll make it my single-minded focus to shut it down every time. The movement will help. If you can’t fucking see the truth in front of your face, you are not the brother you think you are.”

I dropped my face in my hands and when slender arms closed around me, I let it go. I burst into fucking tears like a child.

If my brothers couldn’t see this was killing me, then fuck them. I couldn’t live like this anymore.

ANDRE



Fucking Lafe. I had to get out. That was all there was to it.

If I stayed in that study for a second longer, I was going to pull my fucking hair out—or worse, wring his heartbroken neck. I stalked through the halls, and when one guard tried to stop me, I lashed out, delivering a throat punch and then kept walking.

His gasps for breath behind me went a little way to calming my anger, but honestly, it wasn't that noticeable.

Fucking hell, I would regret that later. He would have had a reason for stopping me, and Matías was doing everything he could to set us up as part of the authority. I just—with Lafe—I couldn't deal with this shit right now.

I needed to find someplace to get rid of this excess energy.

Grey had it easy. He fought or fucked.

Parker blew shit up, although he'd never admit that was a coping mechanism.

But me? I pushed everything aside and kept working on whatever fucked up issue was in front of me until I couldn't function. Every fucking time something like this happened it would inevitably drive me into a raging migraine.

The familiar sliver of pain was already creeping into the edges of my vision, and my neck ached from the stiffness. Before walking out, I had popped a couple of pills to try and

stop it, but it rarely seemed to work for me. It didn't stop me from trying.

I exited the main halls and walked toward the courtyard. Maybe fresh air would help. It was overcast outside. That might help, too.

At the onset, I sometimes went to my room and lay down in the dark, except I couldn't. I just fucking couldn't after what Lafe had done. Not only had he jeopardized almost everything we were trying to do, but he also made me feel like the biggest ass.

Stepping out into the courtyard, I sucked in a deep breath and sped up toward the trees. The part closest to the mansion was the typical bush maze with a pond and stone benches. A replica of any traditional courtyard to be found in a wealthy property. Like Vicente had only cared about the status than the actual courtyard.

But there was a wooded area that he'd left inside the walls. It was covered, cooler, and offered the privacy that I needed.

Anton and Jorge caught my eye, and I waved them away. I didn't need them chasing after me right then. They wouldn't abandon me completely, but I didn't want to have to speak to them either.

I stomped through the trees as thunder cracked overhead.

Fucking great. Just what I needed. To be caught in a thunderstorm. Whatever, maybe the water would wash some of the grime of the last thirty minutes off of me.

Another small pond came into view and I kicked at some of the rocks along the edge, sending them flying into the water. The humidity stuck to my skin. Even though it was a cooler day, sweat gathered at the small of my back and the nape of my neck.

A few birds flew out of the trees from my outburst.

"Fuck," I muttered and sat on the ground. I would have dropped myself for the satisfaction of the poor self-treatment, but I wasn't trying to bring on the migraine any faster than it

was coming. I'd at least taken a couple of my pills before I stormed out.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I needed to address what had happened. I didn't need three guesses to know the other heads were blowing us up. Let Matías deal with it since he was the one with all the cards right now. I doubted they could do that much damage in the next few hours. The thought of how they would react and what offense they might take to this made me dizzy.

I needed my own fucking pity party.

Lafe just didn't understand.

Yes, we wanted to take over, but sometimes it took massaging over raw fucking to do it right. We would shut down the skin business, but it took time so as not to start an all-out war for the top earners in the Institution.

None of them fucking understood. Parker was angry enough that he wanted to kill everyone and wipe the slate clean. Grey didn't care all that fucking much as long as we were still breathing with Amorette between us. Lafe? I now knew how Lafe felt.

If I'd known he was drowning like that...

Fuck, would I have done anything different?

I didn't think I would have. I would have tried to talk to him more, to make him understand, but I wouldn't have said, *hey, let's just blow everything up.*

Gingerly laying back, I shut my eyes and laid my arm across my face for good measure. The darkness helped, but so did the fresh, cool breeze on my face. I let the sounds of the water lapping at the shore calm me.

Minutes passed, and the pain started to ebb away. Fuck, the medicine was working. Usually, it was hit or miss. Then leaves crunching nearby signaled someone was coming closer. I snapped up to a sitting position and twisted around, my gun already in my hand. My heart pounded in my ears as I searched for a threat.

“It’s just me.” Matías raised his hands and paused long enough to make sure I knew it was him approaching.

“Are you here to lecture me or make me feel even more like an ass?” I grunted, lowering my gun.

One side of his mouth twitched as he came closer and sat beside me. He moved like he wasn’t strong enough to carry the weight of our lives. *Join the fucking club.*

“Why would you think I’d do either of those things? Your dynamic fascinates me because you’re all so close, but not really. Maybe that’s normal? I wouldn’t have anything to compare it to.” He cupped the back of his neck as he looked out over the water.

I understood what he meant, but after what Lafe just did... I couldn’t even look at him.

“Nothing to say to that?” he prodded.

“What’s there to say? I’ve tried my entire life to keep them alive, no matter how hard they tried to fuck up with Vicente. They lived for it. Parker and Grey, anyway. And for what? For them to collectively continue to try and fuck this up for us just when the life we want seems possible?” I dropped my head and sighed. There was so much to fucking do. Damage control upon damage control.

If I didn’t snap out of it, our downfall would be just as much my fault as theirs. That wasn’t acceptable to me. I would always do what I could, even if I was the only one trying to swim us to shore.

I coughed out a laugh.

“What?” He gave me a sidelong glance.

“I had this thought that I’m the only one trying to swim us to shore, and an image of my brothers and Amorette popped up. All of them are doing some kind of goofy ass swimming, going in circles. Pointless and ultimately life-threatening. Anyway, it made me laugh to imagine them like that.”

“Hmm. I don’t think that’s quite how it is.”

“Oh, yeah? Then fucking tell me what I’m missing.”

“Later.” He pushed to his feet, brushed off his ass and then held out a hand. “Javier will be here in ten minutes. Now that Vicente is dead, he wants to understand what the Institution is doing and if we’re a threat.”

I groaned, not moving or taking his hand. “You fucking realize after all of Lafe’s warehouses just blew up, then the head of the Dirty Dogs showing up here, we’re going to have riots on our hands? More than just the resident Institution idiots will think we’re selling out or, as Valentina is trying to spread, run the Institution into the ground.”

Matías laughed and shook his hand in my face. He wasn’t going to move until I took it. “I think Lafe had the right idea. Fuck the easy way. We’re going to have a war on our hands regardless. We might as well hold all the cards. If our enemies think we’re unpredictable, they’ll be less likely to move against us.”

What the fuck? I squinted up at him, and he seemed genuinely okay with causing more trouble for us. Was I the one being too cautious? My brothers would say yes. They hated the way I tried to keep us safe, but I didn’t see them putting themselves on the line for everyone else.

Shit, maybe I was the problem. I scrubbed my hand over my face. If this was what they wanted, I’d give it a shot. The bleak reality was that there weren’t any other options. Lafe had sufficiently backed me into a corner. If it blew up in our faces, I was kidnapping their asses and heading to my other island, which I needed to start construction on.

I slapped my hand in his and let him pull me up. Then we started walking back, side by side. Something Vicente would have shit himself over. He always wanted to keep us in the background.

Take that, fucking asshole.

Pausing, I dropped my head. Vicente hadn’t wanted Matías to be close to us. That was never a question. But it had been on us that we hadn’t seen it for what it was. We punished Matías for Vicente’s actions. Maybe even ourselves.

“What’s the plan then?” I asked, scanning the trees. Some of our guards were in the distance and a few nodded to let me know they were paying attention. Good.

That was one thing we’d actually been successful at since we’d been here. Anton and Jorge had started weeding through the guards, dismissing the ones who they thought would be issues and setting up training for the ones with potential. A few had been tossed in the cells because they were deemed too dangerous to just dismiss.

Blanca had also been helping out, sorting through the house staff. I hated to admit it, but Amorette was right about her. She wasn’t a threat to us. At least not right now.

When we made it to the mansion, it was a short walk to the front doors, which Javier was just walking through. The old man had black and silver hair swept away from his face and a leather vest with too many fraying patches. He was the exact opposite of the polished men Vicente had always tried to surround himself with.

He had a small party of people on his heels. One was that kid, Esteban. The light and naive air he’d had at the party was gone. His face was set and his eyes dark as he took in every detail.

I hoped Matías knew them as well as he thought he did. To my knowledge, Vicente had never let them inside the mansion, and this could be nothing more than a reconnaissance mission for an eventual attack.

Striking while we were getting our feet under us was smart for anyone looking to expand their territory. Here is hoping they were as fond of Matías as they seemed.

There was one woman in the bunch. Short, curvy, with as much attitude as she had hair. And the fire in her eyes as she stared down Matías gave away who she was. Javier’s daughter. Fuck, what was her name?

Rhonda? Red? Wait, Rita.

Matías pretended he didn’t feel the burn of her attention as he smiled and held out his hand for Javier. The old man took it

and slapped Matías on the back.

“Son! It’s great to see you. I hope this visit goes better than the last one.”

The vibe in the hall changed immediately. Fucking hell. The smile taking over my face at their exchange became forced. By dinner time, the new rumor would be that the Dirty Dogs ordered the execution of Vicente through their secret connection to Matías. One of the mansion guards was about to become our food tester.

“Javier. It’s good to see you. Let’s go to the study.” He nodded to Javier’s companions, completely glossing over Rita.

Interesting. Although if he started shit up with her again, I wouldn’t have to worry about him chasing after Amorette.

None of those fuckers acknowledged me as Matías led Javier out of the grand foyer. I ground my teeth as I followed behind. I tried not to let it get to me, but it was fucking hard. I didn’t have to have all the control, but I needed to be more than a footman.

This wasn’t going to work. I refused for us to live in Matías’ shadow. We were equals, or we were adversaries. Matías seemed like that worked for him, but everyone else was grating on my nerves.

Inside the study we’d been in a few hours earlier, everything was quiet and only residual emotion seemed to cling to the walls. No one else seemed to feel it as they moved toward the table. Matías was just in a good mood that a friend had paid him a visit.

“Andre, get over here. We can’t have this discussion without you.” Matías waved me over to the chair next to him while Javier and his people took the seats across from us.

Javier flicked his gaze to me then back to Matías. “Where are the rest of the bastards?”

That term had been used for us all our lives. It was hardly the insult Javier seemed to think it was. Still, I couldn’t let him think that was how he was going to start the meeting.

“Bastards or not, you’re sitting in the headquarters of the Institution. No matter your relationship with Matías, I won’t take kindly to insults.” I sat down, injecting all my offense into my expression.

Javier wasn’t impressed as he gave me an impassive stare while one side of his mouth dipped down. “I wasn’t trying to insult you. Isn’t that what you have always been referred to?”

Next to me, Matías flinched. Because Javier had insulted me or because I wouldn’t take it?

“You don’t appear to be a dumb man. Matías thinks highly of you, so I know that you’re not. What’s the point of taking potshots at me?”

“And—” Matías started, but Javier stopped him.

“No, we might as well get this out of the way now.” Javier moved his attention between Matías and me, a severe frown tugging his mouth downward. The wrinkles in his face were deeper today than they had been during the party. “We’ve heard the rumors that have been rippling through the underground. The bastards’ lover killed Vicente—the woman who stabbed Juan, right?” At Matías’ reluctant nod, Javier gave us one of his own as if he had never doubted it. Why would he when Amorette had stabbed one of his men. I curled my hands into tight fists on top of my thighs. We were lucky he hadn’t demanded any retribution for that.

Across the table, Javier’s daughter Rita stared Matías down, probably looking for any signs that he was fucking her too. That was going to be an issue at some point.

Javier continued, “Everyone’s saying you’re power hungry, that you’re going to drive the Institution into the ground to fuck over your father. My favorite is that you’re so greedy; the Institution won’t be enough, and you’re going to take over as much territory as possible from the rest of us. Now, I don’t put weight on rumors. I know enough to know they’re started by petty bitches with nothing better to occupy their time with. The rumor starters are the ones you really have to watch out for since they don’t have the balls to act on what they want. Then we’re eating lunch, watching our girls dance

as we get ready to discuss business, and we start getting notifications that warehouses are blowing up in the Institution. No one knows why—or who—is behind it. So I got curious.” He leaned forward and a light blue ring became visible around his irises. “We came here to extend an offer of help if you need it,” he said to Matías.

I started to relax, but he speared me again with his gaze. Nothing good would come next, not with the way he puffed up and leaned forward. “I want to clarify that we will only work with Matías. The Institution is a corrupt and vile business, even by our standards. I don’t know you or your brothers. I don’t care to. But I know Matías. *You* need us? You call. So, by extension, we’re helping you bastards, too. If Matías ever learns that you’re what people say you are, we won’t hesitate to track you down. We don’t need men like or worse than Vicente in power. We’ll do what we can to take the threat out.” Javier pulled in a long breath, and when I thought he was going to continue his long tirade, he pushed his chair away from the table.

“This was our sole reason for coming. We’ll catch up soon, when you have time to come over for a barbecue.” He rapped his knuckles on the table as he stood. His companions followed. “We’ll see ourselves out. Don’t let the Institution keep you too busy that you become a stranger, Matías.”

We sat there in dumbfounded silence. I hadn’t expected that at all. I wasn’t sure what was going through Matías’ mind, but he was equally still. Clenching my teeth, I turned to Matías. He seemed just as surprised as I was as he fought to pull his gaze from the door.

I waited for the anger and resentment to come, and while there was a small amount of bitterness piling up in the pit of my stomach, the eye-twitching irritation was absent. I was left with resolve.

Even though it surprised me, I was beginning to expect this to be the norm. And that, I hated.

Pressing the heels of my hands into my eyes, I grunted. “Fuck this shit.”

“Excuse me?” Matías had the sense not to use an offensive tone.

“Come on, like you don’t see what’s going on? Parker’s made the observation more than once.”

“Elaborate for me. Parker says a lot of shit,” he said stiffly, pulling his shoulders back.

I leaned back in my chair and twirled sideways to face him. While rocking back and forth, I glared at him. “Except for the Movement, we have no allies in our camp. However, before you ask who *we* is, yes, I mean Grey, Lafe, Parker, and me. In this, we’re separate because no one can comprehend that we’d be on the same team. Everyone else wants you at the top and *only* you.”

“Well, too fucking bad,” he sneered like I was being ridiculous. “I don’t know how I can make it any more clear without licking your ass in public that you’re my equal.” He shoved his chair away from the table but didn’t stand up as he pushed his hands through his hair.

“You have,” I conceded, resting my hands on my thighs. “We all know you have. That doesn’t change the fact that to everyone else, you are the Institution. We aren’t.” I opened my hands and studied my palms. “The funny thing is, I don’t even think you want to be here.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” He sounded exasperated like he didn’t know what I was talking about. Yet, I bet he did...

“I’ve been watching you, Matías. With the heads, with the staff. You hate it. You don’t want to be a leader. You do things only because you think you’re supposed to. You want to be part of us because you think you’re supposed to.” I met his eyes. “Right? What drives you isn’t what *you* actually want, but what you think you’re supposed to want?” I had other suspicions, but I’d keep them to myself for the time being.

“Are you sure this isn’t your way of saying you want to get me out of the way? You are power-hungry, Andre. I’ve known it my entire life. Javier wasn’t wrong about that.”

I smiled. That was a weak fucking deflection. “You know me well enough to know that it’s not power that I crave. It’s control. So much of it has been taken from us our entire lives. Does it surprise you that that’s what I want? To control every situation as much as I can so I can make damn sure the people who matter to me stay safe. Hell, that’s why I took as many beatings for Parker and Lafe as kids as I could.”

“Seeing as they mattered to you.”

“Exactly. The hell of it is, you’re the one obstacle standing in the way of getting what I want. I might as well kill you myself, and then I could take over the Institution,” I mused without any genuine interest in the idea.

Over the last month or so, Matías had come to matter to me. I didn’t view him in the same way I did the others, but we lacked that shared history of growing up together. He didn’t experience the same shit we did to understand us. Although, Matías wasn’t who I thought he was. I liked him. And shit, if I didn’t want this to work out, but with what Lafe pulled, and who knew what else my nitwit brothers would do because they felt it was their right, that possibility seemed further and further away.

“I’m sure my death would make life easier for many people.” There was no sarcasm in his voice and I tipped my head.

“You’re not suicidal, are you?” Never once had he given me that impression. If any of my brothers felt that way, it would be Lafe. It *still* might be Lafe.

“Of course not. But it doesn’t change the fact that you’re right, and I know it. So what can we do to change it?”

I sighed, massaging my temples. Just when one was gone, another headache was slowly coming on. This one didn’t feel like a migraine, though.

“We don’t just need a plan. We need ten, with multiple contingencies and people who support us collectively on our side. Do you have any ideas?”

“Yeah, actually, I do.” He grinned.

We sat in silence for a few minutes as I mulled that over. Wouldn't that solve all our problems if we could get these *cabróns* over the fact that Matías was legitimate and we weren't? But how?

“You know, Matías, I'm sorry I was such an ass to you when we were kids.” In any other circumstances I would have said bastard, except that word felt too raw. “You're not who I thought you were and I wish things could have been different. I wish we could have been brothers—for our sake, and yours.” I reached forward and pulled him against me, giving him a few hard pats on the back.

He seemed surprised that I would make such an announcement. Although he had to know it was true. I trusted him, and that was what was important. Vicente had fucked him over by taking away his opportunity to grow up with brothers. At least I had mine to lean on.

“Thanks, Andre.” He returned the hug. “You—fuck. Thanks.” His voice broke over his words.

I knew what he meant. He never expected us to like him. It didn't mean I wanted him to be part of our fuckfests, but I could accept him as a brother.

AMORETTE



I sat with Lafe on his bed with our backs against the pillows. For the last couple hours, he held me, and instead of the tight hold I expected, his arms were loose. After Andre stormed out and nothing else was said about what Lafe had done, he seemed to breathe easier. It was like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders.

Grey laid across the foot of the bed with his arms crossed behind his head. Parker sat on the windowsill, watching the outside.

“What do you think Andre’s doing? Having a heart attack or organizing all of his contacts to take over the world without us?” Parker rubbed his index finger over one eyebrow.

“You shouldn’t give him such a hard time. He’s only trying to keep us together,” I chastised Parker. He was probably the smartest of the brothers, IQ-wise at least, but when it came to emotional intelligence, he never tempered his reactions or words, no matter how deep they cut. Rolling his head my way, Parker stared but didn’t say anything. He just shook it then went back to looking out the window like he didn’t want to have that conversation with me.

“He’s trying to smother us into compliance,” Grey murmured, keeping his gaze glued to the ceiling. I sighed. They all seemed to be in the *irritated with Andre* camp. I couldn’t lie to myself, though. I’d rather them be irritated with Andre than Lafe. Lafe was so fragile sometimes that I wasn’t sure he could handle their censure. Andre could.

“I’m not sorry. No matter what Andre thinks or wants, I couldn’t keep doing that anymore,” Lafe added quietly with only a slight strain in his voice, as if he needed to explain his actions to us.

He didn’t. Of all of us, I probably understood the best why he felt the need to do what he did. He was drowning, and running drugs was holding him under. Turning him into a person he didn’t want to be. Or maybe keeping him that person.

How funny. Out of all of them, I understood why he wanted to blow up the business. I was glad he did it. As much as I hated how Andre fought against it, trying to figure out how the destruction of the drug business fit into his plans, I couldn’t be happier that Lafe had taken matters into his own hands.

