

she's
MINE

Protected Series - Book One

BELINDA WRIGHT

She's Mine

Protected, Volume 1

Belinda Wright

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SHE'S MINE

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Written by Belinda Wright.

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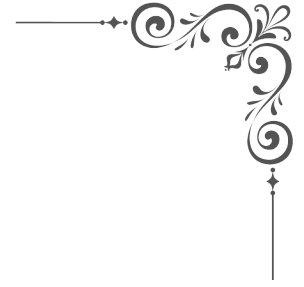
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The phone vibrating interrupts my typing. I reach for it, my eyes flicking across the message from El Patron. He wants to meet today.

Tomorrow, I reply. My agenda is already full.

His response comes in seconds.

Has to be today. I need your help on an urgent matter.

It always has to be *today*. No one can wait for anything. I look up as my brother passes the open office door.

‘Bram?’

He stops walking and wipes his face on the hand towel that’s around his neck; his T-shirt dark with sweat from the session he’s just finished with a client.

Looking at my younger brother is like looking in a mirror, or at one of those spot-the-difference puzzles. We’ve both got the straight dark hair of our grandmother, who had Indonesian roots. He wears his longer; mine’s cut short and gelled, always. We’re both tall and muscular; we get that from our American grandfather, who was a corporal stationed in Europe. I suppose our height might have come from our father, but he didn’t stick around too long after Carl, my youngest brother was born so I’m not sure. Not that I can blame the guy, Mum was off her head all the time, so what was there to stay for? Three screaming kids?

‘S’up?’ My brother’s gaze meets mine as he leans on the door frame.

‘I need you to take my class, later,’ I tell him.

He raises an eyebrow. ‘Where you going?’

‘Nio’s. Antonio wants to see to see me.’ I run my hand over my jaw, registering the scratch of my stubble.

‘El Patron? You’re gonna skip your class for him?’ He pulls a face.

‘It’s business. He’s a customer.’ I shrug. ‘And it has to be today, apparently.’

‘Better be one whole heap of business.’ Bram chuckles and walks in the direction of the showers.

I shut the door, strip off my training shorts and T-shirt, and put on a suit. Then I head through into the empty gym. We’re always quiet at this time. It’s busiest in the afternoons, after the schools kick out. That’s when we run most of our fight classes. During the day we mainly do personal training sessions and the odd few guys who want to spar on their days off.

I nod to Angelo who’s lifting weights. He’s our contact in the police, he’s been working out at the Take Down pretty much since we opened. He

watches out for us and gives us a tip-off if anything's going down we need to know.

Dylan looks up from behind the punching bag he's holding in place for his client. He eyes my suit, tells the client to take five then walks to me.

'I'm going to Nio's,' I tell him before he asks. 'Bram'll cover my class.'

Dylan's my best friend. Has been since we were kids. His flat was next to ours and we used to play together on the balcony outside the front doors. He's like my third brother.

'Slater?'

My hand's already on the door; I look around.

'You need me to come with you?'

He knows El Patron's not like Bana or Li'l Cesar. Antonio will only deal with me, the boss. The others don't care who they deal with as long as shit gets done. I shake my head.

'Nah, it's cool. I can handle El Patron. Thanks, D.'

It takes longer than I expected to drive through the centre of Rotterdam. Eleven o'clock on a Monday morning seems to be when all deliveries take place. I get stuck behind a van and have to take a detour through the backstreets. I know the roads well, but it doesn't ease my irritation at wasting time.

I wonder what El Patron wants to see me about, what's so urgent that it couldn't wait until our scheduled meeting next week. I tap my fingers on the steering wheel as the car in front puts the hazards on to drop off a passenger. I should have taken the A10 – it would have been quicker than having to wait behind these idiots who seem to have all the time in the world. Bram may be covering my next class, but I've still got three more later this afternoon that I have to get back for. Those kids are counting on me.

The Take Down is our main location in the south of Rotterdam, it's the biggest and the first fight club/gym that we opened. Secretly, it's my favourite. Bram, Dylan and I are all based there; it's more of a home to me than my own apartment. We've got two more gyms, one near Hoogvliet, run by my other brother, Carl, and a third in Schiedam, run by the fifth member of our crew, Sepp. We're building an empire and I couldn't be prouder.

Bram, Dylan and I are fighters and coaches. Carl and Sepp aren't fighters, they're accountants. They met at university and are the best in the business, which is why all the bosses in the city come to us to get their dirty money cleaned. I'm the boss of our crew because I'm the oldest and, well, someone

has to have the final call. But we operate together, a tight unit. Our decisions are shared.

El Patron's nightclub is north of the river. Everywhere in the north is his turf. South of the river is Li'l Cesar's. Then there's Bana. His crew operates on the eastern outskirts of the city. We work with all of them. Generally, they stick to their area and things run smoothly. Generally.

The sign above the club says Angelina's but everyone still calls it Nio's. Some places can never shake their original name no matter how many times the owner tries to rebrand them. Antonio, El Patron as he's known on the street, is Spanish. He's been a boss here in Rotterdam longer than I've been alive. I don't know how or when he ended up in the Netherlands. I've heard rumours that he betrayed a Spanish Mafia kingpin and fled the country, but whether it's true I've no idea. He doesn't speak Dutch, but you don't need to here. Most of the people we work with aren't Dutch, anyway. Dealing drugs can be done in any language.

'Coach Slater.' The security guard nods as I enter.

I recognise him from the gym and give him a half smile in return as I pass. Nio's smells of stale alcohol and cleaning products. There's the muffled sound of vacuuming from somewhere in the back; the cleaners are still busy rectifying the place from the night before.

Gonzales is behind the bar, by the cash register, poring over the books. He does the accounts for Nio's, but he's nowhere near as skilled as Sepp and Carl, which is why El Patron cleans about eighty per cent of his money with us.

Gonzales glances up and gives me an oily smile. 'Slater. Antonio is in the back.'

I nod and continue walking, not wasting words on him. I don't care for Gonzales, something in his eyes that I don't trust.

I find the boss, telephone pressed to his ear and whisky tumbler in the other hand. He's on the Nio's terrace which overlooks a canal. It's a sunny day and the golden light is refreshing after the dim atmosphere of the club.

'Marcel.' He ends his call immediately and shakes my hand. 'Thank you for coming at such short notice.'

El Patron is the only one who calls me by my given name, Marcel. Everyone else always calls me Coach or Slater. Antonio's old school, he likes formalities.

I glare at him. 'I had to rearrange my schedule, so this better be important.'

'Marcel.' He chuckles and flicks his hand to dismiss my concern. 'Of course it's important. It's always important. But we'll come to that in just a moment. First, can I have Joaquin bring you a drink?' He gestures to his whisky.

I shake my head. 'It's too early for me.'

'It's never too early.'

I eye his paunch. 'You know, Antonio, at your age you ought to take a bit more care of yourself. Why don't you come down the gym? I'll have one of my guys fix you up with a light programme. Get you in shape.'

He shakes his head. 'I don't want to spend my time in a gym, sweating. I enjoy life too much.'

'You won't enjoy it much when you have a heart attack at sixty.'

He gives me a sly smile. 'I'll make sure to squeeze all the juice out of the next two years, then.' He drains the last of the liquor from his glass. 'How's business, Marcel?'

I rest a hand on the railing. 'The gyms have never been busier. We're considering opening a fourth.' I run my thumb and forefinger over my chin. 'But first, we're getting our bar up and running.'

El Patron nods approvingly. 'Good, good. A bar is a good step for you young people. It will loosen you up. Angelina's,' he waves his arms around, 'is like my second home.' Sadness fills his eyes. 'My first home, since my dear wife Angelina was so tragically taken from me.'

I push off the railing and stand square.

'Your crew took out Boris Banasinski, Antonio. You must have expected Bana would retaliate.'

'Banasinski.' He pulls a sour face and spits on the floor. 'Don't mention that scum in here. What we did was business; he made it personal. You don't touch a man's family. A man's wife.'

'Boris was Bana's brother,' I remind him.

'Brother? Boris was a soldier. He was part of this life. Angelina was my sweet angel, my Daleylah's mother. She wasn't involved in anything.'

I hold up my hands. 'It's none of my business. Your beef is with Bana.' I work with both of them, there's no way I'm getting caught up in their feud, as much as I know El Patron would like it if I sided with him.

'Now, what's so urgent that you called me out of my training sessions?'

‘I have to go away, Marcel.’ He turns to look out over the canal. ‘And I need you to do me a favour.’

‘I don’t do favours.’

‘I’ll make it worth your while.’

I frown, waiting for him to continue, but not liking where this is going. El Patron thinks he owns everyone. He doesn’t own me.

‘I’m going to Spain for a couple of weeks and I need you to look after my Daleylah.’

I stifle a laugh. ‘Do I look like a babysitter?’

‘No. But you look like the hardest man I know. The strongest man. You have never lost a fight.’

That’s not true. I did lose a fight. Once. That was before I became a real fighter, it’s made me who I am. In a way, I’m grateful for that twat who gave me a kicking when I was a mouthy twelve-year-old who thought he knew everything. If it hadn’t been for getting beaten half to death, I’d never have got into martial arts the way I did. Anyway, he’s long since paid for it. With his life.

‘Sorry, Antonio, but babysitting your daughter is not in my remit. Why don’t you ask Gonzales? Or your security? If you’re short on men I can easily hook you up with some guys from the gym. Good fighters.’

He shakes his head. ‘Her usual minder, Juan Carlos, is away and Joaquin is coming with me to Spain. After he and Daleylah are married then her security will be his problem, but until then—’

‘Gonzales is engaged to your daughter?’ I don’t even try to keep the shock from my voice. Joaquin Gonzales is a slimy piece of shit, I wouldn’t touch him with a bargepole, let alone marry him off to my only daughter.

El Patron waves his hand dismissively. ‘He’s a good boy, the son of my late partner, Salvador. But he’s not a fighter. Not like you, Marcel. You are the best. I trust you like I would family. I need someone I can count on.’ He sucks in a breath. ‘There’s no way I could survive if anything happened to my *princesa*. Not after losing Angelina the way I did, God rest her soul.’ He makes the sign of the cross on his body.

I shake my head. ‘I’m not looking after your daughter, Antonio. What is she ...?’

I try to remember the last time I saw Daleylah Martinez. It was years ago, and she was a sulky kid with braces on her teeth.

‘She must be, like, sixteen now?’

‘She’s twenty-two.’

‘Fuck me. Daleylah’s twenty-two? Where did the time go?’

‘Marcel.’ He puts a hand on each of my shoulders and looks me in the eyes. ‘Do me this favour. She’s an adult, you’ll hardly see her. All I need you to do is stay in my house for two weeks until I’m back, to be there for her, just in case. She needs protection. Someone who understands the dangers this life creates. When was the last time you took a vacation?’

‘I don’t take vacations.’

‘You should. Take two weeks off. They’re forecasting warm weather; it’ll feel like you’re in Spain, too. I know it’s hard to believe in this country. I can never get used to the Dutch weather.’ He raises his eyes to the sky. ‘I have a beautiful place, it’s like a holiday home, here in Rotterdam. Since I had it built, I rarely even go to my house on the coast. I have everything right here in the city. You can lie by the pool and I have a gym, I’ll have Maria, the housekeeper, prepare anything you want to eat.’

‘You have a gym?’ I say in disbelief.

‘It’s small, I never use it.’ He flicks his hand. ‘What do you say? The house will be secured from the outside. I just need someone inside I can trust. You won’t have to do anything other than be there and make sure nothing happens to my Daleylah.’

‘Why don’t you take her with you to Spain? That would be a whole lot easier.’

‘I cannot.’ He looks defeated. ‘Youngsters can be so stubborn. She’s studying for her final exams and refuses to join me. She says she needs to stay close to the university.’

‘When are you leaving?’ I’m starting to feel sorry for the old guy. He’s never been the same since his wife was killed.

‘Tonight.’

‘Jeez, couldn’t you have given me more notice?’

‘I apologise, Marcel. Her minder, Juan Carlos, was called away yesterday to be with his sick mother. He was supposed to be here while I’m gone, and I can’t rearrange my trip.’

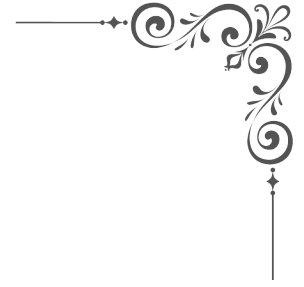
I run a hand through my hair, thinking through all the appointments I’ve got lined up over the next two weeks. Dylan and Bram can handle most of the stuff at the gym. Sepp and Carl aren’t big fighters but could step in to cover some of my personal training clients, if needed, although they’re both far more productive behind a desk working the books.

‘I’ll have to step out from time to time, there are some meetings I can’t put off.’ I think about the meet with Bana. He’s got an arms shipment coming in next week that we’re trafficking for him. There’s no way I can leave Bram to handle that alone.

‘Of course, Marcel, of course. Just don’t leave her for too long.’

‘She’s *twenty-two*, Antonio, not two. What are you so worried about?’

‘I’m a paranoid old man.’ He puts his hand on my arm. ‘I’ll be eternally in your debt.’



I stop at my apartment to pack a bag before going back to the Take Down, where I've called a meeting. The crew gather in my office and I tell them I'm going to be out of the game for two weeks.

I would trust each of these guys with my life and I know nothing said in my office will ever leave it. El Patron doesn't want too many people knowing he'll be out of the country and I don't want anyone thinking I'm in with him because I'm babysitting his girl. I'm in with everyone. That's how our business works. We're middlemen. We don't take sides. My crew aren't fussy about whose money we clean, whether it's Bana's, Li'l Cesar's or El Patron's. We don't give a shit where it comes from, all we care about is that it's money that will be legit, just as soon as we've shaved off our cut.

I go over the schedule for the next two weeks and distribute my workload between the crew. I keep one of my classes, though; I love teaching the young kids to fight. Hell, most of them come from hard-up families, they've got a difficult enough life ahead. I'm not letting those kids down for anybody.

When I pull up at El Patron's house the security guard waves me through and I park in the private underground garage. Antonio meets me as I'm grabbing my bag from the boot of my car.

'Marcel, I'm so pleased you're here.'

'Nice place you've got.'

'Yes. I was instrumental in its design. I like new buildings. I hate those crumbling old houses.' He wrinkles his nose.

'Really? I'd have thought you'd be more into all that old baroque architecture, Antonio.'

'I love baroque, but not here. You don't see beautiful old buildings in Rotterdam.' He waves his hand. 'This city was destroyed in the war.'

'There are still some impressive places in the centre.'

'That modern stuff doesn't do it for me. Like those cube buildings.' He shakes his head. 'Trying too hard. I prefer a functional modern building, like this one.'

I follow him to the lift. 'You were right about the weather, Antonio. It's getting warm.' I can already feel my shirt sticking to my back.

'I've got air conditioning. You'll be comfortable here.'

'Your house has only one level?' There's a single button on the lift panel.

'Yes. All one level, in the shape of a hexagon, with a garden in the centre. I had it designed in the spirit of the Pentagon in Washington.'

I grin. 'See yourself as a military general, do you?'

‘Yes, I do,’ he says, and I’m not sure he’s joking.

The interior walls of the hexagon are floor to ceiling tinted glass. There’s a sparkling blue swimming pool in the centre of the garden. I get an urge to dive into it. I can’t recall the last time I went swimming. Probably when we were kids and we got a grant from the council to go away for a summer camp. My two brothers, Dylan and I all went for a week; that’s one of the best childhood memories I have.

Antonio shows me to the guest room. It’s like a five-star hotel room, with king-size bed and en suite.

‘You’ll feel at home here, Marcel.’

‘I’ll be fine.’ Growing up, I shared a room with both my brothers. It wasn’t until we started out on our own and began earning that I discovered the luxuries that money can buy. I run my fingers over my jaw. Maybe it’s time I got myself a place like this. My loft apartment is comfortable, but this is the next level.

Gonzales is at the table in the kitchen. We greet each other. I didn’t realise he would be here and I fight to conceal the irritation his presence causes me. Everything about him sets my teeth on edge: the satin shirt, the three buttons open at his chest, the way he smiles and narrows his eyes to slits. The less time I spend around this man, the better.

‘Daleylah? *Princesa?*’ El Patron calls for his daughter. I turn, moving away from Gonzales, my gaze falling on Daleylah as she pads from her bedroom, her bare feet silent on the tiled floor. She has long dark hair that she wears loose around her face and her dark eyes flick from Gonzales to me then to her father, her teeth digging into her bottom lip. El Patron’s little girl certainly grew up.

‘*Hola, Daleylah.*’ Gonzales rises to greet her. He bends to kiss her, and I watch the flicker of annoyance cross her features as she turns her head, only allowing him to kiss her cheek. The satisfaction that small gesture of rejection brings me is surprising.

‘Daleylah, I want you to meet someone,’ Antonio says, ushering her closer to me.

I offer my hand.

Her gaze moves over my suit trousers and pale blue shirt and rests on my face. Our eyes meet and I see the flash of insecurity before it’s quickly replaced by an expression of insolence.

‘Marcel Slater,’ I say, nodding to my extended hand. She ignores me and looks at her father. I let my arm drop, a smile playing at the corners of my lips.

‘Marcel will be staying here while I’m away, *Princesa*.’

‘I don’t need looking after, Papa,’ she says, in a quiet but urgent tone meant only for her father’s ears.

‘*Princesa*, someone needs to be here. We talked about this.’

‘Why?’ she huffs. ‘I can take care of myself.’

‘Excuse us, Marcel.’ Antonio looks embarrassed. ‘She’s not been the same since her mother passed. Give me just one moment.’

I take one of the stools from the breakfast bar and sit, watching them as they speak in loud, whispered Spanish. I don’t understand but I can tell they’re arguing. I run my hand over my face. Agreeing to do this sure was a bad idea. Sharing a house with a sulking girl is not my idea of a vacation and it’s the last thing I need to be doing right now.

Daleylah is facing her father. I study her; her dress is loose on her body and falls to her ankles. As she raises her hand to brush a strand of hair from her face, the fabric pulls against the swell of her breast and I see a hint of the curves hidden beneath her clothes. I force myself to look away. This really was a bad idea.

‘Daleylah.’ Antonio raises his voice, switching to English. ‘You’ll be polite and show respect. I don’t want you leaving the house without him while I’m gone. Do you understand me?’

‘Yes, Papa.’ She looks at her feet.

‘That’s a good girl.’ He puts a hand on her shoulder and pulls her close for a hug. ‘Now, you show Marcel around the house. He is my guest, Daleylah, you are to make him feel welcome.’

‘Maria will be here soon to cook for you,’ he tells me, apologetically. ‘Daleylah’s a good girl really, Marcel. She’s just lonely, that’s all. Since what happened with her mother, she doesn’t go out any more, or see people. Once they are married everything will be much easier.’

‘I’m sure she can’t wait.’ I glance at Gonzales, whose eyes close as he smiles at me.

‘You saw Rafa at the gate? My security guard.’

‘Yeah, he waved me through.’

‘Rafa does the day shift. Stefano does the night. They’re good boys, they know what they’re doing.’

‘You only hire Spanish guards?’

‘Oh yes. It makes me more comfortable.’ He presses a hand to his chest. ‘We understand each other. It’s easier that way. Right, Joaquin and I have got to leave you now. We are running late. Call me if you encounter any problems.’

‘What sort of problems might I encounter?’ I tip my head to one side.

El Patron waves his hand. ‘Anything. Problems with the house, Daleylah, security. Maria will be here during the days...’

‘I’m sure I can handle things.’

‘So am I, Marcel.’ He shakes my hand. ‘We’ll see each other in two weeks.’

I watch them leave then look at Daleylah, who’s appraising me from beneath her eyelashes.

‘We’ll try again, now.’ I extend my hand. ‘I’m Marcel Slater.’

Slowly she places her small hand in mine, and I shake it.

‘Everyone calls me Dale.’ She pronounces her name *Dal-eh*, her tongue flicking her front teeth as she says it.

‘Dal-eh?’ I try to mimic her accent and do a horrible job. ‘Your fiancé didn’t call you that.’

She looks at me as if I’m stupid. ‘No, not him. Nor my father. But Mama used to call me Dale, and Maria, and my old friends.’

‘Your old friends? What about your new friends?’ I arch an eyebrow.

‘I don’t have many new friends. Not since he made me move here.’

‘You don’t like it here? This house is pretty cool.’ I turn around. ‘I wouldn’t mind checking out that pool. Maybe you can show me around?’ I speak gently, trying to win her over. If I’m going to be here for two weeks we might at least get along.

‘Sure.’ She turns, her hair flying as she walks to the tinted glass door. We step out on the patio and she points sullenly at the pool. The heat outside immediately hits me and I’m overdressed in my suit trousers and shirt; I need to get a pair of shorts on, fast. She hangs by the building as I walk outside and dip my hand into the water.

‘Nice. Soon as we’re done looking around, I’m gonna try it, if that’s OK with you?’

She shrugs. ‘Whatever.’ She turns away from me and walks back inside. I follow her. The flowing fabric of her dress pulls against the curve of her

bottom as she moves, and my gaze is drawn to it. I have to remind myself that she's eight years younger than me and to keep my eyes off her.

She opens each door, showing me all the rooms, pointing out the gym, the bedrooms, the bar, the games room. When we come to her bedroom, she nods at the door but doesn't show me inside. We finish the tour outside my room. I smile, trying to get her to meet my gaze, but she avoids eye contact.

'I think I'll take that swim now. Want to join me?'

She curls her top lip in a faint look of disgust, which ignites a flash of anger within me.

'I've got to study.' She goes to walk away but I catch her wrist and pull her back. Her eyes widen with shock at my physical action.

'Dale, I appreciate this is your house and everything, but let's just set some rules up front, shall we? I'm here for two weeks while your dad's out of town, at his request, not mine. We don't have to be best friends. I don't care if you like me or not. I couldn't care less, even. But while I'm here, I'm in charge, which means you will not leave this house without informing me first. I don't care what you do, as long as it's in this building, but I'd appreciate it if you would do me the honour of being civil when you speak to me.'

Her gaze is fixed on mine; she doesn't answer, her teeth biting into her lower lip.

'Do we have an agreement? Because if we don't, you're gonna have to stay by my side the whole two weeks I'm here. And I can tell you, that wouldn't be very pleasant for either of us.' I don't let go of her wrist, holding her close as I speak, waiting for her to react to give me something back that I can work with to understand where she's at. Her eyes are the colour of warm caramel. The smell of her shampoo fills the air with floral and fruity tones. She is stunningly beautiful, even more so, up close. I rethink what I just said; maybe spending two weeks with her by my side wouldn't be too unpleasant after all. If she'd only drop the attitude.

'Do you agree, Dale?'

Her lashes flicker. 'Yes, Marcel.'

'Call me Slater, everyone does.' I release her wrist.

'Papa didn't.' She rubs the skin, where I gripped it.

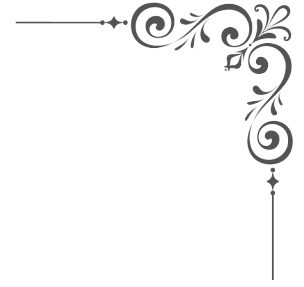
'Your father's old-fashioned. Your fiancé calls me Slater.'

'I wish you'd stop calling him that.'

‘Gonzales? I thought you were engaged to be married? That’s what your old man told me.’

‘That’s what Papa wants.’ She crosses her arms over her chest. ‘There’s no way I’m marrying that man.’

‘Antonio’s got his work cut out with you.’ I chuckle, pleased at her revelation, and head into the bedroom to change into my swim shorts.



I shut my bedroom door and lean against it. Why did Papa have to install one of his dumb heavies while he's away? I hate being around these people. All his associates are involved in drugs and who knows what other illegal activities. I'm sure Slater's no different.

The sooner I get out of here, the better. With Papa going away at the same time as Juan Carlos I thought I would finally get some freedom, then this guy shows up telling me I have to report to him if I want to go out. But even if I do have to report to him, I'm still going out tomorrow night.

I'm not normally allowed to go anywhere or do anything without my minder, Juan Carlos, and even then, I'm only allowed to lectures then straight back home. I'm treated like a two-year-old and it drives me crazy. It's been this way ever since Mama was killed.

I rub my wrist, the skin still burning from his tight grip. There's a noise in the corridor so I open the door slightly and listen as Slater leaves the guest room then goes out to the patio. I peek out and see him standing beside the pool, his back to the window. When he turns, I see that his entire left arm is decorated with a sleeve of tattoos that continue up and around his collarbone. I draw in a breath, those tattoos begging me to study them. I step closer to the window, confident that he can't see me through the tinted glass. His exposed body ripples with muscles, abs packed into hard segments, forearms thick and solid. My eyes travel down to muscular legs that emerge from black swim shorts, giving a promise of iron thighs that are hidden from view.

He removes his sunglasses, drops them on the sunlounger then turns to the pool. He stands at the edge for a moment, contemplating the water, allowing me a few extra seconds to look. Why couldn't Papa have set me up to marry a man like this, instead of Joaquin Gonzales? At least physically that would be a better option. The thought of seeing Gonzales in his swim shorts makes me shudder.

With the grace of a panther, Slater dives effortlessly into the pool. The water barely moves as he slices through it, swimming a length before surfacing. He turns and begins pounding up and down in a fast, sleek crawl.

I watch, mesmerised by the hypnotic motion of his arms, his dark eyes focused on the wall each time he comes up for air. A sound behind me makes me jump. I turn away from the window just as Maria, our housekeeper, comes in with bags of shopping.

'Hola, cariño.'

'Hola, Maria.' I quickly sit down at the kitchen table.

‘Your papa’s gone already?’

‘Yes, they just left.’

Since we moved here, Maria’s been a mother to me. Without her and Juana, the housekeeper from our house in the country, I don’t think I would have survived the last years. I felt so alone. They were there for me, carrying me through the grief that I was certain would destroy me. I watch her unload the shopping.

‘It’s a shame you couldn’t have gone with him, Dale. A few days back home would do you good.’

‘Spain was never home to me. I was born here.’

‘I know, but your mother and father are Spanish, your roots are there, and your grandparents would love to see you.’

‘Hmm.’ I peek out the window. Slater is still swimming lengths.

‘Who’s that?’ Maria stands beside me, looking outside.

‘Some guy Papa’s got in to look after me because Juan Carlos is away.’

‘Why is he in the pool?’ She frowns not liking the idea of employees using the facilities; Juan Carlos never would.

‘This guy is different, *a friend* of Papa’s, here for a holiday, apparently.’ I roll my eyes at Maria. ‘I’m supposed to treat him like a guest, not a prison guard.’

We watch as Slater puts his hands on the side of the pool and easily lifts his body out. He stands up tall, taut muscles glistening with water, then puts his sunglasses back on, sits down on a sunbed and looks at his phone.

‘Oh,’ Maria says, glancing at me. ‘And he’s staying here for a holiday?’

‘Until Papa gets back.’

‘Then I’d better cook steak tonight, *cariño*. A man like that, with all those muscles, needs to eat meat.’

She busies herself with the food while I stay where I am, toying with a scrap of paper at the table, thinking about tomorrow. I want to go out so badly. The girl I sit next to in my lectures, Sanne, invited me to join a group at Paradiso. Jordan will be going, too. I bite the side of a nail. I’ve never spoken to him, but I always try to get a seat in one of the rows behind him and spend most of my lectures staring at the back of his neck.

I won’t let Slater stop me from going. I’ve waited too long for a chance like this, Papa and Juan Carlos both away at the same time never happens.

The patio door opens; Maria and I both look up.

‘Great pool.’ He’s already partly dry from the sun, his towel slung around his neck, wet swim shorts clinging to his legs.

‘Hmm.’ I focus intently on my nails, not able to look at him without staring at his half-naked body.

‘Ahem!’

Maria coughs. I glance at her, read her expression.

‘Oh, sorry. Slater, this is Maria, our housekeeper. Maria, this is Slater. I mean, Marcel Slater.’

‘Pleasure to meet you, *señor*.’ She steps forward, wiping her hands on her apron, then smooths her hair. She takes hold of Slater’s outstretched hand and only goes and curtseys for him. I roll my eyes. Just because I told her we’re to treat him like a friend of my father, not an employee. She’s never curtseyed for Juan Carlos.

‘Dinner will be ready for you soon. Have you got everything you need? Towels? Is the room OK for you?’ She walks with him to the guest room, fussing. I stretch my arms out in front of me and drop my head onto them.

‘*Cariño*,’ Maria hisses when she comes back. ‘Get your head up. Help me lay the table, the one on the patio, and use the good silverware.’

‘Why? For Slater? Why are you making such a fuss? He’s nobody special, just some security guy Papa’s got in.’

She clucks her tongue and looks at me disapprovingly. ‘Daleylah, your father asked us to treat him with respect. You can see the sort of man he is.’

‘No, I can’t. What sort of man?’

‘Someone important. You can see from the way he stands and walks. In Spain, men like that command respect. And he’s a friend of your father’s.’

I go to the drawer, take out a linen tablecloth and carry it to the patio.

‘But we’re not in Spain now,’ I mutter, as I spread the cloth.

‘No, but that doesn’t mean you should disregard the lessons from your homeland. Your culture is who you are, *cariño*; you are still young, you have so much to learn.’

‘Yeah, but no one is letting me learn anything. I’m hardly going to learn much about life locked in this house,’ I say, as I walk back inside.

‘It’s for your own good, Dale. After your poor mother ... God rest her soul.’ She marks the sign of a cross on her body.

I take cutlery from the drawer.

‘I can do this.’ She takes the knives and forks from me. ‘You go and freshen up for dinner.’

‘Maria, stop making it such a big deal.’

‘Your father isn’t here, so it’s up to you to entertain him. Why don’t you put on some of the new clothes you had delivered last week? I haven’t seen you in anything new for so long.’

‘I don’t want to create more laundry. This is fine.’ I look down at my dress, so Maria can’t see the flush that’s creeping to my cheeks.

‘I do the laundry, it’s no problem. Go, change, Dale.’ She pushes me in the direction of my bedroom. ‘The food will be ready in half an hour.’

I shut my bedroom door and look through my wardrobe. Maria kept complaining to my father that I didn’t have enough clothes, so he transferred some money to me so I could order some new things. I ordered some, to make Maria happy, but then I secretly returned them all to get the money back. All apart from shoes and a dress for tomorrow night. I pull it from the back of the wardrobe and run my fingers over it, loving the smooth feel of the stretchy black fabric.

I don’t need any other clothes. The only other place I ever go is to university lectures four times a week; I’ve got enough clothes for that. But I do need money. As soon as I graduate, I’m leaving. I’m going to start a new life where no one knows that I’m El Patron’s daughter. Somewhere I won’t have a target on my head. And where I won’t have to marry Joaquin Gonzales.

I take out an old dark-blue dress that I haven’t worn in years. Hopefully Maria won’t remember this one. It’s a little tight around the bust and under the arms, but it looks kind of OK. I check my reflection in the mirror. The hem falls mid-calf and the sleeves are three-quarter length. I pull the fabric around the chest to try to loosen it, then smooth it down, satisfied with my appearance.