I rested my cheek against his shoulder. “I believe you. And I don’t think any of us fault you for it.”

Parker glanced our way again and sighed as he brought one leg up in the window and draped an arm around it. “Look, Lafe. I’m the last person to judge you for destroying the business. I’m not sure it’s going to be as smooth as you think it’s going to be, but I have no room to talk. At least you had a noble cause in mind. I tend to act out when my feelings are hurt.” His gaze skated over me for the briefest moment.

Hell. My heart skipped a beat. Was that what I had done? Hurt his feelings, so he lashed out with Mia? Parker always seemed so...

The day he’d tried to give me the ring, I’d thrown it back at him and he’d stormed off. Yes, I’d known he was angry, but had it been deeper than that? Had I *hurt* him? Not just his pride but *him*?

Outside of Lafe, I didn’t think any of the brothers were capable of that kind of emotion...

My thoughts were spinning wildly with too many fragments to make sense of anything, when Grey pulled me out of my head.

“I don’t care that you fucked shit up. We need to make the world we want. Not pander to the one that’s already around us.” He turned his head to face me. “What do you say, *mami*? Should we go a little psycho on those motherfuckers?” He grinned and I returned it.

I’d actually love nothing more than to assert ourselves at the top. It would be a short-term fall from grace to save more lives and heartache in the long run. And maybe we could get answers from Valentina while we were at it.

That was...So different from who I was a few months ago. I waited for the aversion to the new me to hit, but as I watched the guys I’d come to care so much about, I breathed easier knowing we were together.

Wow. I had changed.

“Let’s do it.” I nodded. “When Andre comes back, we should make a list of everyone who’s against us or who we think is against us, and start plucking their power from them one by one. We can do that, right? Remove them from their positions? Or do something to make them a nonissue?”

Parker smirked. “If we’re going to do that, they need to die. Along with their families so they can’t cause us issues, and there’s no one to avenge them. Are you ready for that, Little Love?”

My easy breathing turned shaky. Maybe I wasn’t quite the villain I’d imagined myself to be. I couldn’t wipe out whole families without cause. Lafe hugged me tighter.

“No,” I enunciated the word slowly, “but we need a plan on how to get the cards stacked in our favor.”

“Come on, Park.” Grey rolled off the bed and motioned for Parker to go with him. “Let’s go see if we can find Andre. It’s been a few hours, enough for him to calm his ass down. Then, we can start on the plan our Wicked Love wants. Maybe she’ll be the new head of the Institution,” he mused.

“Depends on the benefits if I’m going to pledge my allegiance at her feet.” It was a tease, yet the way his gaze

snaked toward me as he left the room started a fire deep in my stomach. I shifted my legs and cleared my throat.

I'd thought he was done with trying to chase me. But that look and those words were a suggestion. A sexual one.

"He wants you." Once again, I was tugged from my thoughts.

"What?" I startled.

Twisting his lips to the side as he scooted down further in the bed, Lafe studied me. "He wants you. I think it's safe to say the four of us have lost our minds over you."

I tried to laugh, only it sounded forced, like I was purposely trying to throw him off. Giving up trying to play it off, I sunk down into his arms and moved one hand over his chest. "I don't understand you all."

"I don't expect you to. You came from a much different world from the one you're in now." It was so matter of fact.

"In the States, unless people are strange, or abused, or I don't know, unconventional, maybe? They don't build harems. Not the general population."

His body shook like he was laughing. "We're not the general population here or there. And I don't mind it. I think I actually prefer it."

"Prefer sharing me with Andre and Grey?"

"And Parker. You can't forget Parker."

I bit my lip, unsure how I felt about it. This felt very close to 'girl talk' only with a lover about his brothers. "Why are you so insistent on me being with Parker?"

"Because he wants you. I've never seen him actually try or fixate on anyone before. It's fun to watch him stumble over how to talk to you when all he's ever done was bend girls over or push them to their knees. Not that we've done any better." He snorted out a low laugh. "And you want him, even though you tell yourself you shouldn't. Why is that?" He sounded genuinely puzzled.

“Why don’t I want Parker?”

“No, why do you tell yourself you don’t want him? We’ve already covered that you do.” He tipped my chin up and gave me a no-nonsense look that dared me to lie to him.

“Fine. I’m attracted to him. I don’t know if it’s Vicente’s genes or the women he picked, but all of you are gorgeous. Add in the bad boy, I-don’t-give-a-damn vibes, and it’s a recipe for instant attraction.” A slow grin took over his face. Lafe must enjoy a little ego-stroking. I placed my palm on his chest and moved my fingers back and forth, giving me something else to watch before I took advantage of him. “Parker’s an asshole.”

“So is Grey. And Andre. And me when I want to be.”

“I understand when you all are assholes. Parker is unpredictable. He scares me.”

He was quiet for a few minutes. “Why are you with me when I run–ran–the drugs? That’s more morally reprehensible than anything Parker has done.”

“Lafe.” I pushed myself up a bit to look him directly in the eyes. “I never thought poorly of you for things you had to do. I tried because I thought I had to, because it was the right thing, but once I saw you as a person, I never went back.”

He twisted his lips again like he wasn’t sure he believed me. “Just, give Parker a chance. I think he’s more fragile than he lets on.”

I busted out a laugh. “Parker is not fragile.”

“Maybe not, but he is out of his depths. He’s never tried to connect to anyone like that. If you don’t want him, fine. But try not to toy with him, okay?”

That caught me off guard. Was that what they thought I was doing? Toying with him? That felt terrible.

“I won’t.”

“Good.” He closed his eyes and pulled me down on top of him. “You don’t have to sleep, but lay here with me? I feel like all the adrenaline coursing through my body is finally

crashing. There's going to be hell to pay outside these doors, and I want to be here with you a little while longer before I have to face it," he mumbled.

"Sounds good to me." For once, I wasn't trying to worry about all the possibilities. I was here, in the moment, with Lafe. The rest could wait.



LAFE'S HOLD on my hand tightened as we rounded the corner to the dining room. We napped for three hours. I couldn't believe I'd actually gone to sleep, much less for hours. Parker and Grey had never returned, but a quick text let us know they were in the dining room.

Shouting could be heard from the hall. With the way the mansion seemed soundproof, someone was bellowing the house down.

"What's going on? Can you tell?" I whispered to Lafe.

"It's Maikel. He's here, and he's screaming about the warehouses." The shakes started hitting his body, and I gave his fingers an extra squeeze. He started patting his pockets, but I slapped his hand away.

"Don't. You threw it at Andre, remember? You don't need it anyway." More yelling in Spanish spilled into the hallway and I groaned. "I wish I could learn faster. But you all speak so damn fast for any of it to make sense."

He didn't acknowledge anything I said as he pushed the door open. The brothers, minus Andre, were lounging around the table as Maikel screamed so loud his face was purple.

"English," Andre ordered, crossing his arms.

Maikel sneered my way, then turned back to Andre, continuing in a stream of Spanish.

Grey pulled a wicked knife out of nowhere and stabbed the table. "English, or you'll leave here with a few new scars."

“What do you have to say about this, Matías? You’re going to let these animals run the Institution? Now the drug business is gone, what’s next?”

Matías had his elbow on the table with two fingers resting against his temple as he stared down his nose at Maikel. “My brothers and I are equals. What more do you want me to do to prove it?”

Andre pressed his knuckles against the tabletop and leaned toward Maikel. “You’re lucky we’re entertaining you at all. You showed up unannounced, shouting the place down. I’m not a fan.”

“You’re not a—not a fan?” Maikel tossed his hands up. “I came to talk some sense into you boys. You’re one bad decision away from the other heads uniting against you.” He turned to Matías. “After what happened today and who I heard was here, they might already be taking steps to unseat you.”

“The majority of the population reports to us. So unless the heads have a secret power we’re not aware of, or they’ve been shaking hands and kissing babies while I wasn’t looking, we’re not concerned.” Andre raised one brow. He flicked his gaze toward Lafe, then back to Maikel. “I am glad you stopped by, though. There’s something we need from you.”

Maikel straightened his back. I wasn’t sure what he thought Andre would ask for, but I was sure he wasn’t right.

“Lafe, give Maikel the list of girls to be returned.”

Lafe jolted and the entire room crashed into shock, except for Matías. He grinned like the cat that ate the canary.

The dynamic was changing. Andre was taking control, and Matías was actively supporting it. What had happened to change so much in the last few hours?

“What are you talking about? Once girls are taken, they’re the property of the Institution.” He gave me a sidelong glare. “There’s only one exception, but it can still be argued she belongs to the Institution.”

“Lafe,” Andre urged.

He pulled up his phone and rattled off a few names. Maikel started shaking his head before Lafe even finished.

“It’s not possible. That girl isn’t even in my possession. She was bought and transported last week.” He had to be talking about the one who was thirteen.

“Then get her back,” Andre barked.

My heart plummeted. I saw what they did to the girls. That she was so young and already bought... There was no way she was untouched.

“Fuck that. She’s Tomas’ now. You want her, you go get her.”

Red clouded the outside of my vision. That was the man who ran the financial side of the business. That asshole was a pedophile. A fucking monster. I met Lafe’s gaze, then Grey’s and Parker’s.

No matter what happened here, we were going to get that girl back. For the Movement or not, I couldn’t let her stay there.

“And the others?” Andre pressed.

“Absolutely not. You’re trying to change too much. Our people are losing faith in you, and if you know what’s good for you, you’ll leave things the way they are!”

“Is that a threat?” Grey ran his fingers up the side of the knife. “That sounded like a threat.”

Maikel curled his lip. It was a threat, but he was about to kiss their asses to make us think it wasn’t. “Valentina was right. You four are nothing but savages trying to change the empire my brother built. If you want the girls, get them yourselves. Just know, my men will be waiting for you.”

He stormed out, slamming his shoulder into Jorge’s on the way out.

“Very well done,” Matías said to Andre, pride shining in his expression.

Andre huffed a laugh under his breath. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. That went about as we expected. Terrible.”

Matías stood up and rounded the table to slap Andre on the back. “We have to start somewhere. That was a good start. None of those fuckers are going to give in and roll over. We must show them you’re strong enough to take it. It’s the only way.”

“Wait a minute here. When did this happen?” Parker twirled his finger between Matías and Andre.

“What?” Matías asked.

“This...closeness.”

They both shrugged like it was no big deal and didn’t answer him. Or maybe I didn’t give him a chance.

“We have to go get her.” I stepped forward.

“We can send men to collect her,” Andre said as he started to motion for Jorge to come closer.

I shook my head and walked to the table. “No. I don’t want to leave anything to chance. That asshole is...” I paused to collect myself, “He’s hurting her. I know it. I’ve seen what those evil men are capable of. And when we get her, she’ll do better with a woman than a man.”

The brothers exchanged a glance and a few words in Spanish. But I didn’t give them an opportunity to argue. Not on this. Not when a child’s life was on the line. Chills raced down my arms as my stomach rolled, thinking about what she had endured this past week. Andre started to speak again, but I cut him off.

“We’re all going, or I’m going. Make your decision.”

“Little Love,” Parker said as he rounded the table for me. He cupped my shoulders and turned me to face him. “We were just trying to figure out who was driving. I’m with you. And we’re doing this right this time. No more fuck ups where you get taken.”

Good. That was as good an answer as I could hope for.

AMORETTE



Grey drove us in a fifteen-passenger van. Anton and Jorge organized some guards to accompany us, taking up four SUVs, two in front and two in the rear.

Tomas lived less than two hours away from the mansion, so for once, we didn't need to fly anywhere.

For the first time ever, I took the front seat. I think the others realized how important this was to me and when we stepped outside, Parker immediately shuffled me toward the front. He fastened my seatbelt and as my skin tingled where his hand brushed, he looked me in the eye and said, "The one with the plan always sits up front. That's why it's usually Andre."

Matías and Lafe were right behind me, and Parker and Andre spread out over the last two rows.

I opted to leave off the music, instead thinking of how this could go. I expected the brothers to lecture me, but they stayed quiet, letting me mull everything over.

While we were getting ready, Matías filled me in on the layout of Tomas' place. It wasn't grand, or particularly very large. It wouldn't be considering Tomas hadn't been very high in the Institution until recently. It was only after his predecessor died at Vicente's hands did he start making more money.

Instead of using it to build a house, he'd apparently used his bonuses to purchase a child.

My top lip curled.

“What?” Grey glanced at me.

“Hm?”

“What’s got your face like that?” He reached over and tugged on my bottom lip with his thumb.

I grabbed his hand and held it between both of mine in my lap. “I don’t understand how some people can be so evil. To hurt a child, like I’m sure he’s hurting this girl, it’s rape. To be able to do that for your own pleasure. That’s evil.” Rape was one of the most despicable acts no matter who it was. But my heart broke for the victims who were children.

“Unfortunately, some people crave power. They enjoy causing others pain. It’s what most of the Institution is made up of. I doubt that will ever change. Organized crime doesn’t usually attract good men,” he said very nonchalantly, as if it wasn’t anything he was worked up over.

I just...couldn’t accept that. I’d have to find ways to make this world better, even if I had to pick and choose the lines I did and didn’t cross like they had. And I knew with certainty, hurting women and children was always a hill I would die on. Always.

“What’s the plan, Amorette?” Matías leaned forward and popped his head between the seats. “We have about fifteen minutes before we arrive.”

His face was open and curious, showing no signs of stress. Not like how Lafe rocked in his seat. Andre must have noticed too because he leaned forward and laid a hand on his shoulder to calm him.

This was it, my chance to show the brothers and myself that I could be the person they needed in more than just life or death situations. “Tomas’ house is small and set just on the outside of town. He’s a man that enjoys his privacy,” I paused, the reasons for that made me sick, “with very few people on his staff. Did you get a count?” I shifted around to look at Parker.

“A housekeeper and gardener. Neither of which live on-site, although we have to assume they will be there when we get there.” It was early evening. With the heat, the gardener could save his work for when the sun went down. The housekeeper could be preparing dinner. It just really depended on what he used their services for.

“Okay.” I let out a breath through my nose. “Then Jorge’s two teams will secure the perimeter, then one of Anton’s teams will go in and clear the rooms, making sure there’s no surprises. Then we’ll follow. We’ll hold one team back in case we need them.”

I wasn’t a tactician. Outside of trying to learn Spanish through the Art of War, I had no experience in these types of missions. The brothers nodded like they were onboard and I had to trust that they would tell me if what I had planned was going to get us killed.

“I see no issue there.” Andre propped his forearms on Parker’s seat. I exhaled a breath I didn’t realize I was holding. That was the approval I needed. As much as the brothers hated it, I needed Andre’s type of care, and I thrived under his approval.

“Good, because we’re here.” Matías pointed to the house we were fast approaching. Lafe used the radio and gave instructions to Anton’s teams. They must have expected something like this because as soon as their vehicles stopped, the men jumped out in a coordinated effort, running to and around the house without missing a beat.

My heart started to palpitate as Grey parked. I unlatched the seatbelt then jumped out. I’d been holding the knife Grey had given me the entire ride, smoothing my fingers over the ridges on the handle. Weirdly, it calmed me.

“Ready, Little Love?” Parker asked, hopping out of the back and checking his gun. The rest of the brothers all had weapons in their hands as they watched me, waiting for my say.

It was strange yet exhilarating.

“Let’s go.”

We walked swiftly up the path. I was in the lead, and even though Anton’s team had called out, I checked the windows as they cleared the house. Nothing.

Except for the yelling as we entered the house. Lafe started translating at my side.

“Tomas is livid. He says we have no right to barge into his house. That he’s a head with as much status as us and demands our respect.” Lafe tilted his head as we started up the staircase.

I was so focused on getting to Tomas and finding the girl, I had no idea what anything looked like in the house. I heard his voice and my feet followed, as if my body instinctively knew that was where I needed to be.

“He knows it’s us. He sounds both confused and fucking furious. He thinks this is a takeover.”

“Well, dear brother, he’s not exactly wrong,” Parker quipped from the back.

They shared a quiet laugh, but I didn’t share in their humor. My heart was now a loud staccato in my ears, and belatedly, I searched the hall for signs of the girl as soon as we reached the second floor. Shit, I should have asked Anton’s team downstairs if they’d seen her.

“Shut up, fat man. You’re about to lose your tongue for speaking about them this way.”

“Them? They’re here?” He switched to English. Did he even realize it, or was he following Anton’s lead?

“They’re all here,” Anton said conspiratorially. We entered what must have been his bedroom just in time to see Anton leaning forward. When he caught sight of me, he winked.

I stuttered a step. The men who worked for the brothers kept their distance from me. They never engaged in conversation or seemed to know I existed. I knew the guys liked it that way. But now, he not only acknowledged me but gave me a sign that said...

Shit, I didn't know what that meant. But it felt like he believed in what we were doing. Or that he was okay with this. I didn't know.

Tomas whipped around, his arms swinging out to the side from the rotation. Either he just got done working out, or he had sweated so much at the fear of what was happening that he completely soaked his shirt.

Fat drops of sweat rolled down his temple as he started to yell in Spanish, zeroing in on Matías. Before any of the guys said anything, I stepped forward, clutching my knife.

“Where is the girl?” I demanded. My voice shook, but I wasn't afraid of Tomas. If anything, I was afraid of what I'd see when I found her.

“Is that what this is about?” He sputtered and his face mottled red. “That fucking whore?”

A thirteen-year-old. A whore.

I didn't think. I didn't give my brain time to process my actions as I ran forward and stabbed Tomas in the shoulder, just like I had that man at the Dirty Dog's party. Then I heard the screaming.

My own.

“Where the fuck is she!? What did you do to her!” I screeched and spittle hit his face.

“Ah! You fucking bitch! Get the hell off me!” Tomas grabbed my shoulder as his other hand went for my throat, trying to shove me away. Only my sheer determination kept me close to him. That and I had a death grip on the hilt. I twisted the knife and he cried out, dropping his hands.

The putrid scent of his body odor tickled my nose, then the strong, acidic smell of pee took over.

“You're fucking weak, man. A stab to the shoulder caused you to piss your pants.” Grey came up behind me and fisted Tomas' shirt, lifting him to his toes. The knife jerked out when I refused to release it. “Now answer her fucking question. Where's the girl?”

“You bastards are going to pay for this! You think there aren’t already plans being made to take you out? You’re wrong! And you!” Tomas jerked his head toward Matías, “If you don’t learn who your friends are, you’re going down with them!”

“It’s not friends he needs.” Andre stepped up beside Matías. He gave him a sidelong glance. “It’s brothers.” Then, moving next to me, he eyed the knife and Tomas before pulling me a few steps back. “We don’t give a fuck about your threats. You’re nothing. Less than nothing. The only value you have to us is in telling us where the girl is. Though your house isn’t big, so we’ll find her without you. You can either start talking, or we’ll let Amorette have some fun with her knife.”

The whites of Tomas’ eyes were bloodshot as he glared wildly around the room. His nostrils flared, and he tried to loosen himself from Grey’s grip with no luck. “What is this? Why is that bitch so fucking important? The Institution has never cared about what we do as long as we don’t skim from the top.”

I squeezed my fingers so tight around the hilt that they ached.

“Which you did, didn’t you, Tomas? I saw the books when I cleared the office. The old head was watching you. I tried to warn Vicente, but he liked you too much. You know what I think?” Matías walked closer until I was boxed in between him and Andre. “Vicente wanted you dead and he was setting you up to die. He was building you up for the bigger fall. It was a game to him.”

“Vicente didn’t care about the money.” Parker slapped Tomas on the back and grinned like they were old friends. “He had more money than God. He just liked the games and the pain he could cause others. Especially when he could stab them in the back and they’d still come crawling back for breadcrumbs.”

“The girl,” Grey barked as he shook him.

“In the bathroom,” Tomas choked out as if he was finally realizing he didn’t have a choice.

Dropping the knife, I raced past them and slammed into the door that had to be the bathroom. The only other door was too narrow. It burst open and a small scream came from inside. A girl. A sweet young girl sat huddled in the corner. The bath was drawing, and she was naked, trying to cover herself by folding her arms and legs.

Taking a second, I calmed myself, smoothing out my expression and doing my goddamn best not to come off like a raving lunatic. I made the shushing noise and pressed my hands down, trying to signal that it was okay. I crouched down as I walked toward her. I was already small, but it was best to come off as non-threatening as possible.

When I was a few feet away, I went to my knees and tried to smile at her. It was pained, but I tried. Then I saw it. Small smears of blood were just visible on her thighs. The smile froze on my face.

She started babbling in Spanish and I didn't understand any of it. I shook my head to clear the bubbling fury rising inside me and let her know I didn't speak Spanish.

"Sorry. I only speak little Spanish."

Her face fell and tears formed in her eyes. They didn't fall, though. There was a stubbornness I was glad to see in her expression.

It didn't do anything to take away the waves of regret lapping at my back. Did we arrive just too late to save her from rape? Or was he extra brutal today? Either way, we could have saved her some pain if we'd come earlier.

"We help. I came to help. You want family?" I focused on the small words I did know, and she seemed to understand.

"Yes, please. Mother," she said back, using single words and fragments to get her point across.

"Okay. We take you." I nodded and then reached up to turn off the water. She flinched and dropped my hand. *"You want clean?"*

She dropped her gaze to her legs and one silent tear leaked down her cheek. *"Yes."*

I glanced around. She would want privacy, but I didn't want to leave her alone. When I turned toward the door, she gripped my arm and screamed, "No!" Then came more Spanish, and I shook my head with a sad smile.

"Sorry, I don't understand."

"No. Leave." Her English was harsh and pointed.

"I won't." I slowly turned my back so she knew I wasn't leaving. The water splashed behind me and I waited for her to finish. Even though this was Tomas' house, the home of the man who hurt her, she would feel much better if she washed.

A small gasp of breath caused my own tears to come. I quickly brushed them away. I didn't want her to feel worse than she already did. Except, when the water started to drain, she collapsed onto the floor and burst into giant whacking sobs.

I snagged the towel off the counter, wrapped her up, and held her in my arms. We cried together. My tears hit the top of her head as hers leaked onto my legs. She kept saying the same two words over and over again.

Hesitantly, I told her I didn't understand again.

She looked up at me with large, watery eyes. They were missing the spark of joy in most girls' eyes. "I. Hurt."

She hurt. He hurt her.

As that sunk in, she clung to me, her thin arms looping around my neck until I was afraid she would choke me. I returned the embrace, fearful of what I'd do as soon as she let go.

Heat spilled from my chest and engulfed my body until it felt like I would erupt. My fury was so great that I had to grit my teeth to rein it in. Slowly, I regained some of my senses even though I was still wrecked for her.

No one knocked on the door to check on us. I was glad. The girl needed the time, and Tomas wasn't powerful enough for us to need to leave quickly. From all the reports Anton and Parker had given, he was barely tolerated by anyone.

When she was ready, she peeled herself away and stood up. Her eyes were dark pools that had seen too much, too soon.

I stopped with my hand on the doorknob and tried to tell her the men on the other side were our friends. She nodded, but there was a small divet between her brows that either meant she didn't understand or didn't believe me.

"They won't hurt you," I vowed. Not only because I would never let that happen, but more importantly, they wouldn't.

Peeking my head out the door, Parker, Grey, and Lafe walked toward me, and Tomas was nowhere to be seen. "Where is he?"

"Anton bundled him up and stuffed him in the next room just in case she didn't want to see him." Lafe stepped forward. But when I opened the door wider, he paused and his face fell. "Just a baby," he muttered.

Thirteen was that in-between age where she wasn't a little girl anymore, yet she wasn't a young woman. In all the ways that mattered, she was young. She deserved to still have a few years of innocence, and that was stolen from her.

Grey crouched in front of her and spoke in low, earnest tones. Parker stepped forward and added a few words with a dark smile. That wasn't how they should be approaching her, not so soon after she was raped. Except she responded to it.

A fierce look dropped over her face and she answered them in short, huffs. Grey nodded and called out to Anton, "Bring that *cabrón* back in here!"

Feet shuffled in the hall, along with a few shouts and grunts. When they marched Tomas back in, half of his face was swelling and blood was trickling from his nose and mouth. His right arm was also hanging awkwardly.

He didn't make any attempts to hassle the girl, as if he was afraid of more pain.

Grey pointed to the blood seeping through his shirt at his shoulder and then nodded his head at me. My face flushed as

the girl's eyes brightened into something akin to hero worship.

“My *hermano* is telling Mara that you were so enraged on her behalf that you stabbed that shithole as soon as you saw him. He also told her she can take her pound of flesh if she wishes.” Grey took his serrated knife off his belt as Parker spoke and flipped it around to hand it to her by the hilt.

Her hand raised and she took it with only a little hesitancy.

She eyed Tomas as she stalked toward him. Grey called out an order, and Parker translated, “He’s telling her not to kill him. Not yet.”

Mara, her name was Mara. I should have asked that, but I’d been so caught up in making sure she was okay that I hadn’t thought to ask.

Mara raised her tiny fist and screamed as she stabbed him in the side and then pulled the serrated edge down so it tore through the flesh. Tomas shrieked and struggled against the two men holding him, and he tried to kick his leg out.

“Well, I think you should have been more specific, Grey. He’ll die from that wound alone. How sharp is that knife?” Parker didn’t seem surprised or bothered by the girl’s feral attack.

I silently urged her on. In the US, most women never got the chance to stand up to their abusers, much less get any of their own power back. This was something I was going to love in the gray.

The girl left the knife in, pounding on his stomach and chest as she yelled at him. Tears fell down her face in fat droplets. The men in the room stood back and waited for her to expend her energy and calm down. When she did, I stepped forward.

I paused in front of Tomas and looked back at the brothers. When they didn’t move to stop me, I reached out a hand and grabbed the handle. “Tell Mara not to look if she doesn’t want to. But if he’s going to die soon anyway, I want him to get exactly what he deserves.” I yanked the knife out, and Tomas

only grunted his pain this time. He was soaked with sweat and his head hung like he'd lost too much blood and was barely hanging onto consciousness.

That would change in a minute.

“There’s no reason we need to leave him alive?” I asked, making sure I wasn’t about to start a war we wouldn’t already have on our hands.

Parker grinned and rubbed his hands together. I couldn’t help but return it. “Andre would tell you yes, we need him alive. But he’s run off somewhere with Matías. I say jack shit up and have your fun, Little Love. We’ve waited way too long to see this side of you. It’s not like we’re not already crossing several lines being here.”

Grey wiped his thumb over his bottom lip as he smirked, “You know my answer, *mami*. Go psycho on his ass.”

Lafe shook his head and smiled to show his own agreement. He had dark circles under his eyes, and he was struggling, but he was holding it together. “Go for it, Killer.”

I eyed Tomas. What would be the best way to do this? “Lay him down.” He wouldn’t be able to pass out if he was laying down. Right?

Once he was on his back, I opened his pants and pulled them down to expose his tiny dick. It was streaked with dried blood and the disgusting sight lit a new fire inside me.

I gripped it, and Tomas immediately started screaming. Grey and Parker each took a foot so he couldn’t kick me. Then, I used the serrated edge and sawed at the soft appendage. For such a small bit of flesh, there was so much blood. It came off easier than I expected.

Tomas never stopped screaming the entire time, even as his voice became a hoarse whisper.

I scooted closer to his head, handed the knife back to Grey, then tugged his chin down to open his mouth and stuffed his dick inside.

“You did this. Because of your vile actions, you brought this on yourself. Maybe in your next life you’ll do better.” I stood and stared down at the blood coating my hands.

This wasn’t a sight I’d ever thought I would see on myself. But I didn’t loathe it the way I thought I would.

I was still a hero, just not his. I would be Mara’s hero. Blanca’s. And the brothers’ if they let me.

There was so much black in the world; in this one especially, I could be in the gray to keep those I loved safe.

And I wouldn’t lose a wink of sleep over it.

PARKER



“I don’t think this is gonna work, boss,” Gio grouched down the line like I was the biggest pain in his ass. He wasn’t exactly disrespectful, but I wasn’t technically his boss. They worked for me, but they did their own thing too. In theory, he could talk to me however the fuck he wanted.

“You said you were on their asses. How did you lose them?” I’d contracted Gio and his men for one job. Watch the fashion boys. And he’d lost them.

“Listen, they’re slippery little shits. Are you sure they’re not already involved in some kind of family?”

“Positive. I did all the research myself. They started life out rough, but it wasn’t anything to give them significant ties.” If anything, they’d avoided the crime world growing up. However, fame and access to money often changed people.

“I heard about that. Pedos can fucking eat their own dicks.” I had to smirk at his use of words.

“Funny you should say that, our little love feels the same way.”

“Why do I feel there’s a story behind this?”

I grinned and leaned a shoulder against the wall by the window. It was nice and warm outside—a perfect beach day. But I doubted Andre would give us any recess. It was all work and no play with that boy.

“Because there is.”

“And you’re not going to share? You know how I feel about prompts that leave you hanging in conversation. It’s my biggest pet peeve.”

I traced my fingers down the inside of the window frame, then I turned and leaned against the wall. “Okay, fine. It’s not so much of a story, more of irony that those are your chosen words. We rescued a girl from this nasty piece of work. Little Love decided he should choke on his dick, so she cut it off and stuffed it in his mouth.”

He was quiet for a minute, then coughed. “I don’t feel an ounce of remorse for that guy, but damn if it doesn’t make my own junk hurt.” Another cough. “Isn’t she the goody-goody you told me about last time you were here?”

“The very one. Although to be fair, she’s still a little too good. Unless you’re going after someone she cares about or wants to protect. Then she’ll make mincemeat out of you.” That was an idea. If flowers and a ring were too hoity for her, I could present her with tools to take the pedos down a notch. Maybe I’d try a meat tenderizer.

Although, I needed some kind of sign from her that she wouldn’t throw it back at me like all the times before. If she did, I was afraid I’d act just as stupid as I always did when I didn’t get my way.

It was a self-realization I was becoming very intimate with.

“Is she yours yet?” There was a snicker in his voice and some of my old self reared its head. I wanted to reach through the phone and choke him. Mainly because I didn’t have an answer.

I was ready to toss the towel in, but Andre, the meddling brother that he was, didn’t think I should give up quite yet. When I’d pressed for any information he had, it didn’t appear he had any. He just didn’t want to see me quit.

Or leave. That was probably his actual motive. He knew if I was involved in this group lovefest with him and my other

brothers, then he'd be safe in the knowledge that his baby brother wouldn't run away.

But his meddling had already served its purpose. The niggle of hope sat low in my stomach and each time I touched her or just shared her air, I wanted to do wicked, dirty things with her. To her.

More than that, I wanted to peel her apart and learn every secret she ever had. It was a strange sensation I didn't hate. Not at all. It felt more thrilling than anything I'd ever experienced. If she'd just stop giving me those pouty lips when she turned me down, I wouldn't want to bite them so badly.

I sighed. "I don't know."

"What? The arrogant Parker Adair is unsure about a woman?" Gio laughed.

"This call is over. Find the fashion boys. Keep on their asses and keep them out of trouble."

"Or what?" He still laughed.

"You're off my roster. Good luck getting other heist jobs without my glowing recommendation." I hung up as Lafe entered the room, followed by Grey. Our brother was jonesing. Lafe was so jittery, he was about to tap dance out of the room.

"You need to hit the gym with me. That's not a request. It's a fucking order." Grey shoved his shoulder. Lafe stumbled a few steps then caught himself on the wall.

"What are you talking about?" Lafe's face twisted up like he smelled something sour.

Crossing his arms, Grey gave him a knowing stare. "You're in the process of detoxing. Come to the gym with me. The workout will help."

"You bastards have never cared before! Fuck off!" He threw a shaky hand out, trying to wave Grey off. He should have known better. The only way to get Grey to leave you alone when he was determined would be to leave him unconscious. Not that he'd tried this particular brand of

brotherly love before, but I imagined he would need extreme motivation to fuck off.

Lafe's next tactic was to twist his body to the side and glare out the window as if Grey wouldn't be able to see him if he couldn't see Grey. I shook my head. Lafe had never been so obstinate in the past. Although to be fair, none of us had inserted ourselves into his business like this either.

"Just like we told you before, Amorette was right. We are shitty fucking brothers. I want to see you get clean. I want to see you get help. I can't do the fucking work for you. But I'm tired of watching you shake all over the place. Get in the fucking gym, or I'm going to carry you there. You can't take me at your best. The way you are right now? It'll be easier than corralling a toddler."

"Corralled many toddlers there, Grey?" I smirked.

He gave me an irritated glance. "Help get his ass in the gym or shut the fuck up."

"I'm good. I'm trying to work out my own issues within my business." I raised my hands. "Don't worry. Andre has searched every single item he owns. Little Love has gone above and beyond to make sure he's accompanied at all times. What more is there to do?"

"Fucking care. That's what you can do," Grey growled, and I snapped up straight.

"You don't think I care?" I asked incredulously. I did. Like Grey said, I couldn't get clean for him; he had to do the work himself. Taking the first step to remove the drugs from his life was monumental. It still didn't make me a babysitter when I had other shit to worry about.

"I'm not a goddamn child!" Lafe laced his hands behind his head like he couldn't deal with this. I was right there with him. As it was, Grey and I were standing around watching his tantrum.

"Look, I'll leave you all to it. I have somewhere I need to be." I started to brush past them when Grey stopped me.

“You get him in the gym, and I’ll get you a seat the next time I fuck Amorette.” I froze, then tipped my head back.

Damn it. Why was that so intriguing? And why was I so fucking weak? I turned around and pointed at Lafe. “Looks like we’re going to the gym.”

He sneered. “Seriously? Now you’re going to strong-arm me to the gym so you can watch Grey fuck Killer?” Lafe started shaking his head. “If you want her, just fucking tell her without all the petty games. Leave me the hell out of it.”

“You see, that’s where I’ve been going wrong. I’ve learned I have no fucking clue how to talk to women. So, because I’m just pathetic enough, I will take the scraps I’m tossed until my ego can’t take it anymore. Now, let’s go.”

Grey pulled a familiar canister from his pocket and held it up to show Lafe. He stilled, eyeing it like it was both the air he needed to breathe and the poison that would choke him. “Where did you get that?”

“Not important. What is important is that you stay coherent. If you quit cold turkey, you’ll be down for days throwing your guts up. That can’t happen. But we can keep you as healthy as possible and wean you off slowly. I won’t tell Andre if you won’t.” Lafe reached out, but Grey pocketed it. “Only after the workout. And I control the amount.”

“Fine, *skitstövel*.” Grudgingly, Lafe stomped his feet as he headed for the door. He stayed several feet ahead as we headed toward the gym. Grey gave me a nod of appreciation. “Are you doing this for you, or for him?” I asked quietly. The gym at the mansion was about three times the size of the one we had on the island, and this one was used by the guards. Vicente hadn’t cared enough about working out to have his own personal gym, yet somehow he always stayed fit.

“For him.” Grey rolled his eyes. “You think I would do this to fuck Amorette? I don’t need to do that. I already fuck her anytime I want. Or she wants.”

I narrowed my eyes on him. “Then what’s changed for you?”

Lafe stopped up ahead and glared back at us. The poor soul didn't like that he had to wait on us. And from the suspicious note in his eyes, he knew we were talking about him.

“He blew up his business. He wants to get clean. As long as he's willing to do the work, I'm willing to help. Before I thought it was just a waste of my time and effort.”

“Fair enough.” When we entered the gym, the guards scrambled to clear a section of the gym for us. Outside of a few nasty pieces of work, we'd come up against a surprisingly small amount of resistance.

It wasn't all that shocking that there hadn't been any uprisings since Vicente had been a murderous psychopath. Then again, he had been a charming psychopath when he wanted to be.

As far as we knew, Valentina had still been trying to start trouble for us, but we couldn't be sure. She was tremendously elusive.

Grey put me and Lafe through the paces, starting with two miles on the treadmill with two minute breaks after each half mile to do push-ups and sit-ups. Then came the sparring. And lucky me, I got to be the sparring partner as Grey walked around us, correcting our form and giving us lessons on how to be more effective.

“Gosh, Grey. I really missed spending time with you like this,” I snarked, except it didn't have the same effect as I panted out the words.

“I didn't,” Lafe grumbled. Then we shared a grin, right before he smashed his fist in my face.

“What the fuck! We weren't fighting then!” The words were barely audible through my hands. The warm, wet liquid on my hands was about to make a mess. “Fuck you, Lafe. You made my nose bleed.” Grey tossed me a rag as Lafe collapsed onto the mat, in decidedly worse shape than me. “I don't think it's broken. I'm sure you're glad to know.” But it did throb like

hell as I pinched it to stop the bleeding. It would probably be swollen too.

I glowered at Lafe as I cleaned myself up and tossed the rag in the bin.

Lafe threw an arm over his eyes as he tried to catch his breath. The shaking was still there, but it wasn't nearly as bad. "Serves you right, you bastard, for using me to get to Amorette."

And wouldn't you know it, our little love came through the doors right then with Blanca on her heels.

"Where's Andre?" she demanded. No *Hi, hello, why are you bleeding, Parker?*

Although to be fair, it was just a trickle now.

"Probably fucking off with Matías," I grumbled.

Did no one else think it was weird that suddenly Andre and Matías were closer than the rest of us? No? Okay, it was just me.

Although, I'd be the first to admit I had a tendency to get jealous. First, I was jealous of Matías with Amorette, and now he was taking Andre too.

"What do you need, *mami?*" Grey tossed water bottles to both Lafe and me, then he walked over to Amorette, picking her up so she wrapped her legs around his waist and placed her hands on his shoulders.

My cock jumped in anticipation.

She pushed against his shoulders for him to set her down, but he didn't. When she realized it was futile she sighed and gave up. "I wanted to know what else he'd found out about my abduction. It's been a while since he mentioned it, and now that I've had a few days to breathe, I can't stop thinking about what it means."

What it meant for Grace, she meant.

Oh fuck. That's what I could do for her. I could get a few men on Grace. Get some pictures to make sure Little Love was

assured of her safety. Then, do what we could to keep her safe from the Institution. Jorge told me this morning that he was starting to hear whispers about Tomas' death and how Little Love mutilated his body.

We could have kept that under wraps, but why? If people thought she was unstable, she'd be safer. Although, Andre wasn't exactly on board with that line of thinking.

"Out!" Grey yelled to the rest of the room. Seeing the sway we were starting to have here was liberating as the men almost trampled each other to leave. Blanca turned to the door, then back again, unsure of what to do.

"You should definitely leave. When these two are together, they fuck. Unless Little Love is fine with you staying?" I glanced at Blanca as I tossed a thumb toward Grey and Little Love.

"Parker!" Amorette pursed her lips, even as she caressed Grey from his shoulders and up the sides of his neck. "We don't fuck all the time."

"Yes, we do. Leave," Grey said more calmly, glimpsing back at Bianca.

She didn't need any more convincing as she ran from the room laughing. "Sorry, Amorette!"