A bell rings outside my door. I roll my eyes. That’s Maria’s new signal dinner’s ready. When it’s just her and me eating she doesn’t even bother putting a tablecloth on the table. She doesn’t behave like this for Gonzales, or Harry, another of Papa’s associates, when they’re here. Maybe Slater’s half-naked body had an effect on her, too. I smile to myself and head to the patio.

‘Seriously? What’s with the candles?’

‘It looks nice, *cariño*.’

‘And why are there only two place settings? What about you?’ I stare at her suspiciously.

‘He doesn’t want to eat with me. I’m the housekeeper.’

‘But we always eat together. I don’t want to eat with him and not you.’

‘I’ll be right here, I won’t leave you alone with him. But I work for your father, Dale. I’m not family or a friend.’

‘You’re my family. And my friend. I don’t want to eat with that man without you.’

‘I’ll be right here. Can you turn the lights of the pool on?’

I go inside and flick the switch and the blue water of the pool glows. It’s just one evening. I’ll be civil to him tonight, then I’ll keep out of his way as much as I can tomorrow. If I can get him onside tonight, he might even not make too much trouble about me going out tomorrow evening.

Slater comes out of his room, his dark hair wet from the shower and combed back.

‘Are we eating outside?’ He looks out at the patio.

‘Yup. It’s a warm evening.’

‘Marcel, there you are.’ Maria hustles him to sit down.

I slide into the chair opposite and watch as he looks at the pool. ‘Your old man was right. This is like being on vacation.’

‘It’s not always like this. We normally eat inside. I don’t know why Maria is making such an effort.’

He looks at me and I immediately flick my gaze to the table, feeling the weight of his stare.

‘Why are you so uptight, Dale? You don’t want me staying here, you’ve made that clear, but guess what – I am – so you might as well stop acting like a kid and suck it up. Or I’ll start thinking I actually am here to babysit a two-year-old, like I feared.’

My skin prickles and I glare at him. His dark eyes twinkle with laughter in a way that makes me want to take the jug of iced water that Maria’s set on the table and tip it over his head. But I remember my plan: be civil, try to win him over, so tomorrow, when it comes time for me to go out, he’ll repay the favour.

‘Sorry.’ I smile. ‘I’m not used to this. We don’t often have company.’

‘Your dad’s pretty protective?’

‘You could say that, but it would be an understatement. I live in a luxury jail.’

A smile traces the corner of his lips. ‘You’re a bird in a gilded cage?’

I hold his eyes. ‘Standing on a grave of dreams.’ I quote the Maya Angelou poem that I studied in English and search his face to see if he knows

it. He narrows his eyes but there's no recognition.

'Your father is only trying to protect you,' he says, eventually.

'Protect me by taking my freedom?'

Slater holds up his hands. 'It's between you and him.'

'Yes, you're right,' I say brightly. 'You didn't come here to listen to me moan. What do you do? When you're not babysitting caged birds, that is.' I smile, although I feel like crying, I don't know why.

'I run a chain of fight clubs.' He leans back in his chair, legs extending out in front of him. The top two buttons of his shirt are undone, exposing his chest, but my gaze is drawn to his forearms. His shirt sleeves are rolled up and the network of black tattooed marks on his left arm are visible. Maria places a bottle of wine on the table, which makes me look up, and I realise I've been staring at him and haven't heard what he said.

I get up quickly, embarrassed.

'*Nona*, should I help you? You're running around like a servant.' Her face is flushed from the stove. She might be the housekeeper but she's like family to me.

'No.' She puts a hand on my shoulder and presses me back down into my seat. 'You enjoy. It's so rare we have company. *Nona* can manage on her own.'

She pours wine into each of our glasses then bustles back to the kitchen.

I glance at Slater; he's watching me with curiosity. He picks up his glass and holds it out.

'So, cheers.'

'Cheers.' I touch my glass to his, but struggle to meet his eyes. 'You were saying something about fight clubs?'

'Yeah, I've got three.'

Fight clubs. He's an associate of my father's so I imagine that there's something illegal about them: gambling, drug dealing.

'What sort of fighting?'

'MMA, mainly. That's my specialism, but we train lots of different skills.'

'What's MMA?'

'Mixed martial arts. I'm a champion. Although lately I've been specialising in ju-jitsu.'

'A champion?' I don't know why that surprises me. He's got the body for it.

He slides his thumb across the stubble of his chin. I watch as the cords in his tattooed forearm flex and suddenly I'm filled with an overwhelming desire to watch him fight.

'I've never seen a fight.'

'No?' He grins. 'Not your thing?'

'I don't know.'

'If you want, I could teach you something. We've got time these next two weeks, and we run some girls' MMA and self-defence classes.'

'Oh. I'm not sure...' I hesitate; a personal fighting lesson seems kind of intimate. Fortunately, Maria arrives so I don't have to answer. Slater gets up to take the plates from her.

'Sit, sit.'

She fusses with Slater as I go inside to fetch the bowl of salad and tray of baked *patatas bravas* that she's prepared. The smell of the crunchy potatoes makes my stomach rumble as I carry them outside, and I realise I am hungrier than I thought.

'*Gracias, cariño.*'

'Maria, this looks amazing,' Slater says.

'I hope you enjoy it.' She smiles proudly and I can't help but feel happy at her smile.

'I think she's taken a liking to you,' I tell him, as he spoons potatoes onto my plate.

'If it means I get to eat like this every day, then great.'

'I'm sure you will. Every day apart from tomorrow, that is. Tomorrow is Maria's day off. But if you ask her, she'd probably come in to cook for you.' I glance at him. 'Although, she does need her rest day.'

I hope he doesn't ask her to come. The last thing I need is Maria here tomorrow night. There's no way I'll be able to go out if she's here.

'I'm sure I'll survive for a night. I've managed for thirty years, most of them I've been cooking for myself.'

I smile, trying to hide my relief. 'Don't you have family?'

'I've got two younger brothers, Carl and Bram. They work with me in the gym. Carl does the accounts and Bram's a trainer, like I am.'

'And your mother and father?'

He shakes his head.

'You don't have a mother and father?'

‘Not any more. I never knew my father. He was in the British army, might still be for all I know. And my mother’s long gone.’

‘Oh. Sorry.’

‘Don’t be. I’m not.’ He’s holding his glass of wine as he looks at me. ‘And what do you do to while away the hours in your gilded prison?’

‘I’m doing a degree in literary studies.’

He nods as though he has no idea what I’m talking about. I assume reading isn’t his thing.

‘Is that fun?’

‘It is. I’m almost finished. I just need to take my Finals then I can graduate.’ And get far away from this place, my father and all his criminal associates.

‘And that’s why you couldn’t travel to Spain with your father; he told me.’

‘Yeah, that’s why.’ I swirl the contents of my wine glass. That, and because going on a trip to Spain with Papa and Gonzales is just about the last thing I want to do.

‘You didn’t finish the potatoes,’ Maria chides as she clears the plates.

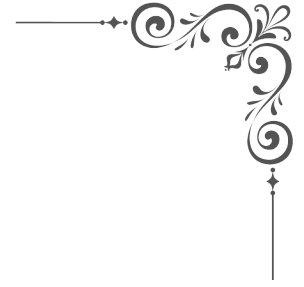
Slater puts his hand on his stomach. ‘It was amazing, but I couldn’t eat any more. I’ll have to spend extra long in your gym tomorrow as it is.’

‘You’ve got all day, right? You’re not going out or anything tomorrow, are you?’ I ask casually.

He shakes his head. ‘I’ve got some appointments I can’t miss the day after, but tomorrow, I’m all yours.’ He smiles, his eyes finding mine.

The look sends a flutter of anticipation through me: he’s all mine tomorrow. How am I going to get out? Will I be able to convince him to let me go? A thread of doubt creeps into my mind, but I lift my head and hold eye contact and smile back.

‘Wonderful. I’m already looking forward to it.’



Was she flirting with me? I watch as she walks to her bedroom. I can't work her out. One moment I get the impression she hates the very sight of me and the next I'm questioning if she's flirting with me. I throw back the last of the wine and walk around the pool, thinking.

My phone buzzes with a message from Bram. He wants to speak to me. I look around for somewhere to call him from, not trusting that El Patron hasn't got cameras and bugs all over this joint, but I don't find anywhere I trust so I tell Bram I'll call him tomorrow, then head inside to bed.

'There's fresh coffee, and juice in the fridge.' Dale smiles at me from her seat at the kitchen table. 'I didn't know what you wanted to eat, but I can make you anything you like.'

'Wow. Thanks. I'm not used to that sort of wake up.' I pull my hand through my hair. 'Where's Maria?'

'She's at home, it's her day off today, remember? She'll be in tomorrow.'

'Oh, yeah.' I look around. 'Is anyone else here?'

'No, just security at the gate.'

'Oh, right. Just you and me, then.' I frown.

'What's the matter?'

'I was going to go for a run, maybe around the perimeter of the building, but I don't want to leave you in here alone.'

'Oh. Well, I could come with you.' She shrugs. 'I was going to exercise anyway.' She points at the baggy T-shirt she's wearing.

I hesitate, assessing the risks.

'Please? I haven't been out for ages and if I'm with you, I'll be fine, right? You said you were a champion of ... MMA, that was it, wasn't it?'

She looks up at me, her brown eyes wide and pleading, and suddenly I feel my body respond to her. I have to turn away and pour myself a glass of water.

'OK, sure, I guess you can come, if you stay close to me,' I say, looking back at her over my shoulder.

She grins. 'I promise not to leave your side. I'll just go grab my trainers.'

I wait for her by the door, stretching my quads by lifting my calf to my glute.

'Ready.' She comes out of her room with her shoes on and wearing a pair of shorts that expose the shapely curve of her legs. I avert my eyes and head out to the front of the house.

An hour later we get back to El Patron's house. Dale showed me a path that took us about a kilometre away from the property and we ran several laps. It's already getting warm and my T-shirt is damp with sweat.

'You go in, I'll be there in a minute. I'm going to stretch out here for a bit,' I tell her, stopping by the door.

'OK.' She turns around to look at me but keeps walking backwards.

'Shall I prepare something for your breakfast? Eggs or fruit maybe?'

'Thanks. Eggs, scrambled, would be nice.'

'Sure.' She smiles, raising her hand in a little wave, then turns and jogs inside.

I frown, watching her go. She's like a different person today, friendly and helpful. Yesterday, I had the feeling she couldn't stand the sight of me and today, she's offering to prepare my breakfast.

I take out my phone and call Bram on the gym number.

'S'up?' I say when my brother picks up.

'Hey, bro.'

I can hear the background noise of the gym, the smack of leather on the leather of the punch bag. It makes me smile.

'How's the babysitting going? What's El Patron's girl like?'

'I don't know yet. Jury's still out.'

'Not sure babysitting is your thing?' He laughs.

'It's not my thing. What did you want?'

'Can you talk?'

'Yeah, I'm outside.' I lean against the wall.

'Bana wants to add to the delivery.'

'What does he want to add?'

'A whole heap of shit. Grenades, mainly, and a load of other stuff.'

'What he do? Hit up an artillery unit?'

'Fuck knows, I don't even wanna ask. But you know, with all his connections in Eastern Europe, I wouldn't be surprised if they aren't government issue...'

Tomek Banasinski is Polish but seems to have connections in just about every Eastern European country. He showed up in Rotterdam some years back and began dealing drugs on the outskirts of the city. When he tried to move into El Patron's turf things became ugly and El Patron warned him off. That was how all that stuff with Boris and El Patron's wife getting killed

started. Since then, he's stuck to the outskirts and things have been relatively calm between the crews.

Bana's crew aren't only into dealing drugs, they also import weapons, and girls too to sell into the sex trade. We help him with arms, but I never have nor ever will have anything to do with his trading girls.

'And?' I ask my brother. 'Can we shift it all?'

'Guess so. I mean, the dark web doesn't discriminate, does it? But I need to check with our guy. I'm meeting Bana tomorrow to negotiate the price. Can you be there?'

I glance at the house. This is a big deal. I can't let Bram handle it on his own. 'Time?'

'Around lunchtime.'

'I'll be there.'

'Cool, I'll let you know where. In the meantime, enjoy your vacation.'

'Hmm, I think that'll be easier said than done,' I murmur, pushing off the wall and standing up.

'Why? Is she giving you a hard time?'

'Not exactly. I just don't know what to make of her. She seems kind of complicated.'

'Who isn't?' I hear my brother laughing.

'I'll see you tomorrow, Bram.' I cut the call and head inside to take a shower.

I spend the rest of the day swimming and lying in the sun. I seriously should consider taking up swimming, it's great for strength and conditioning. I feel my muscles working as I power up and down the pool, pushing myself to go faster with each length. When the sun goes down I go to El Patron's gym and spend a few hours lifting weights and working on my arms. By the time I'm finished, I'm starving. I head to the fridge, remembering it's Maria's day off. Just me and Dale tonight. Maybe I'll be able to get to know her a bit better, figure out what she's really like. I could see if she wants to watch something on Netflix, that might get her to relax a bit. I run a hand through my hair. I haven't seen her all day, not since our run. She's spent most of the day in her room.

As much as I don't want to admit it, there is something about her I'm attracted to, in spite of the shapeless clothes and her attitude. The sight of her legs this morning affected me. I'm pretty sure beneath her clothes she's got an incredible body. It's a shame she hasn't used the pool today, seeing her in

a bikini would give me a chance to really check her out. My mind wanders until I stop myself. She's El Patron's daughter. Getting into something with her would be an extremely bad idea. I don't suppose he would like it one bit, not to mention she's engaged to his right-hand man.

Her bedroom door opens; I turn at the sound. Dale comes out of her room, her legs elongated by high stiletto heels and her curves very much accentuated by the black dress she's wearing. Her waist is tight, her hips curve like an hourglass and the dress clings to them, exposing everything. My suspicions were right; her body is smoking hot and now very much on display.

All my senses awaken at the sight of her, but the enthusiasm is mingled with irritation.

'I'm assuming you're not dressed up like that for an evening on the sofa watching Netflix.' I grin, crossing my arms over my chest, not liking where this is going.

She tosses her long dark hair over her shoulder and smiles. Her full lips are dark and glossy with lipstick, and my gaze automatically fixes on them.

'Actually, I need to head out tonight. Some people from my course are meeting up at Paradiso and I promised I'd be there.'

I run my fingers over my jaw, feeling it tighten. Why does she have to do this? Just when everything was going so smoothly. I shake my head.

'Not happening.'

'Excuse me?'

'Not happening,' I repeat, and turn away from her to grab a bottle of water from the fridge. I search through the cupboards until I find a snack, ignoring her bristling silently behind me.

'You can't stop me going out,' she says, eventually.

I walk past her to the table and sit down.

'I can and I am.'

'You're not my prison guard.'

'I kind of am.'

'I'm not a prisoner. You're not my father.'

'No, I'm not.' I fight to keep the annoyance out of my tone. 'But I'm here as a favour to your father and he told me not to take my eyes off you, so sorry, Dale. Not happening.'

'I could have sneaked out while you were in the gym. I could be there by now and you'd have no idea I'd gone, but I didn't. I played it straight and

told you where I'm going and you repay me by saying I can't go? I'm twenty-two. I'm an adult. I want to go and meet my friends.'

I toss a handful of nuts into my mouth and wash them down with water while studying her, brown eyes brimming with moisture, lips swollen and quivering, and again feel my body respond to her. I suck in a breath, considering. Paradiso is in the centre of the city. It's on neutral territory. I draw a hand through my hair, considering the risks. The chances of bumping into any of Bana's crew there are slim to none. They're not the type to go to clubs. Maybe Li'l Cesar's men might be there but it's a mainstream club and not their usual hang-out. The bigger risk is meeting El Patron's own men – then it'll get straight back to him. I run my fingers over my jaw, hating to be the bad guy for her. If I don't leave her side, I guess there's no risk of her coming to any harm.

I lean back in the chair, wondering if having to explain this to El Patron is worth making her happy. I run my gaze over her again. Her long dark hair frames her face and her dark eye make-up is now smudged from her tears, which only makes her look cuter, and that body is so damn hot. I get a strong desire to do something nice for her.

'OK, Dale. You can go.'

Her upset expression dissolves into happiness. She smiles, a sparkle appearing in her eyes.

'Thank you, Slater, thank you so much. I knew you were different.'

'I better get changed.' I stand up.

'What?'

'I'm coming with you. I haven't been to Paradiso for years.'

She glares at me. 'I don't need a minder.'

'Don't worry, I won't cramp your style or anything. I'll keep my distance. Just let me change real quick.'

'You don't have to come. I'll be fine.'

'I'm coming with you or you don't go. That's the deal, take it or leave it.' I look at her, waiting for her response. She glowers at me, and then pulls out a chair, drops down onto it and huffs.

'Can you please hurry up, then? I'm supposed to be there in ten minutes.'

'I'll be as quick as I can.' I head to my room. 'You didn't give me much notice.'

'You weren't supposed to be coming,' she calls after me.

I park around the corner from the club. She hasn't said a word to me on the drive here and the atmosphere in the car is tense. As soon as I turn off the engine she reaches for the door handle, but I catch her wrist. It startles her.

'I'll stay out of your way tonight. But I'll be watching you the whole time.'

She closes her eyes in frustration.

'It's for your own good, Dale.'

'Yeah, great.'

'And after the club, that's it. No going on anywhere else, no going back to anyone's house, you come straight back to my car.'

'But...'

I release her wrist and hold up my hand. 'You can do all that on someone else's watch. Your father asked me for this favour and I sure as hell wish I hadn't agreed to it, but I did, and I don't break my promises. So I mean it: after the club we're going home.'

'And what if I refuse?' Her eyes flash with defiance. 'What if I just leave anyway?'

'Try it and see what happens.' I smile and put my hand on the door. 'Shall we?'

There's no queue to get into Paradiso. I stay a few steps behind her, watching as she meets her friends, who are waiting for her outside. I scan the group, trying to get a read on them. Four girls and three guys. The other girls pale in comparison to Dale, they look like they're trying too hard, not used to going out, lacking confidence. The guys look like typical university students, supposed to be broke but clearly with enough money to afford designer shirts and shoes. These are the sorts of guys with big mouths and attitudes, but as soon as any real trouble develops, they'll be gone. The kids from my fight classes might not have the money or brains of these university students but I know who I'd rather spend my time with.

I enter the club behind them. The girls are excited and visibly nervous, linking arms and struggling to walk in their high heels. Only Dale looks natural, even with her dark make-up; maybe it's that striking, long dark hair.

They find a table and sit down. Once I see that they're settled I go to the bar and grab a beer, then find my own standing table a short distance away, from where I can keep an eye on her. We're on a mezzanine. The dance floor is below, and I can see over the railing there are already lots of people dancing. This might turn out to be a long night and I could use some

company, so I text my brother and tell him where I am. Bram and Dylan show up at the club in about fifteen minutes.

‘Never picked you for a Paradiso man, bro,’ Bram jokes, leaning beside me at the table.

‘Funnily enough, it wasn’t my pick.’

Dylan comes back from the bar and hands my brother a beer.

‘How’s the vacation so far, Slater?’

‘Would be better if I didn’t have to spend the evening here.’

‘Where is she?’ Bram asks.

I nod my head in the direction of her table.

‘Which one?’

‘Long dark hair, black dress.’

He breathes out through his teeth. ‘That’s her? Fuck me. I can see why El Patron’s keeping her quiet.’

‘Forget it, Bram. She’s mine.’ It comes out before I can stop myself. ‘And she’s just a kid.’

‘She’s yours?’ He arches an eyebrow and exchanges a look with Dylan. ‘What does that mean?’

‘She’s my responsibility, I mean.’

‘Whatever you say, boss.’ Bram holds up his hands, smiling, mocking me. ‘How old is she, anyway?’

‘Twenty-two.’

‘Only five years younger than me. And legal.’ Bram winks at Dylan, so I punch him on the arm.

‘Hey.’ He pulls away from me rubbing his bicep. ‘Easy.’

I smile. ‘I’ve got enough on my plate keeping her away from the rest of the men in this club, I don’t need to add you to the list. Drop it.’

‘Sure.’ Bram grins, while Dylan swallows a laugh.

‘Let’s get to the point.’ I want to get off this subject. ‘Where are we with Bana?’

Dylan leans closer, voice low so I can only just hear him over the music. ‘He’s doubled his delivery.’

‘Yeah, I heard from Bram this morning. What’s the new value?’

‘I calculated it. He’s adding a hundred to the original shipment.’ Dylan runs a hand over his chin, his stubble longer and almost looking like goatee beard.

‘Has Sepp told our man?’ We have a connection from the dark web who we use to sell on the gear. Sepp’s the only one in contact with him.

‘He has,’ he says.

‘And?’

‘He can shift it all, no problem. But it’ll take longer.’

‘Where can we store it?’

‘The garage at the docks is empty,’ Dylan says. ‘I had Jimmy and Rich clear it out today.’

‘What’s our price?’ I look at Bram.

‘I dunno, what do you think? Fifteen?’

I consider for a moment. Fifteen per cent feels too low to me, considering what we’re dealing with.

‘Ask for twenty, settle on seventeen,’ I tell him. ‘More risk, more logistics.’

I look at each of them in turn. They nod.

‘We’re meeting him lunchtime?’

‘Yup.’ Bram sips his beer.

‘OK.’ I pick up my bottle and shift my eyes to Dale’s table.

A group of her friends have gone to the dance floor and she’s sitting alone with one of the guys. He’s saying something and she’s listening intently, like he’s telling her something of utmost importance. I wonder what he can be saying to have her looking so completely fascinated. I feel a pang of jealousy. He’s got mousey brown hair, slightly buck teeth, and doesn’t look particularly well built from where I’m standing, so whatever it is that’s got her so rapt can’t be physical. Her face is flushed from excitement and alcohol and, as she leans in closer to hear what he’s saying, I know he’ll be getting an eyeful of her cleavage. It pisses me off and I have to drag my eyes away from her. Fucking university students, they’re so superior, just because they’re studying and know how to talk. I’d like to see them deal with setting up and running a business, like I have.

‘How’s things at the gym?’ I ask Dylan, turning away from her.

‘Busy. I was teaching till midnight, last night, and again today; my arms are still aching.’ Dylan stretches, reaching upwards, the rolled-up sleeves of his shirt sliding further back and exposing more of his tattooed forearms. He’s got more tattoos than me, a sleeve on each arm, and more on his back.

‘You know what helps? Swimming,’ I tell him. ‘We need to look into getting a training pool in one of our places.’

I glance back at her table and freeze, adrenalin pumping into my body. She's gone.

'Relax.' Dylan puts his hand on my shoulder. 'Over there.' He points down to the dance floor where she's dancing with her friends.

'I fucking hate this,' I mutter and move closer to the balustrade to watch her. That jerk she was talking with manoeuvres to dance beside her. 'Why did I fucking agree to be a babysitter?'

'Beats me.' Dylan joins me, leaning his elbows on the railing.

'Anyone wanna dance?' Bram asks.

'No. And you're staying here, too,' I say, through gritted teeth; the last thing I need is my brother hitting on her. 'El Patron owes me big time for this.'

'He's paying you, right?' Dylan asks.

'Not enough,' I mutter and take a long swallow from my beer.

'Surely two weeks alone with her is payment enough?' Bram says, leaning on the rail beside me.

I glare at my brother. 'She doesn't usually dress like that. And, to state the obvious, she's kind of off limits.'

'Ah, yeah.' Bram nods. 'Although, those forbidden fruits are the ones that taste the sweetest.' He finishes his beer. 'Another round, anyone?'

The guys keep me company until Dale and her group make signs that they're about to leave the club. I catch her eye as she gets up and she looks away from me, but it's enough to make me satisfied she knows I'm here and so she doesn't forget about meeting me back at my car and try to slip off somewhere.

We hang back as her group head to the exit of the club. She's wobbly on her feet, I note, clearly having had too much to drink. Her guy friend steadies her; his arm snakes around her waist as they walk together to the door. We let them go, waiting a few minutes before leaving, and I lose sight of them.

Outside the club, we find her group lingering on the pavement, talking.

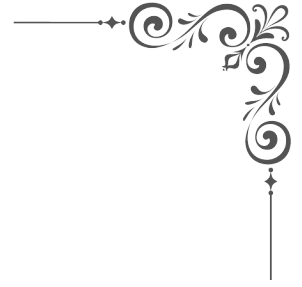
'Hey, where's your date gone?' Bram asks.

I scan the faces but don't see her. I glance up the street in the direction of my car. She can't have made it around the corner already, that would have been too fast; we were only about twenty seconds behind them. Her guy friend is with them, so she hasn't slipped off somewhere with him.

'Shit,' I murmur. 'D, I'm parked around the corner; go check out my car, see if she's waiting for me there. Bram, you stay here and watch her friends

in case she comes back. I'm going back in to look for her.'

I head back into the club, my heart pounding, hands clenched in fists at my sides. I do not need this, why did I let her out of my sight? If someone snatched her, I've no idea how I'll explain it to El Patron. Nah, scrap that, there's no way I'll get into this with him. I have to get her back before he gets wind of it. There's no option.



I pull a comb through my hair then put on an extra coat of lipstick, staring at my reflection. I wish Sanne was here with me, but she'd already gone ahead when I realised I had to use the toilet.

I'm dying to talk to her about what just happened with Jordan. He had his arm around me as we were walking. I can still feel the heat of his hand on my hip and it makes me tingle with excitement. I've never been touched by a man like that before and the feeling is a heady thrill.

I've spoken to him so much tonight and we even danced together. It was in a group so it wasn't actually *together*, but we were close. I think he likes me! A smile forces its way to my lips at the thought of Jordan actually liking me. If I could just speak to Sanne... I need to tell someone or I might burst with happiness.

This is the best evening ever. It's so much fun to be out with people, drinking and having a good time. I don't want it to end. I want to go back to Sanne's with the rest of them, now. Everyone's going, except me. But Slater made me promise to go straight back to his car. Like a kid. Or like some sort of Cinderella who's got to go back to her life of oppression.

The whole evening, I could feel Slater's eyes on me. It was awkward knowing he was there with those two other guys, barely moving, watching me all the time.

I step back and turn round, checking my reflection in the mirror one last time, then push through the door of the Ladies and head towards the exit. I flick my hair so it falls down my back, feeling confident and sexy for the first time ever. Maybe Jordan will even kiss me goodnight. I glance back at the dance floor; the music is loud and there are still a lot of people dancing. I wish we weren't leaving so soon.

'Oh!' I turn round as I bump into something hard. I walked straight into a man without looking. He moves, blocking my path.

'What's the hurry, babe?'

He smells of alcohol and sweat. My hands press against the damp cotton of his shirt as he holds me close to him. I try to step away but can't move, as his arms encase me. I struggle, but he's too strong. He grabs my bottom, pulling me closer to his body.

'You can bump into me anytime.'

I push hard against him, trying to get away, but it's like pushing against concrete. Panic rises in my throat.

'Get off me.'

‘Why? We’re having so much fun.’

His hand tightens on my bottom, his fingers curling beneath the hem of my dress.

I struggle against him, but his grip is tight. I pound my fists against his chest, pushing him away, but that just makes him hold me closer.

‘Calm down, babe, you bumped into me.’

‘Let me go!’

I shove his chest, but it achieves nothing. He’s pressing his crotch against me.

‘Get off!’ I cry out, but the music in the club is so loud my voice dissolves into the atmosphere. There are people passing but no one seems to notice us, we must just look like a couple hugging.

‘Why don’t we go around here, for a little privacy?’

He lifts me off my feet, his fingers digging into the soft flesh of my behind, his arousal pressed against me. He walks towards the side of the bathrooms as I hammer my fists against his chest and kick at his shins, but he doesn’t even flinch.

‘Didn’t you hear her?’ Slater hisses, appearing at my side and tearing the man’s arms off me. I stumble backwards as I’m released, my feet fighting for balance. I gasp, shock pulsing through my body as tears of relief spring to my eyes.

Slater grips the guy’s shirt and flings him against the wall.

‘She said she didn’t want you to touch her.’

Anger is painted on his face. He presses his forearm into the man’s neck, choking him against the wall.

‘Do not do it again.’

The man’s eyes are wide with surprise. He opens his mouth to say something but before he can speak Slater smashes his hand upwards, breaking his nose. Blood flows from him like an open tap; he cries, then bends double, gripping his face.

Slater steps away from him and checks his shirt is clean before he turns to me. His eyes are dark and flashing with fury. I take a breath, relief flooding my body. I glance back at the man, realising how very close that was.

‘Let’s get out of here,’ Slater says, and he takes me by the arm and walks me to the door. I let Slater support my weight. My whole body is shaking.

We stop before we reach the exit of the club and he looks at me, cupping my face and examining me. Then he wipes the tears and smudged mascara

from under my eyes with his thumb.

‘Are you OK?’

He peers into my eyes, as if searching for the answer to his question.

I nod, not trusting myself to speak.

‘Say goodbye to your friends then go straight to my car,’ he instructs me. ‘I’ll be waiting for you.’

I nod again. He indicates for me to go first, so I walk out of the club. I breathe in the night air when I get outside and fix a smile on my face as I approach my friends. I keep my hands by my sides, afraid that someone will see I’m trembling if I don’t.

‘Hey, San.’ I take her aside. ‘I’m going to head home. I’m feeling so tired.’

‘Really? You sure?’

‘Yeah. I’m not used to being out so late!’ I laugh; it sounds awkward and false.

‘I bet Jordan will be disappointed.’ She nudges me.

‘Yeah.’ I look at my shoes. ‘I’ll stay longer next time.’ I give her a hug and then shout goodbye to the rest of the group, avoiding Jordan’s gaze. I turn and hurry down the street to Slater’s car, tears welling in my eyes.

When I turn the corner, out of sight of my friends, and see Slater waiting beside his car I want to run to him and collapse into his arms. Everything about him screams safety. I force myself to walk to him slowly, but with each step that brings me closer I feel more and more grateful. He opens the passenger door and lets me into his car.

I drop onto the leather seat and almost burst into tears of relief. I fight to keep my composure, not wanting to lose it in front of him. Slater closes my door then walks round to the driver’s side and gets in next to me.

He doesn’t speak as he manoeuvres the car out of the city centre. Neither of us does. I glance sideways, watching him drive. His eyes are on the road and his jaw looks tight, a frown wrinkling his forehead. I bite my lip. Everything would have been fine if I’d just left the club with my friends or if I’d called out to Sanne to come with me to the toilet. But Jordan had his arm around me, and I didn’t want to look like a silly girl who can’t go to the toilet alone.

What would have happened if Slater hadn’t been there? Would that man have bundled me around the corner of the toilets? Then what? I shiver at the

thought and Slater's gaze leaves the road and lands on me. I meet his eyes and try to read what's behind them, but he looks away.

'Are you hurt?'

I consider his question. The adrenalin is still in my body, and my heart is pumping fast.

'No, I don't think so.'

'Good.'

When we get home, Stefano waves us past the security booth and opens the door to the parking garage; we drive in and he cuts the engine.

'Slater?'

He stops moving, his hand on the door handle, and looks at me.

'I'm sorry,' I whisper.

He doesn't answer, just opens the car door and gets out. I follow him inside, feeling wretched with guilt and embarrassment. I watch as he pours himself a glass of Papa's whisky. He glances at me and takes another glass, pours a finger measure into it and hands it to me.

'I don't drink whisky.'

'Drink it. You need it.'

I take the glass and sip it, the alcohol burning my lips and tongue. He stands by the window staring out at the terrace. I wait for him to say something, but he doesn't. The silence drags until I can't stand it any more.

'Are you angry with me?'

He turns and looks at me and I feel like a disappointing child. I swallow a larger sip of whisky, forcing myself not to wince as it heats my throat. He tips his head to the side.

'No, I'm not angry with you.'

'Are you going to tell Papa?'

'No.'

He doesn't miss a beat before answering and then he turns back to the window.

'What would have happened? If you hadn't been there, I mean. What would he have done?'

'Don't think about it.'

'But there's security and cameras, right? Someone would have spotted us and come to help me, right?'

He looks at me, lips in a firm line.

‘It happens frequently. Most of the girls who come to our self-defence classes have been attacked, in clubs, out of clubs. It can happen anywhere.’

My skin contracts into goosebumps as I remember that man’s grip on me. I couldn’t escape. Slater walks over and puts a hand on my shoulder.

‘I’ll talk to Antonio when he gets back, get him to enrol you in one of our courses. I won’t tell him about tonight, but it doesn’t hurt to know how to look after yourself. Especially if you’re going to places like that. I won’t always be with you.’

I stare at him. The thought of what would have happened if he hadn’t been watching me hangs in the air. I want him always with me. I don’t think I ever want to go anywhere without his protection again.

‘I don’t go out much. Not when Papa’s home. He never lets me out in the evenings. I shouldn’t have gone tonight. It was stupid. I won’t go out again. Ever.’ I sink down into the chair and swallow the rest of the whisky, letting the liquor cut my throat.

‘You can’t stay in this golden cage all your life, little bird.’

His voice is kind.

‘Hiding’s not the answer. The best thing to do is to learn to protect yourself, so you can go out and feel confident you can handle anything that arises.’

He smiles, the sides of his eyes crinkle and I get an overwhelming urge to ask him for a hug.

‘But for now, I need you to promise me something.’

‘What?’ I’d promise him just about anything right now.

‘No more surprise trips out like that while I’m here.’ He grins.

‘No.’ I look down at my hands and pick at the side of my nail.

‘Hey, are you OK?’

He brushes a strand of hair from my face. I look up at him, the gentle gesture sending me over the edge; tears spring to my eyes and I can feel my face crumple.

‘Come here.’

He pulls me to my feet and wraps his arms around me. I bury my face in his hard chest, unable to stop the tears from spilling and soaking the fabric of his shirt.

‘You’re safe now, Dale. It’s over now,’ he whispers in my ear.

‘I’m so sorry,’ I murmur.

The warmth of his body and protection of his arms soothes me, and I let him hold me for a long time before I pull away from him.

‘Look, I’ve got mascara over you,’ I sob, wiping at the wet cotton of his shirt.

He catches my hand, squeezing it gently within his.

‘It’s OK, little bird. I’ve got plenty shirts.’

I look up at him and smile through my tears.

‘Thank you.’

He cups my face in his warm hands, lifting it so I’m looking into his eyes.

‘There’s nothing to thank me for.’

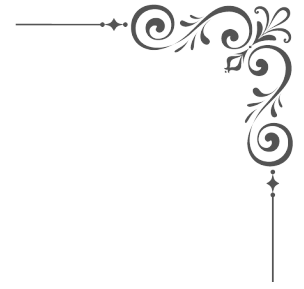
There’s so much within his gaze that I don’t understand and find myself unable to look away.

‘Shall we have one more?’

He pulls away from me, goes to get the bottle and refills our glasses.

‘Then we better get some sleep. I want to have some energy to spend in that pool of yours tomorrow.’

He grins, lightening the atmosphere, and I’m finally able to smile again.



‘How are you doing this morning?’ I ask Dale when I come out of my room and find her at the kitchen table. I’ve been anxious to check on her since I got up. She wasn’t around when I had my breakfast or when I got back after my workout. Her hair is pulled back off her face in a high ponytail that emphasises her cheekbones and her face is fresh, no make-up this morning. She looks so different from last night.

‘I’m fine.’ She smiles brightly, too brightly to be genuine. ‘I’m sorry about yesterday.’

I shake my head. ‘Nothing to be sorry about. As far as I’m concerned, it’s in the past. But I meant what I said about getting those self-defence lessons.’ I lean on the kitchen counter.

‘Sure.’ She looks at her nails.

‘Is Maria around? I’ve got to step out for a bit and I don’t want to leave you on your own.’

She looks at me, her eyes narrowing.

‘She’ll be here around ten thirty. I’ll be fine on my own until then. There’s security at the gate, and the gardener’s here.’ She points out of the window to the terrace.

‘OK.’ I hold up my hands, and then glance at my watch. ‘I’ll be back this afternoon, around five or six. Maria will be here all day?’

‘She’ll probably go to the supermarket before dinner, but she’ll only be gone for an hour or so if she does. I’ll be fine.’

‘OK. What are your plans for today?’ I ask her.

She stands up. ‘I’m going to study and then, when I’m finished, I might sit by the pool.’

‘Ah, sounds great. I’ll join you there when I get back from work.’ I roll the cuffs of my white dress shirt up over my forearms.

‘I thought you were supposed to be on holiday these two weeks?’

She walks with me to the lift to the underground car park.

‘I am. There’s just something that I can’t avoid. I’ll be back by the pool before you know it.’

I smile; she blushes and lowers her eyes. There’s something between us, an energy, an attraction, that wasn’t there before. Something changed after last night and she feels it, too, or she wouldn’t have blushed just then.

My gaze passes over her; her body is completely covered, her skirt hangs all the way to her ankles and her T-shirt is tucked into it, which emphasises her narrow waist and the swell of her hips. Her figure is womanly and after

seeing her last night in that tight dress I'm even more aware of it, in spite of the concealing clothing.

'See you later, then,' she murmurs, and turns away.

'I'll look forward to it,' I call after her.

Dylan is waiting outside the Take Down when I drive up. He's got a bag in his hand. I slow the car and stop, letting him get in beside me.

'Where's Bram?' I ask, as I pull away.

'There.' He points as my brother's car pulls out in front of us then stops, forcing me to slam on the brakes.

'Fucking idiot,' I mutter.

Bram waves and I hold up my middle finger. He's always been a joker, since before he could walk.

'How's things?' I ask Dylan.

'Busy. I've had to rearrange appointments all morning for this meeting. The club's crazy busy.'

'That's good.'

He looks at me. 'And you? Getting much rest?'

I rub a finger over my chin, thinking about Dale and the way she blushed when I told her I'd join her by the pool. I hope this meeting goes smoothly so I can get back to her. I glance at Dylan.

'Remind me never to have kids. Especially not a daughter. El Patron's definitely got his work cut out with her. I had to break some punk's nose last night.'

Dylan looks at me. 'Where? Someone get into his place?'

'Nah, in the club, when I went back in. This dude's hands were all over her.' My blood heats thinking about it. The guy was lucky he got to walk away with a broken nose.

We pull up at the docks and I position my car a few metres away from Bram's. Dylan opens the bag and passes me a gun. I check the magazine and chamber, then tuck it into the belt of my trousers, adjusting my shirt over it.

Bram's waiting at the back of his car when I get out.

'Clear on where we stand?'

'Yup.' He grins. 'How's the lovely Daleylah this morning? Did she sleep well?'

'Drop it, Bram,' I mutter. 'Don't joke about her.'

'What? I mean it. She is lovely.' He holds up his hands in mock innocence.

‘They’re here,’ Dylan says.

A white Transit van with Romanian plates has turned the corner of the warehouses and is heading in our direction. The three of us watch as it slows and stops.

Bana’s in the passenger seat and is the first to get out, jumping down on to the concrete and leaving the door open for Solo, one of his soldiers. Dex is driving; he turns off the engine and climbs out too, then the door slams shut with a hollow clang.

‘Bana.’ I extend my hand and we shake. His palm is sticky with sweat and I resist the urge to wipe my hand on my trousers.

‘Coach Slater.’

I nod to Dex and Solo, but don’t shake their hands. All three men have identical short buzzed haircuts, clearly done themselves. Their clothes are jeans and T-shirts, dirty and worn. Dex is overweight, with a round belly. His T-shirt is too small and the bottom of his stomach is visible beneath it.

Bana reaches into his back pocket, takes out a squashed packet of cigarettes and lights up. He squeezes it between his thumb and forefinger and sucks hard.

‘You are going to increase the delivery, I understand,’ I say, watching him.

He nods. ‘*Tak.*’

‘Double,’ Solo says, grinning and exposing yellowing teeth.

‘You’ve been busy.’

Bana doesn’t answer, just winks and smiles.

‘When?’

‘Next week.’

I look at Bram, he nods.

‘We’ll take it.’

I watch as Bana sucks hard on his cigarette, the cherry becoming a long thin burning peak. Bana says something in Polish to Solo.

‘Same price?’ he asks, and flicks his cigarette.

I wait a beat before shaking my head. He picks at his nail and looks from me to Bram then Dylan. He shifts his weight from foot to foot; his once white trainers are grey and worn.

‘It’s more money, less work for you.’ He pulls out his packet and puts another cigarette in his mouth.

I shake my head again.

‘More to move, it’ll take longer, there’s greater risk.’ I stare at him.
‘Twenty per cent.’

Bana laughs and breaks eye contact as he draws on the cigarette. Dex grins stupidly and looks at his boss.

‘Not twenty,’ he says, eventually.

‘Twenty.’ I don’t move.

Bana looks at me, squinting up from under his eyebrows.

‘Fifteen?’

‘Twenty.’

Bana’s not laughing any more. He looks at Dex.

‘We can find someone else,’ Bana says.

‘Do it, then.’ They can’t find anyone else, not for a shipment this big. We’re the only ones who can shift it for them and we all know it.

‘Seventeen?’

‘Twenty.’ My tone says no negotiation.

I feel Bram move beside me. We had agreed we’d settle on seventeen but now I don’t want to. The stakes are higher, and I want to make sure we get a fair cut.

Bana turns away from us and speaks in Polish to Dex and Solo. We step back, letting them talk. Bram knows better than to question me. Dylan’s silent beside me, relaxed and comfortable like he always is. They’re going to agree, I know it.

‘OK. Twenty,’ Bana says.

I hold out my hand and shake his. Twenty per cent, that’s a whole lot of money. It’ll give us enough to kit out the bar we’re going to open and there’ll be change left over to think about a fourth fight club. I don’t let Bana see that it makes me happy; he has to think I don’t give a shit.

‘When do you want to deliver?’ Bram asks.

Bana looks at Dex.

‘Friday,’ Dex says.

‘OK. I’ll let you know where.’

They nod. Bana sucks on his cigarette one last time before dropping it and following Solo through the passenger door of their van. Dex starts the engine and they drive off. We don’t speak until they’re gone.

‘That was straightforward,’ Dylan says when the van disappears around the corner.

‘Result.’ Bram claps me on the shoulder, and I realise how tense I am.
‘What happened to agreeing to seventeen?’

‘He was going to go for twenty. I could see it.’

‘We’re going to be rich men.’ My brother laughs.

‘We already are rich men,’ Dylan says.

‘That is true,’ Bram concedes.

Our fight clubs already bring in a lot, even more once Carl and Sepp are finished with the books.

‘This money is for the new bar and the gym. It’s investment capital.’ I run a hand over the back of my neck. The sun’s pounding on me, I feel hot and sticky in my suit and dress shirt.

Dylan looks at his watch. ‘Speaking of the fight club, I’ve got a client. I need to get back.’

‘Yeah, and I need to go and take a swim in El Patron’s pool. I’ll see you in a couple of days, Bram.’ I shake hands with my brother, then Dylan and I walk back to my car.

I drop Dylan off where I picked him up, outside the gym.

‘You coming in?’ he asks, getting out of the car.

I shake my head. ‘I need to get back. I sure as hell wish I hadn’t agreed to watch El Patron’s daughter, but now I have I feel uncomfortable leaving her alone for so long.’ It’s not true, I’m pretty sure she’s fine, but I’m looking forward to seeing her again.

‘Sure.’ He holds out his hand.

I let myself in and walk into the kitchen. It’s quiet and there’s no one around. I figure Maria’s gone shopping, like Dale said she would. A movement on the terrace catches my eye. I stop by the table and look out.

Dale’s by the pool, lying on her stomach on a sunlounger, tanning her back. As I watch, she props herself up. The strap of her bikini top is undone, I guess to avoid getting tan lines.

‘Holy shit,’ I mutter, as she reaches down to pick up the bottle of suntan cream, giving me a perfect view of her naked breasts. I drop my keys onto the counter and suck in a breath, eyes fixed on her body as she pours lotion into her hand. I groan, my cock straining in my trousers as she smooths the liquid onto her skin, rubbing her fingers over her breasts. I grip the table, longing to take hold of her soft curves.

‘Sweet fucking Jesus,’ I murmur as she reaches behind, trying to rub lotion into her own back. I want to go out there and offer to help but I’m not

sure she'd appreciate it. Instead, I drag myself away from the window. It feels wrong to be watching her when she can't see me. The gardener doesn't seem to be here any more. He can't be or she wouldn't be sitting there practically naked like that.

Fucking Gonzales, how the hell did he get so damn lucky as to be engaged to Dale? El Patron's got no idea what a bad match that is, setting up a goddess like Dale with that spineless excuse of a man.

I go to the bedroom, peel off my suit then get into the shower to take care of the raging hard-on that's starting to ache. Maybe it's time I found a girlfriend of my own. I've been so busy with the fighting, then the fight clubs and business, that fucking hasn't been my number one priority. But seeing Dale rubbing lotion into her chest is too damn much. It's all I can do to stop myself from going out there and giving it to her by the pool. I smile at the thought, wondering whether she'd agree or not. She'd enjoy it, though, I would make certain of that. She's so sheltered, I wonder if she's ever even been with a man. The thought of being her first makes my cock stir again so I turn off the water and dry myself. Maybe I would be better going to the gym first to work off some of the sexual frustration before going out there and sitting metres away from that half-naked gorgeous girl, but it's so damn hot, I can't wait to dive into that pool – and take a closer look at her in her bikini.

I head out to the terrace, making sure the door bangs so she knows I'm approaching.

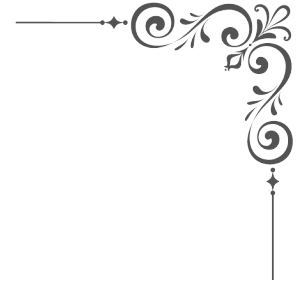
'What are you reading?' I call loudly, before I get too close.

'Oh! Slater?' She puts down her book and looks up, an expression of shock on her face. She moves her arms so they rest under her chin to ensure I don't get a glimpse of her chest as she looks up at me. 'You're early. You said you'd be back at five?'

'Yeah, the meeting went faster than expected.' I drop my towel onto the lounge beside her and dive straight into the water, swimming a length before coming up for air. When I look back, she's sitting up, her bikini top in place. The tight fabric highlights the swell of her breasts and I feel my cock respond again. I drag my eyes away and focus on pounding through the water, refusing to look at her. The next days are going to feel like a hell of a long time, living with her and feeling myself more and more tempted. Something tells me it's going to be painful.

I drag my mind back to business. This deal with Bana is great news, a new fight club is just what we need, and the bar will be a whole new way of

life. Hanging out in a bar every evening will definitely dig my non-existent sex life out of the rut it's currently in.



Shit that was close. I didn't hear him come in. I hope he didn't realise I had my bikini strap undone. I fumble with the string, struggling to tie a knot as Slater swims. I manage to loosely fix it and then wriggle onto my back just in time, as he surfaces. I take a deep a breath and try to look casual.

He sweeps his wet hair off his face and wipes away the water. Beads glisten on the curve of his biceps and butterflies gather in my stomach. I want to reach for my T-shirt. Sitting here in a bikini in front of Slater makes me self-conscious. I'm glad Maria isn't home, I'm sure she wouldn't approve either. Part of me does find it kind of exciting, though, dangerous even, being so close to him in so few clothes.

He stops to take a breath at the shallow end and rests his elbows on the edge of the pool.

'You didn't tell me,' he says.

'What?'

'You didn't tell me what book you're reading. Anything I'll have heard of?'

'Oh, probably not.' I look at the cover. 'It's *Anna Karenina*. It's Russian.'

It's one of my favourites, I've probably read it ten times, but I'm sure he won't have heard of it. I put it down.

'Where were you before?' I ask him.

'I had a business meeting.'

'At your gym?'

'Nearby.'

'What sort of meeting was it?'

He lifts himself effortlessly out of the water and sits on the edge.

'Do you discuss business with your father?'

'No.'

He smiles. 'Well then.'

'You're not my father.'

'No, but we won't discuss my business either.'

'Is it illegal?' I examine my nails. The thought that he might be doing something illegal disappoints me, although it doesn't surprise me. I know Papa's got his hand in all sorts of stuff. His club is just a front for drugs. Ever since I was small, Papa was rarely around. He was always at that club. Mama looked after me, until she was killed. I know her death was something to do with my father. Someone he'd upset, trying to get even. I don't know exactly, but I know I hated him for a long time after. I hated him and everything about

him. I hated that I depend on him and his dirty money to live, that he had allowed crime to infiltrate and ruin my life.

Everything changed the day Mama died. I was fifteen. That was when Papa stopped me going to school. He got me a tutor and started my home schooling. I wasn't allowed to see my friends or teachers any more or to go anywhere. I became full of hate those first years. I hated that Mama was dead and mostly I hated Papa. But he was all I had so, in spite of my hate, I loved him. I know that sounds weird, that I hated and loved him at the same time. He's my papa, but he was to blame for the death of Mama. My head was truly messed up.

It got easier when we moved from the coast to Rotterdam, to this house. I had my space, the pool, and there weren't the reminders of my mother everywhere I looked. I still wasn't allowed to go out. It was only when I started university that I was allowed out to lectures, although never alone. I am driven there and back by Juan Carlos, who waits for me outside the university.

Things with Papa got easier, then, too. Until he told me about his plans for me to marry Joaquin Gonzales. Papa says he will look after me, take care of me. I just think Papa wants to get rid of me. I told him there was no way I was marrying Joaquin, but he says I don't have a choice.

Joaquin is Papa's friend Salvador's son. Papa and Salvador left Spain together to work in the Netherlands, but Salvador died of a heart attack years ago when I was small. The wedding would have happened after my twenty-first birthday, that was his plan, but he finally backed down and agreed to delay it until I graduated. So, I'm on the clock. I've got until I graduate to get far away from here.

Slater answers my question.

'I told you, I run fight clubs. We help kids like you learn how to defend themselves.' He gets up, takes a towel and rubs the water off his body.

'I'm not a kid.'

He pulls the spare sunlounger next to mine and sits down beside me.

'Tell that to your old man.'

Anger boils inside me. 'I'm an adult. I'm twenty-two. He's not going to keep me locked up here all my life and there's no way I'm marrying Joaquin Gonzales. I'm going to get away from here as soon as I can.'

'It's not exactly safe for you to go running around on your own, Dale. Your dad is well known, he has enemies. There are people out there much

worse than that would-be rapist from last night.'

'I'll learn to take care of myself. You said you'd teach me how to fight, right?'

He looks at me, eyes covered by dark sunglasses, and for a moment doesn't speak. I wonder if I've told him too much. What if he tells my father what I'm planning?

'I can't teach you how to stop a bullet,' he says, eventually.

'I'll get a gun myself. You can teach me how to use it.'

He snorts a laugh. 'I'm sure your father will thank me for giving you shooting lessons.'

'Why not? If it keeps me safe.'

'Dale, guns are dangerous.'

'I know that. I'm not stupid.'

'You don't want to be messing with that sort of thing.'

'I want to be able to look after myself. I don't want a bodyguard following me my whole life.'

'I'm not a bodyguard.' He lies back on the sunlounger, folding his arms behind his head, the hard ropes of his muscles contracting and exposing soft hairs in his armpits. My gaze is drawn to the tattoos decorating his skin. I long to trace my fingers over them, study them and... I force myself to look away.

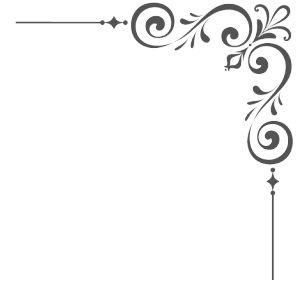
'No, and you won't be following me my whole life, either,' I mutter.

He looks up at me and grins. 'Not unless you want me to.'

Butterflies dance in my stomach. His gaze holds mine; his eyes are so enticing, so dangerous.

'I'm sure Papa would be over the moon about that,' I whisper, and I actually wonder what Papa would say if something did happen between us. Slater doesn't look like the sort of man who could be stopped from doing what he wanted, and if that was something he wanted...

'Yeah, so, it's not going to happen. Last thing I need is a battle with your ol' man. I've enough on my plate, right now.' He rolls onto his stomach and turns his head, indicating the conversation is over.



My eyes flick open. I stop breathing and listen. Silence pounds in my ears. My back is slick with sweat and my heart races. Something's up. I'm sure of it. I heard a noise. I wait, listening for more. It could have been nothing, a random creak, a shift in temperature causing the house to adjust, or even just my imagination. But it wasn't. I feel it. Someone is here. I get up, take my gun from under the pillow and open the door, moving slowly, silently.

The house is dark. I step forward, scanning the blackness. My back is to the wall, my bare feet silent on the tiled floor. My eyes adjust to the darkness; the door to her room is open. I swallow, moving closer, energy pumping through my body; I fight it to remain silent. The metal of the gun is heavy in my hand. How did someone get past security? I don't breathe as adrenalin floods my body.

Sliding around the corner of the door, into her room, I see her. She's in bed, on her front, the sheet covering her back, dark hair spilling over her shoulder. He's standing in front of her, I can just make out the dark shadow. For a split second I think I'm too late, that she's dead, but then she stirs, turning her head, eyes closed in sleep.

I dive at the man, slamming his arm so he drops his gun. A shot is fired and Dale screams. My arms lock around his neck as I clench and snap it. He doesn't have time to fight me. His body goes limp. We sink to the floor as I squeeze tighter. I channel all my strength to my arms, not letting go, and I feel his breathing stop.

Dale puts the light on. I look up and see the terror in her eyes. She screams as she stares at the lifeless man slumped in my grip. I look down at his face and recognise Solo, Bana's guy.

'Fuck!' I say.

The door swings open. I finally let go of Solo and snatch up my gun again as Stefano rushes in to the bedroom. He looks in confusion from me to Dale, who is cowering in the corner of her bed.

'What happened?'

'You tell me.' I stand up, my gun fixed on Stefano. 'How the hell did he get in here?'

I've no idea who I can trust right now. Stefano holds up his hands, panic in his eyes.

'I don't know. I didn't see anything.'

'It's your fucking job to see.'

He stares back at me blankly. I glance at Dale; her face is pale and her eyes wide.

‘Pack a bag. Now.’

She doesn’t move. Her body pressed to the wall, she looks as though she hasn’t understood my words.

‘Where are you going?’ Stefano asks.

‘I’m getting her away from here. Somewhere safe for tonight until you can get this mess cleared up and I can figure out what’s going on.’

I have to call El Patron, but first I need to get her out of here. There might be more of Bana’s crew nearby, I’d be surprised if Solo came alone. I feel like a sitting duck.

‘Move,’ I hiss at Dale. ‘You’ve got thirty seconds to get what you need.’

She climbs off the bed. I watch her rush about, throwing on clothes and dropping things into her bag. ‘Time’s up. Come with me.’

‘I haven’t finished.’ Her voice is shaky.

‘I don’t care, come on.’

I go to the door. Stefano is still standing in the doorway watching me, like an idiot.

‘You really didn’t see anything? How the hell did he get past you?’

Stefano runs his hand through his hair. He has no idea. This guy is clueless, I know his type. We see a lot of men like him in the gym, they work in security but aren’t even able to think straight.

‘And if you’re in here, Stefano, who’s out front watching the gate?’

‘No one.’ He looks panicked.

‘Call Rafa. Get him to come in and help you get rid of him.’ I nod to Solo. ‘That body needs to be gone before tomorrow morning when Maria gets here, and not a word to her. I don’t want you scaring her until we can get things figured out. Once you’ve taken care of the body, I suggest you scour the camera footage and figure out how this guy managed to get into this house and hold a gun to your boss’s daughter’s head without you noticing a thing.’ I glance behind me. ‘Stay close to me, Dale.’

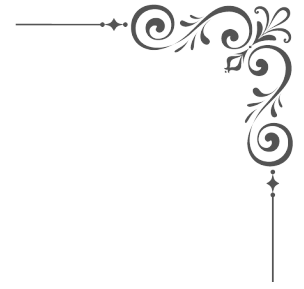
We go to my room and I tell her to sit on the bed as I dress and then toss my stuff into my bag.

‘Leave a note for Maria, so she doesn’t worry when she gets here. Tell her I’ve taken you somewhere to do something.’

‘Where?’

‘I don’t know ... the library? A theme park? Anywhere. Just make something up.’

She does as I tell her and leaves the note folded on the kitchen counter, and I take her arm and lead her to my car.



‘S’up?’ Dylan answers the phone on the first ring even though it’s the middle of the night. His voice is heavy with sleep.

‘I’ve got a fucking situation.’ I press the accelerator to the floor and check the rear-view mirror. Dale is huddled in the seat beside me.

‘What?’

‘I just killed Solo Galkina.’

Dylan is silent.

‘He broke into El Patron’s place. I took him down while he was holding a gun to Dale’s head.’

Dale shivers and I reach over and put my hand over hers.

‘She’s with me now. I’m taking her to a safe place, but we have to meet tomorrow.’

‘Is it being cleaned up?’

‘El Patron’s security is on it, but I don’t know if I trust him. He just let the guy walk into the house without stopping him. Could have been sleeping or he could be in on it. I need to speak to El Patron to figure things out. But for now, I think we can safely assume that me killing Solo will get back to Bana. We’ll meet tomorrow at the canal, to work out how to handle it. Tell the rest of the crew.’

I hang up the phone, feeling mildly better. Speaking to D and knowing I’ve got my crew behind me calms me and helps me think. I drive, circling through the city to make sure no one is following us, then stop on a bridge over the river and turn to Dale. Her eyes are wide with fear, her hair loose around her face, tousled from sleep.

‘Give me your phone.’

‘Why?’

‘So no one can track you.’

‘Who’s going to track my phone?’

‘I don’t know, but I’m not taking chances.’

She hands me the phone she’s been clasping. I turn it off, then toss it out of the window and into the water.

‘My phone!’

‘I’ll get you another one,’ I say, as I pull away. I drive around for another twenty minutes before we turn into my parking garage. My place is in the south of the city in the industrial area. It’s a loft on top of a warehouse. I like it because it’s remote and out of the way, no one knows about it. Dale is

silent as I park, and we take the lift up to my floor. I unlock the door, and show her in.

She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear as she looks around.

‘Make yourself at home,’ I tell her, watching as she walks around checking the place out. It’s sparsely decorated, open plan, big windows and three separate bedrooms. I lock the front door and carry her bag through to the guest room.

‘Are you going to call Papa?’ she asks, following me.

‘Yeah. I’ll call him now.’

‘How long do you think I’ll have to stay here?’ She runs her fingers through her hair.

‘I don’t know. Until I find out what the hell is going on and why that man was in your room trying to kill you.’

She nods.

‘Hopefully not too long. Hopefully your father has an explanation for it.’

Except I don’t believe he will. What sort of explanation can there be? He’ll most likely go crazy when he hears and start an all-out war.

‘OK.’ She looks down.

‘You get yourself settled in. I don’t have a pool but you’ll be safe here.’ My voice is soft. The shock is still visible on her face and I feel bad for her. Hell, I’m still pretty shaken up myself.

I go to the kitchen and pour a whisky, then dial El Patron, letting it ring. It takes a long time before he answers.

‘Antonio?’

‘Marcel. It’s three a.m., I was sleeping.’

‘Yeah, so was I, until I had to get up and save your daughter from a gunman.’ I walk to the window.

‘What? What happened? Is she OK?’

‘One of Bana’s crew was in Daleylah’s bedroom with a gun to her head. Fortunately, I got there in time and managed to take him out before she got hurt, but it was too fucking close for comfort.’ As I explain I realise how damn close the whole thing was. If I hadn’t woken up when I did...

‘You killed him?’

‘Yeah.’

El Patron chuckles.

‘Are you laughing? That man had a gun pointed at your daughter’s head.’ I can’t keep the anger from my voice.

‘You were there, Marcel. I knew you were the right person to protect her.’ His voice is calm. This wasn’t the reaction I was expecting at all.

‘Why would Bana’s crew try to take out your daughter, Antonio?’

‘You know what that cockroach is like as much as I do. How much reason does he need? What reason did he have to kill my wife?’

I rest my forehead on the window. From that height I have a good view of the city below.

‘Your security guard was a fucking waste of space. Do you trust him?’

‘Stefano? I’d trust him with my life.’

‘I wouldn’t, after seeing how much care he took with your daughter’s. Do you think he might be involved?’

‘Stefano? No. He’s a good boy.’

I tap my fingers on the glass. I just told him someone tried to take out his daughter and he’s laughing and defending the security guard. Something doesn’t add up. He doesn’t even seem that surprised by the whole thing.

‘How soon can you get back to take care of this?’

‘Not yet. I still have something to attend to here.’

‘I don’t feel comfortable with Dale at your place any more. Not now the security’s been compromised. And I’m sure Bana will want to retaliate against me for taking out his man, so I’ll be his target, too, now.’

‘Where are you? Still at my house?’

‘No. I’ve taken Dale ... somewhere safe.’

‘Good, good. Keep her with you until I get back. Then I’ll clear everything up.’

‘When will you be back?’

‘I’ll let you know, Marcel.’

I hang up the phone and stare at it. Why won’t he drop everything and come back here to deal with it now? An attack on his daughter is an attack on him. Surely he wants to put things straight immediately? I swallow the whisky and go to the guest room. She’s sitting on the bed, staring at the floor. I stop in the doorway, watching her. She looks up and sees me.

‘What did he say? Is he coming home?’

She sounds so hopeful it makes me feel bad.

‘Yeah, soon.’

‘Tomorrow?’

I run a hand over my face. ‘Not tomorrow. Soon, though.’

‘Right. So, I’ll stay here tomorrow?’

‘Yeah, for now. Until he gets back and can figure some stuff out.’

‘Right.’ She looks down at her hands, then up at me with wide eyes. ‘I forgot my laptop. I need it. I have to study.’ She shakes her head. ‘How could I have forgotten it? It’s the only thing I can’t live without. I’m so stupid.’

‘You can give me a list of what you need tomorrow. I’ll have someone fetch it all for you, don’t worry.’ She looks pale and I remember the time. ‘It’s late, Dale, we both need to sleep. I know I sure as hell do. Things will seem better in the morning.’ I turn to leave her.