"This is serious. I need to know what really happened. If it wasn't just luck." She tried to escape his hold, but he clamped his hands on her thighs.

It wasn't happenstance. The more I thought about the way Valentina operated and the way Vicente died, the more it seemed she was working on some unseen plan. But what part would Little Love have played in that? Valentina couldn't have known she would be ours.

It made it all very curious.

But that was for later. Right now, Grey was laying Amorette back on a weight bench and tugging her clothes off.

"Andre doesn't have an update. But you can ask him the next time you see him." My voice was nasally from my

swollen nose. Lafe was a bastard.

“Lafe, get rid of her shirt.” Grey didn’t have to tell him twice. He miraculously found his breath as he pulled off her clothes.

“Grey!” Amorette fought against her laughter, which was full of exasperation. She slapped their hands, but they were too fast and too strong. Once her glorious body was on display, Lafe held her hands up by her head.

She arched her back, pushing her chest up as both desire and annoyance flared in her light blue eyes. Little Love was perfect. Her porcelain skin and tiny curvature were so doll-like, yet the fire inside her threatened to burn us all up.

I stood there like a stone statue, taking everything in. Memorizing every dip and valley. I’d know her body by heart the first time she let me touch her.

He pushed her knees to her chest and landed a hard smack against her ass. She cried out as her cheeks pinkened. “Shhh...” He soothed the pain away. “Lafe’s been such a good boy, following my instructions. Parker helped. I promised them a reward for good behavior.”

I wanted to snort. I almost did. But Little Love shot a look at me, and the way my body electrified as soon as our gazes collided made everything else disappear.

Oh yes, I wanted her. In moments like this, it was achingly clear that I would pursue her until I was dust on the wind. There was too much between us that neither would acknowledge, but I was done with that.

And so was she. She just didn’t know it yet.

“You want to be a good girl and give them their reward, right, Wicked Love?” She hummed and met his gaze, getting lost in the spell he was weaving around her. “You’re the only reward they want. The best thing that’s ever happened to four neglected bastards.”

“Lafe?” She tipped her head back seemingly to check on how he felt about all of this.

He winced. “I don’t like sharing you. But I also don’t think I could walk out that door.” His thumb brushed over her pulse. Tension was so tight in his body, the corded muscle in his arms and shoulders stood out.

“You’re the prize, *mami*. What do you want? Do you want us to fuck you raw? Suck on your gorgeous tits and clit until you can’t take it anymore? Just tell us and we’ll make it happen.”

Her eyes kept finding their way back to me and if she tried to push me out, I would riot.

“I want you to make me feel good,” she finally answered, arching her back as she met Grey’s stare. Fuck, she was the goddess of seduction. She had to be. And I didn’t even think she tried. But to us, every twitch was an aphrodisiac.

“Parker too?” Grey nudged, trying to pull me into their circle. Fuck, the way my brothers were trying to include me messed with my head, but at the same time, I couldn’t think about it right then. I wanted her too bad and my cock was stone trying to lead me to her.

She hesitated and I tried to make myself look as docile as I possibly could. Because Grey would have to fucking carry me out of the room if she wanted me gone.

“Look at me.” Grey caught her jaw and turned her to him. “Do you want him?”

Time stopped as I waited for her answer. When her gaze tried to slide my way, Grey gave her a little shake. “Do you want him?”

Squeezing her eyes shut, she nodded, like she couldn’t bring herself to say the words aloud. That was enough for me. Everything bounced back into place and I wanted to fall to my knees. Instead, I used the hem of my shirt to make sure any blood was gone as I prowled toward them. Giving Little Love plenty of time to change her mind.

Lafe moved both of her hands to one of his as he bent down to kiss her. He cupped her face, caressing her cheek with

his thumb and she melted for him. Little Love liked it sweet just as much as she liked Grey's abrasiveness.

She tried to shift her legs together but Grey pulled them apart. The sight of Lafe with her even in such an innocent way was like fire to my soul.

What was it about this girl and my brothers?

Grey ran his palm up the inside of her thighs, stopping to rest them at the apex.

"I love her tits. You know that, Parker?" Grey asked conversationally.

"I did not." I wanted to be as blasé as Grey, except my jaw was too clenched for that.

"Why don't you cup them? See if you can figure out why I love them so much."

I reached out both hands and tested the weight. Perfect. They were just the right size to be a handful. I tweaked her nipples and she whimpered into Lafe's mouth.

Lafe softened her up with kisses. I massaged her breasts. I leaned over to see her pussy that Grey kept on full display. Grey teased her by stroking her lips gently with his thumbs. It was an act of worship, while also one of torture.

I groaned. Up close like this was even more perfect than the glimpses I'd gotten before. She had one of those cute button clits. If she had her legs together, I knew it would just barely peek out. Her pussy was so pretty and pink.

And deliciously wet. How would she react if I bent down and licked up her cream from ass to clit? Would she know it was me? She couldn't see me. Not with Lafe taking her attention.

Would she be able to tell us brothers apart? Would she rank us as lovers?

My rigid cock throbbed, and a drop of pre-cum leaked out. The potential games we could play would be endless. And even though Lafe and Grey weren't as competitive as Andre and me, I couldn't imagine they wouldn't take them seriously.

We all wanted to be her favorites. Yet, I was so far behind...

“Please...” she moaned, shifting over the bench.

“You’ve had enough, *mami*? You aren’t enjoying our attention?” Grey’s voice took on a hypnotic quality. When Lafe pulled back, her eyes were so glazed over, I wasn’t sure she even saw him.

“I need...” she started, but Grey worked down his pants and gripped his cock in his hand. He lined himself up and thrust inside. Little Love’s eyes rolled back in her head.

“I. Know. Exactly. What. You. Need,” Grey punctuated each word with a thrust. “Lafe. There’s Vaseline in the drawer over there.”

Lafe ran to get it.

“All right, *mami*. Your tits or your ass. Where do you want Lafe?”

She gasped, then groaned as she reached behind her to hold onto the bench. The force of Grey’s fucking was threatening to slide her up.

“Boobs. I’m not ready for that yet.”

One side of Grey’s mouth hooked up. “You want us to mark you up instead?”

Opening the container, Lafe greased his dick up. He’d already lost his shorts somewhere along the way.

It was weird to see their dicks like this, but at the same time, I was left out. What the fuck did I do? I couldn’t fuck her but I still wanted to fucking join in.

“And Parker? Where do you want Parker?”

She rolled her head my way, and the indecision was right there for me to see.

“Fuck it. She can jack me off.” I took the decision off the table. Relief swarmed her and she relaxed back into the bench.

I dropped my shorts, spit into her hand and closed her fingers around my aching cock. “Fuck yes.” Her hands were so tiny and soft. The feel of her touching me was so fucking good.

Lafe squeezed her tits together as he straddled her and slipped between the swell of her breasts. He panted, gritting his teeth.

Grey grunted with his head tossed back, completely ignoring Lafe in front of him. He stilled as Amorette twitched and cried out.

Fuck. She was coming. She was fucking coming with the three of us using her like this. She loved it and got off on it, and that knowledge alone made me want to fucking blow.

She started bouncing up the bench again with Grey’s movements. Lafe had never stopped. I squeezed her hand tight at my base. I didn’t want to be the first to come. Not from a fucking handjob.

“One more, *mami*?”

She nodded, and Grey sucked on his thumb, then pressed it against her clit as his other hand pushed on her lower stomach. If five seconds went by, I was a damn saint.

Little Love came so hard, her skin flushed red as sweat covered her entire body. Even her hand spasmed over me.

“Lafe, get up. We’re going to mark her chest,” Grey grunted as he doubled his pace.

Once Lafe jumped up, Grey pulled out. He didn’t need to give us any more instructions, and I didn’t need any more time. I stroked our hands up and down my cock as Lafe and Grey did their own. Then jets of our cum painted her chest and stomach.

Our little love didn’t blink as she homed in on each of our faces like she couldn’t get enough of us. Like she didn’t want to miss a second.

So much white across her already pale skin. Holy fucking hell. That was a workout.

And as thought returned to her brain, she shifted her gaze away. Grey didn't give one fuck as he slid his fingers through our cum, and then pushed it inside her, taking the time to make it feel good for her. She bit her lip and turned her head, almost like she was embarrassed. Yet our Little Love opened her legs wider.

“This is where our cum belongs, Wicked Love. We can mark you, but then I'll stuff you full.” He went back for more, swirling his fingers over her ribs and through the valley of her tits. When he fingered her this time, he brushed his thumb against her clit.

She and I both groaned in unison. Her, because he was giving her the most sensual finger fucking I'd ever seen. Me, because my fucking seed was inside her. And she was still horny for more.

All of that, and I still didn't know where I stood with her.

ANDRE



I was sprawled back in the office chair with my chin resting on my knuckles as I twisted back and forth. Soft notes of classical music played from my phone. When I was stressed, the instrumentals helped me keep my thoughts straight.

MY EMAIL WAS OPEN, and the email was typed. Over the last few days, Matías and I had worked through some of our more pressing issues.

The heads had been suspiciously silent since Tomas met his fortunate demise. I would have thought they would have stormed the mansion. Tried to burn it down, or I don't know, maybe fucking bury us alive.

I understood the way those men thought, and the slightest perceived offense would be enough to get them plotting a coup. Tomas wasn't wrong about that.

Over the years, I'd cultivated a broad and varied network. When Vicente wanted someone gone the clean way, we'd set them up as a scapegoat with the US law enforcement. It was something of an understanding. We gave them someone to take to the news to look like they were fighting the good fight, and we got to continue dipping our toes into the US crime world.

And eventually, or quickly, depending on who it was, we'd organize their death in prison.

The very bland email was written out and signed. The question was, who to send it to?

THE STORM IS POTENTIALLY MOVING. What is your location and list those with you in case of an emergency. Be prepared for the call.

This kind of email from me would really stir shit up. I'd never sent one like this. It was essentially a call to war, alerting my network that they'd need to be working behind the scenes when things fell to hell.

Sighing, I saved it as a draft. It wasn't the time to send it now. Business was calm. But my gut said I'd have to send it at some point, probably sooner than later.

We could at least count on the movement not fucking with us for a time. After Mara was delivered back to her mother, Ricco had sent Lefe a text of appreciation and gratitude. It was short and to the point, saying we could count on them if needed. Not the undying loyalty I would have preferred but it was something.

"Andre," Matías rapped against the door. When we'd temporarily taken over in the mansion, we'd sorted out offices. He'd taken Vicente's just because it was easier and it was what people expected. Although, he'd been using his time to sort through everything Vicente left behind.

I'd taken the one next door for convenience sake. The others had also been assigned offices but I hadn't seen any of those assholes step foot in this wing. Why would they? They were all off fucking around, figuratively and literally.

"What?" I snapped.

He gave me a dry stare as he walked into the office and shut the door. "Have you heard anything from your people?" He'd already asked me who my people were, but I'd refused to tell him.

It wasn't that I didn't trust him. I actually liked him and I wasn't sure if that shocked me or him more.

But I didn't share my contacts with anyone. Parker and Lafe knew who a few were as a result of working in the same offices at the compound. Unfortunately, a few leaks were unavoidable. I just didn't make a habit of spreading my contacts around. The more people confirmed working for me, the more likely they were to get executed.

Clearly, given how Vicente chopped their heads off for the parade.

"Nothing. It's like the calm before the storm. But we both know that's a goddamn lie." I sat forward and crossed my arms over the desk.

He chuckled and took the seat directly across from me. "You know, when we were kids, Valentina's favorite pastime was getting guards and staff whipped for the hell of it."

"Not surprising," I remarked drily. He wasn't telling me anything about her character that I didn't already know. She'd always been haughty and bitter.

He shrugged. "But what you might not know is that it was a game. She had a prize in mind and she worked in the shadows to try and make it come true. Then she'd brag to Vicente about it."

"Hoping he would see her value as a player in the Institution?"

"Yes." He leveled me with a stare like he was trying to tell me something.

"Just come out and fucking say it." I leaned back again. I was so fucking restless with how calm everything seemed to be going. Our lives were never calm.

"I found emails in Vicente's hard drive from Valentina. Giving vague updates on her work with Maikel. Some of it is gibberish, and some of it was...interesting."

Now that...That peaked my interest.

"Having to do with Amorette?"

“Maybe.” He crossed his arms and watched me.

“Fucking tell me, asshole.”

He grinned. “I thought you’d never ask.”

I had to laugh. Sometimes his dry humor was a little like Parker’s. Not nearly as obnoxious, but close. He was more like us than we’d thought, he’d just never been allowed to be that person. With Vicente gone, he was changing, morphing into a new person.

Was it the person he wanted to be, or always was?

“Hey there, *hermano*—” Parker slid into the office and stopped short. His gaze traveled between Matías and me, and his excitement dimmed. “What’s this meeting of the minds about? Where everyone else wasn’t invited.”

“It’s not that you aren’t invited, but you three aren’t ever working.”

Parker sneered. “Just because I don’t work in this wing doesn’t mean I’m not working. Which, by the way, I have to go check on some of my men and their jobs soon.”

‘No’ was on the tip of my tongue, but I held it.

I heard their conversations about how much I suffocated them. The ones they knew I was listening to, and even their private comments.

It had been weeks, and Danny hadn’t made any attempts on my life. At some point, I’d have to let them out of my sight for longer than a few hours.

Regardless of what Parker and Grey thought, I didn’t want to smother them.

“Just give me the details and your plans. Danny has been quiet, but I don’t want to be overly stupid either.”

His brows jumped up. “That’s very reasonable of you, dear brother. But you still didn’t answer my question. Why are you two giggling in here?”

I scoffed. “We’re not giggling. We’re working on keeping our asses safe. What did you need?”

That got his back up. “You know, I always hated when Vicente—or anyone else for that matter—tried to make me feel like I was a nuisance.” He shook his head, derision threading through his tone. “But you know what? Fuck it, I didn’t mean to intrude on your brotherly time here.” Fuck it all, Parker was jealous. “I just wanted to tell you I’m going to put men on Grace. Little Love stresses about her, and with how our lives are going, I don’t think she’s entirely wrong for worrying that someone will get a wild idea that they can get to us through her sister.” Parker smirked, like now he was just trying to be an asshole. “Everyone thinks we’re pussy whipped. Which *you* are. We *would* act to save her sister just to keep Little Love happy.” He sounded so matter-of-fact.

I wiped my nose. I was whipped. I cared about her happiness just as much as my brothers. And I was also kicking my own ass for not doing this sooner.

“You’re right. Hell, we should have done this from the beginning when we looked into her.” I moved my finger over the mousepad to wake my laptop up.

“You can save your energy. I already have some of my people working on finding her. Since we’re in this new sharing phase of our lives, I wanted to make sure you were in the loop and weren’t already working on it.” He turned on his heels and waved over his shoulder. “I have shit to do.”

Once Parker disappeared, Matías got up and shut the door. “Is it just me, or does Parker have a worse problem with me now than before?”

It was definitely worse. “Parker’s been a brat his entire life.”

Matías crossed his arms then dropped his head to study his lap. “Valentina was a brat, but worse, she was an actual snake. I couldn’t stand to be around her more than I had to be.” He shrugged, then glanced at me from the corner of his eyes.

Parker was jealous, and Matías was envious...

Why the hell was Matías envious of us? We were distantly close and quicker to settle our problems with fighting than

words. For the first time, I felt sorry for him. “How long did you want to be with us and just never said anything?”

He looked up, seeming to contemplate his answer. “The very first time I saw you take a beating for Lafe.” He drew in a deep breath. “Vicente kept me surrounded by his top men, best trainers, and even the ones he knew would stab him in the back in a heartbeat. There was no kindness or compassion. Only machinations, underhanded slurs, and public violence. Then there were the four of you. It was so obvious that you would die for each other no matter how much Vicente tried to sabotage that bond. You know,” he tapped his fingers on the desk. “I think he put you in the position to take beatings for Parker and Lafe to build animosity between you. It didn’t work, though.”

No, it hadn’t. If anything, how he doled out punishment and our willingness to cover for each other was why we were as close as we were.

“How are the others with you?” I asked.

He shrugged like it wasn’t a big deal, even though it obviously bothered him. “The same. They don’t hate me, but I’m certainly not their friend either.”

“You’re wrong.” I shook my head and started twisting the chair from side to side again.

“I’m not.”

“You are. That you’ve been allowed this close for this long without Grey slicing you up, Parker making purposeful accidents happen around you, and Lafe...Lafe would just glare unless you did something directly to him or one of us. Anyway, all that tells me is they’ve accepted you.”

Matias turned to face the wall. “Yeah, well. It doesn’t feel like that.”

I couldn’t make him believe it. Either he saw it, or he didn’t.

He stood as a soft knock came at the door. I grinned. There was only one person who knocked like that.

“Don’t let the door hit you on the way out, Matías. I have a special visitor.”

“What about—you know what, it’s not that important. I’ll tell you later.” He rolled his eyes, then opened the door. Amorette stood there with a tray of food. “Are you leaving? I brought you all lunch.”

“I’ll just take mine to my office. Don’t worry, I’ll shut my ears.” He picked one of the plates up and brushed his fingers along her waist as he scooted past her.

We’d have to have another talk about where his hands could and couldn’t go. He was my brother, but he wasn’t one of *those* brothers.

Amorette furrowed her brow as she turned her head. She didn’t watch him leave, even though she moved her head that way. Then she shook it off and came inside, using her heel to shut the door back.

“Look at you, my own personal Wifey. Taking care of me, bringing me lunch.”

“You don’t eat enough. I think you’ve lost weight.” She frowned, setting the tray on the table.

I caught her hips and set her on the desk in front of me. She yelped and knocked the tray to the side. Soup sloshed over onto the desktop. I grinned. I loved it when she made a mess.

In fact, she was my favorite kind of mess. “You got the glass dirty, Wifey. You know what that means?” Her breathing quickened as I pushed her dress up to her waist and pulled her legs on either side of me. “Did you wear so many dresses in the States, Wifey?”

“Andre,” she breathed as I moved her panties to the side. She was wet and glistening. I groaned as I used my thumbs to pull her apart. How did such a small pussy handle so much dick?

Fuck it, I wasn’t complaining. I spit on her lips, using my fingers to massage the area around her opening. She was so sensitive here. I bet she could come just from this.

“I came to see you, not to fuck.” Her voice was still breathless. “All you guys want to do is stick your dick inside me.”

“Mm. Who’s fucking? Certainly not us. I thought you wanted to feed me?”

Grinning, I dipped my head and twirled the tip of my tongue around her clit as I slid two fingers in. She tossed her head back and arched her chest.

“Damn it, Andre. I—I miss you. I wanted to talk.”

“So talk,” I hummed against her and she whimpered. I loved that she was so fucking horny for us. And wet. All the time, she was wet. Which made me wonder...

“I can’t—” She gasped when I curled my fingers against the spongy part of her G-spot. Her legs tried to close, but they couldn’t with me in between them.

“Did you stay wet like this in the States?”

“No, never.” She dropped her head to give me a half-lidded stare. Her lips and cheeks were rosy, bringing out that beautiful light blue I loved so much. She had siren eyes. That was the only explanation for why I needed her as much as I did. Why I couldn’t keep my hands to myself when she was my brother’s girl.

“Did you fuck like you fuck us?”

“Wha—No!” Wifey tried pulling her legs up, but I clamped my hands down on her thighs.

“Good. That means you’re ours.” I dropped my head again and feasted on her sweet, perfect pussy. Her soft sounds were music to my ears, better than any Chopin or Bach.