‘Slater?’ she calls to me.

I look back. Her hair is loose on her shoulders and she seems so small in the T-shirt and joggers that she threw on.

‘Where will you be?’

‘My room is next door. But it’s OK, Dale, you’re safe here. Good night.’ I pull the door closed, go to my room, strip off my clothes and drop down onto my bed.

This whole situation is fucked up. The feud between Bana and El Patron has been going on since Bana first showed up and his brother got taken out in an attempt to show who was in charge. Bana retaliated by killing El Patron’s wife, showing he didn’t give a shit about anything, there were no boundaries as far as his crew were concerned. His brother was a soldier and El Patron’s wife had nothing to do with this business. But all that is history. Seven years ago. Why is Bana trying to kill Daleylah Martinez now? Is he digging up old bones? Or has El Patron done something else? Bana can’t still be trying to avenge Boris. Can he? I stare at the ceiling, turning it over in my mind until I eventually fall asleep.

I wake up because there’s someone in my room. My gun’s in the kitchen. Fucking idiot. Someone breaking into my place was the last thing I’d been expecting. Only my crew know where I live, and I was careful we weren’t followed when we came here. But someone’s here; they got in somehow.

I don’t move, lying still, waiting, listening. My back is to the door. Whoever it is walks towards my bed. I strain my ears for the sound of a gun cocking. There’s no time to hesitate or it’ll be too late. I spring up and dive forward, grabbing the intruder. As soon as my hands touch her, she screams, but I can’t stop the momentum. I throw her to the bed, pinning her body beneath my weight.

‘What are you doing?’ I jump off her and fumble for the light, turning it on and looking at her. ‘What the fuck, Dale? I nearly killed you. Why are you

creeping around like that?’

‘I’m sorry, Slater.’ She sits up on my bed, staring at me, eyes wide with terror.

‘Why are you creeping in my bedroom? After what just happened, I could have killed you!’

Tears roll down her cheeks. ‘I’m sorry. I didn’t want to wake you. I didn’t know what to do.’

My anger melts. ‘You don’t have to be scared. I’m here, I told you, no one can get in here. This is a safe house. You and me are the only ones here, and we’re the only ones who know we’re here.’ I run a hand over my face wiping away the remnants of sleep. ‘And I won’t hurt you, not if you don’t go creeping around my house in the night making me think you’re a fucking intruder.’

‘Sorry. I didn’t want to wake you. I know you’re tired.’ She doesn’t look at me, she’s twisting the corner of the sheet in her hand. ‘I can’t sleep, I’m scared. Every time I close my eyes, I keep seeing him. That man with the gun in my bedroom.’ She screws up her face. ‘I don’t want to be alone. Can I sleep in here, with you?’ She finally looks up at me, brown eyes wide, her lips slightly parted and suddenly I feel my body respond to her, my cock straining in my shorts. How fucking inappropriate.

‘Please, Slater. I can’t be alone.’

I take a breath, turning from her so she can’t see my arousal. This isn’t a good idea, especially as she’s making me turned on as hell right now wearing only that baggy T-shirt. But how can I say no to her? After what she’s been through tonight.

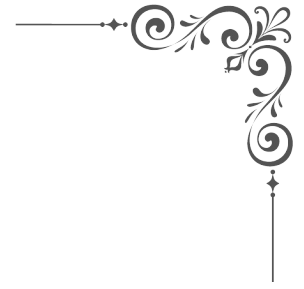
‘Sure, I’ll sleep on the floor,’ I mutter, my back still to her.

‘Sleep next to me, please. I need to know that you’re there. Otherwise, I’ll never sleep.’

I let out a slow breath and look back at her. She brushes her hair off her face, and I see her hands are trembling. This is such a bad idea; my body is screaming for her.

‘OK. Sure. Lie down.’

I motion to the bed. She scoots up and climbs under the sheets. I grab a bottle of water and take a sip, then get in beside her. I turn my back to her, my hard-on aching, tight against the fabric of my shorts. I can fucking do this. I can lie here beside this girl without touching her, I can fucking do this. I close my eyes and try to sleep for the third time that night.



When I wake, my body is pressed against his. I'm curled into the shape of him, my front to his back. It's dark, light is coming in under the crack beneath the door and I don't know what time it is, or how long we've been sleeping. I feel the steady rise and fall of his breathing beside me.

I must have moved closer to him in my sleep, curled myself against him. My arm is around his waist. The feeling of his body sends warmth to my core, and flickers of excitement tingle within me. I trace the hard ropes of his stomach and brush against the fabric of his boxers and against something else. I stop, realising what it is. He's hard. Heat floods between my legs.

Everything feels strange. I've never been in this situation before. I've never had a boyfriend. Of course, I've thought about it. I've imagined having a boyfriend and sleeping with a man. Sometimes it was all I could think about, trying to visualise what it would be like to be with a man.

I wonder if it's going to happen now. We're so close. I want it. I want it very much. I never thought it would be like this, though. It feels dangerous but thrilling. Slater's an associate of my father and I know he would be furious about this. He would be furious about me being in Slater's bed in the first place. Which makes me want it more. My father didn't consider my wishes when he offered me up to Gonzales. Sleeping with Slater seems like a good way to repay him.

I always imagined I would feel terrified when the moment came to be with a man. I am nervous, but it's mixed with burning excitement. The hard muscles of his body beside me feel so good beneath my fingers.

I gently close my hand around him, through the thin fabric of his shorts, and squeeze softly. He groans, shifting his body so he's on his back. My pulse quickens. His eyes are still closed, he's half asleep.

I grip him again, moving my hand up and down in what I think is the right way. He groans again, so I figure I'm doing it right. I continue, burning with excitement, my whole body alight with desire. He catches my hand, stops me, holds it still against his leg.

With his other hand he runs his fingers up my inner thigh. I'm moist with arousal, I'm sure he'll be able to feel it. He moves the fabric of my knickers, and the tips of his fingers brush against me. I sigh and part my legs wider, an involuntary reaction to his touch. It's so warm in the bedroom, my body is slick with sweat, my hand still held against his leg.

He parts me and slides his finger inside, his thumb rubbing against my swollen nub. I close my eyes, holding my head against the bed, my body is so relaxed in the just-woken-up state and the excitement of him beside me is too much. It doesn't take long for him to work me to an orgasm. I gasp and sigh as his fingers control me.

I reach for him. I want to kiss him, to feel what it's like to have him inside me, I can hardly wait for it, but he pulls away and gets up off the bed. He walks to the door in the corner of the room, an en suite I hadn't noticed the night before.

'Where are you going?' I prop myself up on the pillows.

He points at his erection, visible through his boxers. 'To take care of this.'

'Oh. But can't we...?'

He shakes his head and shuts the bathroom door.

I lie back and stare at the ceiling. My body's still throbbing and tingling from the orgasm, but my mind is burning. He rejected me. I breathe slowly and look around the room, listening to the sound of the water as he takes a shower. Was it because of my father? Or because of me? I wrap my arms around my body, feeling more alone than usual.

The bathroom door opens. He's naked. I stare at his body as he stalks across the room. He is hard and lean, his thighs look like they are carved from stone: he's a work of art. I can hardly breathe. He seems comfortable walking naked in front of me, like it's nothing. I can't keep my eyes off him.

'Slater?'

He stops and looks at me. As his gaze sweeps over me I see the immediate reaction from his naked body. He can't deny he is attracted to me.

'Is everything OK?' I want to ask him so many other things, but I don't dare.

'No, it's not OK.' His jaw is firm and he doesn't smile, just goes to the chest of drawers, takes a pair of clean boxers then puts them on, followed by a shirt.

'Slater?'

'We'll talk later, Dale. I don't have all the answers right now.' He walks to the bedside table, picks up his phone and checks his messages. 'Shit.'

'What?'

'It's eleven. I'm late.'

'We overslept.'

‘Apparently.’ He steps into his suit trousers. ‘I never oversleep.’ He rolls the sleeves of his shirt up over his forearms.

‘You must have needed it.’

He doesn’t answer me, just leaves the bedroom. I scramble off the bed and follow him out of the door.

‘Where are you going?’

‘To figure out what the hell happened last night.’

I watch as he takes a small bottle of juice from the fridge and opens it.

‘How long will you be?’

‘Couple of hours.’

‘What about me? What should I do?’

‘Stay here and wait for me to get back.’

‘But what will I do?’

‘Make yourself at home.’ He gestures to the living room. ‘Watch a movie, read a book, eat what you want, there’s stuff in the fridge.’

‘Right.’

I sit down at the breakfast bar. The idea of staying alone in his place makes me uncomfortable, but what choice have I got?

‘I don’t have a phone.’

‘I’ll get you one.’

‘I should call Papa.’

‘You can do it later. Write a list of everything you need, and I’ll make sure someone picks it up for you.’

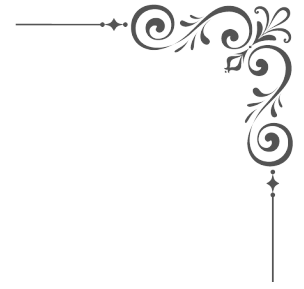
He goes to the door and I feel a sense of panic at him leaving me.

‘Slater?’

‘What?’

He turns to me. I stare at him, not knowing what to say. I feel like an idiot. He pauses, then walks back to me, reaches up and cups my cheek.

‘I won’t be long, little bird. Wait for me.’



I shouldn't have let her sleep in my bed. It was a bad fucking idea. How could I sleep next to that smoking hot girl and not touch her? I've just made my life even harder for myself. Why couldn't I keep my damn hands off her? I had been doing so well, ignoring her, until she started jerking me off this morning. That was too much, it put me over the edge, and I was already on the verge of losing, just clinging on by my fingertips.

When I put my hand between her legs, she was so wet and she came so fast. The desire to fuck her this morning was almost unbearable. But fucking El Patron's daughter would start a war that I just don't need or want. Now I have to make sure that I keep fighting that temptation until he gets back and I can return his daughter to him.

Everyone is already there when I slot my car between Sepp's and Dylan's. My crew are waiting for me on the bank of the canal.

'What time do you call this, bro?' Bram complains as I walk up to them.

He and Dylan are both dressed in workout shorts and T-shirts, as they've come straight from the club. D's got his hands shoved in his pockets and looks up at me from under his eyebrows as I approach.

'I had to play fucking Tetris with the appointment book all morning to make this meet,' Bram continues, and Dylan puts a hand on his shoulder to tell him to back off. He can read my expression better than any of them.

'What the hell happened?' Carl has a habit of getting straight to the point and this is no different. I like that about him, cuts through the shit and says it the way it is. As a kid, Carl was never as much of a fighter as me and Bram. He was always way more interested in number games and computers. When it comes to accounting, he can clean money faster than an industrial-strength washing machine.

'I woke up last night to find one of Bana's men with a gun to El Patron's daughter's head.' I run my hand over my tight jaw remembering my anger as I squeezed the life out of him. 'It was Solo Galkina.'

'We saw him yesterday, right? He was the one at the meet?' Bram asks.

I nod.

'So, Bana's still got a fire burning for El Patron?' Carl says.

'Could be.' I slide my hand through my hair. None of it sits quite right.

'Why, though? El Patron killed Boris Banasinski, so Bana kills El Patron's wife. They should be even. Why would he go after his daughter as well? All these years later?' Dylan asks.

‘I don’t know.’ I walk to the canal edge, pick up a stone and throw it into the murky water. ‘Could Bana have known I was there?’ I turn to look at them.

‘We’re the only ones who knew where you were,’ Bram says.

Dylan shakes his head. ‘We’re not the only ones who knew.’

I look at my friend; his blue eyes are clouded.

‘Who else knew?’ I ask him.

‘El Patron.’

‘El Patron.’ I repeat his words and add, ‘And fucking Joaquin Gonzales.’

‘But why would El Patron try to kill his own daughter?’ Sepp tugs at his tie. ‘It’s freaking hot out here today. I’m sweating my balls off.’

‘You wanna try going for a run in this weather,’ Bram says.

Sepp shakes his head. ‘Nah, I’m fine in the air-conditioned office.’

‘Maybe El Patron or Gonzales tipped Bana off. I guess he was pissed we made him agree to twenty per cent,’ Bram says.

‘But why would he go after Dale? If Bana’s pissed off with us, why drag El Patron into it? And would El Patron really risk his daughter getting killed in crossfire?’ Dylan asks.

I shrug. ‘No fucking idea, but the whole thing stinks.’

‘When is El Patron back?’ he asks.

‘I don’t know, exactly. I called him last night, told him what had happened, expecting him to get the first flight back, but he says he’s got stuff to do.’ Saying it out loud, it sounds even more off than it did last night.

‘Maybe something’s going down. Maybe Bana has got cause to want to bump the girl,’ Carl suggests.

I look at Bram. ‘Have you heard anything on the street?’ My brother’s got good connections with people who know what’s happening, he’s often the first to hear if anything’s going on.

‘No.’ He shrugs.

‘Ask around. If there is something, I want to know. We’ve got that delivery coming, so be careful. Take extra protection. If something’s going on, we don’t want to get screwed over in the process. There’s a lot at stake with that arms deal.’

I rub my eyes. I don’t trust anyone right now. For all I know, El Patron set me up as the protector of his daughter so I would side with him in his turf war against Bana. I hate that I’ve allowed myself to be dragged into whatever’s happening.

‘See what you can find out. I want to know what the hell is behind this.’ I nod, signalling the end of the meeting, and each of them turns to leave.

‘Want to stop by the bar?’ Sepp asks, as we walk to our cars. He’s in charge of getting our new place, the Highbar, up and running.

I can see he’s keen to discuss stuff, but right now there’s too much other stuff on my mind. I can’t focus on business, not until I find out what was behind the hit on Dale.

‘Yeah, I do want to come by, Sepp, but I can’t, not now.’ I have to get back to her. I’m uncomfortable leaving her alone so long. ‘I’ll let you know; tomorrow, maybe.’

He nods and shakes my hand.

‘Where is she now?’ Bram asks, coming up to me beside my car.

‘My place.’

He grins. ‘Should I stop by? Help comfort her? She must be pretty shaken after last night.’

‘I’m not sure your sort of comfort is what she needs right now.’ I put my hand on his shoulder. ‘But thanks for the kind offer.’ I refuse to let myself be wound up by my brother.

‘You should see that girl, man,’ he tells Sepp.

‘Drop it, Bram,’ I warn, ‘or I’ll give you the same treatment I gave Solo last night.’

‘Dressed like that?’ Bram nods at my suit.

‘Even in this I’d take you down easily.’

Bram huffs; I’m right and he knows it. My brother is an excellent fighter, one of the best. But I’m better.

‘Slater’s got a bit of a soft spot for old El Patron’s little girl,’ Bram tells Sepp. ‘And I can’t blame him. Wait till you see her.’

‘Bram. Goodbye.’ I give my brother a playful shove in the direction of his car.

‘Let me know when you want to drop by the bar. I’ll meet you there.’ Sepp gets into the car with Carl and they drive off.

‘D? I need you to do something for me,’ I tell Dylan, who’s leaning on the bonnet of my car.

‘What’s that?’

‘I need a burner to start with, and I need someone to stop by El Patron’s to pick up some of her shit.’

Dylan glances at Bram. 'Me and Bram can go later. But we've got to get back to the Take Down now, we got clients waiting. Follow us to the gym and I'll give you a phone. And what about your class tonight? You gonna take it or you want me to?'

'I'll do it.' Teaching a fight class will be a good way to help me unwind, take my mind off everything that's going on. I slide down into the driver's seat and start the engine, and follow D and my brother to the fight club. I wait as they go inside, then Dylan comes out with the phone in his hand. I roll down the window and he leans on the top of the car as he gives it to me.

'Thanks, D. I'll send you a message about what needs picking up from El Patron's.'

'Sure. Hey, Slater? You OK?'

'Yeah.'

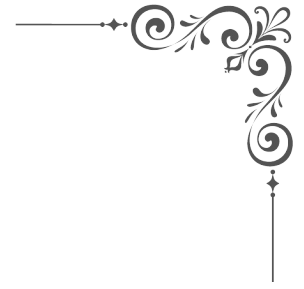
I run a hand over my jaw and consider telling him about what happened with Dale this morning but decide against it. Nothing happened. She slept in my bed, that's all, and I got a bit carried away, but there's no need to make it into something more than it is.

'It's just all this stuff is making me uneasy.'

'Yeah. We'll start asking around and get it figured out.' Dylan's expression is serious, but it gives me confidence.

'Thanks, D.'

He nods, taps the roof, and I drive off.



Dale's on the sofa when I get back. She jumps up when she hears the door, but the panic in her eyes fades as she sees me.

'Finally.' She sinks back down with a sigh.

'You got dressed, I see.' I eye her mismatched outfit of joggers and navy blouse.

'This is all I have with me. This and the T-shirt I slept in. You gave me thirty seconds to pack, remember? It was the middle of night and there was a dead body on my bedroom floor, I could hardly think straight.'

I look away from her and turn to the kitchen. I shouldn't find her as attractive as I do. Even in those clothes, with her hair pulled back off her face, I think she looks cute as hell.

'Have you made a list of what you want picking up?'

'Yes.' She gets up and hands it to me, then crosses her arms over her chest. 'But I want to go and pick the stuff up myself.'

'Not going to happen.'

'I don't want some stranger poking around in my bedroom.'

'There was a stranger poking around last night, remember? With a gun.' I open the fridge and take out a bottle of water, then look at her. 'Until I figure out what the hell is going on, you're staying here. It's not safe.'

My phone buzzes in my pocket. I pull it out and read 'El Patron' in the ID. I press the phone to my ear.

'Yes?'

'Marcel, I've spoken to my security team. They've disposed of the problem from last night.'

'Good.'

'It's safe for you to take Daleylah back home, now.'

'Safe, how?'

'They'll be more vigilant.'

'Why weren't they vigilant last night?'

'Marcel, it won't happen again. You have my word.'

'When are you coming back?'

'I'll be back in a few days. I'll let you know when.'

I hang up the phone. There's no way I'm taking her back there, I don't trust his security at all. I can't believe he's willing to take such a risk with his own daughter's life.

'Was that Papa?' Dale is standing behind me.

'Yeah.'

‘He didn’t ask to speak to me?’ She looks confused.

‘No.’ I try to think of an excuse to spare her, but can’t.

‘I want to talk to him. Can I call him?’ She holds out her hand for my phone.

I don’t give it to her. There’s no way I’m taking her back home. If she talks to him he’ll tell her to go home, and it’s not going to happen. I shake my head.

‘I want to figure out what’s going on. I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to speak to him right now.’

‘Why not?’

‘I don’t know why that man was trying to kill you. Until I do, I don’t know who I can trust.’

She laughs. ‘But you can trust my father. He wouldn’t be trying to have me killed.’

I don’t answer.

‘You don’t think my father had something to do with it?’

‘I told you, I don’t know who was involved.’

‘Why would Papa try to have me killed?’ She throws her hands in the air.

‘I didn’t say that. I just said I don’t know who is involved and why.’ I take the burner Dylan gave me out of my pocket. ‘For now, for your own sake, I’m asking you not to call him. Not until I know a bit more.’ I hand her the phone. ‘This is for you.’

She takes it and turns it over. ‘What’s the code?’

‘Four zeros.’

I watch her enter the code and look through the phone. ‘But I don’t have anyone’s numbers.’

I shrug and walk to my bedroom to get changed. ‘You have mine. My number’s in there.’

‘I don’t need to call you, you’re here.’

I unbutton my shirt as she stands at the doorway watching me.

‘What about my stuff?’

‘My brother and Dylan will go and pick it later. You’ll have it by tonight.’

‘Can I go with them? It’ll be much faster.’

‘No. I’d rather you stay here. Your father asked me to protect you while he’s away and I will do that.’

‘Let me call him. He’ll come back immediately when I talk to him and tell him about last night, I’m sure, then you won’t have to babysit me any more.’

‘He already knows what happened and he didn’t rush back, did he?’

She runs her hand through her hair. ‘I don’t get it. He must be going crazy with worry. Why hasn’t he come back?’

‘I don’t know. But until I’m sure he didn’t have any part in this, it’s better you don’t speak to him.’

‘He didn’t have a part in it. Why would Papa send someone to kill me?’

‘I don’t know,’ I say, softly.

Something in my voice makes her eyes flick to mine. She studies me, trying to read my face, then spins around and heads out of the room.

‘I’m going to call him.’

I catch her arm, stopping her.

‘No.’

It comes out hard. Harder than I meant it to, but she has to know I’m serious.

‘You won’t speak to him until I’ve figured this out. I forbid it.’

‘You forbid me to speak to my father?’ Disbelief is heavy in her tone. ‘You can’t.’

‘I just did.’

I walk away from her and toss my shirt in the washing basket, then unbuckle my trousers, waiting for her response. She’s not going to drop it, I know she won’t, there’s too much fight in my little bird. But she just watches me, standing in the doorway, her chest on the door frame, breasts pressed up against it. Just looking at her like that makes me want her. I step out of my trousers and hang them up. I like that she’s watching me change. Instead of leaving she walks into my room and sits on my bed, her eyes fixed on my body. I like that even more, remembering that morning in bed with her.

‘What are you going to do now?’ she asks, wrapping her hair around her finger.

‘Take a shower, eat something and go back to the gym.’ I rest my hand on the door of the bathroom.

‘You’re going to leave me here, again? On my own?’

‘It won’t be for very long. An hour and a half. I’ve got a class to give, then I’ll be back before you know it.’

She looks down at her hands. She seems so lonely, I'm struck with an urge to take her in my arms and tell her she's not alone. This is hard for her, but it's for the best. How do I know that if I took her back home there wouldn't be another security breach? Everything in me is screaming that something's wrong. El Patron's unquestioning faith in his security, his refusal to come back and lack of concern for Dale are all too suspicious. He didn't even ask how she was, damn it. Does he really care so little for her? Could he actually somehow have had a hand in things?

I run a hand through my hair, watching her. When I woke this morning with her body pressed up against my back, she was practically begging to be fucked. It was the best wake up I've had in so long. I don't even remember the last time I woke up with a woman. I swallow a groan thinking about how hot she was. I turn to the bathroom, my dick straining to be released.

'Are you going to take care of that?'

She points at the erection that's tenting the fabric of my boxers.

'I could ... help.'

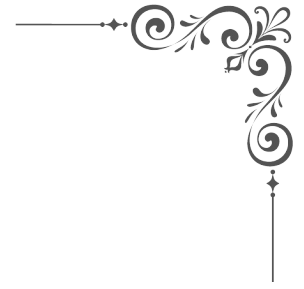
Her mouth is open as she waits for my answer. She runs her tongue over her lips, and I get a vision of ramming my cock into her throat. I'm tempted, so tempted that I take a step towards her. Would letting her suck me off be so bad? Would that cross the line? I hesitate. I can almost feel the heat of her tongue, the softness of her lips. Sure as hell it would be crossing the line.

I move closer, cup her face as she looks up at me from the bed, and run my thumb over those puffy pink lips of hers.

'It's not going to happen, Dale. As much as I'd like to give it to you right now –' I grip my cock, holding it through the fabric of my boxers – 'it would be a very bad idea.'

'Why? Are you scared of my father?'

I laugh. 'I'm not scared of anyone, little bird.' I drop my hand from her face then go to take a shower.



I wait until I hear the shower running then hurry to the kitchen and pick up the phone Slater just gave me. I enter the code, then dial my father's number, my hands shaking. I press the handset to my ear, waiting.

'Papa?' I whisper.

'*Princesa*? Are you OK?'

Papa sounds happy; he doesn't sound worried sick, like I expected.

'Yes, Papa, I'm OK. Slater told you what happened?' I ask him to be sure.

'He did. Are you all right, my angel? Where are you?'

'I'm with Slater.'

I sigh, the fear of the night before coming back to me, causing a thin layer of perspiration to cover my body.

'I don't know what would have happened if he hadn't been there. That man was in our house.'

'I heard, *Princesa*. I heard. But Marcel was there. He's the best in the industry. I knew no harm would come to you if I left you with him.'

'When are you coming home to get me, Papa?'

'In a few days, my angel. I need to arrange the flights.'

'But what about me?'

'Marcel will take you home. It's safe there, now.'

'No, he won't. He says it's not safe...'

I pause, realising the shower's stopped. How long ago did it stop? I panic, cut the call immediately and drop the phone on the counter, then grab a pen and add to the list of things I need. Slater comes out of the bedroom, his damp hair combed back.

'Shall I make you something to eat?' I offer quickly, my heart pounding. I study his face, trying to find a sign that he heard me speaking, but I see nothing in his eyes.

'Sure.'

I open the fridge. 'A sandwich, maybe? You don't have much food.'

He hands me his phone with the supermarket app.

'Order anything you want. There's a drop-off place close by, I'll pick it up.' He takes out a prepacked salad bowl. 'I'll have this.'

'You buy them like that? You don't make your own food?'

'Cooking isn't my thing. Food is just fuel.'

'Don't let Maria hear you say that. She'd consider that blasphemy.'

He smiles. 'Sure, she would.' He peels the cover off the salad and grabs a fork. 'Help yourself to anything.'

'I need to call Maria, she'll want to speak to me, but I don't know her number.'

'Write her a letter with the number of the burner on it. Tell her you lost your phone. I'll get Bram to leave it for her when he goes round.'

I peer into the fridge and take a salad for myself.

'Can I come with you?'

'Where?'

'To the gym.'

He shakes his head.

'I can work out myself, or something, I won't be in the way.'

'I'll be teaching, I won't be able to look after you. It's too dangerous.'

'Dangerous? In your own gym? Please, I can't stay here on my own. I've got nothing to do.'

'No.'

He doesn't even look up from his food. His elbows rest on the table, his muscles flexing every time he lifts his fork to his mouth.

'Can't we go and pick up my stuff before you go? Then at least I can study while you're out.'

'I told you, tonight. Bram will go this afternoon and your things will be here for you, tonight.'

There's no point trying to change his mind. His tone tells me there's no negotiation. I leave the salad bowl on the side and walk to the guest bedroom.

'Why don't you read a book?' he calls after me.

'Because I haven't got any books with me,' I tell him.

'In the cupboard under the bottles.'

I go to the cupboard and open it. There are shelves of paperbacks. I glance at the titles. They're arranged in alphabetical order of author. There's John Le Carré, Lee Child, Jocko Willink and more.

'Wow. I didn't realise you like to read.'

'Why not? Because I didn't go to university, like you and your friends?'

There's resentment in his voice.

'No, I just didn't expect it.'

I take *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu from the shelf then walk to the guest bedroom and lie on the bed.

Does he seriously think my father had something to do with that man trying to kill me? I know my father. He may not let me live my life the way I choose but that's his way of protecting me. He wouldn't allow me to get hurt. I don't know why Slater thinks he would be involved. It doesn't make sense. Slater just doesn't understand him.

I look at the book in my hand. And I don't understand Slater. That cupboard full of books is the last thing I expected to find. I assumed he wasn't into reading. I realise I know hardly anything at all about him. Except I do know I'm attracted to him and he is to me, but nothing's going to happen between us. He told me in as many words. That makes me feel weird, because I do want something to happen.

'Dale?' Slater calls from the kitchen.

'Yeah?'

'I've changed my mind. You're coming with me.'

I get up and hurry to the kitchen. He's standing by the door.

'Can you do something with your hair?'

I run my fingers through it. I washed and brushed it this morning. I had to borrow Slater's shampoo and there wasn't any conditioner, so it's not as soft as usual, but I don't think it's that bad. I look at him, puzzled.

'Put it up somehow, so no one can see how long it is,' he says.

'Oh. A bun. OK.'

He grabs a baseball cap and T-shirt from his room and hands them to me.

'Put them on.'

I turn from him, shrug off the blouse and pull on his T-shirt. It's loose on me, the sleeves hang long on my arms. It smells of fabric conditioner and washing powder, and Slater; a hint of his aftershave lingers, even after the wash.

I use the hairband from around my wrist and pull my hair into a low bun. I've only got one band so it's kind of messy. I put the cap on then look at him.

'Here.'

He hands me some sunglasses. I put them on and he nods his approval.

'Let's go.'

I follow him to the car and he holds the door for me to get in.

'Isn't this a bit much?' I ask, when he gets in beside me.

'Someone tried to kill you, remember?' He pulls the car out of the parking space and speeds away.

‘How could I forget.’

I look out of the window at the buildings. I don’t know Rotterdam well as I rarely go out and have no idea which part of the city we’re in.

‘What made you change your mind?’

‘About what?’ He glances at me, his eyes covered by his own sunglasses, and he looks all the more alluring, his tanned, tattooed arms on display.

‘About letting me come with you.’

‘I felt sorry for you.’

‘Oh. Thanks, I guess.’

We drive on in silence for a few moments.

‘Can I take this off now?’ I say, as I remove the cap.

‘No.’

His tone is sharp, so I quickly put it back on.

We pull into the car park behind a one-storey building. There’s a light-up sign that reads ‘The Take Down’. I go to open the door, but Slater puts his hand on my arm.

‘Wait.’

He gets out of the car then comes around to my side and opens the door.

‘Stay close to me.’

He pulls me to his body. Adrenalin pumps through me as I stick to him, the scent of his aftershave strong in my nose. I don’t know what’s going on; is there someone here? Watching us? I feel panic rising in my throat, and I cling tighter to him. His arms grip my shoulders as he strides into the building through the back door. It’s locked, but he has the key. Inside, he releases me. We’re in a corridor.

‘This way,’ he says, walking away from me.

He opens a door on the left, holding it for me to go in. It’s an office. There’s a large antique-style desk made from heavy polished wood facing the door, and two leather sofas.

I take off the sunglasses, then look at Slater. He nods, so I remove the hat as well.

‘You can wait in here.’ He picks up the phone on the desk and says, ‘Tell D to come through.’

Moments later there’s a knock and a man puts his head around the door. He’s got dark blond hair, long on top with an undercut, pulled back in a ponytail. I recognise him as one of guys Slater was with at Paradiso the other night. Slater motions for him to enter. He slips around the door. I see both

arms are tattooed and exposed to mid-bicep by a dark polo shirt with a company logo on it.

‘Hey.’ He shuts the door behind him and extends a hand to me. ‘I’m Dylan.’

I take his hand, my eyes on his tattooed forearms.

‘I’m Dale.’

‘I know.’

There’s kindness in his smile.

‘I’m going to take the class. Stay with her, D, don’t let her out of your sight.’ Slater drops his keys on the desk.

‘Yes, Coach.’ Dylan turns to me and winks.

‘Dale?’

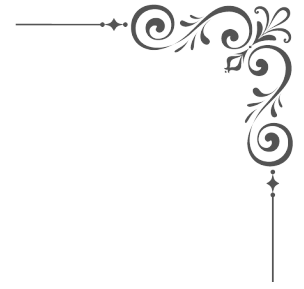
‘Yes, Slater?’

He walks to me and takes hold of my wrists. He bends his head so he’s level with my eyes. His face is close to mine, so close our noses are almost touching. The darkness of his eyes matches his stubble; goosebumps ripple across my skin.

‘You should have everything you need in here. There’s a bathroom. There’s a fridge with food and drinks. Make yourself at home.’ He glances at Dylan, then back to me. ‘D will look after you. You’ll be safe here with him. But do not leave this room until I get back. Under no circumstances. Do you agree?’

I nod, not daring to speak. He goes to the wardrobe and takes out a white martial arts suit.

‘I’ll see you in an hour,’ he tells me as he leaves.



Dylan smiles and shrugs in a kind of we're-in-this-together gesture. He goes to the fridge, gets a bottle of mineral water and offers one to me. I accept it, then he drops down on the sofa and grabs the remote control to put the TV on.

'You had a rough night yesterday, I heard.'

Someone breaking in and pointing a gun at you could be described as rough, I guess, so I smile and nod.

'And now I can't go home.' I sit down on the opposite sofa.

'S tough.' He nods to my water bottle. 'You want something stronger than water? Whisky? Beer? Take the edge off.'

'No, thank you.'

'I guess this kind of sucks, huh? Having to follow Slater round. Not being able to hang out with your friends.' He rests his feet on the coffee table between us, elbows on his bent knees.

'I'm used to it. My father never lets me out, anyway.'

'Yeah, I heard what happened to your mum. I'm sorry.'

I shrug. 'It happened.' I look around. 'Is this Slater's office?'

'Yup.'

'And you work for him?'

Dylan considers my question, rubbing his fingers over his goatee beard.

'Slater's the boss, yes. He's also my best friend. But we're in this together, the five of us: the three Slater brothers, plus Sepp and me.'

'How come Slater's the boss?' I tip my head to one side, curious.

'You've met him, right? He likes to be in control. I mean, really likes it.' He grins. 'But we own this and the other places together.'

'How many places are there, again? I think Slater told me, but I don't remember.'

'We've got three fight clubs, and plan to open another soon. And we're opening a bar, too.' He shrugs. 'We're building an empire.'

'And you're a fighter, too?'

'Yup.'

'Like Slater?' I remember him taking down the gunman with his bare hands.

'Like Slater, but maybe not quite as good.'

There's a knock at the door. Dylan looks over his shoulder.

'Yeah?' he calls out. The door opens and another man who looks like a younger version of Slater comes in. He has the same sharp jawline dusted

with dark stubble, a broad and muscular build, but he's a little shorter and has no visible tattoos.

'Not disturbing anything here, am I?' He stands beside the sofa. 'You're the famous Daleylah Martinez? Daughter of El Patron?'

'I wouldn't say famous.' I laugh, nervously.

'I've heard of you.' He sits down beside me.

'And you're Slater's brother?'

'What gave it away?'

He cocks his head. His hair is longer than Slater's and falls to the side as he moves.

'You do look very similar.'

'Except I'm younger and better looking. Bram Slater.' He holds out his hand and I shake it. 'I can see why my brother's been keeping you to himself.'

'It's actually quite complicated.' My cheeks heat up.

He holds up his hand. 'It's OK. I know all about it. I'm just glad he decided to let you out for an excursion.' He looks around the office.

'Although, this isn't where I'd bring you on our first date.'

'It's not a date. He said he had a class to teach.'

Bram puts a hand on my arm. 'I'm joking. Hey, D, turn it over, there's a race starting in a minute.'

Dylan flips the channel and they gaze up at the screen, watching cars whizzing round a track. Bram shifts so he can see better, his leg pressing against mine.

'Do you mind this?' Dylan asks me. 'We can put something else on if you prefer.'

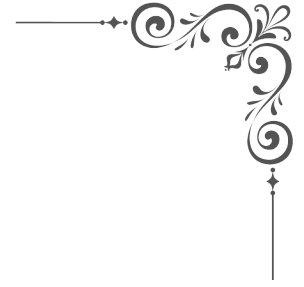
'No, it's fine.' I feel awkward, and I'm happy they're focused on something other than babysitting me.

'Thanks. With Slater on holiday we haven't had much time off. It's good he's stepping in for an hour.'

Dylan turns back to the screen and I follow his gaze, although my mind is not on motor racing. It's on Slater. I get tingles in my stomach when I think about him and what he did to me this morning in bed. He said nothing more would happen, so why do I keep hoping that it will? And why is he all I can think about?

The door opening again breaks my thoughts. Slater comes in. He's wearing the martial arts suit, there's a towel around his neck and his skin is

glistening with sweat. I can't help the smile that creeps over my face at seeing him again as I look up and meet his gaze.



Bram is beside Dale, his knee pressing against her leg. That sight causes a flash of jealousy within me. My fists ball at my sides and I fight to keep control. I try to reason away my emotional response – *she's not even mine, I'm overreacting*. The problem is, I hate people touching what's mine. I guess that comes from having to share everything when I was growing up. If I ever had something that was really mine, and I cared about it, I'd do anything to protect it.

But Dale's not mine and getting angry at Bram for sitting next to her is irrational. I've got to keep a grip on myself. He glances up, sees my face, reads my expression and pulls himself up.

'I've got to get back to work. Hey, nice meeting you, Dale.' He jumps over her legs and heads to the door, clapping me on the back as he passes. 'Later, bro.'

'I'll call you,' I mutter.

'You all right?' Dylan asks.

'Yeah, I'm good, D,' I tell him, although I'm not looking at him. My eyes are still on Dale. I saw the look she gave me when I came in and I'm not sure how I feel about it. What I do know is that at some point during the past few days she's started to mean something to me. Is it because I'm looking out for her? Because I feel a sense of responsibility for her? Or because she slept in my bed last night, and I woke up to her begging me to fuck her?

I don't know what caused it, but the situation's changed between us and I need to figure out how I'm going to respond to it. There's a lot at stake. She's El Patron's daughter and she's engaged. Those two reasons alone should be enough to convince me to stay the hell away, but I'm starting to wonder if I'm past that point. Past caring about El Patron. I don't appreciate his lack of concern for his daughter, his not taking the attack on her life seriously. And I never had respect for Gonzales. It doesn't sound like their engagement was by mutual agreement, anyway. So why am I holding out?

I know I can control myself and not lay another finger on her if that's what I decide. Being in control of the situation, of myself, of my actions, is what I've lived and breathed since I started fighting when I was thirteen. Control is everything, in my sport and my life. If I decide I'm not going to touch her, no matter how my body and mind beg me to give in, I won't. But what I need to decide is, do I want to stay away from her? That'll take some thinking about.

One thing is sure, though; we have to re-establish the ground rules. My little bird will have to realise when I say something, I mean it. I asked her not to speak to her father and I know she disobeyed me. I saw the phone glowing when I got out of the shower, then when I checked the recently dialled numbers I saw straight away she'd called him. Directly after I asked her not to. I'll have to help her learn that she has to trust me, otherwise she's putting us both in danger.

'I'll leave you to it, then. Catch ya later,' Dylan says, to her or to me or both of us, I don't know, I'm not looking at him.

'Thanks, D.'

Dale starts to get up.

'Don't move,' I tell her. 'I need to take a shower before we can get out of here. I'll be five minutes.'

'OK.'

She's watching me as I walk to the cupboard and take out my clothes. I can feel her eyes on me.

'I like your suit.'

'It's not a suit, it's a gi.' I loosen the belt, take off the gi and drop it in the laundry basket.

She's still sitting in the same place when I come out of the bathroom a few minutes later.

'Right. Let's get out of here.'

I don't speak as I drive back to my place. I'm thinking about how things between us have changed and how best to address it with her. Am I ready to overstep the mark with El Patron? Fucking his daughter would definitely be a step over that mark.

'Are you OK, Slater?' she asks, breaking my thoughts.

Her question is met by silence. My eyes are on the road, hidden by my sunglasses. I don't know what answer to give her yet.

'Didn't the class go well? Did something happen?'

She peers at me. I ignore her, unsure how to articulate what I need to say.

'Slater, why aren't you talking? You're scaring me.'

I glance at her. It wasn't my intention to scare her.

'We'll talk at my place, Dale. Later.'

I park, take her up to my apartment and shut the door. She looks at me, waiting, as I walk past her and get the iPad. I hand it to her.

‘Use the shopping app. Order food, whatever you want. My usual order’s in there, so add to it.’

‘You’re leaving again?’ She steps towards me. ‘Where are you going?’

‘I’m going with Bram to get your stuff.’

‘I thought he was going with Dylan?’

‘I’ve changed my mind. It’s better if I go.’

‘Can I come with you?’

‘No, you stay here.’ My tone tells her there’s no persuading me; she sinks down in the chair.

‘I thought you said we were going to talk?’

‘We will. But later. I’m not ready, yet.’

‘What do you mean, ready?’

‘Later.’

‘What if someone breaks in? While you’re gone?’

‘No one knows about this place, little bird. Only my crew. No one will come for you here.’ I look at her, watching how she reacts to my words, trying to understand what she’s thinking. All I see in her warm brown eyes is sadness and fear. Something snaps inside me. I want her and I’m going to have her. I’m struck by an urge to press my lips against hers and drive my tongue into her mouth. I want that, I really do; those lips look too sweet not to kiss.

I run my hand through my hair. Not yet, though.

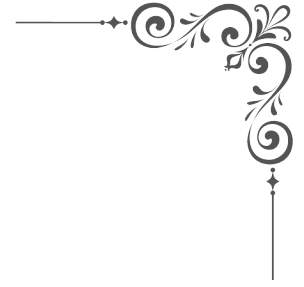
‘I’m going to be about...’ I look at the clock and do a quick calculation.

‘Forty-five minutes. Use that time to make a supermarket order and whatever else you want to do. Then I want you to be waiting for me.’

My voice is soft. I put my curled index finger under her chin and lift her face to look into her eyes.

‘I want you to wait for me on my bed.’ Her eyes widen as I add, ‘Naked.’ Her lips part in a perfect O that makes my dick stiffen.

‘Then we’ll talk, Dale.’ I turn to leave the apartment before she can say anything.



I pick Bram up outside the Take Down. He gets into my car with a grin.

‘You in a better mood now, big bro?’

‘Yeah.’ I pull away, the tyres screeching.

‘Good. I hate seeing you so in a spin over a girl, albeit a hot girl. You looked like you were about to kill someone, earlier.’

I glance at him. ‘Don’t joke about it. I did kill someone, yesterday.’

He holds up his hands in submission. ‘Yeah, sorry, that was bad taste.’

‘This is a serious mess that I shouldn’t be caught up in and it’s getting to me.’

Bram nods.

‘I just don’t get why El Patron wasn’t more pissed off that Bana took a swipe at his daughter. You’d think he’d be furious and rush back here to start a war, not laugh and tell me to handle it.’ I pull off the ring road and turn towards the north of the city. The more I think about his reaction, the less reasonable it seems.

I wave to Rafa in the security booth at the entrance to El Patron’s parking garage and slide the window down. He leans in.

‘Hi, Coach Slater. El Patron said you would be coming back, with Daleylah.’ He looks at Bram then into the empty back seat.

‘Not yet. I’ll bring her back in a few days. When I know it’s safe. When El Patron’s back.’

‘It’s safe. We’ve taken extra measures.’

‘Hmmm, we’ll look at that. But now I’m here to collect some of her things.’

‘Sure.’ He opens the garage.

‘When’s El Patron due back?’ I ask.

‘Not for another week,’ Rafa tells me.

So, he really isn’t planning on coming back any earlier. I nod to Rafa, then drive down the ramp to the garage.

I check that my gun is safely tucked into the back of my belt as we take the lift up into the house. Bram’s beside me, his hands in his pockets, and I know he’s holding his own gun.

The doors slide open and I let my gaze sweep the corridor before stepping out.

‘Hello?’ I call, in case Maria is there. I don’t want to startle her. As far as I’m aware, she doesn’t know about the attack on Daleylah. Not unless El Patron or his security filled her in.

‘This is a cool place. El Patron lives in style.’

Bram looks at the pool as I lead the way straight to Dale’s bedroom.

‘Doesn’t surprise me. He looks like a man who lives in style. Although, this isn’t what I expected. This is too modern and cool. I kind of imagined his house would be like Nio’s. All maroon leather and gold finishes.’

‘Yeah, surprised me, too. Let’s just focus on what we’re here for, OK?’ I want to get out ASAP.

My heart is beating fast in my chest as I push open the door to her room. The body has been removed and the bed has been made. There’s no sign that someone was killed here a few days ago.

I hand Bram the list. ‘Let’s start getting her stuff.’

He glances at it. ‘Seriously? I’m going through her underwear drawer?’

‘Just get on with it.’ I push him aside and empty the lingerie drawer into the bag.

It takes us no more than fifteen minutes to find everything on the list.

‘Right, now let’s get out of here.’

We carry the bags to the lift.

‘Wait, hang on, I almost forgot.’ I take the letter for Maria from my pocket and leave it on the kitchen table. Then we head down to the car.

‘That was straightforward,’ Bram says, as we drive away. I don’t answer, my eyes on the rear-view mirror. There’s a black car behind us but it’s not close enough for me to see who’s driving. I turn on to the slip road to the ring, taking the long way round the city.

‘Are we going to drop in at the Highbar?’ Bram looks at me, wondering why I’m not heading for the Take Down to drop him off.

‘No.’

He leans over and checks the mirror himself.

‘Could that be one of Bana’s crew?’ I ask him as he studies the black car.

‘Doubt it. The car is too nice. More like one of El Patron’s men. Harry Jackman, maybe? He drives a black Mercedes.’ He squints. ‘He’s too far back, I can’t make it out. But why would El Patron have you followed?’

‘Maybe it’s part of the extra security. I’ve no idea what’s going on with him. Have you heard anything from Bana? Anything about Solo going missing?’

‘Nah, nothing from Bana. He’s in Poland at the moment dealing with that shipment.’

There’s a ping and Bram takes out his phone.

‘No shit,’ he mutters, reading the message.

‘What?’

‘Billy was in the gym earlier, apparently, and he mentioned that there was a hit on Bana’s supply, a couple of days ago.’

Billy works for us when we need him. He’s a good kid, a regular at the gym, but he’s also close to the street, always knows what’s going on.

‘What sort of hit?’ I glance at my brother.

‘Stolen.’

‘How much?’

He shrugs. ‘Everything, from what I can gather. Let me ask.’ He types a message back.

‘You get that from D?’

‘Yeah.’

I let out a breath, whistling it over my teeth. ‘Who would have the balls to steal all Bana’s supply?’

The phone pings again.

‘Dunno. Billy’s going to ask around and let us know.’

‘Has there been anyone selling recently? Other than Li’l Cesar and El Patron’s crew?’

Bram shakes his head. ‘Supply is the same as always. That’s what makes it harder to figure out.’

‘Talk to Carl and find out if he’s heard anything.’

‘Why don’t we stop in now? I’m sure our workaholic brother will still be in the office.’

I look at the clock on the dashboard. It’s been forty minutes since I left her. ‘No. I have something to do.’

‘Drop me at Carl’s, then. I’ll talk to him now.’

I look in the rear-view mirror again; the black car is still there. I indicate and pull off the ring, watching the mirror. The car doesn’t follow, so I drive to our gym in Hoogvliet and stop out front.

‘Thanks, Bram.’

‘See you tomorrow?’ he asks as he gets out. He leans in through the open door. ‘We still meeting?’

‘Yeah.’

Every week I get my crew together to go through business issues.

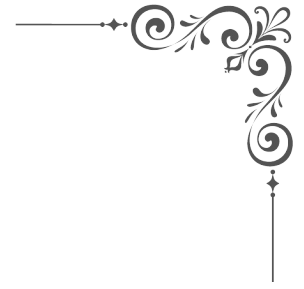
‘Find out what you can by then, but let’s not meet at the Take Down. It seems too exposed, with so much going on. I feel like we should be changing

our routines.'

'Here, then?'

'Dunno. I'll let you know.'

He shuts the door and I pull away. I take the long way back to my flat, my eyes on the mirrors the whole way, checking I'm not being followed. What with taking a hit on his supply and Solo ending up dead, Bana's going to be mightily pissed. And when El Patron comes back and tries to take revenge for the attack on his daughter, things are going to get ugly, pretty damn soon. It's a good thing that Dale is with me. No matter what he says about stepping up security, I don't feel it'll be safe enough. I park the car and glance at the clock. I've been gone for fifty minutes. I hope my little bird's waiting for me.



I open the door and listen, my hand on my gun. I hear nothing. I bring her bags in and wait outside her bedroom door, listening before I go in. She's not in there. The door to my own bedroom is also closed. That's good. She's in there waiting for me, like I asked. I hope she's naked.

I go to the kitchen and pour myself a drink. I'm pulsing with adrenalin, which makes my body tight and I realise my muscles ache, but not from training, from stress. I've got to make sure to take more time to unwind. Relax properly. I roll my shoulders out and rotate my head, enjoying the dull pain I feel from the movement.

I listen as I sip the whisky. Still silence. I'm desperate to check on her but force myself to wait. Force her to wait, too. I can't give up yet. Yes, I want her, but I have to stay in control of the situation and I'm so close to losing it. I want her more than I realised.

I drain the glass, pour some more, then walk to the bedroom. My hand on the door handle, I hesitate, letting the anticipation last a few more seconds before I open it.

She's in my bed, just as I asked. The covers are pulled up to her neck, her hair framing her beautiful face. She's staring at me with a mixture of expectation and nervousness that makes me hesitate, but only for a second. I know this will be everything she's expecting. And more. I assume my little bird is naked beneath the covers. The thought causes my body to react.

I stride across the room and pull the armchair from the side, position it directly in front of the bed and sit down, watching her. I sip my whisky.

'Well done, little bird, I know this can't have been easy for you.'

She doesn't answer me.

'I collected everything you asked for. It's in your room.' My comment is met with further silence. I tap my fingers on the side of the glass. It's all I can do to stop myself jumping onto the bed, tearing the covers from her body and fucking her like she's the last woman alive. But I don't. I draw it out.

'Dale, I don't know how long you're going to be staying with me, but probably a while longer. Certainly, until your father gets home, which looks like it'll be sometime next week. So, we need to establish some house rules.'

I run my thumb over the stubble of my jaw.

'I'm going to protect you while you're here, Dale. Do you trust me to do that?'

She nods.

'Come here.'

She hesitates.

‘Dale, do you trust me?’

She considers my question.

‘Yes,’ she whispers.

It’s the first word she’s spoken since I entered the room.

‘Come here,’ I repeat.

Slowly, she peels the covers back and slides out of the bed. She’s not naked but wearing her bra and knickers. The plain fabric of the underwear conceals far too much of her, but at the same time exposes more than I imagined. I long to tear the garments from her body. I’ve been waiting what feels like a long time to see all of her, although it’s only been a matter of days. I hold out my hand as she walks to me and stops before me.

I stand, reach out and cup her cheek, brushing my fingers over the soft skin of her face. Then I unhook her bra, dusting my hands over the straps so they fall from her shoulders to the floor. I slip my fingers through her knickers and sweep those to the floor, too. She doesn’t move, frozen to the spot in front of me. I press my lips to her cheek, breathing in her clean, sweet scent, then I sit back down, leaving her standing naked in front of me. Every inch of me is screaming for her, but I ignore the hot throb of my cock.

I pick up my glass again and take a sip.

‘Do you trust me to protect you, Dale?’

‘Yes.’

‘Say my name.’ My voice is thick; I swear, my lust for her is audible.

‘Yes, Slater.’

The way her pink tongue flicks her front teeth as she pronounces my name makes me long to kiss her. She’s making no attempt to hide her body from me, standing straight, allowing me to take my fill. I stretch out my legs, crossing my ankles in front of me and adjusting my shorts to give my swollen cock some space.

‘Have I protected you before, Dale?’

‘Yes, Slater.’

‘Have I let you down?’

‘No, Slater.’

‘Do you believe I can protect you?’

‘Yes, Slater.’

‘Why?’

‘Because you’ve done it before.’

‘That’s right. I had to kill a man to protect you, little bird. I would do whatever it took to protect you, Dale. But I need you to be able to trust me.’

Reaching forward, I press my hands on her hips, gently turning her so her back is to me.

‘I want you to put your hands on the bed, Dale.’

She does as I say, leaning over. I have to stifle the groan that rises in my throat at the sight of her upturned bottom and rosy pink pussy. I take a moment just to look and she doesn’t move, her gaze on the head of my bed. My eyes fix on her, moisture glistens on her folds and the sight almost sends me over the edge. She’s enjoying this as much as I am. She’s fucking soaked. I swallow, fighting the urge to ram myself deep inside her.

Between the gap in her legs I can see the swell of her breast, her flat stomach hidden by her pubic bone. She’s completely exposed and vulnerable. But she does trust me, completely. It’s clear.

‘If I’m to protect you, I need you to trust me. But I need to trust you, too, Dale. Can I trust you, little bird?’

‘Yes, Slater.’

‘If I tell you not to do something, can I trust you not to do it?’

She doesn’t answer. She knows what I’m talking about. She knows she did the very thing I asked her not to.

‘Can I, Dale?’ I get up and move closer to her. I gently place my hand on the soft flesh of her bottom. A hint of a sigh escapes from her lips as I squeeze the handful of cool skin, kneading it between my warm fingers. My cock throbs furiously in my shorts.

‘Can I trust you, little bird?’ I whisper.

‘Yes, Slater.’

I let my fingers move to her seam, tracing in a line from her bottom down to her pelvic mound. She groans as I slide effortlessly over her wet path, then back again. She’s hot and soft, and deliciously slippery. Gently, I part her, pressing the pad of my thumb into her opening, my fingers scissoring the swollen clit. I rub her, teasing her body, building the pressure of my touch and the speed of my movement. She groans loudly now, no longer trying to suppress it, and that makes me wince against the desire. My cock is on her thigh and I press against her, restraining my urge to grind on her body.

I continue to work her, stroking her harder and faster, dipping my thumb and fingers deeper into her each time. I feel her stiffen as the orgasm builds. I lower myself so my mouth’s close to her ear.

‘I told you not to call your father, Dale.’ My voice is heavy with desire. ‘I forbade it and you disobeyed me.’

Her body tenses, but I keep working her; she’s unable to do anything but respond. I grip her shoulder as she comes on my hand. Her arms give way and she falls forward, my fingers still pressed into her.

I release her and sit back down, watching her throbbing for a long while after the orgasm passes. I swallow my whisky.

‘You will not disobey me again, Dale, otherwise this isn’t going to work. Do you understand?’

‘Yes, Slater. I promise,’ she answers from where she lies, on my bed.

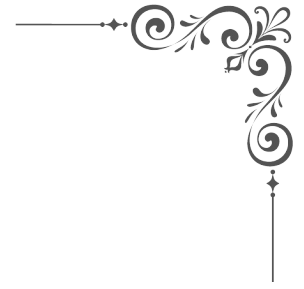
She looks so small and delicate. I want to pick her up and hold her tight and fuck her until there’s nothing left.

‘Your things are in your room.’

‘Thank you,’ she whispers.

Her voice is tiny and I immediately regret what I’ve said. I’ve pushed it too far. She’s too innocent. I step forward and try to scoop her up in my arms but she pulls away.

‘I’ll check my things.’ She reaches down and grabs her underwear from the floor and practically runs from my room.



I dash to my room and close the door behind me. My bags are on the floor, but I ignore them. Slater's T-shirt, that I wore earlier, is on the chair. I grab it and pull it on, then climb into bed. I drag the covers over my head, wrap my arms around my body and squeeze my eyes shut, trying to block out what just happened.

Tears leak out of my closed eyelids, although I'm not even sure why I'm crying. I'm angry. Angry with myself for allowing my body to be manipulated by him so easily. It felt wrong, like I'm a child that he was reprimanding, and I'm mad with myself for liking it and wanting it. Why am I so drawn to him?

I think about Jordan from uni. I've been dreaming about him for so long. He's smart, intelligent and well read, but he pales in every way in comparison to Slater.

I bite my lip, forcing my breathing to slow, trying to rationalise things in my mind. How did he know that I called Papa? Did he hear me? Did he check the phone? I should have guessed he would find out, but how could I not call him? My own father. He'll be worried. Everything he's done is for my safety and I don't want to hurt him. I know how much he suffered when Mama was killed. Like I suffered.

I open my eyes and stare into the darkness, feeling an urge to go home. I was always planning to run away from my home but now everything is mixed up in my mind I just want to be in my own room, my own bed. But even my own room isn't safe any more. And I can't go back there, not now. The only person I can trust to protect me is Slater and that makes me feel hopeless. I don't want to be dependant on him but I don't think I can leave this city on my own now, my confidence has taken a hit after the attack. But I can't stay here either. How long before Slater gets sick of babysitting me and wants me gone?

I don't know how long I slept, but something wakes me. I sit bolt upright in bed, my heart pounding so loudly in my ears I hear nothing else. I'm dripping with sweat, my eyes straining against the darkness. The air feels hot and thick, and I struggle to draw it into my lungs. Someone's going to kill me. I know it. I stare at the darkness, searching for movement, the glimmer of a gun, the twitch of a limb. Panic threatens to take control of me; I force myself to breathe. There's no one here. It's just my imagination.

I lie down again and close my eyes. I see a gun held close against my face, I hear my mother's voice telling me to run and I sit up again, gasping

for air, pressure in my chest. It's like the walls are closing in. I can't do this. I have to go to him. I get silently out of bed and tiptoe out of the room. The apartment is dark. Slater's door is ajar. My eyes have adjusted to the gloom and I see his sleeping body outlined in the shadows, his back to me. His shoulders rise and fall as he breathes. I push open the door, watching him. Then, remembering the night before when I startled him in his sleep, I call to him.

'Slater?'

It's a whisper, barely audible, but he hears it. I see his body tense, ready for action.

'Slater, it's just me, Dale.'

'What?'

His voice is deep with sleep, but I can tell he's wide awake now.

'Slater, I'm scared, I don't want to be alone.'

He rolls on to his back, making room for me.

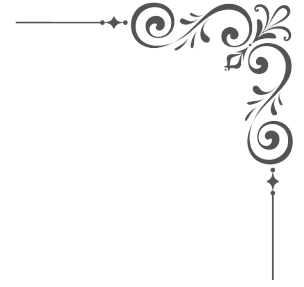
'Come here.'

Quickly, I hurry around the bed and climb in beside him. He turns on his side, his back to me. I move as close as I can without touching him, my body outlining his. I lie still, listening to his breathing. Then I edge even closer to him. I'm so scared right now and being close to him is the only thing that feels safe. He rolls onto his back and lifts his arm, putting it around my shoulders, pulling me into his body. I sigh with relief and press up against him, moulding myself to him, gripping him for dear life. He's warm and solid and safe. As long as I cling to him nothing bad can happen to me. I feel weak having to rely on him like this, but in the darkness of the night all my strength has gone, leaving me nothing but afraid and in need.

'Get this off.'

He tugs at the T-shirt I'm wearing. I let go of him long enough to take the top over my head before wrapping my arms around him again, pressing my naked body against him.

He lifts my hair away from my back so he can hold his fingers against my skin, and I hang on to him. I'm so close I'm almost on top of him but I don't care. Now I can close my eyes and breathe easily, my face against his chest, the heavy thud of his heartbeat soothing me to sleep.



The air conditioning unit buzzes. I lean back in my chair, comfortable in my suit, shirt open at the collar. This room is cool even if outside is still sweltering. We're at Carl's gym. This meeting room is smaller than the one at our main gym, but still comfortable.

My men are here already, all of them. Carl and Bram are on either side of me; Sepp is next to Carl. We're just waiting for Dylan, who had to step out to take a call.

'Sorry.' Dylan comes back into the room, putting his phone in his pocket.

His black shirt is rolled up over his forearms, exposing his tats. I always think Dylan looks badass in a suit; his ponytail, goatee and tattoos are a great match with the elegant cut of his Italian designer clothes.

'That was Billy,' he says, sitting down opposite me. I nod for him to go on. 'Turns out there was indeed a hit on Bana's supply. Happened five days ago.'

'Bana was wiped out. I heard he's got nothing left,' Bram says. 'And he's in Romania or Poland or who-the-fuck-knows-where right now sorting out the arms shipment, so not able to get the hell back here to deal with things.'

'Who did it?' I ask.

Dylan shakes his head. 'No one's saying anything, but the street price has gone through the roof with all of Bana's dealers out of action.'

'Bet Li'l Cesar and El Patron are laughing right now. They must be making bank out of this,' Sepp says, tossing his water bottle in the air and catching it with one hand.

'Yeah.' I look from Carl to Bram, then to Dylan. Dylan's face is grave.

'What you thinking, D?'

'I think...' He rubs his fingers over his chin. 'I think it's a convenient moment for El Patron to fuck off out of town.'

I look at him and meet his eyes.

He continues: 'He left his daughter with the best protection money can buy and disappeared, just after his biggest enemy's supply got hit. Which, incidentally, puts him in a great financial position.'

I look at Carl. 'And Cesar? He had nothing to do with it?'

Carl has the closest connection to Cesar. This club is near his patch and he comes in often to work out.

Carl shrugs. 'He was in last night crowing about how much money he's making right now, but I'm pretty sure he was as surprised as everyone else. He even asked if we can bump his supply, as he's running so low.'

‘El Patron’s guys not running low?’ I look around.

Bram shakes his head. ‘Haven’t heard anything. I can check with Harry.’

‘El Patron plans a hit on Bana, wipes out his supply then heads out of town, first making sure that his daughter is taken care of, and leaving his dealers to take over the gap in the market. That’s our theory?’ I steeple my fingers together, considering it.

‘He’s got bigger balls than a fucking rhinoceros if that’s true,’ Sepp says.

I smile, my throat tightening as the pieces fit together. It’s plausible. It would explain why one of Bana’s men was creeping around my little bird’s bedroom the other night.

‘If it’s true, El Patron won’t have any fucking balls left when I’m done with him.’ I get up and pace the room. That fucking cocksucker played me for a mug. My fists ball at my side.

‘Does Bana suspect him?’ Carl asks.

‘Maybe. It would certainly explain Solo’s midnight visit to take out El Patron’s daughter,’ Bram says.

A mix of emotions floods my mind and for a moment I lose control. I pull my arm back and hammer it into the punchbag hanging in the corner of the room.

‘Marcel, take it easy,’ Carl says.

I breathe in through my nose before pulling my arm back and letting it go even harder a second time.

‘How do we deal with this shit?’ Bram gets up and paces the floor. ‘This is a direct insult to us. He thinks we’re some sort of private security team? We’ve never been involved with the beef between players. What’s Bana gonna do when he finds out we’re guarding El Patron’s daughter? We need this deal with him, I’ve got everything set up for it. If he thinks we’ve sided against him after his gear has been ripped off ... he might even think we were involved in ripping him off.’ He turns away.

‘We’ll have to make it clear to El Patron that things don’t roll like this,’ Sepp says.

He and Carl are the most level-headed of our crew. They’re the ones who meet with the banks, estate agents, solicitors. Anyone from the corporate world. They both went to university and know how to speak to people like that. Not like me, Bram and D who are just simple knuckleheads.

‘We’ll have to hit back,’ Sepp continues.

‘How, though? Bram asks. ‘I feel like heading down to Nio’s and trashing the place.’

‘No.’ Carl shakes his head. ‘Sanctions. We could limit his laundry for a few weeks. Hit him in the pocket.’