Moving my fingers out of the way, I plunged my tongue inside her, eating up that delicious cream that was uniquely Amorette. “Fucking hell, I love the way you taste.”

She speared her fingers through my hair, pulling tight and rocking against my face. Next time, she’d have to ride me just like this.

Her walls started to flutter as I sucked on her clit, rolling my tongue over the tiny bud. This time, I used three fingers to fuck her properly. And when she cried out, I gave her the softest bite, just a pinch to add to her pleasure.

Dropping back, the tray flipped off the desk and soup and rice landed on the floor. The mess didn't matter. I'd have Blanca come clean it up. And Wifey...she was my new favorite meal.

"You can feed me anytime." I pressed a kiss to her mound before dropping and licking a swatch from her ass to clit. She jumped, but I held her down.

"You guys are going to be the death of me," she moaned.

I smiled against her thigh. "This is the only death I'll allow from you."

She choked out a laugh. "I do miss you, Andre," she said while keeping her attention on the ceiling. "I never see you anymore."

Amorette didn't see me much before, either, but I knew what she meant. I sighed and pulled her down to straddle my lap. She rolled her hips, teasing me. I wouldn't fuck her right here, though. Not in the mansion. I'd take her back to my room, where I could make sure we were safe from anyone popping in.

The urge to tease her hit me, but I stopped when I saw the concern in her eyes. "You can come visit me whenever you want. My door is never shut for you."

She cupped her hands on either side of my neck. "What about you?" She rolled her hips again, and I stopped her movements by grabbing her hips.

"Later. Sleep with me tonight?"

Nodding, she bit her lip.

"What's wrong, Wifey?" I brushed a few errant strands of hair out of her eyes. She bit her lip as her gaze dropped from his eyes to my lips then back again. Fucking was on her brain. Good. I'd capitalize on the wait when I had her in my bed.

“Nothing. I just...I don’t know. I feel like as much as we all fuck, we’re still so far away from each other...You know, I don’t really know you.”

What? “You do know me,” I said softly. Amorette had been with us for months. She’d been with me every single day in some capacity. I pulled her tighter against my cock. Apparently, I wanted to torture us both.

“I know you greet people with a gun under the chin.” She raised one eyebrow as she looked at me pointedly.

“Hey, only threats.” I grinned to hide my discomfort. I hated that I did that to her. “You were a big threat then. You could have been on Vicente’s payroll to fuck with us.”

She ignored that. “I know you love your brothers. You try to do too much and control too much when people aren’t predictable. But I don’t know *you*.”

“What do you want to know?” I settled back, pulling her with me so that she rested on my chest.

Her brow furrowed. “I don’t know. What do you like to do? What you like for dinner? Your favorite shirt. The little things.”

“I like to fuck you,” I started.

She rolled her eyes, and I laughed. “It’s true. You’re my favorite thing now that I have you. I’ve never felt so comfortable with a woman. I’ve never felt like one was mine. You give me so much of what I didn’t know I needed.” That seemed to warm her a tiny bit. “I love my mother’s *ajiacó*, and now that it’s getting cooler, I’d love to have it even more.”

“What’s that?”

“A traditional Colombian soup dish. It’s delicious.”

“So she’s Colombian? You’re Colombian? See, I don’t know these basic details about you.”

“You don’t need those details about us. I’ll give you as much as you want, but you don’t need them. We never identified ourselves that way. And as much as I love Pilar’s cooking, it doesn’t define me.” A sly grin took over and as

much as I tried to suppress it, the comment came out anyway. “Now, the way my cock fits inside you? That defines me. And it defines you.”

Slapping my chest, she laughed. “I’m serious.”

“Me too.” I was. Deadly.

My brothers and this little dynamite package on my lap were all I needed in life. Nothing else mattered.

“Why do you call her Pilar?”

“Sometimes I call her *mamá*, but in the Institution, it’s difficult to show affection to anyone. She wanted to make Vicente happy, and being a good mother didn’t do that. But she did find her own ways to care for us. Out of all our mothers, she was the best one, and she looked after Parker, Grey, and Lafe almost as well as she did me.”

“That’s sad that it had to be that way.”

“It is.”

“That’s not the world I want us to live in. I don’t want a cloud over my head ruling my thoughts so much that I have to hide who I am and who I love.”

My fingers unintentionally twitched. That sounded a lot like a sideways declaration.

“Then don’t. Vicente is dead. If everything goes well, we’ll live our lives as we want to within a year.”

“I don’t want to wait, Andre. I want to live the way I want to now. I want our life to be what we make it. Not what someone else directs for us. And playing it safe to appease the Institution is exactly that.”

Innocent Amorette. I wished we could all be dreamers like she was. Like Lafe was, to a certain extent. His just tended to be more like nightmares.

“Then help us. You want the Institution to be ours? Then we have to make it ours.”

A look of devastating conviction overtook her. “All right, Andre. You want me to make it mine? I will. I’ll work to make

it the Institution I want it to be.”

Fuck, that meant she was going to try and save every perceived innocent person and make the rest eat their own dicks.

And me? I only cared about four others—five others.

She was right; our versions of the Institution looked very different.

AMORETTE



“**W**hat put that dour expression on your face, Little Love?” Parker asked quietly as he sat beside me and popped a grape in his mouth.

Breakfast wasn't a big affair in the mansion, but the staff made a point to put on a nice spread in the informal dining room every day. From the dust that had been here when we first took up residence, I doubted Vicente ever used it. And the cooks did a great job, usually. Except for today.

The correct answer to his question was that the smell of whatever meat the cook had prepared made my stomach roll. It was definitely some kind of mystery meat stew like substance. I would say pork, but pork didn't make me sick just at the smell. At least it was across the room. I'd opened the window and I was only getting whiffs periodically.

I gave Parker the next correct answer.

“I'm making a plan. Andre gave me the approval to make the Institution mine. In order to do that, I need to understand the full picture and outline steps to make it happen.” We'd never gotten to it when Lafe and I walked in on Maikel. And I certainly had been sidetracked when I stopped in to see Andre. I'd even forgotten to ask about Valentina until later when Andre had to take a meeting.

It seemed so much mundane business was keeping us from actually working on our plans. We were more reactive than proactive, and I hated it.

Parker grinned as his gaze dipped down to my chest.

Since the day Grey used me as the prize, I couldn't shake the electricity that zapped between us. It was different with each brother. With Grey, it was a raging inferno that never seemed to be enough. Between Andre and I was this silky line that wrapped me up and brought me to him in the most delicious ways. With Lafe, we had a desperate love that never seemed to be enough.

Parker and I always had a connection, even when I didn't want to acknowledge it. But now, it was more. It was a live wire that I was afraid would sting me with the wrong move.

He reached up a hand and brushed hair off my shoulder, his fingers brushing delicately against my bare skin. Tingles shot out from that point, straight to my core.

"Why are you getting so flustered, hm?" he whispered.

My nausea was forgotten as I got sucked into his dark eyes. I was wrong. They weren't cold. They were burning coals that saw too much.

"Why would you think I'm flustered?" I squeaked. Why had I even said that?

His fingers touched my cheek, moving to my throat, then sliding along the swell of my breasts. "Here, here, and here. It's such a pretty blush. Your skin is too fair to hide your secrets, Little Love," he said quietly, but his voice had deepened to the point I felt the timbre in my stomach.

I couldn't do this right then. I needed an out. I needed to change the subject.

"What secrets are *you* hiding?" I asked. When he started to smirk, I continued to nail the coffin lid onto our brief exchange. "You were comfortable enough to push Mia to her knees."

Shit, I didn't even care about that. I mean, I did. It did sting to watch him touch another woman, but we weren't anything to each other. Not then. And for some reason, with Parker, I couldn't curb my need to be an asshole. It had to be a survival mechanism, as if my head knew how bad he'd be for me, even if my body didn't.

My body definitely craved his. When Grey gathered up their cum and pushed it inside me. I shivered.

Parker's smile dropped and he scowled. "What's that got to do with shit? You said that wasn't the reason you stormed off at the party?"

I was such an asshole. It was a new development since I'd been here and the guilt that pressed down on my shoulders soured the taste in my mouth.

Now that I wasn't drunk on the brothers' attention, the idea of being with all four of them made me uncomfortable, like I was doing something...not wrong, but shit, I couldn't think of a better word for it.

And they all seemed like this was normal!

I didn't have to do it this way.

Closing my eyes, I counted to ten, then when I opened them, I tried to convey how much of an idiot I was. "I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to be an ass."

"Yeah?" He stopped like he was about to say more but didn't. He turned his head to the side and clenched his teeth so hard the muscles bulged in his jaw. After a minute of awkward silence, he looked back at me.

"I don't know how to do this with you. Sometimes, I think I understand your thought process, what you want or don't want. But I don't. You don't cut any of the others down. You don't throw their gifts and words back in their faces. Why do you do it with me?"

With each sharp word, my face slackened until my mouth was open. Was that what I was doing? Or was that what he wanted to see? I turned over our interactions in my head. The ring I threw back. The way I stormed off. The way I discounted him whenever he'd tried to do something nice.

"You know, I wanted to properly woo you." His brow furrowed and confusion colored his tone. "My brothers aren't doing it. I thought you would enjoy it. Women like that sort of thing, don't they?" It was a question, like women's desires were such a foreign concept to him.

“I—”

He snapped out a hand, like he was done. “Why the fuck did I think this would work? You’re never going to treat me the way you treat them and I’m done playing second to anyone, especially now that Vicente’s rotting six feet under.”

Parker pushed up out of his chair and I caught his arm when he rushed past me. “Stop.”

“Why? Tell me why you’re so fucking different with me when I know you want me just as much as I want you. When I know you want me as much as you want *them*.” He waited, but from the way his body tensed, he didn’t expect an answer.

“I’m sorry.”

He started to pull away, but I dug my nails in as I stood up. “You know why you’re different? Because you fucking scare me. Out of all the brothers, you’re the most reckless. You have plans and ideas and you’ll do anything to make them work. *Sacrifice* anything. Then you throw tantrums when they blow up in your face.” I motioned to him. “Like now. Instead of having a cool conversation, you get your feelings hurt before I can apologize and then you try to storm out. What the actual fuck?” I panted, releasing his arm, one finger at a time.

“I wouldn’t sacrifice anything,” he said quietly. Then he softly shook his head. “I have never been willing to sacrifice my brothers. Or you. I’ve fucked up a lot, and after this last time, whether it was the reason or not, I’m trying to be smarter. To make sure we’re all on the same damn page. I don’t want to be anywhere else. I want to be with my brothers. With you. I want us to bring the Institution to its fucking knees so we can finally be happy. I don’t even know what that would feel like.” He leaned into me and the sadness in his eyes was all I found. “And that’s all I want.” The way his tone changed, he almost seemed to be pleading with me.

“Then make it fucking happen.” My chest rose and fell rapidly as I pushed up on my toes and leaned toward him, bracing myself on his chest. He glanced down, but I kept going. “You want that life, make it,” I seethed. “Follow through. Stop acting out and get yourself under control. No

one can take anything from you unless you allow it. Actions speak louder than words.”

“And what about you? You’ve avoided me because I scare you?” He scoffed. “That’s a feeble excuse if I’ve ever heard one. You want me? Then take me.” He latched onto my hips and pulled me against him so hard, I grunted with the collision. Crashing his lips against mine, he punished me with his kiss, stealing what wasn’t his.

Only my body didn’t know that. I sank into him, parting my lips to deepen our connection. Pressed tight against his hot body, I slid my hands higher up his chest. His hand moved to my ass and squeezed my cheek so hard, I gasped. Parker wanted me. He wanted me just as much as the other brothers by how stiff his cock was.

What would he look like when he came? Fierce like Grey? Intense like Andre? Or maybe like Lafe who gazed at me like I was breaking and remaking his entire world?

My pussy throbbed and heat engulfed my body. I needed to know. I could just drop down to the floor and put him in my mouth.

Until he was gone.

Shit. I clumsily pushed a strand of hair off my face. Parker flipped my life upside down with that one kiss, then left me shaky and throbbing in the dining room.

I had to use the table to steady myself so I didn’t collapse to the floor. My knees were no stronger than pool noodles.

Parker swept out so fast, the door was going to slam, but Grey caught it. He twisted to watch Parker storm off, then came into the room, letting the door shut much quieter.

“Having trouble, *mami*?” Grey asked as he moved closer. His sharp gaze touched on my mussed hair, my flushed skin, to my swollen lips. He knew exactly what had been happening.

“He drives me insane.” I tried to laugh, but the sound was weak and breathless. Pulling my fingers through my hair, I let my forced smile fall into a frown.

He came closer. And when he reached my side, he slipped his hand under my skirt and into my panties, sliding his fingers along my slit.

“Mm. He definitely has an effect on you. The kind every man wishes to have on his woman.” He gathered some of my wetness and started moving gentle circles around my clit.

Grey was usually so rough and wild, it was like making love in a hurricane. Yet my already overly sensitive clit was bursting to life with this side of him.

I gasped, then buried my face against his chest as he worked me closer to the edge of my favorite brand of insanity.

They were actually going to kill me with orgasms.

“You know, it doesn’t even bother me that you’re wet for my brother,” he said casually. And that dirty visual, like I was doing something naughty, something wrong, was all I needed to break apart. His other arm curled around my waist and held me up when I would have otherwise fallen.

When my vision cleared, he was still massaging my clit like it was his love language. Then he lifted me up on the table and pushed my skirt up, revealing how I’d soaked my panties. Instead of moving the gusset, he gave a hard yank and pulled them off completely.

I watched him unbuckle his pants and free his cock as if I was in a daze.

God, he was just so fiercely beautiful. Hard and rough around all the right edges. I spread my fingers over his abdomen, then moved them up his chest, taking his shirt with me.

As he slid the head of his cock up and down my pussy, he watched me with what I now knew was love. Grey Morozov loved me. And I loved him.

He lowered just a bit so he could push his cock inside. It wasn’t fast, and it wasn’t hurried. The almost painful stretch was everything I needed.

“I was wrong before.” He started moving in long, steady strokes. “I don’t give a fuck if you wish it was my brother’s cock inside you.” I moaned, fluttering around him as I remembered exactly what he said to me at his club as Parker took a woman on the club floor. “You’re mine. And theirs—yes, even Parker’s. So you can think of my cock or theirs. But you’re still going to come hard on mine.”

He sucked a finger into his mouth, then went straight for my ass. I started to squirm away, even as he pinned me down. The table was cold against my back, but I was sweating. “No, *mami*. If you’re ours, you’re going to take us all at some point. It’s time to start getting you ready.”

With his cock already inside me, the intrusion of his finger felt like too much. I groaned, pushing against his shoulders. I’d never done anything with anal. It was painful.

“Shh...relax,” he whispered against the top of my head, never faltering on his rhythm. I tried. And once I did, he slid his finger all the way in. Alternating his thrusts in my pussy and ass, I was beet red in the face. I had to be.

It felt so good. But it also felt so dirty.

I couldn’t hold back my cries anymore as I clawed at his chest. He picked up his speed every time I begged him to go faster, harder, or just for more.

The door opened behind him, but I didn’t care to look, not when I was right there.

“It’s about time we started playing with her ass.” Andre’s voice got closer.

Ah, God. They were both going to fuck me here in the dining room. Andre slid his hand between our bodies and pinched my clit. That was all I needed to come a second time.

Grey grunted as he thrust hard. Then pulled back and thrust in again. I had just enough mind to tip my head back so I could watch the savagery of his pleasure. I raised my thumb to his lips, and he nipped the pad.

“You’re done, it’s my fucking turn,” Andre growled, shoving Grey. He stumbled backward, and the sudden loss of

him left me cold. Then Andre flipped me over and I let out an ‘oomph’ when I landed against the table. I twisted my head so I could watch him as much as this position allowed.

With his cock in hand, he bucked his hips and bottomed out.

There was no buildup. Andre’s expression was tense and his grip bruising as he fucked me within an inch of my life. Unable to turn anymore, I dropped my head and stretched my arms over my head. My breasts bounced and I slid up the table with each thrust, until he yanked me back against him. I was raw and oversensitive, but he felt better than anything I’d ever experienced.

The way the brothers fucked was almost too much for me to handle.

“Fuck, you’re so slippery. I can’t believe I’m fucking in my brother’s cum.” Andre grunted as his hips crashed against mine. “I love it. You do too, don’t you, Wifey? You want us to fuck you like this. One after the other. Next time, we’ll tie you down and line up, turn you over a breeding bench so you can’t do anything but take whatever pace we set.”

“Andre,” I whined, tugging on my hair as I fell back against the table. The pain and pleasure mixed so effortlessly together that somehow, I fell into that abyss a third time. Except this time, it was soft and gentle, so at odds with the wild way Andre was trying to lose himself inside me.

“You’re mine, Amorette. Nothing is going to change that. Fucking nothing.” Andre’s top lip pulled up as his brow furrowed. Then he tossed his head back as he groaned long and loud.

My heart rate slowed as Andre came down on top of me. He gathered me in his arms, his own heart racing against my chest.

“Fuck,” he grumbled.

I combed my fingers through his silky hair and locked my ankles at the small of his back. I didn’t respond. There was nothing to say. Other than that, I was a hypocrite.

“I thought you didn’t want to have sex in public where people could barge in,” I commented when I found my voice.

“Yeah, well, I needed an outlet and I’m not one to intentionally punish myself for the hell of it.”

“What’s going on?” Grey tossed a few hot towels on the table next to me. It was weird, using the steamed towels meant for fine dining to clean up after sex, but it made me feel so much better.

“Valentina is on her way here. She’s demanding to stay at the mansion.”

“What?” I shrieked and shoved him off. She had answers about why I was taken.

“She’s the one who fled when we arrived. But we’re not letting her breathe the same air as Amorette.” The deadly tone Grey took on sent chills down my spine.

“We’re agreed on that. She will be here in less than thirty minutes, give or take. Straight from one of my contacts.” His mouth was a severe slash of disapproval.

I wanted to ask him why he was so angry about it. Except, this was my chance to figure out what had happened in Virginia. I needed to get ready.

“Don’t start without me!” I fixed my skirt and raced from the dining room.

It was time to get some answers.

AMORETTE



I slid into the bedroom to change my clothes and make myself presentable. I could have crashed their meeting as I was, but just like in the courtroom, appearances mattered.

If I showed up with sweat-soaked hair and flushed cheeks, I would always be viewed as their toy. Something they fucked and pampered just because they could. That wasn't my goal. I wanted to be their equal, with equal power to call the shots.

Grabbing a sleek dress that fell almost to my knees, I paired it with kitten heels. I'd be tiny compared to the brothers. All the brothers. That would never change. I wouldn't risk breaking my neck just to have some height.

I fastened my knife holster on my thigh with the knife Grey had given me. After I twisted my hair up into a slick bun and brushed on some light makeup, makeup that was actually mine and not sourced from Mia's stash, I left the room and went searching for the brothers. Odd that no one waited for me, but I should have asked where they planned to be.

When I reached the main hall, I checked the Gallery first. Then stiffened.

I hadn't been in this room since we first came here. The mansion was massive, and we'd stuck to the study, the offices, or any other number of smaller and more livable rooms.

Why hadn't I demanded a tour of the mansion and a report on the inner workings? I could have. The brothers were giving me free rein to do what I wanted. Word had spread enough that the staff left me alone.

But hell. There were women in the windows of the Gallery. They looked drugged with simpering, empty smiles and glazed over eyes. Why the hell were they here? Who were they dancing for?

The hall was empty.