‘Hit ourselves in the pocket, too?’ Sepp asks with a snorts.

They all look at me, waiting.

‘I want to take the old man out,’ I mutter through clenched teeth.

My comment is met by silence. I see them exchange glances and I know what they’re thinking: I’m angry, now’s not the right moment to make this sort of decision. Sometimes my temper can get the better of me, but not now.

What sort of a man risks his daughter like that? If I hadn’t woken up that night, if I hadn’t been there in time, Dale would be gone. The thought sends a chill through me. He doesn’t deserve to live after taking that sort of chance with her life.

It’s Dylan who finally speaks.

‘Taking out El Patron is not the best idea, Slater. Think about it. Antonio’s old school; with him gone, you just make space for creeps like Bana to take over. Someone who’d sell any kind of shit as long as they make money. The whole city will become meth-heads before we know it.’

I rub my thumb along my chin, the sharp stubble barely registering on my rough pad. In spite of my anger towards El Patron, I know Dylan is right. El Patron does keep the city in balance.

‘We have to do something else. Something that shows him he can’t fuck with us but doesn’t screw up business either’ Carl says.

Dylan gets up and stands behind me and puts his hands on my shoulders, trying to squeeze some of the tension out like we do with the young fighters. But there’s no chance of me relaxing. My muscles are like stone.

I pull away from him, my fists clenching as I remember Solo with his gun pointed at Dale. I draw my fist back and hit the punchbag again. Fucking El Patron, playing me for a fool, telling me to take a vacation, relax by the pool. I punch the bag again.

‘Bro, why don’t you take your suit off and go take it out in the gym?’ Carl suggests. ‘I’m sure Bram will be up for sparring with you.’

‘No fucking way.’ Bram shakes his head. ‘Not when he’s in a mood like that. Let some other unsuspecting kid be his punchbag.’

I hold the bag still, resting my forehead against the leather. I haven’t fucked her out of respect for her father, out of respect for his wish to marry

her to Gonzales. I've had that beautiful girl in my bed for two nights in a row and yet I've never had to jerk off so much in my life. I'm such a fucking sucker. I turn and look at them.

'El Patron's doesn't deserve to see his daughter again.' My voice is low, the anger growing by the minute.

Dylan clears his throat. 'Will she agree to that?'

I close my eyes and run my hands over my face. 'I don't know. I don't see why she'd want to go back to him, when she finds out what he's done. And if she doesn't want to go back home, I won't make her.'

'Bana's going to want to retaliate. She'll be a target. Do we really want to be associated with her?' Bram asks.

I turn my back, unable even to process his question. How can he suggest that I wouldn't protect her? Even if it does make me a target, alongside her. I draw my fingers down the soft leather of the punchbag. There's no way I'd abandon her. I don't trust El Patron to be able to look after her properly if she does decide to go back to him. She'll be far safer staying with me.

I'm pretty sure she won't choose him, though. Why would she choose to go back to her father and to a life where she'll be forced into marriage with Gonzales?

'I'll talk to her. If she agrees, as soon as El Patron's back we'll plan a meet and she can decide.'

'That'll be a fun meeting.' Carl chuckles. 'We'll have to toss a coin to see who gets to come along to that one.'

I dismiss them. I can't discuss any other business, my mind is too preoccupied. They get up and go, but Dylan hangs back.

'You sure about this, Slate? I mean, keeping El Patron's daughter is a big thing.'

I look at him. 'I won't keep her against her will. But if she doesn't want to go back to him, I'm not going to make her. She can stay with me. She's no fucking kid, she's twenty-two. She's old enough to decide, and to take care of herself.'

D holds up his hands knowing from my tone not to take it any further.

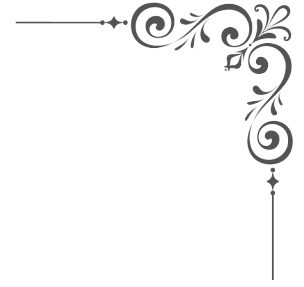
I pick up my phone, dial her burner and wait. After two rings she answers. The sound of her voice is like a soothing balm. It calms me and the anger from a few moments earlier dissolves. Now I'm eager to get back and see her again.

'I'll be back in ten minutes, Dale. We need to talk.'

I disconnect the call before she can question me, and drop my phone into my pocket. Dylan eyes me.

‘Are you sure it’s a good idea to go back to her right now? Why don’t you come with me to the gym, we’ll work out, blow off steam?’

I shake my head. ‘It’s OK. I’m in control. And I’d never hold her responsible for the mistakes of her father.’



I drop the phone on the table and a shudder runs through my body. That sounds serious. My mind is racing wondering what he wants to talk to me about. I walk around his flat, unsure what to do. I go to his room and sit down on his bed, thinking. I spent the night in his arms. Once my head was on his chest, I felt safe. Comforted. I know he can protect me, but now he's not here I feel exposed and vulnerable again.

When I woke this morning, I was alone. He had already somehow unpicked himself from my grip without waking me and was in the shower. Then I lay in his bed watching him dress for work. He put on a suit and styled his hair and the overwhelming desire I felt while watching him shocked me. I don't know what to think any more. I don't want to have to depend on him. I was so ready to leave my father and start my own life on my terms, and now it just feels like I've moved from the protection of one man to the protection of another. Except with Slater there's something else. I don't just want protection from him.

I go to my room and strip out of my clothes, then pull all my things out of the bag. I don't have anything to wear. All my clothes are dowdy and old-fashioned. It never bothered me before, but now I want to wear something nice. Something that will make him see me as feminine. And sexy. But the only sexy thing I have is the dress I wore to Paradiso the other night.

I put on leggings, then a T-shirt. I tie a knot in it at the front, so it exposes my navel. I pull a brush through my hair and put some dark liner beneath my eyes and red gloss on my lips.

I wait for him in his bedroom, too nervous to do anything but sit on his bed. I hear the key in the lock and freeze.

'Dale?' he calls.

'I'm in here,' I answer, then sweep my hair off my shoulders, smoothing it. I take a breath, waiting, hoping he'll find me attractive. I hear the sound of the fridge door in the kitchen then his footsteps approaching the bedroom, getting louder. He pauses outside the door. I see the handle turn and there's silence as it opens.

I watch him as his gaze sweeps over me. He hesitates then enters the room.

'Why are you in here?' he asks, as he goes to the side and takes the armchair.

'You said you wanted to talk,' I murmur. I don't dare admit I hope for a repeat of yesterday.

‘Yeah, I do.’ He sits down opposite me, crossing his legs in front of him.
‘You look nice.’

‘Thanks.’

I look down at my leggings, unable to meet his eyes. Do I look like I’m trying too hard? Is it too obvious what I want from him? Waiting on his bed like this?

‘What do you want to talk about?’

‘We’ll come to that,’ he answers, his voice thick. ‘I like that you’re waiting here for me. But I think I’d like it better if you removed your clothes.’

My gaze flicks up and finds his fixed on me. There’s not a hint of amusement in his eyes. He means what he said. He’s waiting for me to undress.

I stand up and peel the T-shirt over my head, then slide out of my leggings, letting the clothes pool on the floor at my feet.

‘Keep going.’

Slater shifts in his chair to accommodate the bulge of his erection, visible in his trousers. I reach behind and unhook my bra, then remove my knickers. Naked, I stand in front of him waiting for his next instruction. He doesn’t speak for a few moments. I feel his eyes roaming my body. This was what I wanted. Heat races within me, accumulating between my legs.

‘Sit down, little bird.’

He motions to the bed. I do as he instructs, and he gets up and sits beside me.

‘Move back a little.’

I scoot up the bed.

‘Lie.’

I lie, as he sits beside me.

‘I like having you on my bed. I like it a lot.’

He traces his fingers over my shoulder. My skin reacts to his touch, contracting, my nipples pebbling hard, and I know he notices.

‘Do you like being here?’

I nod, not daring to speak.

‘When your father asked me to watch out for you, I didn’t realise I would enjoy it anywhere near as much as I do.’

His fingers slide over my body to my nipple, tracing a circle around it before gripping it between his thumb and forefinger.

‘I suppose in many ways I have a lot to thank your father for.’

His finger moves down my body, following a line over my belly button to the top of my pelvis.

‘We do need to talk about something, though.’

I groan as the tip of his finger brushes against my clit. It feels like all the blood from my body is between my legs. I’m swollen and light-headed.

‘When you spoke to your father yesterday, after I told you not to call him...’

His thumb catches in my opening, his fingers pressing against my engorged nub.

‘...Did you tell him where you are?’

I suck in a breath as his finger enters me, I struggle to think.

‘I don’t remember.’

I sigh as he rubs his whole hand along my seam, waves of pleasure rolling through me.

‘Did you tell him you’re at my place?’

‘No,’ I gasp. ‘I don’t think so. I can’t remember.’

‘It’s important, little bird. I need to know. For your safety.’

He eases the speed at which his fingers caress me, drawing the movement out in slow agonising circles.

‘I told him I’m with you.’

He’s silent as he strokes me. I close my eyes and give up thinking. His fingers inside me, the pressure he’s putting on my body is building.

‘I’m very angry with your father, little bird.’

The words blur in my mind. Angry? My father? I can’t listen, not now. Why is he even talking to me when he’s doing this? I feel the orgasm building, it’s so close and with each move of his finger it comes closer.

‘I think your father is responsible for that man coming to your house to kill you, Dale. You need to know that.’

He speeds up; my senses are alight and fixed between my legs right now, all my being is focused on the movement of his hands. His words are far away, an echo in a dream.

‘I don’t think it’s safe for you to go back to your father, little bird. I want you to stay here with me.’

The waves crash over me. I sigh as I come, my body vibrating on his hand.

He sweeps a strand of hair from my face. I focus on my breathing, letting my body relax and recover. When I open my eyes Slater is leaning on the bed beside me, watching me. His shirt is open at the collar. I reach for him, running my hand over his shoulder.

‘Did you understand what I just told you, little bird?’

I shake my head. I’ve no idea what he was talking about. He said something about my father.

‘I think your father was responsible for that man trying to kill you.’

I frown, propping myself up on my elbows. ‘Papa? No.’ I shake my head. ‘He didn’t have anything to do with it.’

‘I think he did. Indirectly. I think he knew you would become a target, which is why he tricked me into looking after you.’

‘No. You don’t understand. My whole life he’s kept me inside, protecting me, he wouldn’t do anything to put me in danger. If he thought I was at risk, he’d have moved me to a safe house or something. You must be mistaken.’

Slater doesn’t respond. His eyes are dark and serious.

‘I’ll ask him when he’s back.’

‘Will he tell you, do you think?’

Slater’s seemingly casual question stops me. He’s right. Papa won’t tell me anything. He never has and never would speak to me about anything to do with his work. I don’t know that much about what my father does. Slater clearly knows far more about it than I ever will. Tears of embarrassment well in my eyes.

‘My sweet little bird.’

He draws his thumb under my eyelid to wipe the tears away.

‘I don’t think it would be safe to go back to your father. Not until we understand why he would expose you like that.’

‘But where should I go?’

‘You can stay here. With me.’

‘Right.’ I consider his words. I can stay here for the time being, but in reality, for how long?

‘Papa’s always protected me.’

‘Where was he the other night? When the gun was at your head?’

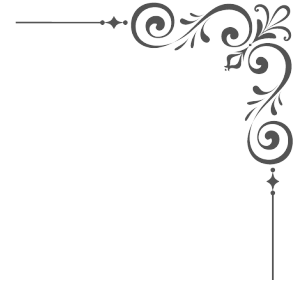
Slater’s voice is low. He sweeps the hair off my cheek, letting his fingers trail down my face, over my collarbone and land on my naked breast. I watch as his thumb brushes over my nipple, causing it to harden and my skin to contract again. Slater groans, the sound deep in his chest and it reaches deep

within me, causing a physical reaction. His forefinger and thumb grip my nipple, rolling it gently.

‘It’s better if you stay here, Dale. For both of us.’

I look up into his eyes. They’re dark, clouded with anger and lust, and I wonder if there’s something else going on that I don’t know about. Why is Slater so angry with my father? Do I want to stay here? My body’s reacting to him constantly and the desire is hampering my brain. I can’t think like this.

I push his hand away from me. I have to think, I need space. He doesn’t speak as I get up and go to my bedroom. I close the door and press my back against it, then sink to the floor. I don’t know who to trust. Slater saved my life and has been watching out for me ever since we met. But my father is my father. He wouldn’t put me in danger, would he? Not when he’s spent so long protecting me. But what about Mama? He didn’t manage to protect my mother. Not when the men came for her.



I call El Patron from the car as I drive. He messaged me last night to tell me he'd be back today.

'Antonio.'

'Marcel, I've been trying to reach you.'

The confident tone of his voice makes my chest tighten. El Patron always acts like he owns the world, that everyone else should fall over for him.

'I've been busy.' My fingers grip the steering wheel, my knuckles white. 'When did you get back?' I force myself to sound casual.

'This morning. I returned as soon as I could.'

I focus on the car in front of me, keeping my breathing even.

'Where is my daughter? I'll have someone pick her up.'

'She's safe. With me.' I feel my heart rate beginning to increase.

'You're a good man, Marcel. I'll be forever in your debt for looking after her. Where is she? Harry will come for her.'

'I'll bring her to you, Antonio.'

'OK. You will come to my house. I'll have Maria prepare dinner for us, to thank you.'

'I'll bring her tomorrow.'

'Tonight, Marcel. Tomorrow I'm at the club.'

'I'll bring her to Nio's tomorrow, then.'

'Tonight. I've missed my *princesa*. I want to see her.'

'Not tonight. I have something to do.'

'Then Harry will collect her.'

'No. I don't trust anyone with her. Not after what happened.'

'Marcel, Harry is one of mine. You can trust him.'

'It's not Harry I don't trust. But Harry can't handle things like I can.'

'That's true, Marcel, you are an excellent fighter. But Harry's got a gun and he knows how to use it. Daleylah will be safe with him.'

'I'll bring her to Nio's tomorrow.' I say it firmly, hoping to put an end to the negotiation.

'Angelina's is too impersonal. Come to my house.'

My palms are slick with sweat. I know he's used to getting what he wants but right now I've got the upper hand.

'You know what happened at your house. I have bad memories there and I still don't trust your security. We'll meet at your club.'

'My security is not to be questioned, Marcel. The breach has been addressed, like I told you. Angelina's is not a place for a girl like Daleylah. I

don't want her there, especially after what happened. It's too exposed.'

'I'll be with her. She'll be safe.'

'Marcel.' His voice is hard. 'I'd prefer to meet somewhere less public. Come to my house, or I'll have someone collect my daughter.'

'Antonio, your club tomorrow night, or nowhere. We'll be there at seven, before it opens.' I cut the call before he can respond, my heart racing.

I have to warn my crew. Going up against El Patron is a step I didn't want to take, but it's unavoidable. He's played me and put his daughter at risk and those two things can't be overlooked. Not if I want to be able to face myself in the mirror again.

I turn off at the exit and drive to the gym. Dylan looks up as I enter and nods when he sees me. He's giving a private lesson to two kids, holding hand pads up as they take turns to hit.

I shake hands with a few of the regulars and pick my way through the equipment past the fighting ring to the back. Bram is on his way from the showers; he follows me into my office and shuts the door.

'So?'

'We're meeting El Patron at Nio's tomorrow evening. We're going to have a talk with him about what happened.'

'You spoke with Dale about it?'

'Kind of. I told her I think her old man was responsible for the attempt on her. I told her I think she'd be safer staying with me.'

'What she say about that?'

'Not much. Kind of walked away and shut the door in my face.'

Bram grins. 'Went well, then?'

'We have to be prepared. El Patron's not going to be too pleased with me if Dale decides she doesn't want to go home.'

'No, can't imagine he would be.'

'We'll have to up our security here.'

'But would El Patron hit us? If you're looking after his girl?'

'I dunno. I mean, if she tells him she wants to stay with me he might go for it.'

Bram pulls an unconvinced face. 'You really think he'll just let her go? *Hey, go hook up with Slater, you've got my blessing. And make sure you use a rubber, sweetheart, we don't want any little Slater junior dropping in here, becoming an heir to my empire.*'

‘It’s not about fucking sex, Bram. It’s about what’s best for her. Where she’ll be the safest.’

‘Bullshit,’ he mutters, then holds up his hands. ‘Not that I blame you. I wouldn’t be able to let her go, either.’

‘Have you heard anything from Bana?’ I ask, unbuttoning my shirt and hanging it up.

‘Deal’s still going ahead. In two days.’

‘Good. And no rumours about Solo?’ I ask.

‘Nothing. Let’s see what Bana says when he gets back.’

‘Yeah, and once we get this thing with El Patron ironed out we can move on. We’ll finish the deal with Bana and, as soon as we get paid, Carl and Sepp can get on with finding a property for the new gym. There’s been too many distractions lately. We’ve not been focused on business.’ I pull a club polo shirt over my head.

‘Speak for yourself. I’ve focused like hell, you’re the one who’s been off on holiday.’

‘Yeah, well, I’m back now.’ I step out of my trousers and put on a pair of sweat shorts.

‘Are you?’ Bram arches an eyebrow. ‘Who’s going to babysit Dale when you’re working?’

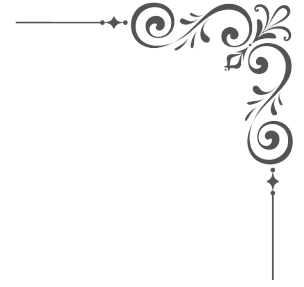
‘If she’s at mine, she’s safe. She won’t need looking after. And if she decides to stay with me, then I’ll tell Bana that she’s no longer with El Patron and that should get her off the target list.’

‘Yeah, but it’ll put us on El Patron’s list.’

‘Maybe, maybe not. But we know how to handle ourselves better than she does.’ I hang up the trousers then grab a bottle of water. ‘I want you to come tomorrow night,’ I tell him, as I open the door and walk to the gym. He follows me.

‘I wouldn’t miss it if you paid me. Carl’s coming, too.’

‘The more the merrier.’



I feel better after my class. Teaching kids how to fight always makes me feel better. Helping them know how to defend themselves so they never have to take a beating like I did when I was young, gives me purpose.

I don't bother getting changed, I'll take a shower at home. I'm too eager to see Dale. I stop by the collection point to pick up the supermarket delivery and take the bags up to my flat. I unlock the door and look for her. She's in her bedroom with the door shut. The light is on and I can see movement beneath the door.

I don't disturb her, just unpack the shopping then cook some pasta. I bang about with the pans, hoping she'll hear me and come out of her room, but she doesn't.

I lay the table and pour two glasses of wine. Then I go to her room and knock on the door.

'Yes?'

Her sweet voice makes me smile.

I open the door and lean against the frame. She's cross-legged on the bed, her computer on her lap, her long hair tied up in a messy bun on the top of her head.

'You wanna eat? I cooked dinner.'

Her brown eyes widen with surprise. 'Yeah, I guess I am hungry.' She puts the computer down, climbs off the bed and follows me to the kitchen.

'This looks nice.' She wraps her arms around her body as she checks out the table and pan of pasta.

'I can be a gentleman when I want.'

She meets my eyes but doesn't return my smile. She sits opposite me and takes a sip of wine.

'I thought you said you didn't cook?'

I spoon pasta onto her plate.

'Pasta's about as far as I stretch.' I smile and she smiles back, and I feel her starting to soften. I keep talking. 'I don't often do carbs but sometimes I just get a craving.' I glance at her. 'Things have been kind of crazy these past seventy-two hours, huh?'

'That would be an understatement.' She pulls the hairband out of her hair, letting it fall loose over her shoulders. 'I guess I should be used to it by now. This sort of life is all I've ever known. My father tried to keep me away from it, but since my mother was killed I've been living in constant fear.'

‘You don’t have to be afraid any more, Dale. While you’re with me, no one can hurt you.’

She looks down, toying with her food. She doesn’t believe me. Even now she doesn’t feel safe. But I mean it. I won’t let anyone harm or threaten her again. I’ll make it my life’s mission to protect her.

‘And what about when I’m not with you, Slater?’ Her eyes are on her plate.

‘We’ll figure it out. I’ll teach you to fight. And I’ll make sure that you’re never a target.’

‘Do you really think my father was in some way responsible for that man trying to kill me?’

‘Indirectly, yes, I do.’ I don’t hesitate, even though I know my words will hurt her. She needs to know the truth. ‘He’s back. I spoke to him today. We’re going to see him tomorrow night. Then you can talk to him. Ask him about it.’

She shakes her head. ‘He’ll never tell me. He never tells me anything.’

‘Then you can decide. What you want to do.’

‘Do?’ She looks at me blankly.

‘You can decide if you want to go back home...’ I swallow and meet her gaze, suddenly nervous to finish my sentence. I force myself to say it. ‘Or stay here with me.’

She doesn’t answer. Her eyes are on me as she processes what I’ve said.

‘Come on.’ I get up and hold out my hand. ‘Let’s go.’

‘Where? I haven’t finished eating.’

‘We’ll finish later.’

She stands up and follows me. I’ve been waiting for this and I can’t wait any more. I stop in front of the bed. She looks up, uncertain. I pull off my polo shirt and drop it on the chair, then hook my fingers beneath her T-shirt and peel it over her head. She lifts her arms to help me.

I look at her; ever since the first time I saw her, I’ve been wanting to kiss those lips. I can’t believe it’s been this long and I still haven’t. I hold my finger under her chin, urging her to look at me.

‘Do you want this, Dale?’ I ask her, although I already know the answer. I can tell from the way her pupils are dilating and her lips are redder than before. No matter what she says, I know that if I put my hand between her legs she’ll be wet and ready for me and that thought makes me harder than I knew was possible.

She doesn't speak, but moves her head up and down ever so slightly in response to my question. I lower my face to hers and she closes her eyes, waiting for my kiss. I groan, running my thumb over her lips, then pull away from her and she opens her eyes, gasping, disappointment pooling in her eyes.

I smile; tonight, there is going to be no room for disappointment. I know exactly what she needs and I'm going to give it to her. But not all at once. I tuck my fingers into the waistband of her leggings, pull them down letting them fall to the floor.

'Get onto the bed. On your hands and knees,' I whisper, caressing her cheek.

She climbs on to the bed but not before she sneaks a glance at me. It's no more than a split second but I can read her eyes. She's wondering if tonight is going to be different. I've played with her before but that's always where it stopped, we've never gone further. The corners of my mouth rise in a half smile; she has no idea how different tonight will be.

'Part your legs,' I whisper, and suck in a breath as she does. My cock throbs, I slide my shorts down and step closer to her. My dick is millimetres from her entrance. I put my hand on her bottom to stop myself from ramming into her. The desire is so strong, it's painful. Instead, I slide the head of my cock down her seam, all the way to her clit. It slips easily in her moisture and we groan in unison. She feels as fucking good as I knew she would. No, that's wrong, she feels better, a million times better. I rub my cock over her pussy, forward and backward, closing my eyes. She's moaning and already getting close; my sweet little bird is so easy to please. She needs this but she's got to wait. I reach for a condom, rolling it on slowly, watching her as I do.

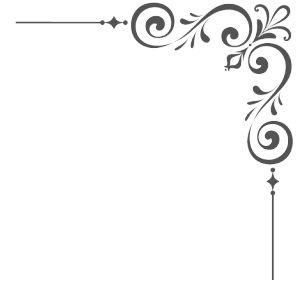
I swear I see her getting wetter by the second. It turns me on so much that I watch her for longer than I planned, studying the sight of her upturned pussy. I place my hand on her body and she reacts to my touch. Goosebumps ripple over her exposed skin and I lower my face, kissing her buttock. She moans at the touch; my stubble must be rough on her sensitive body. I trail kisses over her bottom, my lips dusting the inside of her thighs. Then I move to her seam, my tongue teasing the warm folds, caressing and licking her arousal from her. She moans, louder this time and the sound goes through me, vibrating all the way to my hard-on. I'm longing to be inside her, I can barely imagine how good it will feel. I move my tongue, exploring her

entrance, and then work back to her clit. Her breaths become shallower and my tongue flicks forwards and backwards over her sensitive spot. She tastes so sweet and eating her out is turning me on so much I have to force myself not to grab my cock to jerk off. I'm desperate to fuck her, but enjoying every sound of pleasure she makes.

I reach around and take hold of her left breast, teasing her nipple with my fingers as I suck her pussy. She moans and her body tenses; she's nearing the edge, I can feel it. I work her harder and faster until she cries out and her body explodes in my mouth.

I pull away, standing behind her and press myself into her, just a little at first, giving her time to adjust to me. She gasps. She's so wet I go in easily. I take hold of her hips then press into her, all the way in one movement. She cries out, and I pull her bottom against my body, pushing hard to get as far inside as I can. We fit together. She's so tight and I daren't move or I might come inside her right now. I bite my lip, controlling myself and letting her catch up. I pull out again slowly, savouring the pleasure, she's so damn wet, then I slide into her again and again. I've been waiting for this but it's nothing like I imagined. Nowhere close. She feels a hundred times better than I ever dreamt. The slower I move, the closer I get to coming.

Fuck it. I grab her long dark hair and tangle it around my fist, pulling her head backwards. I can't wait another damn second. I drive into her again, lifting her and hammering my hips against her bottom, her velvet-soft body gripping me, caressing me, working me. I wrap my other hand around her and finger her clit as I fuck her. She's ready and I feel her tighten around me as a sweet sigh escapes her lips. It's too much, the last straw, the feminine timbre of her voice sends me over the edge and I explode within her, driving hard against her one last time before I fall forwards on top of her, my chest pressed against her back as she collapses beneath my weight. I bury my face in her hair, breathing in the strawberry scent of her shampoo.



He's still inside me and the warmth of him against me is the best feeling. He's right, I am safe with him. I feel it, really safe for the first time ever, just like this, his body within mine. He strokes a stray strand of hair off my face, brushing his fingers over my cheek, and I smile.

When he gets up to go to the bathroom I scoot up the bed and lie on my back. I want him again, but I want him to take me like this, so I can see his face and hold my arms around him.

When he comes back I open my arms wide, waiting for him. His hair is tousled, his muscles defined; every inch of him is chiselled and perfect. And he's hard again.

He stands by the bed, studying me for a moment before he climbs on top of me, pressing himself against me. My arms close around him like the spring of a trap, our eyes meet and it feels like he's looking into my soul. I raise my mouth to his. He has to kiss me now. He still hasn't and I can't it take any longer.

And he does kiss me, for the first time ever, lowering his lips to mine. His kiss is firm and commanding, his stubble grazing the skin of my face. My tongue seeks his and I reach up and curl my fingers around the back of his neck, drawing my hand through his hair. I can't get enough, it's too good. I kiss him harder and faster than I've kissed before and he kisses me back, owning my mouth.

He reaches over me, fumbling in the drawer. He breaks our kiss for a moment as he puts on another condom, then he enters me again, moving softly, slowly this time, long pleasurable strokes. We rock together as one, locked in place, my arms and legs clamped around him. We remain like this for hours, kissing, making slow love, until Slater eventually pulls back before thrusting hard and coming inside me.

'You are everything I knew you would be, little bird.'

He strokes my hair and I run my fingers over his bicep, tracing the intricate lines of the works of art that are his tattoos.

'I've waited for this,' I whisper.

'I know you have.' He kisses my hand. 'Did you think I would disappoint you?'

'No, I didn't,' I answer without hesitation. There is nothing about Slater that could be a disappointment.

I wake to Slater kissing my cheek.

'I have to go to work now, little bird.'

‘Oh, OK.’ I blink; I slept soundly for the first time in a long while.

‘I’ll be back around six thirty, so be ready to go.’

‘Where?’ I prop myself up in the bed.

‘To meet your father.’

He gets out of bed and goes to take a shower.

I lie back. I don’t want to go to see my father. I wish I could just stay here in Slater’s bed forever and never have to face Papa again. He will force me to go back. And marry Gonzales. There’s no way I can. Not after what happened last night with Slater. I’m no longer that little girl. I’m a woman, now. I’ve crossed a line with Slater.

He comes out of the bathroom, naked, and my eyes are drawn to his body.

‘Slater? Can’t you come back to bed, just for a little bit?’ I want to do it again, to prove I didn’t imagine it. He glances at me.

‘I have to teach a class, little bird. Later.’

He pulls on a clean pair of sweat shorts and a polo shirt then styles his hair.

When he goes to the kitchen, I take one of the towels from the bathroom and follow, wrapping it around my body as I go. I sit opposite him at the breakfast bar while he eats.

‘Drop that, I want to see you.’ He pulls the towel away from my body. ‘You don’t need to hide yourself from me.’ He caresses my naked breast, which sends heat shooting to my core.

‘Slater,’ I murmur, wanting him.

He grins then gets up and puts his bowl in the dishwasher, walks around the breakfast bar and bends to give me a kiss.

‘Sorry. I’ve got to go.’

‘Great,’ I mutter.

‘Be ready later. We won’t have much time. We’re meeting him at seven.’

I watch as he turns and leaves the apartment, locking the door behind him.

I’m alone the whole day. I try to study, but struggle to focus. My mind keeps wandering back to Slater and to tonight. What will I say to Papa? We’ve never discussed his work. How will he react if Slater confronts him? In my father’s eyes my future lies as a protected wife.

I begin to pack my bag. Slater said I could decide whether to go back to Papa, but the choice isn’t really mine. My father will never allow me that

freedom. He'll demand I come home. I might as well be ready for the inevitable. I have only two options: go back to him or run.

Leaving and going somewhere no one knows I'm Daleylah Martinez, daughter of El Patron, would also mean leaving Slater. And I'm not sure I will be able to do that.

Going back to my father would mean saying goodbye to Slater. There is no way Papa would agree to let me see him again, let alone date him. The thought of never being in his arms again is inconceivable to me. My choice is an impossible one.

I shower and wash my hair, brushing it and then using the curling iron to give light waves. I normally never wear make-up but today I put some on and Papa's going to see the difference immediately. But that's good. I want him to realise I'm not the same any more. Things have changed.

I select one of my few dresses. The way it hangs on my curves makes me look like a sack of potatoes. I'm ashamed for Slater to see me like this. I want him to think of me as sexy and attractive, not as an old-fashioned housewife, but it's the best I have, the dress I wore to Paradiso is too much for tonight.

I go to the kitchen to wait for him, my arms wrapped around my body. The door opens at exactly half past six. Slater looks more polished than usual in an expensive dark suit with a dark shirt, and he smells freshly showered. I feel even more frumpy.

'Dale, you look beautiful.'

His eyes are on my face. I stiffen, sliding closer to the table. I don't want to let him see what I'm wearing.

'Come here.' He hands me a bag. 'I figured you wouldn't have any clothes with you for going out, so I picked this up.'

I take the bag and pull out a midnight blue dress made from a light chiffon.

'Hope it fits. I had to guess.'

'Oh, I...' I hold it to my body.

'Try it on.'

'Right.' I take the dress and hurry to the bedroom and slip it on. It hugs my chest and waist and floats around my thighs.

'I can't believe you bought me this, just when I needed something. It's lovely, Slater. Thank you.' I turn and look at myself in the mirror.

'I got you some shoes, too.' He hands me a box.

'But how did you know the size?'

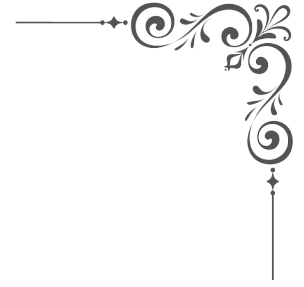
'I checked your trainers.' He shrugs.

I take the high heels out of the box and slide my feet into them.

'Turn around.'

I turn slowly on the spot then wait for his verdict.

'Perfect.' He smiles and takes my hand. 'Now, let's go before we're late.'



She looks more than perfect. She looks sexy as hell, miles different from when I first saw her last week, when her body was covered from head to toe, like a nun. Dale would look sexy in pretty much anything, but now she's practically glowing. Sex might have something to do with that, too. She hasn't said as much but I'm pretty sure she was a virgin. And I'm her first. That means more to me than I realised.

Choosing her clothes for tonight was important. I need Antonio to see the change in his daughter, to realise that she's no child any more, and I need Dale to realise that, too. I want her to remember that she's mine, even when we're standing in front of her father.

She's trembling; this meeting with her father is a big deal for her. Hell, for me, too. Things could go either way. If he puts his foot down and insists on taking her home, it will get messy.

I drive to Nio's with one hand; the other holds hers the whole journey. I want her to feel OK, to know I'm there for her. No matter which way things go, I'll be there for her.

She's staring out of the window, watching the buildings as we enter the city. I rub soothing circles on the back of her hand as I park at around the side of the club.

'We're meeting Papa at the club?' Surprise is audible in her tone.

'Yeah.'

'He agreed to that? Does he know I'm coming?'

'Yeah.' I don't tell her that he didn't have much choice. My jaw is tight and it's causing my head to ache. I guess I'm more nervous about this meeting than I realised. There's a lot at stake for both of us.

Carl, Bram and Dylan are waiting at the front. The club's not open yet but the doorman nods and lets us in.

'Hi, Coach.'

I nod back and let Dylan and my brothers go ahead of us, ensuring that Dale and I are the last to enter. She's hanging close to my body. As we walk forward, I squeeze her hand to comfort her. She has to trust me. I won't let anything happen to her.

El Patron is in the club lounge, sitting on one of the leather sofas, a tumbler of whisky and an open laptop in front of him. He's tanned; he clearly got to spend time in the sun while he was away. He stands, shakes hands with Carl, then Dylan, then Bram. He looks past Bram and sees Dale.

'*Princesa!*' His voice resonates in the empty club. He opens his arms.

She hesitates for a split second before running to him, letting herself be enveloped and held against his black silk shirt. I watch them, my chest tightening. What if she chooses him? What if she decides she does want to go home? How will I deal with that? I'll have just been a fucking pawn in El Patron's game with Bana, and I'll walk away a loser.

I force myself to keep breathing. Slowly, evenly. Keep control. Stop second-guessing. This could go either way. I don't know anything yet.

'Champagne!' El Patron calls to the bar. 'Let's celebrate.'

'No,' I say, loudly. 'Water. We drink water when we're working.'

'Ah, Marcel.' He looks at me, as if he only just realised I'm here, like I'm the hired help. He walks round the table to offer me his hand. 'This isn't work. This is a celebration! My *princesa* is back with me, safe and sound. Thanks to you.' He claps me on the back.

'Water,' I almost growl, standing my ground and fighting to maintain my temper.

'Sit.' He motions to us.

I take the armchair opposite him. Dylan and Carl sit either side of me and Bram chooses to remain standing.

A barmaid brings a tray with bottles of water and a bottle of champagne in a metal bucket.

'You decided to end your trip early after all, Antonio?'

'Of course. When I heard what happened to my Daleylah.' He holds his hand out and she moves around the table so she's standing beside him.

'Daleylah.' Gonzales appears from somewhere and puts his hands on her shoulders.

I grip my water bottle, the plastic cracking in my fingers as he lowers his face to kiss her. She turns her head so he can only reach her cheek. My eyes fix on the greasy dark-haired cocksucker and I imagine slicing his lips off. I'm like a jack-in-the-box and I'm struggling to keep it together. We have to get on with this so I can get the hell out of here. I don't know how long I'll be able to keep control.

'Tell me, Antonio, why do you think Banasinski's man was in your house with a gun pointed at your daughter while she slept?' My voice is even. It sounds like someone else is saying the words, I'm far too angry to speak so calmly.

He spits on the ground. 'Don't mention that name.'

'Why does Banasinski want to kill your daughter?'

‘I don’t know.’ He waves his hand in the air. ‘That man killed my wife, he’s an uncivilised beast. Now he wants to kill my daughter, too.’

‘I don’t buy that. You killed Boris, Bana killed Angelina. That score was settled seven years ago. Why is he going after your daughter? Why now?’

‘Marcel, I don’t know the answer to your question. It’s a question for that Eastern European rat, not me.’

I open my bottle and sip the water, my gaze falling on Dale. Her eyes are wide, her expression uncertain. She looks back at me, searching my face for an indication of what she should do. I will her to stay calm for just a few more minutes and we’ll be out of here.

‘You know Bana had a hit on his supply just before you left the city?’ Bram says.

He’s getting impatient; I know my brother, he’s like a firework ready to go off. El Patron looks briefly at Bram, irritation in his eyes.

‘I heard something about it.’ He turns back to me. ‘Marcel, I don’t want to talk business now, my daughter is here. She doesn’t need to hear about this. We should be celebrating her safe return.’

‘Dale?’ I say, my eyes meeting hers again. ‘Does our conversation disturb you?’

She shakes her head, her hand fluttering to her hair to brush a strand off her face. I look back at El Patron. I’m defying him and the irritation is evident on his face.

‘What part did you have in the hit on Bana, Antonio?’

‘Be careful, Marcel, you’re making some extreme accusations there.’ His voice is hard, his eyes narrow.

Fear threatens to creep up my chest; the tension in the club intensifies.

‘I don’t think the accusations are that extreme. Bana gets hit just before you leave the country, but not before you drag me in to protect your girl. It’s all too much of a coincidence for my liking.’

‘Enough.’ El Patron bangs his fist down on the table, making Dale flinch. ‘I will not have this discussion in front of my daughter.’

‘Dale, come here,’ I say, holding out my hand. She glances at her father then walks around the table to me and stands behind my chair.

‘You risked your daughter’s life by hitting Bana then leaving her here, exposed. You dragged me and my crew into something I don’t want to be involved in. You thought you could play me, Antonio?’ My voice is raised.

‘Marcel, you have it wrong.’ He speaks through gritted teeth, eyes moving from me to Dale.

‘Have I? Put me straight, then.’ I cock my head to one side, waiting for him to expand.

‘I don’t know anything about the hit on Bana.’

‘I don’t believe you.’

He doesn’t answer me. His eyes are locked on mine. I hold out my hand and take Dale’s, drawing her around the chair and closer to me, so her legs are pressed against mine. She silently complies. I watch the shock register on El Patron’s face at the sight of his daughter so close to me. He stands up.

‘What are you doing? What is this, Dale? Don’t you know she is engaged?’

‘I know that was your plan for her, yes.’ I run my finger over the bare skin of her leg. ‘But everything’s changed since you left town, leaving her as a target and tricking me into being her personal security guard. You didn’t warn me someone would be trying to take her out. She came this close to dying.’ I hold up my finger and thumb a centimetre apart.

‘You’re on very thin ice, Marcel, I suggest you watch where you tread. And take your goddamn hands off my daughter.’

I shake my head. ‘I don’t care what happens between you and Bana.’ I raise my voice. ‘But I never wanted to be part of your dispute. We don’t take sides. That’s our position. You know that, everyone knows it, and yet you dragged me in to your beef, like some sort of fucking fool. Like hired security.’

‘Marcel, you have it wrong.’

‘I don’t think I have. But I’m willing to let it drop, if you agree to release your daughter.’

‘Release?’

‘Release. I want you to give her the choice of whether she goes home with you or stays with me.’

‘With you? Marcel, what is this? She’s engaged to Joaquin. This is out of the question.’

‘Daleylah?’ Gonzales moves to stand behind El Patron. He says something in Spanish I don’t understand, his tone low and angry.

I ignore him. I turn to Dale and take my hands off her.

‘You can go to your father, now. Or you can stay with me. It’s your decision, little bird.’ I smile, praying that she’ll make the right choice.

‘But ... Slater?’

‘If it’s what you want, then please –’ I pause, letting silence hang in the air – ‘go back to your father.’

She looks from me to El Patron.

‘Papa, I—’

He cuts her off. ‘Daleylah. Come here, now. This is ridiculous. What is he even talking about?’

She looks back to me and slowly shakes her head. She reaches down and takes hold of my hand. I want to jump up and fist-pump the air.

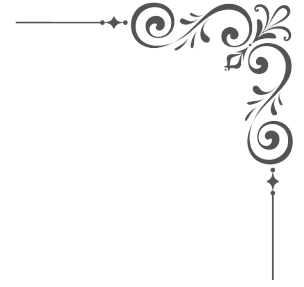
‘Your daughter has decided what she wants to do.’ I stand.

‘You can’t do this,’ he shouts.

I see Carl and Bram both reaching for their guns.

‘I think you’ll find he just has,’ Carl says.

‘If you want to contact your daughter, you know where she’ll be. Now, I consider this matter closed, Antonio. But if you ever try to fuck me over again, it won’t end as nicely.’



There's silence as I follow Slater out of my father's club. I look back as we leave; my father is watching me. I've never seen him lost for words before and this hurts me. I've done this to him. Tears well in my eyes but I still turn away and keep walking. No one speaks until we get to Slater's car.

'Where we going now?' Bram asks. 'Back to the gym?'

Slater doesn't answer. He puts his hands either side of my neck, resting his wrists on my shoulders, and looks into my eyes.

'Are you OK, Dale?'

I shake my head, not daring to speak. My whole body is on the verge of dissolving into a shaking fit. I've been in a heightened state of nervousness since the moment we entered the club and I'm struggling to process what just happened and what it means.

Slater looks round then points at the nearest bar, just across the street.

'Let's go in there.'

He takes my hand and when we get to a table he tells me to sit. I collapse into the chair, just as my legs give way.

'D, stay with her,' he says to Dylan, as he strides off in the direction of the bar.

My knees begin to knock together, then my chest convulses, and my shoulders shudder.

'Here.' Slater comes back and hands me a glass. 'Drink this down.'

I sip the strong alcohol and wince.

'Drink it in one go, Dale. For the shock.'

I swallow the alcohol as Slater rubs circles on my back.

'Breathe.'

I take a couple of deep breaths.

'I don't think we're going back to the gym tonight,' I hear him tell Dylan and his brothers.

'No, I don't think that would be wise,' says Dylan.

They're all standing around me; I'm the only one sitting. Dylan looks at me.

'How are you feeling now, Dale?'

I smile but it feels weak.

'She's OK.' Slater rests his hand on my shoulder. The strength and warmth of it penetrate to my core and I sit up straight, determined not to let him down. I listen to them talking, their voices above me, like it's happening in a dream.

‘Went OK?’ Carl says. ‘Better than expected.’

Slater shrugs. ‘Too soon to judge. Let’s see how he digests it. We might have a war on our hands.’

Might I really never see my father again? To look into his eyes when Slater told me to choose was crushing. A piece of my heart broke off and dissolved. How could I do that to him? He won’t leave it at that. I know my father. He will fight to get me back. He won’t give me up that easily and the thought makes me sick. He hates to lose. What will he do to Slater? I’m scared. Scared for myself and scared for Slater.

Slater puts his empty beer bottle on the table. ‘Let’s go.’ He takes my hand and we leave the bar. Neither of us speaks as he drives home. Nor do we speak when we get inside. But once I’m in his flat a sense of calm descends on me.

‘Go and sit down.’ Slater directs me to the sofa while he goes to the kitchen and puts the kettle on. I slip off my shoes and tuck my feet beneath me. He hands me a mug. The spicy steam reaches my nose as I raise it to my lips and take a hesitant sip, tasting strong alcohol.

‘Feeling better?’

‘A bit. Now we’re back.’

Slater sits on the coffee table in front of me and puts his hands on my knees.

‘I know it was hard.’

‘It was.’ I struggle to keep my tears out of my eyes. ‘And what happens now?’

Slater’s chin is resting in his hand. He rubs his finger and thumb over the stubble on his jaw.

‘Give me a few days. I need to arrange things. Then you’ll be able to go wherever you want. I’m not your father, I’m not going to keep you prisoner. No one in this city has a grudge against me and no one will dare harm you if they know you’re with me. I’ll clear this up with Bana.’

‘But what about my father? He’ll have a grudge against you, now. I’m one hundred per cent sure of it. He’s not just going to let you get away with disrespecting him like that. He wants me to marry Gonzales, he’ll be fuming.’ It sounds even worse as I say it out loud and I realise I’m wringing my hands together.

‘Don’t worry about your father, Dale.’ He presses his hands over mine. ‘I know him well, too. We’ve worked together for a long time. He needs me.’

He needs the business we do together. I'll give it some time then I'll call him. Once he's calmed down.' He presses his finger beneath my chin. 'You don't have to worry. I'll take care of Bana and your father. You'll be able to live a normal life. You'll be able to go out and not worry, and you won't have to run. Running away is never the answer.'

I try to imagine living a normal life where I can go to the shops without being surrounded by security guards.

'Really?' I don't believe it will be as easy as he thinks, but he seems so sure.

'Yes, Dale. Really.' He takes my hand and raises it to his lips. It sounds too good to be true. Freedom, life with Slater.

'And what about Papa?'

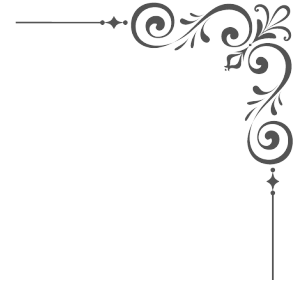
'Once he's calmed down, I'm sure he'll get over this and you'll be able to build a relationship with him again. When he sees us happy and sees you safe, taken care of but free, he'll be happy, too. How can he not be happy for his own daughter?'

'Right,' I whisper. I want to believe Slater, I really do. But it sounds too perfect.

'Look at me, Dale.'

I meet his eyes.

'I promise I'll never let anyone hurt you and I'll never let anyone come between us. That decision you made tonight meant the world to me. You're mine now and that's all that matters.'



Bram's phone rings on the Bluetooth speaker. It's Rich, he and Jimmy are working with us on this job. I listen as my brother takes the call.

'Yeah?'

'We're at the docks. Me and Jimmy.' Rich's voice echoes through the car.

'Any sign of them?'

'Nobody's here. It's dead as shit.'

'Wait. We're on the way, be about ten.' Bram cuts the call.

The tension's heavy in the car. All three of us are on edge. When it comes to Bana there's a lot of uncertainty and this deal is the biggest we've done, the highest risk. I glance in the rear-view mirror but see only darkness. We've been driving half an hour, deliberately circling the city and cutting through housing estates, not prepared to take any chances or risk being followed.

'What are we going to do about the Solo situation?' Bram asks, his eyes on the road.

'I dunno. Have you heard anything? Are there any rumours it was me?'

'Nah, but it's gonna get out, bro. I mean, as soon as it gets out about you and Dale, Bana's gonna put two and two together and equal you killing his best mate.'

'You know my opinion,' Dylan says, from the back of the car. I turn to look at him.

'What's that?'

'We tell him. Sooner the better. He has to hear it from us.'

'What do you think?' I look at my brother.

'I agree with D. I'd rather be upfront with him. Don't want him to think we've got an agenda or are siding against him.'

'You gotta tell him about Dale, too,' Dylan adds. 'He needs to take the target off her head.'

'Yeah, I know.' I tap my fingers on the glass window. Confessing to Bana that I killed his friend is pretty low down on the list of things I feel like doing right now. 'Not tonight. After we get the merchandise.'

'What if he takes it badly? Tips off the police? Or starts a war with us? All we need is to be up against Bana and El Patron at the same time,' Bram asks.

'He won't,' Dylan says. 'He's got as much invested in this as we have. He doesn't want to lose out, either.'

'I'll talk to him tomorrow. I'll set up a meet later.'

Bram slows and turns towards the docks. There are no streetlights in this part of the city and the headlights create a circle of visibility in the darkness in front of us. He drives very slowly as we get close. A car is parked near the lock-up. It's Rich's, the lights are off and he and Jimmy are waiting inside it. Bram turns the car round so we're in the right direction to leave and can see if anyone else arrives. He parks on the other side of the road, a little way back.

We've already got our bulletproof vests on and mine's pressing heavily on my chest, a constant reminder of the intensity of this situation, the risk involved. I take the gun from my pocket and hold it. No one speaks as we wait for Bana to arrive.

It's not long before we see headlights turn into the road and move towards us, fast. I squint and shrink down in the seat until the van passes and stops outside the lock-up. We watch as Rich gets out and unlocks the door so the van can reverse inside. He and Jimmy follow it in, then the doors close again. Bram dials Dylan's phone and D picks up then puts it in his pocket.

'Ready?' I wait while Dylan puts his earphone in. 'Right, let's go.'

The two of us climb out of the car and head across the road. Bram waits where he is. Dylan bangs once on the metal door of the lock-up and Rich opens it and lets us in, then locks it behind us.

A naked bulb hanging from the ceiling casts a dim light on the grimy narrow space. There's barely enough room to pass the van on each side, but the lock-up is deep. You could easily fit two vans in here, end to end, maybe even three at a push. The engine of the van is off and Bana and Dex both slide out of the passenger's side, unable to open the doors wide.

Bana nods to us. He's got an unlit cigarette between his lips and another behind each ear. He's wearing a white T-shirt and jeans, like the last time we met, and it crosses my mind that he might not have changed since then. He certainly smells like he hasn't.

The two men go to the back of the van where Rich and Jimmy are waiting to start offloading. Bana's forehead is speckled with beads of moisture. My own body is pumped with adrenalin, the bulletproof vest making me warm.

I watch as they start to remove the piles of crates from the van and stack them up in the gloom at the back of the lock-up. I don't help and neither does Dylan; we watch silently as the other four men work. Our hands are on our guns. In less than ten minutes the van is unloaded. The crates are stacked and sorted into categories. Rich checks the contents of each crate with Dex, and Bana returns to the cab of the van.

‘Bana?’ I call to him.

‘*Tak?*’ He looks at me as he climbs into the passenger seat; he clearly wants to get out of here as soon as possible. I wish I could have the conversation with him here and now, tell him about Dale and Solo and get it over with, but it’s too risky. We don’t want to be here any longer than necessary, none of us does, and I want to get the merchandise secure. Once it’s in our possession it’ll be impossible for them to back out of the deal.

‘We have to meet again. Tomorrow. Twelve, same place as last time.’

Confusion clouds Bana’s face.

‘*Nie.* We agreed the price already.’

I shake my head. ‘Not about this. Something else. Important. We’ll talk tomorrow. Twelve.’

He studies me, but eventually decides it must be important if I’m risking a meet. He knows I wouldn’t plan one to talk about the weather.

‘*Dobra.*’ He shuts the van door and lights his cigarette. Dex slithers between the van and the wall on the driver’s side and climbs in beside Bana.

‘Are we clear?’ Dylan asks, talking to Bram through his earphone. Bram answers and Dylan motions for Jimmy to go ahead and open the doors. They pull out and drive away, the lights disappearing into the darkness.

‘All good, Rich?’ I ask.

‘Yes, Coach. Everything’s here that was supposed to be.’

‘Good. We’ll get going, then. Call if anything happens, anything at all. Even if you see a goddamn mouse acting suspiciously, I want to know about it.’

Jimmy and Rich will stay here tonight to keep things secure until we can start shifting the gear tomorrow. Dylan and I leave, cross the road and get in beside Bram.

‘Anything?’

‘Na, quiet.’ He starts the engine and drives off.

I peel the Velcro fasteners of the vest open and loosen it.

‘This is easy money,’ Bram says.

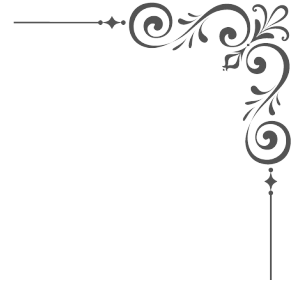
‘Easy money doesn’t exist,’ I say, looking out of the window, my eyes searching the darkness.

‘You ask him for a meet?’

‘Yeah. Tomorrow at twelve.’

‘Let’s see what he says when you tell him you killed his buddy.’

‘Hmm.’ I rub my hand over my face and take a breath. ‘He’s not going to like it, that’s for damn sure.’



It's after 2 a.m. when I finally get home. I took a shower at the club to get the smell of exhaust fumes off my skin. Seeing the bump of her under the covers in my bed makes me smile and my body stirs immediately. I strip out of my clothes, climb in beside her and gently brush her dark hair off her face. Her skin feels damp and moist, and she looks troubled. A pang of guilt bursts in my chest; tonight is the first night since I met her that she had to fall asleep alone. In her sleep she shakes her head and mumbles 'no'. I scoop her up in my arms, gently, but she fights me.

'No, no, no,' she mutters, shaking her head. Her body breaks out in a layer of perspiration and I feel another wave of anger towards her father for not protecting this girl properly.

'It's OK, little bird. It's OK,' I whisper, holding her, soothing her.

'Huh?' She opens her eyes. 'Slater?'

Relief flickers over her face as she sees me and melts into my arms. I swallow a groan as my cock becomes rock hard.

'I missed you,' she whispers, resting her face on my chest. 'I don't like it when you're gone.'

'I'm sorry, I had work to do. But I'm back now.'

I gently slide her body on top of mine, her face still resting on my chest, her long hair caressing my skin. Her legs fall either side of my hips. I move her knickers to one side and rest the tip of my cock against her entrance, biting my lip to stop myself thrusting. I reach to the side table to find a condom and slide it on, my arms reaching around her body.

She's breathing evenly on top of me, her face still resting on my chest. I stroke her hair, letting my hand run down her back to her bottom, cupping each buttock with each hand. She sighs into my skin as I press upwards into her waiting entrance.

Having her here when I get back from work makes it worthwhile. This is the purpose I was looking for: her in my bed, waiting for me to get home and take care of her.

I press into her again, feeling how wet she is, letting me slip in and out easily. She adjusts her position, waking up properly and tilting her hips so I can enter her more deeply. She sighs and pushes her body up, her hands flat on my chest, so she can ride me. It makes me harder, being able to see her face, her teeth deep in her bottom lip as she focuses, her breasts bouncing in the loose T-shirt as she moves.

I pull the fabric up, dragging it over her head so I can see her properly. I don't touch her for a moment, just watch as she continues to move, her nipples contracted and hard. It's too much to resist for long. I reach and take one perfect breast into my mouth, flicking the hot nipple with my tongue, cupping the other breast at the same time. She sighs, her head falling back as she rides me. Her hands curl behind my neck and hold my head in place as her pace quickens and her gasps intensify. I wait for her to peak. Her pussy tightens around me as I take over, sitting up and lifting her body so I can thrust into her, closing my eyes and gripping her tightly as I come.

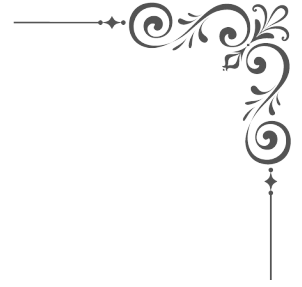
I sink back onto the bed and she falls on top of me, her face returning to my chest, resting as she was before.

'It's funny. I've been imagining moving out of my father's house for so long, being independent and starting my own life, but now I'm free, I feel lost whenever you're not here. I mean, I'm used to being on my own, I've always been alone, but alone within the walls of my father's protection,' she says, as I stroke the hair off her back. 'It's the strangest feeling.'

'You're not alone. I'm here and I'm working on things so you won't be a target, no one will want to hurt you.'

'Hmmm,' she murmurs.

Her tone makes me frown. She doesn't believe me. I need to prove to her that life with me is different. I need to do that more than I've ever needed anything before. If anyone fucking dares threaten her again, that will be the end of them.



Slater left early again this morning, but he promised he wouldn't be home late. I'm going to make him dinner tonight. It's almost time for my final exams and I need to ask him if it's safe for me to go, if he'll take me. I've never been to university alone before, Juan Carlos always drove me there and waited for me.

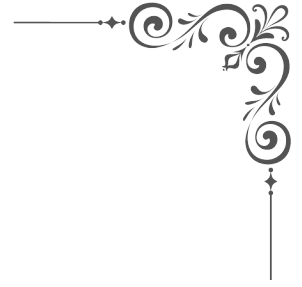
I turn my computer on and open my files, but my mind isn't on studying. I keep thinking about what will happen after I graduate. I had a plan, but now it's changed. Although... do I really want to stay here? Is this what I want? Being with him means staying in this life, the same sort of life as my father's, the sort that I was trying to escape. Slater isn't innocent. I watched him break a man's nose and I watched him kill a man. Sure, he's got his businesses, his fight clubs, but what else is he involved in? Drugs, like my father? Gambling? I don't know and I don't want to. Do I want to give up my future, a future where I can be anything, for this? If I stay here, there'll always be a risk. There'll always be a chance that something happens, that he has a fight with someone, or something happens to me, or – I bite my lip – to him. The thought makes me shiver. If anything happened to him, how could I live?

I rub my face and fix my eyes on my laptop. I need to focus on studying, that's all I should be thinking about at the moment. An envelope appears in the bottom right corner of the screen. I open the email programme: it's from my father. There's no subject. I hesitate, then click on the email and read it.

Dear Princesa, please just let me know you are OK. I miss you and love you, my darling girl.

I close the email. My poor papa. I have to answer him. It was hard enough to convince Maria when she called me on the burner phone that I was fine and she didn't need to worry about me.

I type quickly, writing to tell him not to worry about me, and that I love him, too. Then I shut my computer, feeling guilty. Will Slater know? Should I tell him? I don't want to keep secrets from him but would telling him really be the smartest idea? It'll only upset him. I decide to keep it to myself. He doesn't need to know.



Standing on my own, I watch the van approach. Carl and Bram are fifty metres away, watching; Dylan and Sepp are in the car, parked out of sight. I feel more exposed than I have for a long time, but I have to do this alone. This conversation is just between the two of us.

The van stops in front of me. Bana climbs out and shuts the door; his driver waits inside. Bana spits on the ground then lights a cigarette. He's changed his T-shirt for a black one but he's still wearing the same scuffed trainers and ripped jeans. He doesn't speak, just looks at me, his brow knitted together, eyes squinting as he waits to hear what I have to say.

My fists are clenched at my sides. This is the man who ordered a hit on Dale. He was so very nearly responsible for her being gone. I want to smash him into the middle of next week. But I need to keep control. I force my breathing to steady.

'You and I have got something personal that needs to be settled,' I tell him.

He nods for me to go ahead.

'You need to know. From now on –' I pause and wait for him to look at me – 'El Patron's daughter, Daleylah Martinez, is mine.'

'Yours?'

He's surprised. I guess that was the last thing he was expecting me to say. I wait for my words to sink in.

'Yours? How so?'

'Just mine,' I repeat, firmly. 'I don't want any more attempts on her life. If you do, you won't be beefing with El Patron, you'll be starting with me. And considering the nature of our partnership, I think it's better for both of us if we remain friends.'

His face dissolves into anger. 'And Patron? You with him now?'

'No. I'm neutral. As before.'

'Patron hit us. He wiped out everything I have. He killed my Solo.' He speaks fast, his accent heavy.

'I know he hit you.'

Bana glares at me, his lip curling as he tries to work out what I had to do with the hit.

'You know he hit me? You work with him?'

I shake my head. 'I only found out about the hit later. After you tried to take out his daughter. My crew had no part in the hit, nor would we have agreed to it, had we known. I have no alliances with El Patron.'

‘Just his daughter.’ His eyes are fixed on mine.

I nod. ‘Just his daughter. His daughter is mine. She doesn’t belong to him any more and he’s not happy about that, but that’s not my problem.’

He raises his head slightly in acknowledgement. ‘You take her from him?’

‘Yes.’

He smiles, exposing yellowing teeth. ‘Good. You going to kill her?’

‘No. Never. And neither will you. Your beef with him about the hit is nothing to do with me, or Daleylah Martinez. Are we in agreement?’

He drops the cigarette and crunches it out under his foot. ‘*Taki.*’

We shake hands. He goes to get back into the van.

‘Bana, there’s something else.’ I put hands in my pockets, my fingers closing around my gun. This is the part I’ve been dreading.

‘What?’

‘I was at El Patron’s when Solo came to kill her.’

He looks at me, a snarl appearing on his face.

‘He came in the night. I protected her.’

‘It was you? You killed Solo?’

‘Yes, I killed him.’

He lunges at me. I block him easily, my hand on his chest, and dodge his punch. The driver goes to get out of van, and I hear my brothers approaching.

‘It’s OK. Leave us,’ I shout to them.

I push Bana off me, holding him at arm’s length. I can smell him, a mixture of cigarettes, sweat and alcohol.

‘She’s mine, Bana. I had to protect her.’ I speak loudly and slowly. ‘It was night. I didn’t know it was Solo, I only saw a man with a gun.’

He stops struggling and steps away from me, shaking his clothes straight.

‘Don’t let this come between us, Bana. The risks are part of the job, part of what we choose to be involved in. But not her. She didn’t choose her father.’

He glares at me, then takes out another cigarette and lights it.

‘She’s nothing to do with El Patron any more. Go after him all you want but don’t touch her. Come after me if you want, we can go to war if you feel you need to take revenge for Solo, but I hope you’ll see it for what it was and we can continue to do business.’ I study him, waiting for his reaction. He’s processing what I’ve told him. I’m pretty sure he’d be happy to take me out,

or at least try to, but he knows that wouldn't be a smart move. Our businesses are too intertwined. He needs me.

He draws hard on his cigarette, then flicks it on the ground. *'Tak.'*

I feel a flash of relief. I hold out my hand. He grips it and shakes it briefly, then turns and gets into the van and they reverse away.

'That appeared to go well,' Bram says, as he and Carl walk to me. Dylan and Sepp get out of the car and join us.

'And?' Dylan asks. 'We at war with Bana's crew, now?'

I breathe deeply. 'I don't think so.' I look at Bram. 'But make sure Jimmy and Rich stay at the lock-up twenty-four seven. Tell them not to leave, even to take a piss. Get another couple of boys to work shifts with them. I want that place guarded round the clock, just in case Bana does decide to take his business elsewhere without telling us first.'

Bram nods. 'We shifted about a quarter of the stuff this morning, but our guy won't be able to take any more for a few days.'

'We should have some money flowing soon. Get the first payment made to Bana, ASAP. That should take some of the sting out of the bombshell I just dropped.'

We walk back to the cars.

'You heard any more from El Patron?' Dylan asks.

I shake my head. 'I'll give him a couple more days to calm down and then I'll call him. Find out if he still wants to do business with us.'

'Can't imagine he'll want to.' Bram chuckles. 'But he ain't got much choice. There's nowhere else he can clean the amount of casheesh he must be making at the moment with Bana's supplies diminished.'