Ice engulfed my body. This had something to do with Valentina. Was she bringing people here? Or were these women stuck inside these boxes all this time?

This couldn't happen. I refused to allow it.

One of the staff ran through the room. He was young. Maybe a few years younger than me. I didn't know his job, but he wasn't a guard. They were heavily armed and dressed in all black. This man had gray slacks and a navy blue polo. Too nice for a guard position but not the expensive suit for the higher up positions. Like the heads, any of those men who were at the top of the running of the mansion dressed to impress.

“*Stop!*” I called in Spanish.

He skidded to a halt, looking around to see if I was actually speaking to him. “*Señora?*”

Shit. I didn't have enough words to tell him what I wanted, and I couldn't exactly talk to him in English. I'd never get the respect of the people if that was the precedence I set.

“*The women. Why here?*” It was as good as I could do. I stood as tall as I could, and pretended like I had the right to make these decisions. No, I *did* have the right.

He answered and I understood only the little words. *Men. The. Here.*

I blew out a breath through my nose, avoiding looking at the women. Their forms shifted with silent music as they danced for no one. My heart broke in my chest as my skin grew too tight. If I looked, really looked at the terrible life they were subjected to, I'd lose my temper and I couldn't do that yet.

“*Release them.*”

He stumbled back, giving me a horrified look. Shaking his head, he tried again to tell me that was impossible, or it wasn't his place, or any number of things that all meant he couldn't let them out.

"I said release them!" I screamed in English. Another man poked his head into the room and when he saw us, he swiftly walked toward us. This man was older, with silver peppering his temples, wearing an expensive suit minus the jacket. Clearing his throat, he adjusted his tie.

Good, he was someone who could do something. I rested my hand over the knife on my thigh just in case either of these men got ideas. I'd have to yank my skirt up to get it, but the weight under my hand was comforting.

"Miss," he said in accented English. "Is there a problem?"

"The problem is that these women shouldn't be here. I want them released." I checked each window out of the corner of my eyes, and a few of the women had stopped their lackadaisical dancing to watch us. Could they hear what we said?

"That's not possible. Maikel Castillo is on his way here and plans to entertain some associates. He handpicked the women here." The man's words weren't rude, but he was several inches taller than me, and looked down his nose like he was disgusted to even be explaining himself.

Like any time anyone tried to treat me as less than, my ego reared its head. I would not be looked down on. By no one. I was a woman. I was at the warehouse first, but I had the brothers behind me. I was making my own way and this man couldn't stop me.

Standing tall, I pulled my shoulders back and met his gaze. "No. The Institution will not be operating this business anymore. They need to be released with any belongings they have." I paused. "And enough money to get them home to their families."

When I glanced at the women again, my heart clenched. There were a few mature ones who had held onto their beauty,

but most looked so young. Like they would be in college now or still living with their parents.

He laughed, and it was so condescending, my fingers twitched over my knife. I wasn't a violent person by nature, but it was tempting. The freedom to let out your frustrations on the one who angered or hurt you was dangerous. It gave me a heady feeling that I needed to be careful of or I'd be the next one with an addiction.

One that wouldn't just stain my moral compass but would smash it until I was no longer recognizable when I looked myself in the mirror.

"Bitches don't make decisions here." He sneered and crossed his arms. "You're given...certain privileges while the bastards are amusing themselves with you, but that's it. Maikel has been a formidable, high-ranking member of the Institution since Vicente built it from the ground. He is still the head of his business. If he wants these women here, then this is where they'll stay."

I narrowed my eyes. Everything in my body screamed that I couldn't let women be raped with me only a few feet away. Lafe had explained to me what happened to the women in the Gallery. It wasn't as brutal as the warehouse, but it was still sick and depraved.

My hands started to tremble like they did before a big court case. This was my first time trying to assert myself without the brothers, and it could make my path easier, or much more challenging. The interaction would be scrutinized and picked over. I had to make it count.

Rolling my tongue along my top teeth, I stared the man down. "The Institution is run by the brothers now. All five of them. It's not the same place Vicente created. If you don't release them, I will."

My ears pounded as I waited for his response. He could walk away, scream, throw a punch, or attempt assault. Any of those were likely scenarios here and walking away was probably the one least likely to happen.

The guy I'd initially stopped glanced between us as he slowly backed away.

"Listen here, you little *puta*," he growled, "you are less than worthless here. Your only value is your gold cunt keeping the brothers happy. You want to release them, go ahead, but I won't call off the guards when they break your fingers for the offense or stop them when they fuck you bloody. It's what they do to bitches who break the rules." He affected a smug expression and his eyes glistened like that was exactly what he wanted for me.

I stiffen. Like the guards had broken the women at the warehouse. I knew exactly what that meant. What it looked like. How it smelled, and the sounds it made. My stomach turned and knotted as I tried to hold my breath.

Shit, I was going to throw up. *What the hell?*

I breathed through it, and once the moment passed, I shook my head. "What's your name? So when Grey and Parker go on a rampage, I know where to direct them. Also," I leaned closer, "none of what you say will happen. The guards will die if they touch me. If you don't think they know that, you're a fool. But before that happens, I'll ensure they understand I'm off-limits. And I can do that all on my own." The whole time I spoke to him, I scrunched up my skirt until I could reach the knife.

Pulling it from the holder, I sliced it across his forearm. I'd judged it just right. It didn't cut to the bone but left a nice injury that welled up with blood and stained his sleeve.

"You fucking cunt!" He raised his other arm back like he was about to deliver a strike.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you." Parker strolled my way with Jorge and Anton on his heels. He was already halfway to me and I hadn't even heard him. His hands were casually in his pockets, but his eyes were sharp as they roamed over the man and the cut on his arm.

"She cut me! That can't go unpunished!"

Parker shook his head. “She gave you an order, and you refused. That seems like a mild punishment to me. Would you like me to deliver one more fitting to the ones you’re used to seeing?”

The man balked. “She’s trying to change Maikel’s orders! He’s the head of the Gallery!”

“*Was* the head. We decided that’s not a business that the Institution will partake in anymore.” Parker stopped next to me, so close that I could feel the heat of his body against my back. “Why aren’t you with Lafe, Little Love?” he bent down and whispered in my ear.

The man clamped his lips shut, but his eyes told exactly how he felt about the changes we were making. “Fine,” he spat. “You can let the women go yourself.”

He started to turn, but Anton whistled a warning. “Uh-uh. I believe you earned a punishment. You can come with me.” He motioned for a few men hovering in the door and barked out orders. They nodded and disappeared.

The man became stiff and tried to throw off Anton’s hand when he grabbed his arm. With one warning look from Anton, he stopped struggling, but kept a sour face. A sour face that was starting to fill with fear.

“Valentina is almost here?” I whispered back to Parker.

“Yes. I was coming to find you.” He was equally quiet. The young man I’d initially stopped continued to back up slowly as he watched us with wide eyes. When we didn’t make any moves to stop him, he turned and rushed out.

“You know what you just did, Little Love?” He cupped my hip, holding me in place as he dipped his mouth to my ear. “You just started a war within the mansion. Are you ready for that?”

I sucked in a deep breath. This Institution was going to be what I made it. What *we* made it. And the trafficking business had to go.

“We’re already in a war. This is just bringing it into the light,” I breathed as echoing footsteps pounded closer. Lafe,

Andre, and Grey appeared in the threshold to the great hall. Lafe's face was twisted up with worry, and...maybe guilt. I'd have to figure that out later.

Andre was livid, as he stormed in and headed straight for me. And Grey wasn't far behind with a murderous expression on his face. Lafe lingered several feet away, leaving a healthy dose of distance between him and everyone else. They both had a healthy dose of space between them and Lafe.

"Where's Matías?" Andre asked, glancing around like he expected him to be with us.

Parker and I exchanged a look then shook our heads.

"I came down to find the rest of you all. I haven't seen him."

"Me, either," Parker added.

"Shit. As soon as we found out that Valentina was coming, I ran off. Where the fuck did he go?" Andre checked his phone and sent off a quick text.

"They're coming here. Maikel ordered women for the Gallery." I tried to keep my disgust from leaking into my expression, but it dripped from my tone.

Doors on the other side of the small enclosures started opening and women were being let out. My shoulders slumped and my heart fluttered happily in my chest. Anton was getting them out. I could kiss him.

"Yeah, well, Little Love, with our volatile family relations, we can't stand around waiting for them. We also need to find Maikel before he figures out what you just did." Parker turned to the others. "Little Love here decided that the trafficking business stops here. These women are being released and sent home. We also need to send teams to Maikel's place to shut it down and kick his feet out from under him before he can strike at us."

Andre's face darkened more with each word.

"Fuck!" he bellowed and he paced a few feet away. When he turned around, his face was grim. I readied myself for his

censure, especially so soon after Lafe shut down the drug business. But it didn't come.

"I don't know if Valentina and Maikel planned this together—it's likely they did, but they should be arriving in the same place." Then to himself, "Why the fuck would Matías disappear like that?"

Together, we walked swiftly to the garages. From my understanding, no matter how they came in, by boat, plane, or helicopter, they'd arrive by cars because the strip was too far to walk. As *family* to the Institution, they would never come through the front doors. Apparently, that was a social faux pas. It was apparently also not done that they arrived through the front doors since they were family to the Institution.

Family...What a farce of a word.

We made it to the garages. They were empty. Not even the lingering smell of exhaust or the sound of an engine shutting down. No one had been here.

"Where the fuck did he go?" Andre almost shouted as he whipped around, searching the obviously empty space. A wild look was in his eyes, like he could strangle Matías when he found him...Or like he was afraid.

"Why are you so worried about where he is?" Lafe asked, concern clouding his features as he kept up with Andre.

Andre grumbled but didn't answer, didn't even look at him.

When we started our second search in the mansion, shouting came from the family wing.

"We found them." Parker grinned, although it was strained.

Running up the stairs, we burst through the doors. Matías had his arms crossed, facing off with Valentina and Maikel who were turned just enough that I could see their profiles. Four heavily-armed men stood behind both of them, the suitcases forgotten on the floor. They watched the exchange intently, seemingly ready for a sign to jump in. Their hands were also lightly resting on the multiple weapons strapped on their bodies.

“This has been my home since birth.” Unlike the last time I’d seen her, she was calm, collected. Only her hands fisted at her side betrayed her outrage. Maikel had a similar stance and wore a severe frown.

If I’d been a few minutes later leaving our rooms, I would have run right into them.

“Now, it’s my wing and as head of the Institution, I decide who sleeps in *my* wing. Frankly, Valentina, I don’t trust you. You organized our father’s murder, so what’s stopping you from picking off the rest of us?”

“Wh—” Her face turned blistering red. “What the fuck are you talking about?” she shrieked.

Maikel, who’d been silent, turned a suspicious eye on her. If he’d thought Valentina was behind Vicente’s death, he wasn’t sure of it. He wasn’t certain she was behind Vicente’s death, but he suspected it.

“Come on. Did you really think that no one would look deeper into the woman who ran out shouting his death? Or that it wasn’t convenient that you started rumors about all six of us shortly after?”

This was...all new to me. I glanced at the others and shock was stamped on everyone’s faces.

Everyone except for Andre.

He watched them with steely determination.

“Is this true, Valentina?” Maikel asked, shifting to face her more fully. His entire stance screamed aggression as he bent toward her. “You wouldn’t do that to your father, would you?”

“Oh, please. Stop acting like the concerned uncle.” She sneered as she glared at him as if he were the dirt under her shoes. “You hated his guts just like I did. But no, I didn’t organize anything.” She looked at Matías. “You’re trying to paint me as the villain because you don’t want to share any power with me—”

“No, Valentina. It’s you who wants all the power. I have no problem sharing with my brothers.” His gaze skated over all of

us standing by the doors.

She scoffed, her head rearing back in disgust. “Sticking your dicks into the same whore isn’t sharing. You’re just using them the same way our father did. You’ve just convinced them you’re their friend. Right? That you want to be part of their little club. That you all want the same things? Did you ever tell them what happened to Lafe’s mother before she slit her wrists?”

Lafe choked while Andre and Grey wore thunderous expressions. Parker though, his face was unreadable as he studied their exchange.

Could that be true? Lafe’s mother killed herself?

Matías pressed his lips together and kept his attention glued to Valentina. “Your knack for starting shit is unparalleled.”

Valentina flashed her teeth, her smile full of venom. “There wouldn’t be anything to start if you weren’t guilty.”

“When I found her, she was alone. What happened?” Lafe asked, edging closer. His eyes narrowed on Matías.

Matías cut his gaze to Lafe and gave a small shake of his head. “Lafe, this is a conversation for later.”

Valentina swung a hand out to engulf the room. “What *is* a conversation for now, is that you’re now undermining Maikel’s business...Or hadn’t you told him yet?”

Matías tossed us a confused look but Maikel pulled his attention back. “What does that mean?” he barked, as his brows pinched together and he glared at Matías.

“Only that the girls in the mansion are being sent home.” Valentina raised her phone, “I still have contacts here and it’s happening right at this very moment. Their little bitch announced that trafficking wasn’t part of the new Institution.”

“What!” Maikel swung my way, and Andre shifted in front of me. Lafe was still frozen in place, watching Matías.

“You know our feelings on the business, Maikel. We’re just starting early.” Andre curled his fingers around the gun at

his waist. Parker and Grey moved up to either side of him, effectively making a wall. There were gaps though. Just enough so I could see what was happening.

Maikel turned back to Matías. “You little shit. You’re taking everything I worked so hard for and driving it into the ground. Just like Valentina said you would.”

“I told you how it would be,” Valentina relaxed her hands and sighed like she tried to tell him all along.

“Vicente kept them on the line for a reason! And you’re letting them call the shots. You’re nothing! You hear me? You’re nothing and Vicente regretted that *you* were his only heir!”

Valentina glared at Maikel.

“Shut the fuck up,” Grey snapped. “You know who the real disappointment was? You. You kissed his ass to keep your place, and everyone—everyone—including Vicente knew why you did it. It wasn’t because you loved him, it was because you’re power hungry, like every other *cabron* in the Institution. Face it, the business you dipped into and built your identity on is gone.”

Matías’ jaw went slack as Maikel and Valentina both turned to face Grey. Then he quickly schooled his features.

“If you think someone else won’t start it back up, you’re wrong. Vicente was right to control as many businesses as possible. It made us an unstoppable power!” Maikel vibrated with emotion, clenching his hands into tight fists at his sides.

The words echoed inside my head. Andre had said something so similar when I wanted him to release Lafe from the drugs.

Grey shrugged. “Not an issue. We’ll destroy anyone who tries.” I wanted to run and jump into his arms for that.

Maikel turned back to Matías, shaking with rage. “After what happened with Tomas, the heads are ready to move against you. You can either choose Valentina and I to hold the Institution with you, or you can die with the bastards.”

Parker laughed. “You think you and Valentina are good allies? How would he ever sleep at night? You two snakes would shoot him as soon as his eyes closed.”

Neither Maikel nor Valentina gave him any attention. Valentina couldn't believe that Matías would actually choose her. But Maikel did. He waited expectantly.

Only a few seconds passed before Matías gave one slow shake of his head. “I would rather lick up my own shit than throw them to the side for you two.”

Valentina wasn't fazed. I was certain she expected this. But Maikel made a nasty sound in the back of his throat, “The Institution has survived just fine without Vicente. They'll do fine without his heir too.” He twisted to his men, and barked out orders right before he dove for Matías.

The men reached for their guns but Andre was too fast. He shot two in the chest while Parker took care of the other two.

Maikel never made it to Matías. Lafe intercepted him and pinned him to the ground. He flailed under Lafe, but Lafe had his arm twisted behind his back and pressed his face against the tile.

“Let me up! You're making a mistake, Matías! You'll regret this! If you even live that fucking long!”

“Take him to the cells,” Andre said to one of our guards that hovered in the doorway. They didn't waste any time as they came forward to collect him.

Valentina glanced at the dead men behind her, then watched impassively as Maikel was carted out.

“Did you plan my abduction?” I stepped around the brothers. There was no threat now, not outside of Valentina.

One side of her mouth hooked up as she collected her suitcase and bag. “I'm sorry, I don't know what you're talking about.”

She walked toward the door, and paused, looking over her shoulder at Matías, “Too bad this didn't work out. I had the best intentions for today.”

I ran forward to stop her from leaving, but Matías caught me around the waist. “Let her go. For now, let her go.” His voice was strained and his shirt was almost soaked with sweat. Heat rolled off of him.

“She’s getting away!” I kicked back, but he shifted to the side to avoid the hit.

“We have to choose our battles, Amorette,” he said quietly in my ear as his hold tightened. Then he addressed us all, “And we have bigger problems to worry about.”

LAFE



Andre paced back and forth across the wide hallway, pulling on his hair and gritting his teeth. He didn't say anything because if he did, it would be screaming rage. At me for stepping away for one fucking minute to take a hit. At Matías for trying to take them on by himself. At life for delivering one sucker punch after another.

Matías had his arms around Amorette. Around Killer.

I wanted to rip his arms away and demand answers. What had Valentina meant when she said what happened before my mother died?

She'd slit her wrists in the bathtub. I found her a few hours later. The water was cold and stained red. So much red, even diluted by the water. She'd been alone. There was no reason to believe there was anyone else in there.

I wanted to fight. To burn. To destroy. Mostly myself. I had the driving need to get wasted on drugs and alcohol. My skin felt like it was about to split apart at the seams. Old pains welled up inside and I couldn't take it.

I thought I'd buried them.

If I could just numb everything for a little while.

Fuck. I didn't think I could stand the answer. If Matías had hurt my mother and we'd let him close to Amorette. I—

I sucked in a quivering breath. Grey eyed me. He had another canister.

Shaking his head, he mouthed. *Not on your fucking life.*

It was *my* life! They didn't have the right to tell me what I could and couldn't do.

Andre stopped and roared toward the ceiling, attempting to release some of the tension. It didn't work. When he turned to face us, his shoulders were bunched up by his ears. He directed his sole focus at Matías.

“What the fuck was that about?” Andre shouted, his face red from anger.

Matías still held Killer, although she'd stopped struggling. Now she held onto his forearms as she watched the door, as if Valentina could walk back through any minute. She wouldn't, that bitch never did anything for anyone. If she wanted us to stew over what happened, we wouldn't get another word on it. That was what she would do unless we tortured it out of her.

“Valentina called a meeting of the heads. She's trying to take my place, citing that I'm unfit given our track record so far. The other heads are on their way to hear her out. Maikel wasn't wrong when he said the heads were uniting against us. The only one who's on our side is Sebastian. And even that's not concrete.”

We controlled so much of the Institution. The heads could cause headaches for us, but not anything more serious. Right?

Fuck, I was never one to be optimistic. It went against everything I'd learned in life. But I wanted to believe it. That we were too powerful on our own and everything would be okay.

I was fucking pathetic.

“Why did you let Valentina leave?” I asked in a monotone voice.

He scrunched up his face as if the answer pained him. “The heads expect her to be here. We just took Maikel into custody. If we took her too, the only way we'd get out of today is by mass murder. I'm not ready for that yet.”

“You mean you’re not ready to kill your sister,” Parker noted, twisting his mouth to the side.

Matías clamped his lips shut.

The words to ask about my mother were on the tip of my tongue, but I couldn’t force them out.

“That’s why Maikel set the girls up,” Grey added, swiping his index finger over his brow and watching Amorette. “Even after our last meeting.”

“Sebastian was the one who filled me in. Valentina is also going to call for Amorette’s death. Again.” Matías ignored Grey’s comment, if he even knew what it meant. I barely caught the tail end of what happened myself. “The heads that are against us, after what we did to Tomas, and now Maikel, they’re going to demand some kind of payment to fuck with us.”

Amorette pushed Matías away as she took a few steps toward the door but stopped. After a beat, she turned and flew at me, throwing her arms around my shoulders. The comfort caused a knot in my throat.

I didn’t deserve this from her. Not when I’d left her.

Still, I wrapped my arms around her shoulders, pressing my cheek to the top of her head. This girl was all I needed. Her and my brothers.

My gaze slid to Matías.

Whatever Valentina wanted me to believe, it wasn’t true. I did trust Matías and no matter what happened, he didn’t mean to cause harm. I had to remember that when I finally had the courage to ask him.

“Amorette can’t be here and we need backup.” Andre crossed his arms and dropped his head. He seemed defeated already.

“The movement.” Everyone turned to me. “We got the girls back that they requested. They’ll help us.”

“They also want to see the Institution destroyed,” Andre pointed out.

“The Dirty Dogs. They’ll help,” Matías added.

“They’ll help *you*,” Parker clarified. “The Dirty Dogs made it very clear that we were deferred targets, right Andre?”

“Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

Swallowing, Matías looked at each of us. “I have to stay here. Otherwise, we really will lose our hold on the Institution. And at least a quarter of the guards I’m certain won’t knock me to my death. The others are questionable, although there’s no basis for that.”

Anton and Jorge had brought over a large chunk of our men. They’d been weeding through the mansion guards. Didn’t that count for anything? I guess it wasn’t enough to bank on.

“We can’t leave you on your own. Stop that bullshit line of thinking. For once, I’m with Andre. When we split up is when we find trouble.” Parker glared at Matías, except he’d already moved on to the next thought.

“Why did you all step in for me? Lafe, you—”

“Now’s not the time. I’m barely holding on by a thread, and if we hash out the past right now, you better be prepared for me to go apeshit.” I shook my head and hugged Killer tighter.

She turned in my arms to face the others. She cleared her throat, appearing calm, but I felt the hammer of her heart against her ribs. “We go get allies. We’ll separate into two groups. One stays here with Matías and one goes to get reinforcements. How long before the heads get here?”

“An hour or two, nothing major.”

Killer looked at Andre. “Do you trust the guards here to keep three of us safe?”

“Our people? Absolutely. The mansion guards? I wouldn’t bet my life on it. We should have fucking moved locations.” He shot Matías a glare.

“I didn’t know we would literally cause a revolution. How was I supposed to know that in a very short time we’d

essentially turn three businesses on their heads or just shut them down altogether?” Matías sounded both frustrated and defeated as his face tightened.

My chest burned. I didn’t regret it. Not for a fucking second.

“I’m with the group that goes, obviously,” Killer started, “Grey, you and Lafe should stay here.”

“Why us?” Grey’s brows dropped low over his eyes.

“Because you’re good fighters. And for all intents and purposes, we’ll be safe when we ask for help. This is the most dangerous location.”

Andre dropped his head. “As much as I hate to admit it, she’s right. And if I’m gone, Matías has a better chance of holding the heads at bay before they lose their goddamn minds and try to murder us all. It will give us more time to get back with reinforcements.”

“And if this is all for nothing? The heads won’t try anything?” I asked.

We all exchanged looks. No one believed the heads would leave us alone. In their eyes, we’d been taking too many liberties. And when I blew up my own business, they saw us, or maybe just me as unstable and a threat to their power and income.

I was sure taking out Tomas only added to their paranoia, no matter that Andre released a statement on why he was killed. Stealing children wouldn’t be an excuse to the Institution.

“That settles it. I need to run to the bathroom, then we can head out. Andre, will you arrange any guards we need to take with us? Lafe, Matías, do you want to call? Maybe we won’t need to make the trip if they agree to send reinforcements.” She received a few weak nods, then headed toward my room.

Grey followed and stood in the doorway, probably to make sure she wasn’t abducted again.

“She’s starting to get bossy.” Matías eyed the closed door with a sad smile.

Andre grunted. “You haven’t seen her background check. She was always this way, she just couldn’t show it here while she was getting her feet under her.”

I tried to call Ricco, but the number was turned off. Fuck, had he changed his burner? “No answer from Ricco, but you know where their place is.”

“No answer from the Dirty Dogs, either,” Matías said grimly. He stepped away to leave a message. Hopefully they’d listen to it before Killer, Andre, and Parker had to take a trip there.

“If you get her into any trouble, I will kill you.” Grey leveled a hard glare on Parker. “Brother or not, do not pull any stupid shit.”

Parker’s face twisted up. “I’m not going to fuck up this time. I’ve learned my lesson.” He glanced toward my door, then back at us. “But there’s something else you all should know.”

We stepped closer.

“My men got back to me about Grace Black...” Oh, shit. Amorette’s sister. Her main reason for fighting to get back to the States. “She’s gone.”

Grey grunted, and Andre clenched his jaw.

“You mean they can’t find her?” I shuffled closer. This could be bad. So fucking bad. What if Valentina had her stolen to fuck with us just like Killer feared?

“No.” Parker swallowed hard. “Not like they can’t find her, like she’s been abducted. She’s disappeared without a trace. They checked her phone records, her bank accounts, and floated inquiries with her management team. It hasn’t hit the news yet since I don’t think her management team keeps that close of an eye on her between jobs. She could just be traveling and off-grid, but...I don’t have a good feeling about it.”

“Valentina,” Andre growled.

“I don’t think it was her.” Matías scrubbed a hand over his hair. It had grown longer, making him even more Andre’s twin.

“Why the fuck are you taking up for that cunt?” Parker twisted his head to Matías.

“Look, I’m not. But I’ve been going through Vicente’s stuff, and she’s shady. Super fucking shady, and I think for whatever reason she was behind Amorette’s abduction. Or at the very least, connected to it. But he had her working with Jax, trying to help him get up to speed. Travel was probably the one industry Vicente didn’t want to fall down on. Not when moving shit internationally was such a big part of our business.”

“You don’t think she could have made a phone call? She’s worked with Maikel’s people for years,” Grey said to Matías like he was being obtuse.

“All I’m saying is, from the records I’ve been reviewing I don’t think it was her. I could be wrong, though.” Matías sounded like he wanted—needed—to be right.

“We have to find her. The only reason she’d be taken is to get at us.” I scratched my throat, trying to calm the nerves.

“No,” Andre said firmly. “That’s not the only reason. She’s a celebrity. A fucking beautiful model. There are other reasons she could have been taken. We can’t rule those out or we’ll miss clues. There’s also the possibility that she wasn’t taken at all and she’s fucking off around the world.”

None of us believed that.

“I’ll have my men keep looking, but there’s not a whole fuck of a lot we can do right now.” Parker threw out his hands.

“What are you meeting about?”

Shit, we hadn’t heard the door open.

“Nothing, Little Love. What do you say? Are you ready to go drum up some backup for our sorry asses?” Parker gave her a charming smile and offered his arm.

Considering everything that was going on, Amorette was still able to smile as she walked toward him. At some point, she'd stopped fighting against him. She wasn't exactly falling in his arms, but she wasn't pushing him away. Good. She needed all of us.

She turned and gave us a grin that was so dark, I almost thought she'd been swapped. Was this Grace standing in front of us? No, it couldn't be.

"We're going to come out of this okay. I'll make sure of it." She tipped her face up to Parker. "I'm ready."

AMORETTE



“I don’t fucking like this,” Andre grumbled for the third time, flexing his hands over the steering wheel.

“What don’t you like? The fact that just when things start settling down, we get caught on the rollercoaster of cartel life, or that people always want our heads on a platter? How about last night’s dinner? You didn’t like that, either.” Parker had his arm over his eyes like he couldn’t face the world. What was wrong with him? This was the kind of excitement he seemed to thrive on. Instead, he seemed...off.

“That’s not helping,” I said quietly from the front passenger seat.

“I don’t like the fact that we’re separating again. Shit tends to happen when we separate.” Andre sighed and adjusted in his seat.

“We just need to worry about ourselves,” I said like I wasn’t also worried out of my mind. I talked a big game and was pretending with the best of them, but that was what I was doing—pretending.

I didn’t like leaving the others behind any more than Andre did. There was comfort in having all of us within reaching distance.

Andre and Parker both made noncommittal noises.

“Text Lafe and Matías. See if they’ve gotten through to either of their contacts.” Andre glanced in the rearview mirror.

Parker sighed and sat up as he pulled out his phone. “I will, but we told them to message us right away if they’d heard back from them.”

So many doubts swirled around me making my head spin. As it was, I bounced my knee and clasped my hands tightly between my thighs.

“Just fucking do it,” Andre growled.

As much as I understood why we had to be the ones to do this, I didn’t. They wanted me away from the heads. I got it. Between Lafe and me, we’d made some big waves that we knew the Institution would hate. A slight tingling of guilt settled inside me.

The brothers hadn’t said anything, but they had to be at least a little upset with me. I’d forced us to go get Mara. Which I would do over and over again to make sure she didn’t spend another second with that man than she had to. Then, I’d made a scene in the Gallery.

I had no regrets except for the danger it placed us in. Knowing this was where it would land us, I still wouldn’t change a thing.

“Done. If they get back to us, I’ll let you know. Contrary to what you might think, brother, I’d rather find a nice place to park with our little love than go pander to these assholes to get back up.” Parker leaned his head back again and closed his eyes.

“We’re almost to the Dirty Dogs compound.” Andre tapped on the steering wheel after we turned onto a bright city street. We weren’t going to the same abandoned part of town as before. Matías said they were hanging out at one of the local clubs. They didn’t officially own it, but it was theirs.

We were on the city’s outskirts, where the buildings were only a few stories high. Close enough that the nightlife was busy, but still in a part of town that didn’t look highly patrolled. The buildings were old and dingy, keeping with the image I’d come to associate with the Dirty Dogs.

“Remind me why we’re starting with these assholes again?” Parker sat up and cracked his neck.

“Because they’re closer, and as much as they hate us, they’re the stronger power,” Andre admitted almost reluctantly. “After the movement fucked up when they could have killed Vicente, I’m not convinced they’re competent enough to fuck a tailpipe.”

I choked on my spit. Why did I find the image of a man trying to stick his erection into a pipe at the end of a car and *missing*, funny? It was the nerves.

“Fair enough.”

Andre drove up onto the sidewalk next to the club. When we got out, an attendant ran over, motioning to the car. Andre barked out a few words and the attendant backed up.

“Come on,” he murmured, curling his fingers around my arm. “He’s going to leave it there, and I’m damn sure not giving them my keys for the valet.”

“Smart decision.” Parker fell in step beside us.

There was a queue lined up from the door and down the street at least to the next block. They were mostly men and a handful of women. All were dressed in the same uniform of ripped jeans and old leather.

Andre slid his hand down to link his fingers with mine as we reached the bouncer. He was a mountain of a man with a mane of curly black hair. Frowning, he crossed his arms and barred the way.

“I know who you are,” He didn’t yell, but he spoke loud enough to be heard over the thumping music spilling from the open doorway.

“I’m sure you do,” Andre agreed. “We’re here to see Javier. He’s not expecting us, but Matías sent us.”

The bouncer stared us down like he wasn’t sure Andre could be believed. Then he pulled out his phone and typed out a message. Then another one.

“You can go in. Wait by the end of the bar.” He unlatched the rope.

We walked in, and the smell of sweat, liquor, and bad decisions permeated the air. The place was mostly packed with women in neon bikinis dancing in cages and on stages. Neon lights flashed over the crowd highlighting the smoke. It was deafening and overwhelming.

I worked on keeping my breathing steady as Andre led us toward the bar. It was on a shared platform with the first stage. Bars and chains were set up across the stage, as the dancers used them to swing and dance from. The people in the crowd didn't pay much attention to them as they danced. The women on stage seemed to be more of a vibe setter or ambiance props.

We walked up the steps and I continued searching the crowd, more out of curiosity than anything else. One man had his arms tight around his partner's chest and waist as...

Oh, hell. He was having sex right there.

So were others. Not everyone, but enough.

“It's a sex club, in case you were wondering, Little Love,” Parker whispered in my ear as his hand brushed against my waist and drifted down my outer thigh.

I drew in a shaky breath and faced forward. Heat pooled in my stomach as I picked up a new scent. Sex.

If I kept my gaze up here, it was just a regular club. Men pushed each other back and forth, jeering with laughter as they leered at women. The end was luckily vacant, and Andre leaned against the bar, signaling the bartender.

I pulled Parker's head down to my level. “Tell me none of these women are trafficked.”

He turned and surveyed the club, then came back to me. “No, these are employees and patrons. It's in the heart of the city, and while they could get away with it and clearly don't care about pushing some boundaries, the Dirty Dogs, or the Institution for that matter, wouldn't flaunt their crimes in a public setting.”

Good. That was good. I was still learning how to control my impulses without the rules of society pressing on me. If Parker had had a different answer, I was afraid of what I'd do now that I could without the overarching fear of authorities. It was addictive to be able to avenge yourself or someone else.

In a way, I could see how this environment could breed monsters. But I was better than them. I would never hurt someone simply for the sake of hurting them.

Andre placed an order and turned back, pulling me to stand in front of him with my back to his stomach. He draped one arm loosely around me as Parker slid in beside us.

The bartender returned holding three short glasses with ice and a clear, fizzing liquid. Andre bent down, his lips brushing my ear. "I ordered seltzer water."

I nodded and picked my glass up. Andre and Parker did too, but we must have been of the same mind because none of us took more than a faux sip. Andre didn't even do that.

"Andre Medina?" a man with a heavy accent asked as he walked toward us. He was at least in his mid-thirties. Enough scars and muscle to show he wasn't afraid of a fight and enough intelligence in his eyes to rule out a low man.

"That's me." I loved that Andre spoke in English.

"Javier will see you."

We all set our drinks down to follow the man, but he held up a hand. "Only you."

"I'm not leaving them here without me."

The man smirked. "Javier doesn't trust you, and Matías isn't with you. Consider this an olive branch that he's even entertaining you."

"Just go. We don't have time to fight about it," Parker whispered. "I'll watch over Little Love."

Andre cupped the back of my neck, gave me a hard kiss, then glared at the man. "We came in peace. If so much as a hair on her head is harmed, I'll make it my personal goal in life to make you suffer ten times over. Understood?"

“Crystal.”

“Watch her. I’ll make this as quick as I can.” He sauntered off, head bent close to the man as they had some kind of conversation on the way.

“How much do you want to bet Javier won’t send help?”

I glanced up at Parker. He was turned toward the crowd, watching for threats with his elbows on the bar.

“Why wouldn’t he? He’s fond of him. That was obvious.” I started to turn, but something caught my attention on stage. A woman walked swiftly, heading for the far side. But then she glanced back and I jolted.

Dark hair, angular face. It was too dark to see anything else. Yet, there was something familiar about her. I couldn’t quite remember, but I felt like I should.

My feet started moving before I even realized it. Parker caught up to me, and instead of stopping me, he curled his arm around my shoulders. “I’m all for a field trip, but don’t you think we should wait in the same spot so Andre can find us?”

“We have our phones,” I murmured. Where did that girl go? Who was she?

“I’m not used to this rebellious side of you,” he teased.

“It’s not rebellion. I think I recognize that girl.” The curve of her cheek and the shape of her eyes were so familiar. It was like a dirty memory trying to float to the surface.

The stages were all platforms that came out in a semicircle, just like the bar. It was easy to hop from the bar to the other stages. It barely took any effort and none of the girls cared about us on stage at all.

“What girl, Little Love?”

She was gone. Curtains covered the back wall and jutted out here and there. That’s where she’d gone, back into one of the pockets covered by curtains. We quickly walked across three stages until we met the place where she disappeared, and ducked behind the curtain.

I skidded to a halt.

Randall had the girl tucked against his chest with his hand gripping her throat. She cried out when he squeezed, her face purpling from lack of oxygen.

He grinned at me. That jolly fucking grin that haunted my nightmares after the last time I saw him. Besides losing a little weight, he was the same short, balding man. There was nothing to make him stand out in a crowd except for the dark glimmer in his eyes.

“Hello, Amorette.”

He shifted his hand at her throat to hold her face, digging his fingers cruelly into her cheeks. A knife laid against her throat. She watched us through tear-filled eyes, and it hit me.

She was the girl who had shared a cage with me. One of them, anyway. I’d sat there, helpless, as they raped her against the cage. She’d been taken with the other girls. Why was she here with him?

But I knew the answer. Because of me.

The same turbulent emotions started ripping me apart from the inside out.

“This is curious, you being here in a Dirty Dog establishment,” Parker said curiously, carefully shifting me behind him. “Tell me, dead man, are you affiliated with them or just stupid?”

“Maikel’s upset with you boys. You have to know that,” Randall shook his head like it was a terrible thing. “You’re trying to shut down his business.”

“We are,” I croaked. Fuck! Why was my voice going out? Why was there a lump in my throat?

“All you did was send a few hopeless women out of the mansion. I already had some of them recaptured. We’ll get the rest, too. But you know what Maikel wants more than to keep his business?”

Parker gave him a strange look as he reached for his weapon, but Randall shook his head. “I wouldn’t do that if I

were you. Your slut there loves to be a hero. If you so much as twitch, I'll slit this bitch's throat. That will be on you."

"Don't, Parker." I fisted my hand in the back of his shirt and stepped to the side just enough to keep both Randall and the girl in my line of sight.

"That doesn't explain why you're here." Parker shuffled just a tiny bit forward. Only about ten feet or so separated us. The dim blue light from above flickered, giving Randall a sinister appearance.

"That's because you didn't answer my question. I heard you were the bright one." Randall grinned and shook his head good-naturedly. "What does Maikel want more than his trafficking business?"

"Let me guess, for me and my brothers to suffer," Parker remarked drily.

"Ding, ding, ding."

"And you think I'm just going to hand Amorette over?" He actually laughed. "You're out of your goddamned mind. You release the girl, and maybe you'll walk out of here."

"You're in no position to make that call. In fact, without your brothers, you'll die, and I'll get to finish playing with Amorette. You enjoyed our games, didn't you?" My stomach rolled and I felt like I was going to throw up. Randall returned his stare to Parker. "She's got a sweet pussy, doesn't she? So soft, wet, and hot."

Parker stiffened.

"She came on my fingers like a good little girl. Didn't you?" His disgusting eyes roamed over my body as a salacious grin curved his lips. A cold sweat broke out over my forehead and back.

Fuck the fear and shame that assaulted me. This man was nothing except an evil, twisted bully. I stepped around Parker and shot forward. Getting right in his face, I screamed, "You disgusting piece of shit! That was rape! I didn't want it, and you forced it on me!" With my chest heaving, I looked down

my nose at him. “All you’re good at is defiling woman for your own fucked up fun, and it stops now!” I shrieked.

He grinned, shoving the girl away. Just as he reached for me, Parker tackled him to the ground. Pinning his arms out to the side with his thighs while he pried the knife from his hand and tossed it. Then he pulled a knife from his waistband.

“Take any weapons off of him that you can find, Little Love. We’re about to have some fun.”

I grabbed two knives from his waist and one from his ankle. He also had a shoulder holster with two guns at his sides. I removed those and slid them far enough away that he couldn’t reach them.

Then I pulled my own knife out just in case he flipped Parker.

“Now, what was that you said about Little Love?” Parker pressed a hand against his forehead.

“Maikel is going to—”

Parker covered his mouth with his hand. “Yeah, I don’t want to hear threats. They’re useless and boring. Repetitive. I want to go back to what you just said about Little Love.”

Randall clamped his lips shut. He tried to shift his gaze to me, but Parker pressed his head harder into the concrete floor. “Don’t look at her. I’m the one who needs your attention right now.”

I moved around to stand to the side. My heart thumped erratically and when Parker glanced up, death shimmered in his black eyes. The thrill it gave me was wrong on so many levels, but at the same time, knowing he was about to hurt the man who hurt me and so many others, I reveled in it.

“You know what I don’t like about this guy? His smile. He has a fucking joker smile. Let’s give him a new one.” He took the knife, forced the blade between his lips and jerked it up.

As soon as the flesh started to tear, Randall screamed, making Parker’s job easier. He made quick work of the other side and stared at me again. “I’m sorry to say we don’t have a

lot of time. So I can't torture this motherfucker the way he deserves, but you know what I can do?" There was so much emotion in his eyes; I was caught in his hold, just like I'd been captivated by Grey when he'd killed the man who'd abducted me.

"What?" I whispered.

"I can make sure he doesn't take another breath." While holding my gaze, Parker pulled the knife across Randall's neck, cutting deep. Any screams Randall tried to let out died under a gurgling of wet blood. "I'm apparently shit with presents and gestures, though I tried."

"No." I stepped forward, not caring about the largely spreading puddle of blood. "I'm the bitch. I'm sorry."

"I don't want your apologies, Little Love. I just want you. And this is one of the best things I could do for you. Kill the man who hurt you. I will always do that. So will my brothers. We will kill anyone who even thinks to hurt you. Because you're ours."

I moved closer, sliding the knife back into my thigh band. I cupped his face. His gaze shifted between my eyes like he didn't believe this was real.

How could I have been so blind not to see him for who he was. I wasn't wrong before. He was reckless, and he was dangerous. But no more than any of the other brothers. I was just too afraid to let go of what I thought I needed. Of who I thought I was or would be with him.

But I was changed, and I couldn't go back.

I didn't want to. Lowering my head, I closed my eyes so I could brush my lips against his.

Then a round of clapping started, and I froze.

PARKER



I jumped to my feet and spun, knocking Little Love behind me.

The music was still loud back here, but not that loud. And the clapping was obnoxious, like the person wanted us to hear.

A woman stepped out from the shadows. Rita. Javier's daughter. I'd never met her, but I'd had some of my people do a workup after Little Love went a little stabby at the last Dirty Dogs party.

"I don't know whether I should be pissed you broke our rules or ecstatic you just made my payback a little easier." She grinned. As far as beauty went, she was beautiful. Sin and saucy fit her perfectly. She was everything our women wanted to be—curvy in all the right places and an attitude to bring men to their knees.

Or Matías, considering he'd had an on-again, off-again affair with her for years.

"My apologies, I didn't realize there were rules." I held the knife loosely at my side. There was no way I'd put it away, not after killing Randall on their property. Except a threat wouldn't be taken kindly either. I stepped to the side, doing my best to hide Little Love from her gaze, but sweet Little Love kept sidestepping me.

The fabric of my pants was soaked with blood, clinging to my knees when I moved. That was an annoyance I didn't need.

Rita cocked a brow. “You didn’t know guests are banned from killing on our property?”

“Ah, but this isn’t your property, is it? It’s a club the Dirty Dogs like to frequent?” I turned as she walked around me. Of course, I knew. But I was stalling.

Andre was going to be pissed at me, thinking I’d never change, never learn not to be a reckless brat. But I didn’t regret it. I just had to figure out a way to get us out of here.

We were behind the curtains, but this was still very much a part of the stage. They just weren’t using this one at that particular moment. On one side was a metal bench at cock height with cuffs. On the other, bars so the performers could get creative with their positions. Then, there were chains hanging from the ceiling for the biker version of aerialists. Although they never got more than a few feet from the ground.

As Rita circled us, she put the chains between us. She grabbed them, letting them hold her weight as she leaned forward.

“This is ours. It might not be public knowledge, but we own it. So the rules apply to anyone visiting. And you,” she glanced down at Randall’s cooling body, “just committed a big error in judgment, my friend.”

“I’m sure you can appreciate that he followed us here hoping to steal our girl.”

Her gaze narrowed. “Your girl. *Their* girl.”

“I feel like you’re going somewhere with this,” I said with a grin, rubbing my jaw with my free hand. “Forgive me for not following.”

“My father is meeting with Andre now. It’s not pretty. I took the opportunity to slip away when I got an alert that you two were behind the curtain having a little *too* much fun.” Her gaze went back to Randall. “Did you know that Matías and I were lovers?”

“Were? I thought it was still an on-and-off-again thing?”

Her lips thinned. “He was never serious, but I was.” She let her gaze trail down my body, with more calculation than desire in her eyes. “He’d hate if I fucked his half-brother. You like public displays, do you not?”

Amorette choked like she got ahold of something nasty. I’d take that as a win. I knew it was only a matter of time before she was mine.

I laughed and shook my head. “That won’t be happening. If you haven’t heard, I’m off the market.” Little Love slipped up next to me and curled her fingers into the band of my pants at my back.

Rita’s expression soured. “Yes, I heard you all share her. If your brothers have to share, I’m sure she won’t mind sharing you one time with me. Especially if it keeps you out of trouble. Do you really want to risk adding more on top of the war you’ve already started?”

“Who said we started a war?”

One side of her mouth curved up. “I heard what your brother told *Papá*. Do you truly think he’ll send men to help out the Institution if he knows how disrespectful you’ve been in his house?”

I ran my tongue over my teeth. She wasn’t wrong. This could fuck things up for us if Javier didn’t help. Although, there was always the Movement...

“Javier wouldn’t be helping the Institution. He’d be helping Matías,” Little Love said. “There’s a difference.”

“Is there?”

“You know there is. You want to hurt Matías, but you see what the brothers will do to those who hurt me.” She made a show of glancing down at Randall. I got a good look at the blood spatter over my clothes and knife. Ironically, my hands had stayed clean. “If you try and force Parker to fuck you just to get back at Matías, that will hurt me. Parker isn’t the only one who will protect me like this. They *all* will.” She paused, then turned serious eyes on Rita. “Are you sure this is a *war* you want to start?”

My cock hardened. Little Love was claiming me while making some damn good points too. And with a bit of panache. I reached down to adjust myself. Andre better hurry the hell up, or I was going to fuck Little Love right here.

A small, throaty chuckle broke the spell Little Love had weaved over me.

“I like you. I don’t know what the future holds for you. The Institution is on such...tremulous ground with everyone.” Rita pulled a phone out of her bra and typed out a text before sliding it back home. “What did he do anyway?” She motioned to Randall.

“Raped me. And lots of other girls. He worked on breaking the girls for the Gallery.” Little Love said that so monotone; it was odd to hear her so dispassionate.

Rita sneered. “Then the asshole deserved it. I hate that we occasionally use girls, but Papá gets violent when I backtalk. All right...What was your name?”

“Amorette.”

“All right, Amorette. I’ve called a cleanup crew. My own people, so Papá won’t be offended. We’ll grab lunch sometime.” She turned and started to walk away. “Oh,” she said, looking over her shoulder. “And I’m going to take this as an IOU. I want Matías to pay.”

As soon as she was gone, I sheathed my knife and swung Little Love up into my arms. “Fuck, that was an adrenaline rush.” I slammed my mouth down on hers and walked out from behind the curtain back onto the stage. If the cleanup crew was coming, I didn’t want to be there for questions.

“What are you doing?” she asked between kisses. The bright neon lights flashed over us on stage. Now they were violet, and our dark clothes blended in the black curtains. The lights had also dimmed and spotlights were directed at the dancers in the cages.

“Taking advantage of the moment.” I nipped her bottom lip.

I set her down on a metal bench. This one was close to another set of curtains but not too close to the bar. I glanced up and felt against the wall. Just in case.

“Parker.” She bit her lip as she turned toward the crowd. There were still dancers around us, although they were at the edge trying to get tips, and the lights were so dim, you could barely see past a few feet in front of you.

I gently pushed her shoulders until she reclined back on her hands, then I brushed my nose against her temple, planting a kiss there. “Don’t worry, Little Love. They can’t see us. And this show will go on for a while. They always do when they highlight the cages. It’s a signature move by the Dirty Dogs.”

She was still watching the people wildly dancing and gyrating on the floor. “I don’t think I can—”

“You can,” I ordered, placing two fingers under her chin and turning her face back to me. “You’re facing me, and you’re fully clothed. No one can see anything. And you know what? I find, I don’t want to share you with anyone. All your sounds and expressions are mine. My brothers and I are the only ones allowed to see you come.” I moved her panties over to the side and started dancing my fingers over her pussy. Mm. Deliciously wet. I bet it was from watching a man she hated—a man who violated her, I gritted my teeth against the sudden onslaught of anger—die at her feet. “But that doesn’t mean we can’t have a little fun.” I pulled back and winked at her as I lowered to my knees.

She rolled her lips together as she watched me. Her eyes were so dark from the dim lights, but they couldn’t hide how much she wanted this. Wanted me.

And wasn’t that a decadent feeling.

Little Love fought against her conscience. We should be waiting like good little boys and girls for Andre to find us, then to rush back to the mansion. She should be upset for wanting and getting excited by that fuckface’s death.

However, so much in life was uncertain. Plans and lives were cut short all the time. You had to take life by the balls

and get in as much pleasure and *fuck you's* as possible. I grinned as I nipped her thigh.

I could change. I *was* changing. Little Love had already altered us more than we'd ever expected, and I doubted my brothers even realized it. But I would never lose my zest for life. And if I died tonight, I wanted to know the taste of her sweet pussy, and the feel of her milking me dry.

As I lazily tongue fucked her, I moved my thumb in slow circles over her clit. I hit all the places that had driven her wild when we'd worshiped her before.

My cock was so hard, I could drill holes in the floor. And the way her eyes fell half-lidded, and her small tongue darted out to lick her lips leaving them glistening, didn't help.

Her chest started rising faster and she pulsed around my tongue. She was close. The danger turned on my little love. By the chance of being seen, or maybe caught. I had to laugh. As much as she was changing us, we were changing her too.

And soon, we would meld together, fitting each other so fucking perfectly.

My brothers and I were closer, becoming friends when we'd only ever been necessary allies. All because of her. She was even bringing us closer to Matías, someone I thought I'd hate for the rest of my life.

I thrummed her clit faster and she tossed back her head as small but forceful quakes rocked her body.

God, yes. This was what I wanted from her. Total surrender to let me do any fucking thing I wanted.

Standing, I quickly freed my cock, and after a quick scan of the crowd and bar, I thrust inside.

“So fucking glorious. I knew being inside you would be like this.” I pistoned my hips as I anchored her to me with a hand against the back of her head and my other arm tight around her lower back. She was perfect for me.

For the first time in my life, as she held onto me just as tight, I felt a purpose I'd never felt before.

I'd always wanted something more. Freedom. Respect. Power. To go. To stay.

But this was what I was missing. I just needed a *little love* to make everything else make sense.

"I'm, God..." she moaned long and so fucking throaty it sent shivers down my spine.

I gripped her ass, slamming her onto me as I pushed forward. Grunting, I picked up my speed until the pleasure was too much to think straight. "So. Fucking. Good. Little. Love." I grabbed her hair and yanked her head back so I could crash my mouth against hers. Our teeth hit and I tasted blood, but I couldn't come without the taste of her in my mouth. I need more.

I needed all of her after being denied for so long.

A stage light blinded me and Little Love gasped, trying to climb my body while I fucked her. Shit, the cage show was over. Some men started to turn our way, and a few whistled. Little Love clamped down on me with a ragged cry as I groaned. Jets of cum released inside her.

I reached back and felt for the lever, hoping it was what I thought it was.

I pulled it, and the curtains fell in front of us.

The wait was worth it. She was everything I wanted and could have dreamed of.

Fuck, no condom.

Then I laughed. My brothers were fucking her raw and had been for months. It was good that the Institution was so strict on birth control, or we'd have a baby on our hands.

I groaned as another wave of pleasure rolled over me. That image of Little Love being irrevocably ours, was too much to handle. Someday...

Sliding in and out, prolonging the pleasure for both her and me, I cupped the sides of her face and sucked on her lips.

“We’re covered. No one can see you.” Unfortunately, I separated us and tucked myself back in my pants. Some of my cum leaked out of her and I bit my lip. Cream pies were my favorite.

I wished I had more time to savor the feeling.

Little Love hopped down, and we moved around the curtain and back to the bar. Where a few had whistled before, no one seemed to notice us now. Our drinks were still there on the counter, but we weren’t touching them. Hell, we didn’t touch them before. I didn’t trust anyone in this club.

Rita was a curiosity, though. I’d have to ask Matías about what really went down and why she’s so hot for his dick now.

At the end of the bar, Andre stomped our way, his face a dark thundercloud.

“Let’s go,” he said as soon as he reached us. He threaded his fingers through Little Love’s. He was practically running, and she had to jog to keep up with his long strides. As soon as we were outside, I moved up beside him.

“What happened?”

“I got a text from Matías. Everything went to hell. He, Grey, and Lafe were run off. We have to go meet them. Javier read the text and finally agreed to send some of his men.”

The sidewalk was deserted, but the queue to get in was still long and rowdy.

“Okay, shit.” Javier was sending men. “What about the Movement? Are they worth going to see? If we had enough manpower, we could just end this tonight. Wipe those fuckers off the board.” I scanned the buildings. These weren’t very tall, and that was always a—

A glint of metal from the window across the street was all the warning I had. But I knew.

“Duck!” I shoved Andre and Little Love to the ground behind our car when a shot rang out. Pain bloomed in my back. Fuck! Fuck, fuck, fu...

EPILOGUE

GREY



I chewed on my thumbnail as I rocked my chair back and forth in the boardroom. It was arguably more of an asshole room than the study. Everything was a mind game, and this room was used to make Vicente seem larger than life and more important than God.

None of that shit mattered. I watched the clock on the wall. I wasn't a nervous person, but each minute Amorette was out of my sight, my chest grew tighter.

Sebastian sat across from me. Matías had the head of the table while Lafe was on the other side of me. That was it.

“Where are the other heads you warned us were coming?” I glared at Sebastian. This better not be a fucking trick.

His brows furrowed and he checked his phone. “I don't know. They tried to rope me in and I played along to nip their idiocy in the bud. They should be here by now. With as many guards as they could transport.”

No one talked after that; the only sound was the clock ticking on the wall.

Screaming broke the silence. I jumped up and threw the door open, and several of the staff ran down the hallway like their asses were on fire.

“What's going on?” Lafe was at my back. “I don't know.”

I ran toward the kitchens while arming myself. Those *pendejos* were too cowardly to meet us face to face. They had to terrorize the staff first.

More screams bounced around the hall, followed by grunts. Lafe, Matías, and Sebastian were on my heels.

The noise grew louder, and it at least sounded like our people were putting up a fight. We slid into the kitchen and a handful of our guards were fighting with a swarm of men in black. Not original, and fuck, I had no idea which men were ours and who was theirs.

We jumped into the fray and I channeled all my pent-up helplessness on these assholes. I targeted the ones who had the most fury in their eyes. They had to be the aggressors. Lafe and Matías seemed to do the same. Sebastian, that asshole, stood against the wall.

I slammed my fist into the man's cheekbone in front of me. Bones cracked.

"What the hell are you doing?" I barked at Sebastian.

"I'm not a fucking fighter. I'm a gun dealer. In case you haven't noticed, you can't have a gun fight in a mosh pit."

I growled. Fucking pussy.

We made it down to the last few men, but my arms got sluggish, and my head started to spin.

I looked for Lafe. Where was that bastard? There he was, down behind the island. This kitchen was too small. For such a large mansion it had shit ventilation. It was too hot.

Dropping to my knees, I felt for a pulse, except my fingers kept missing his neck.

"Laf..." I couldn't even get his name out as I started to fall over his chest. Where was Matías? Sebastian?

My head was too heavy to move. The fighting was done. That was good. I just needed a few minutes...



WATER DRIPPED NEARBY. The sound reverberated around me.

The air was damp. I was cold.

What the fuck?

I tried to raise my head but my body felt too heavy and my mouth was full of ass-flavored cotton.

Footsteps came closer. From the sounds of them, I had to be in the basement. Vicente kept a few cells down here when he wanted to toss someone away and forget about them.

“Finally, I get to see them where they belong. I tried. I wanted to help them, but they’re idiots. Serves them right.” Maikel’s voice was smug. Too smug.

“You only wanted to be on top. That’s never going to happen.” Valentina. That cunt.

It was tough and took more gravity than willpower, but I finally got my head to turn. Lafe’s face was right there and he was out cold. Matías’ legs were on the other side of him.

I think. Or are those Sebastian’s legs?

“Oh good. You’re awake.” I lifted my gaze, and there was Valentina, grinning like the cat that ate the canary. “Welcome to *my* Institution.”

***To be continued in Traitor,
the final installment in the Bastard Brothers of Carnage
Series...***

AFTERWORD

Wow! That was intense!

Just when these guys finally seemed to be getting their act together, bam! The rug is pulled out from under them again.

I hope you enjoyed the story, and know there's still more to come with the FINAL book in the series.

Can you believe it? Just one more book. <3

I won't share any spoilers, but I do promise a HEA. Eventually.

If you want to chat all things Psycho, come see me in my Facebook group [Blake's Book Babes](#)! There will be a spoiler post pinned!

In previous books, did you take notice of the Fashion Boys, as Parker refers to them? I'm please to announce they will be getting their own series. And the really cool thing about this bunch is that they also have ties to the Cardinal Sins series. If you've read it, you might recall the brief mentioning of The Curator. I won't share anymore. I'll just leave that for you to have a fun little easter egg hunt.

And don't worry, there will still be some cameos from our favorite characters between both series. ;)

You can find this preorder [here](#).

Any-who, as always, I hope you enjoyed reading this installment as much as I enjoyed writing it. So much has changed over the last year for both my family and me, and I

was excited to be able to dedicate the time to Psycho that I felt it deserved.

If you want to see the Traitor cover early, make sure to join my newsletter! Disclosure, the cover will be sent out via newsletter a few days to maybe a week before it's released to the public.

Join the newsletter [here](#).

And... If you're stalking game is strong, follow me here too!

[Facebook](#) [Author Page](#) [Bookbub](#) [TikTok](#) [Instagram](#)
[Amazon](#)

Thanks for reading and I'll see you in the next book!

XOXO

Blake

OTHER TITLES

The Collection Series

Snatched (Coming early 2024)

Bastard Brothers of Carnage Series

Addict

Convict

Killer

Psycho

Traitor

Mazza Series

Marks of the Mazza

Bonds of the Mazza

Secrets of the Mazza

War of the Mazza

Astrid Scott Series

Pretty Lies

Ugly Truths

Busted Dreams

Vivid Fears

Brittle Hope

Fragile Minds Duet

Fractured

Altered

Standalone RH Romance

Pin-up Girl

Co-Writes with my Co-wrifey

Standalone Series

Kiss of Fate

Taste of Karma

Cardinal Sins Series

Kill Song

First Chorus

High Note

Last Word

Standalone MF Romance

Full Glasses and Burju Shoes

WHO IS BLAKE?

Blake Blessing is a mom, wife, art enthusiast, and author.

She attended ten different schools growing up, so books became her constant friend. Escaping into books of all different genres made life fun and exciting. Blake was also raised on music and still blasts it through the house and car at every opportunity.

She has a weird sense of humor and a penchant for chocolate milk. It only makes sense she would one day go on to write her own stories.