'You're right. And I'll call him. But not yet.'

My brothers and Sepp leave. I look at Dylan.

'I told Bana to get the target off Dale's head.'

'And?'

'And we had an agreement. But that was before I told him about Solo.' I draw my finger along my chin. 'I don't know if I can trust him. She's keen to get out, though, and I promised her she could.'

'Wait. Keep her inside for now. We'll soon find out if we can trust him, it won't take long. But don't take any risks, not now. Don't rush it,' Dylan says. 'She was pretty shaken after Nio's. Must have been hard for her.'

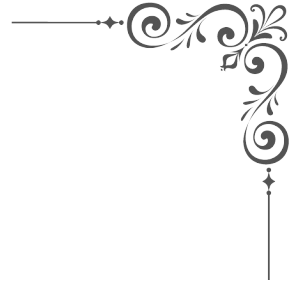
'Yeah. He's kept her locked up most of her life. She's no fucking idea.'

Dylan shakes his head. 'All the more reason to keep her in.' He looks at me, his eyes on mine and I know he can tell she means more to me than anything.

'If anything happens to that girl...' My stomach tightens at the thought.

'We won't let anything happen to her, Slater. We're stronger than any of them, they won't fuck with us.'

'I hope you're right,' I say, and get into my car.



I check the table again and straighten the knife and fork. The salad is ready and the steak is marinating, exactly like Maria does it. I just need to fry it ten minutes before we're ready to eat. I toss the salad again and put it on the table. I've got some flatbread warming in the oven, and I've made a tomato salsa and fried some *patatas bravas* for a starter.

I hear the key in the lock, slide off the chair and smooth my dress. I'm wearing the one he bought me. I washed it today and it's the nicest thing I have here.

'Hi,' I whisper, a smile creeping over my face at the sight of him.

'Hi.' He looks at the table, at me, then at the kitchen. He drops his keys on the counter.

'You weren't teaching today?' I ask, glancing at his suit.

'I was, but then I had a business meeting.'

'I prepared dinner.'

'I can see that.'

'Hope you don't mind.'

A smile touches the corner of his mouth. 'Why would I mind?'

'I don't know. I didn't ask you?'

He shakes his head and walks to the bedroom. I follow him and watch him hang up his jacket.

'You don't need to ask permission to cook me dinner, little bird.'

I lean against the door frame. He looks at me, standing tall, shoulders back.

'Come here.'

He beckons me; I go to him and stand before him.

'You look beautiful tonight, Dale.'

'It's the dress you chose.'

'I have good taste.'

'You do,' I whisper.

'But you always look beautiful, no matter what you wear,' he murmurs.

A shiver of excitement runs through me. His words seem to speak directly to my core and heat it. He runs his finger over my cheek.

'Put the shoes on.'

'Oh.' I look down at my bare feet, then hurry to my bedroom. When I come back he's in the kitchen, pouring himself a whisky. My heels make a clicking sound on the marble floor and he turns, his eyes running from my head to my feet and moving over the curves of my legs.

‘That’s better. Come here.’

‘I just need to...’ I go to the oven and turn it off just in time to save the flatbread from burning. When I stand up and put the warm bread on the side, his eyes are still on me. He reaches out and takes my wrist, pulling me to him, then lifts me easily onto the counter. He cups my face, raising my mouth to his.

‘I missed you today,’ he says, before pressing his lips to mine, his fingers burrowing in my hair, holding my face close to his. He holds his body against me, opening my legs. I’m flushed, the room suddenly feels very hot.

My eyes close as we kiss. His tongue brushes mine and with each hungry caress waves of excitement sweep through me. His arms are strong around me, holding me to him. I kiss him, enjoying the scratch of his stubble and spicy masculine scent of his aftershave. I move my hands over his back and down his arms, exploring the curve of his muscles, tensed as he holds me. His lips break from mine as he kisses my chin, my neck, then he’s moving down to my cleavage. His hands are behind my back, opening the zip of my dress and pulling it off my shoulders. His mouth finds my breast and I feel a surge of warmth before he moves lower. I shiver with expectation.

He sweeps aside the fabric of my knickers, then holds my thighs open and lowers his face to my body. The heat of his breath sends prickles of excitement to my core. I rest my hands on his shoulders as his head moves between my legs. His tongue is hot and urgent. He licks me, each touch sending hot ripples of pleasure through me. Just when I’m about to lose it he stops and moves his mouth to my inner thighs. I cry out. I don’t want him to stop – not now.

But he reaches into his pocket and takes out a condom. I watch him opening the packet and putting it on. My eyes are fixed on his erection and my body is hot and wanting, the anticipation building. He wraps his arms around my neck again and kisses me. Harder and faster than the first time, his tongue owning my mouth, his hands in my hair. I gasp into his mouth as he enters me. He takes his lips from mine and lifts me off the counter, thrusting while holding my weight, his hands under my bottom. I suck in a breath. He fucks me hard and fast, going deep each time. I cling to his neck, not wanting to let go. He pushes me up against the wall, squeezing against me, and his lips find mine again. He groans and I grip him, clinging on as if my life depended on it as he comes.

When he eventually lowers me to my feet, I'm exhausted. I lean against his chest.

'I don't know about you, but I'm starving.' He smiles. I bend over to retrieve my dress from its abandon on the floor and slowly slide it back on.

We sit down to eat, and I watch as he spoons some of the homemade salsa onto a piece of flatbread.

'This is good, Dale.'

'It's Maria's recipe.'

He nods approvingly. 'I could get used to this sort of welcome home.'

I smile. His compliment makes me happier than I would have expected.

'What sort of meeting did you have tonight?' As the words leave my mouth, I regret asking. I don't want to know. Probably as much as he doesn't want to tell me.

He leans back, his forearms on the table. 'I went with my brother to see the new bar we're opening.'

'When will it open?'

'It's almost ready.'

'Cool, I'd like to see it,' I say, then I look at my fingers. 'I mean, it would be cool to see it.'

'You will see it. You'll come with me to the opening.'

'I'd like that a lot.' I look at him. 'Slater?'

'Dale?' He tilts his head, waiting for me to continue.

'Can I tell you something?'

'Anything.'

'Don't be angry.'

'I can't promise that.' He's watching me intently.

'I was surprised when you showed me your book cupboard.'

He leans back, a smile playing on his lips. 'Thought I was just a pretty face, huh?'

'Kind of.' I feel bad admitting it. 'But you know which book surprised me the most?'

'*The Honourable Schoolboy*?'

'No. *Crime and Punishment*.'

'Ah.'

'It's just not a book that people pick up casually.'

'What makes you think I picked it up casually?' He takes a sip from his wine glass.

‘What made you read that one?’

He pauses before answering. ‘I had some stuff to figure out and I needed some help.’

‘Did it help?’

‘In a way, I guess. Made me realise I should trust myself more.’

‘I haven’t read it.’

‘No? I recommend it. But it’s heavy.’

‘It didn’t come up in my degree. I will read it, though, I love the Russian authors.’

‘You didn’t cover Dostoevsky? What sort of literature degree is it?’

He’s smiling but there’s something in his voice I can’t make out. Is it resentment? Bitterness?

‘I’ve got my final exams in two days. I need to go to uni.’

‘Not yet. It’s not safe yet. It’s not worth rushing.’ He shakes his head and puts down his wine glass.

He answered so fast, not even considering it. I try to stay calm; clearly, he doesn’t realise the importance of this.

‘I’ve been studying for three years. If I don’t do these exams, I won’t be able to graduate.’

‘Can’t you do them online?’

‘No.’

‘Did you ask?’

‘I haven’t, but I don’t need to. I know I can’t do them online. They have to be done in exam conditions. All exams are done in exam conditions.’

‘Tell them you had to leave the country or something.’

‘Slater, you don’t get it. They won’t care what excuse I give, they’ll just tell me to come back and sit them at the end of the autumn term.’

‘I don’t get it because I didn’t go to university, you mean?’ He opens the second button on his shirt. ‘Why don’t you just sit them at the end of the autumn term? What’s wrong with that? Or is it too complicated for a knucklehead like me to understand?’

‘Slater, please. I’ve been studying so long.’

‘I may not understand about universities and that shit but I know enough about the real world and I can tell you it’s not safe yet.’ He shakes his head. ‘It’s for your own good, little bird, why are we even arguing about it?’

‘You said I wouldn’t be a prisoner here and I can’t even finish my degree? Papa would never stop me from doing this.’

‘No, but he let a man come into your home and try to kill you. I’m not like your father, Dale. Remember that.’

Anger explodes within me. He doesn’t even care that this is important to me. I stand up. Why does everyone treat me like a child? It’s not like anyone’s going to hurt me in the middle of an exam.

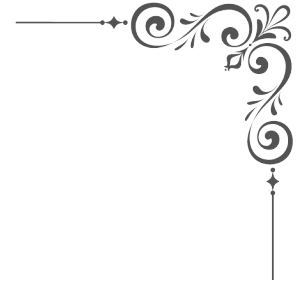
‘You can’t stop me from finishing my degree and doing my exams. I’m going to go, no matter what you say.’

He stands up, his face hardening. ‘No, you are not.’

‘Yes, I am.’ I cross my arms over my chest.

‘No. You won’t leave this apartment until I tell you it’s safe for you to do so.’

‘We’ll see,’ I mutter.



The door slams, sending an electric shock of anger through me. I throw my glass on the floor. It shatters into a thousand pieces with a satisfying crash. I thought she had learnt to trust me. After all she's seen me do for her, can she still doubt that I'm taking care of her best interests?

It's too soon for her to go out. I need to be sure that Bana's not going to retaliate. He's hot-headed and he doesn't play by our rules. Bana fights dirty.

My shoes crunch on the broken glass as I walk to the kitchen. She had prepared a beautiful dinner; shame she had to ruin it. I stare at her closed door as I walk through to my bedroom and begin to undress.

I remove my shirt, trying to calm down, but I hate that she walked away from me. I hate not being in control of a situation. She should be in my room, not hers. This is a stupid fucking argument.

I go to her room, pausing before I open the door. She's sitting on the bed, her back to the door.

'We need to talk, little bird.' My words come out harder than I intended.

'I don't want to talk.'

She doesn't move, keeps her back to me. I fight my anger.

'You don't have a choice, Dale. Come to my room.'

Her head flicks around, her eyes find mine and she sees immediately that I mean it, there's no negotiation.

I'm pouring myself another whisky when I hear the click of her heels on the marble floor. My eyes flick to the door and my dick reacts to the sight of her, in spite of my anger. She hesitates in the doorway. A slight nod of my head gets her moving again and she walks to my bed.

'Stop.'

She freezes mid-stride. I approach her, unable to help myself. She's too fucking sexy, even when she's mad with me. Sliding my hand through her hair and cupping the back of her head, I pull her to me. She doesn't resist as I kiss her roughly, taking what I need from her mouth, my cock hard and straining against my trousers.

When I'm done kissing her and I pull away, her eyes remain closed and her lips red and slightly parted. I slide my hands up her dress, hook my fingers through her knickers and pull them down.

'Turn around.' I watch as she does as I say. 'Bend forward, hands on the bed. Legs apart.'

The dress is short enough that bending forward exposes her completely. I sit down and sip my whisky, looking at her. I don't speak. The silence makes

her crazy, I can practically see her getting wetter and wetter as she waits.

‘I spoke with someone today, Dale.’ I take another sip. ‘A dangerous man. The man who sent that person to kill you the other night.’

I wait to see how she’ll react, but she doesn’t move. Her legs are straight and apart, long and lean in her heels.

‘I told him I killed his friend to protect you. And do you know what he did?’ I wait, knowing she won’t answer. ‘He tried to hurt me.’

Goosebumps break out on her skin and I tilt my head to the side, interested by this physical reaction to my words. I put down my whisky glass.

‘He didn’t hurt me, Dale. No one’s going to hurt me, I’ll win any physical fight I have. But I need to be sure that he won’t try to hurt me by hurting you, little bird.’ As I stand up, I run my hand up the length of her leg. ‘Because it would hurt me if someone hurt you.’ My hand slows on her thigh, enjoying the curve of her body. ‘It would hurt me very much.’

I push the dress further up her body, lower my lips and kiss the soft skin at the bottom of her back.

‘I don’t want to be hurt. I hate pain.’ I draw my hand over her behind, squeezing the softness. ‘And hurting you is pretty much the only way there is for this man to hurt me. My brothers, my crew, can take care of themselves, but you ... you have become my weakness. So I have to keep you safe. I can’t let anything happen.’ I draw my finger along her seam. ‘Even if it means you miss your exams.’ I reach between her legs, tracing my fingers along the sensitive skin of her inner thigh, then moving to her swollen sex. ‘Even if it means you graduate in the autumn,’ I say, rubbing her clit. A groan escapes her lips. ‘You just have to trust me, little bird. Things are different for you now.’ I slide my finger inside her. ‘I’ll make sure you always get what you need.’

My phone rings in my pocket and I close my eyes. I don’t want to be disturbed right now, but I know whoever’s calling me isn’t calling for a chat about the football results. I put the phone to my ear while continuing to finger-fuck her with the other hand.

‘Yup?’

‘Slate?’ Dylan’s voice sounds in my ear, there’s tension in it and I immediately feel the tiny hairs on the back of my neck stand up. Dale sighs in front of me as I continue stroking her while listening to what Dylan says.

‘I’m on my way to the docks. Jimmy just called; the police have been past. We need to move the stuff out.’

‘Fuck.’

‘Yeah. Like now.’

‘They find anything?’

‘No, just passing, but it’s not safe.’

‘I’ll be there in fifteen.’ I hang up the phone. Shit. If that prick Bana tipped off the police to get back at me, I’ll kill him. I seriously mean that.

Dale is waiting in front of me, pink and swollen and desperate to be fucked. I open my trousers and release my cock. I don’t have long, I have to get out of here sooner rather than later, but I can’t leave her so hot and ready.

I press against her and then enter her in one smooth, fast movement, holding her hips and pulling her body towards me.

‘I’m going to have to go,’ I tell her as I pound into her, fucking her harder than I have before. She doesn’t answer, her body adjusting to mine, her breath coming out in short shallow pants. I’m already ready to come. I withdraw, tracing my finger over her clit one last time before driving into her and releasing, just as she does.

I pull out immediately and get dressed.

‘I don’t know what time I’ll be back.’ I button my shirt and grab my keys then head to the door.

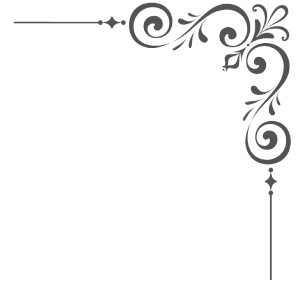
‘Slater?’ she calls out.

I pause and look back. She gets up and runs to me, throwing her arms around my neck and pressing her body against me. She buries her face in my neck.

‘Take care,’ she mumbles.

I wrap my arms around her and squeeze her tightly, then we move apart and I look into her eyes.

‘I’ll be fine. You don’t need to worry about me, ever.’ I kiss her, take her arms from around my neck, then turn and leave.



By the time I get to my car there's a video on my phone from Dylan: the surveillance footage from the lock-up. It shows the empty street, no one around, then a police patrol car rolls into view. It's still light, so it must have been earlier this evening. It cruises to the end of the road and stops beside Jimmy's empty car, presumably while they run a check on the plate. The officers get out and look in through the windows of the car, then go to the lock-ups and try the doors, one by one. I watch them look around, speak into the radio, get back into the patrol car and drive away.

I delete the video and pull out of the car park. I meet Dylan and Bram a few streets away from the lock-up.

'Where are the boys?' I say.

'Rich and Jimmy are in the lock-up,' Bram says, his hands stuffed into his pockets. 'They're getting everything ready to shift.'

'Where we going to put the stuff?' I look at Dylan. 'Is there space at Delfshaven?' We have a smaller lock-up garage on the other side of the river.

'Yeah.' D nods.

'How much of it is left?' I ask Bram. 'Will it fit?'

'About a third. We've shifted quite a bit but just haven't had time to do it all.'

'Let's go, then.'

Dylan gets into the car with me and Bram follows as I drive the two streets over to the lock-up. The road is empty apart from Jimmy's car. We get out, jog across the street and Dylan bangs on the door. Rich opens it and we duck inside. A van is already in there. Jimmy is busy loading it.

'Hi, D, Coach Slater,' he says.

'We're going to Delfshaven,' I tell them and they both nod in acknowledgement.

They finish loading and I toss my keys to Dylan. 'Take my car.' I climb into the van and Rich gets in beside me. Dylan opens the lock-up door and Rich eases the van out onto the street.

We follow Bram to the garage, with Dylan and Jimmy behind us. It's not far but we drive slowly; the last thing we need is to get pulled over with all the illegal weapons we've got in the back. I scan the buildings and side streets as we pass, searching for any signs of police.

We stop at the garage and wait. Bram's car is in front of us, the lights off. I watch as he gets out and moves quickly to the garage. Dressed in all black,

he's a shadow in the darkness. When the doors are open, Rich reverses the van inside and Bram closes the door.

There's a bang on the door and Bram lets Jimmy in. He and Rich begin unloading.

'How soon can you shift the rest of this?' I ask Bram, shifting my weight from foot to foot. The sooner we're shot of this lot, the better.

'Dunno, I'll call later him. Hopefully he'll be able to take it within days.'

'Good. You heard from Bana?'

He glances at me. 'Yeah, earlier.'

'Was he still pissed?'

'I gave him a bag of cash which sweetened his mood.'

'Good. He's the type that holds a grudge.'

Bram pats me on the back. 'He'll get over it. He'll find another friend to replace Solo and it'll all be forgotten.'

'Hmm.' As long as he doesn't go after Dale. I couldn't give a shit what he does. 'I just hope that telling him Dale belongs to me doesn't make her a target.'

'He ain't got beef with you, Slate.'

'He *didn't* have beef with me, you mean. Not until I killed Solo. And now I've exposed my weakness.'

'Is she your only weakness? If someone wants to hurt you they could hit the gyms, the new bar, me or Carl or the other guys. Anything.'

'You guys can handle yourselves and who gives a fuck about a gym? We can rebuild a gym.'

Bram pulls a bemused face. 'Who gives a fuck about a gym? Easy, bro. That's our life you're dissing there.'

'It's just material, Bram. We can rebuild anything, as long as we're still living.'

He shakes his head. 'I hate it when you get all deep.'

'Look, I'm going to give Angelo a call, see if there's anything up.'

Jimmy and Rich finish unloading. This garage is wider but not as deep as the other one. There's a fridge, a sink and an old sofa in the corner.

'You guys stay here. Should only be a few more days.'

They look like they've been living in a car for the past week, which is probably just about the truth, so having a sofa will be a luxury. Both of them will get a big payout for this job; loyalty is always rewarded.

It's late when I get home. I promised Dale I wouldn't be late home again and now I am. She'll have had to fall asleep alone. I hate that, especially as we argued before I left.

I go to the kitchen. She's cleaned up the smashed glass and the remains of our ruined dinner. I take a bottle of water from the fridge and go to my bedroom, looking forward to finding her in my bed.

The bed is empty. Down the hall, her door is closed. I silently open it. She's sleeping in her own bed, her dark hair spread around her face, the covers pulled up part way, her breasts visible through the thin fabric of the T-shirt she's wearing.

Part of me wants to wake her, to take her to my bed and fuck her. But the other part is angry. She hasn't got over our argument and that irritates me. I leave her and go to my room.

She'll join me in the night, anyway. When she wakes up, she'll swallow her pride and come to me. Then I might just make her swallow a whole lot more. My cock hardens at the thought, which irritates me because she's not there to help me with it.

I stretch. I need to work out. I haven't been training enough since I met Dale. I need to get back in the gym. Tomorrow, I've got a couple of personal training bookings. I'll include some sparring with the clients to keep my own fitness up. I take a quick shower then get into bed, leaving the door open for Dale to join me.

The next morning I'm still alone. I dress in my polo shirt and shorts, ready for work at the gym, then check on her; her bedroom door is still closed. I go to the kitchen, make my breakfast and sit down to eat it, my eyes fixed on her door, waiting for her to appear. She doesn't. She's going to let me go to work without speaking to me. I half wish I could walk out the door, but I can't. I have to speak to her.

I go to her room and knock, not waiting for her to answer before opening the door. She's dressed and sitting on the bed, her back to me.

'I'm going to work,' I mutter.

She turns, her eyes red and puffy from crying.

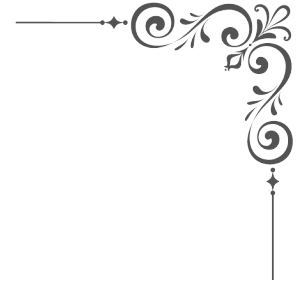
'OK.' She nods.

I feel my chest clench at her sadness.

'I'll be home around six.' My tone is tender now.

'OK.'

I want to say something else, but I don't, I just turn and leave.



Dylan's not at the gym when I arrive, so I have to unlock. There's still half an hour until my first appointment, which gives me time to do some weights. I look around between sets, checking out the equipment. Everything we've got is the latest – top of the range, and it cost a fortune. All three, soon to be four of our gyms are equipped to the highest standard. It's expensive but it's worth it. We have all types of clients: businessmen, security guards and kids from the suburbs. We get some women in, mainly for self-defence classes, but most of our clients are men. We run a bunch of kids' classes for free, and they're popular with both boys and girls. Defending themselves is a life skill that should be taught at school, but as that'll never happen we do our best to set up as many as we can with the skills they need.

The door opens and I look up to see Dylan.

'You're late.'

'You're early, you mean.' He takes his sunglasses off, drops his keys behind the reception desk then walks over and straddles the sit-up bench, watching as I finish the set of deadlifts I'm working on.

'I wanted to get a workout in before my clients this morning.' I wipe my face on the hand towel he tosses me.

'Things all right? At home?'

I shrug. 'Dale's pissed off with me.'

'Why?'

'Because I won't let her out.'

'Not yet. But soon, right? You told her that?'

'I did, but she wants to go out now. She's got her exams or something. I told her it's not safe, not yet.'

Dylan draws his hand over his face. 'You considering allowing it?'

I stand up and stretch. 'I dunno. Not really.' He follows me to the office. 'It's pretty important to her, though, it's all she's been talking about since I met her.'

'Guess we can make it happen if we have to. Just need to be careful.'

Dylan leans on the frame of my office door. 'Bram says Bana doesn't seem to be planning anything.'

'He'd hardly tell us if he was.'

'True. You speak to Angelo yet?'

'Nah. I'll call him later.'

‘See what he says. If nothing’s up and we can shift some more of the stuff, we give Bana another payment.’ He shrugs. ‘I’m sure we can organise for your girl to get to her exams.’

I like the way he calls her ‘my girl’. That’s what she is.

‘Yeah, let’s see.’

Angelo says he’s heard nothing about any raids on the lock-ups. It looks like it was a routine patrol. He promises to let me know if he hears any noise about anything in either that part of town or Delfshaven. It puts my mind sufficiently at ease so I can focus on the rest of my work.

When I get home, Dale’s on the sofa. I drop down onto the seat beside her.

‘How was your day?’

She shrugs. ‘OK. I didn’t do anything. I don’t need to bother studying now, if I won’t be doing my exams.’

I put my hand on her leg. ‘I spoke with my crew. We’re going to make it work.’

‘What?’

‘We’ll get you to the exam.’

‘But—’

‘It’s not going to be easy, but if we’re careful we can do it. We’ll wait for you outside the building.’

‘You mean it?’

Her face lights up, those dark eyes regain their sparkle, and it makes me happy.

‘Yeah, I mean it.’

She throws her arms around my neck, hooks her legs around my waist and hugs me, crushing her breasts against my body.

‘Thank you so much, Slater.’

She speaks into my skin, her breath causing the hairs on the back of my neck to stand up. I grip her body, holding the soft curve of her waist and inhaling her sweet smell.

She jumps up. ‘Shit.’

‘What?’

‘I’ve lost a day.’ She runs to her room. ‘I’ve only got one day left.’ She comes back with her laptop and sets it up at the kitchen table.

‘Is one day going to make that much difference?’

She looks at me. 'I don't know, does one day make a difference when you're preparing for a fight?'

I shrug. 'It can, sure.'

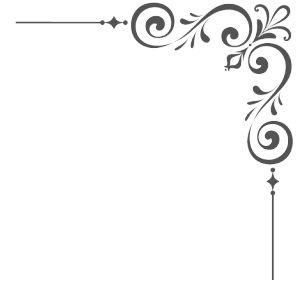
'Exactly. I don't want to take the chance.'

'Right.' I stand up and go to the kitchen and grab a bottle of water. 'So, no home-cooked dinner tonight?'

'Ah, sorry.' She glances at me. 'Do you mind cooking? I want to get on.'

I grin. She looks cute, so focused and serious.

'Sure.' I plant a kiss on her head then go get changed.



‘Ready?’ Slater asks.

I nod, although I feel like throwing up. I haven’t left this apartment since that night at my father’s club. I’m full of nerves for the exam and the fact that Slater is on edge makes me terrified. He can handle anything, so taking me to my exam making him act like I’m going into a warzone doesn’t feel right. What if something does happen? He must believe there’s a strong chance something will or he wouldn’t be as stressed as he is.

I swing my bag over my shoulder and wait. Slater’s phone rings. He puts it to his ear then hangs up.

‘Dylan’s downstairs. Let’s go.’ He takes my hand.

‘We’re not going in your car?’ I ask, as we take the lift to the ground floor.

‘No.’

I blink at the brightness outside. It’s like I’m exiting a cave, after being inside so long. A black car is parked by the pavement, engine running. Slater opens the back door for me to get in, and then climbs in the front. Dylan doesn’t speak; he pulls away from the kerb and drives, eyes focused ahead of him. He looks as agitated as Slater. I sink down into the leather seat and look at the buildings racing past the window, trying to forget about their stress and my own for the exam I’m about to sit.

‘Where are the others?’ Slater asks Dylan.

‘Bram and Carl are at the back, Sepp is at the front.’

I watch them. They’re both dressed in suits and dark shirts and look like real security guards. Dylan’s eyes are covered by black glasses. Slater’s aren’t, and his intense look is unsettling.

‘Bram met Bana this morning. Handed over the package, no sign that anything was up.’ Dylan’s gaze never leaves the road as he speaks.

Slater nods in acknowledgement, then turns to me in the back.

‘We’re going to drop you by the entrance to the university building that’s connected to the humanities lecture hall. I’ll go with you to the doors, but I won’t go in. Once inside, go straight to the lecture hall and stay there. Do not allow yourself to end up alone anywhere, make sure you remain where there are other people. Always. When the exam’s finished, come straight out. I’ll be waiting for you.’

I nod, my mouth dry. I roll the strap of my bag between my fingers. The car slows as we arrive at the university campus. It feels like a lifetime since I was last here, not just a few weeks. My life has changed so much in that time.

‘Ready?’

Slater’s voice breaks my thoughts.

‘Yes.’

He gets out of the car and opens the door for me.

‘Let’s go, little bird.’

He takes my hand and we walk together to the door. I feel looks landing on us as we stride to the building. Slater stands out here among the students with his dark suit and dominating appearance. I move closer to his body, proud to be with him. We slow as we get to the door and, like he promised, he stops just before it.

‘Remember what I said?’

‘Yes.’

‘I’ll be waiting for you.’

‘OK.’

‘Good luck, little bird.’

He runs his fingers down my cheek, leaving a tingling trail of warmth. I stand on tiptoes and plant a quick kiss on his lips, take one last breath of his masculine smell, then turn and walk quickly inside.

I remember what he told me and head straight for the lecture hall where the exam will take place. When I get there, no one is around yet. I’m still early. I dash back to the reception where there are lots of people to wait.

‘Dale!’

I turn and see my friend. ‘Hey, Sanne.’

She comes over and gives me a hug.

‘Where’ve you been? I’ve been calling but your phone’s dead.’

‘Ah, yeah. I got a new number.’ I write it down for her. ‘Here.’

‘Jordan’s been asking for your number, too.’ She nudges me. ‘He likes you. He was disappointed you left straight away after Paradiso. Shall I give it to him?’

‘Errm. Actually, no. I’ve kind of met someone.’

‘You have?’ Her eyes widen.

‘Yeah.’ My cheeks flush. ‘And I’ve moved in with him.’

‘Already?’

‘I had to. It’s complicated. I was only meant to be staying with him for a few days and things kind of progressed between us.’ I give her a half smile and a shrug, although I feel a swell of pride in my stomach.

‘Wow. That was fast work. And your father is OK with that?’

Sanne knows my father is overprotective, which is why I can't go out and why Juan Carlos drove me to and from uni, but she doesn't know the rest of it. About my mother being murdered or my father's business.

'Well, he was a bit annoyed.' I remember the look on his face. 'But Slater's strong. He can easily look after me so I'm sure my father will get used to it.'

'Jordan's going to be disappointed.'

'Yeah. I feel bad about him, but we were never together or anything.'

'No. I'm sure he'll get over it, anyway. Hey, I'm really happy for you, Dale.'

'Thanks.' I twist my bag strap and look around the reception, which is filling up with people. 'I'm so nervous for this exam.'

'Me, too. Let's go through to the lecture hall and wait there. I don't want to be late.'

We walk together and stand in the queue that has formed outside the double doors. Soon, people are behind us and the line is long. I breathe more normally, feeling safe with so many people around.

'Actually, San, I have to go to the Ladies. Do you need to go, too?'

'No, I just went.' She looks at the door to the exam room. 'I'll stay here, keep your place in the line.'

'Right. I'll be straight back.' I hurry to the toilets near reception. There's a huge queue so I join the back of the line.

'Why is it so busy?' I ask the girl in front of me.

'Two of the toilets are out of order.'

'Ah, no. I've got an exam in a few minutes.' I step from foot to foot wondering whether I can make it through the three-hour exam without going.

'If you're in a hurry, go to the ones in the humanities block. They're only two minutes away.'

I consider it. Slater said go straight to the exam room, but I have to pee and can't be late for the exam or they won't let me in.

'Yeah, good idea, I'll go there.' I run along the corridor and out of the building, heading in the direction of the humanities block. Outside, it's quieter but there are still a few people around. I duck into the building and go straight to the toilets. It's only after I lock the cubicle door that I realise I'm the only one in there. I bite my lip. This is exactly what Slater told me not to do, let myself end up somewhere alone.

I have to get out of here as soon as possible. I flush the toilet and am about to unlock the door when I hear a noise, someone entering. My heart speeds up, adrenalin floods my body. Is this someone coming for me? I freeze on the spot, not moving, not breathing, waiting to hear what happens.

The person walks in and stops. Then, nothing. I don't move. If they came to use the toilet, why aren't they going into a cubicle? Have they come to kill me? Is this what Slater was worried about? My heart is beating so loudly I hear it in my ears.

The seconds tick by and neither of us moves. I have to get out of here. My hand is shaking as I unlock the door. My plan is to make a dash for the exit. I fling the door open and dart out. It takes a second before I process what I see: a girl at the sink, applying mascara. Our eyes meet in the mirror. She must read the fear on my face.

'Nerves?'

'Oh, yeah,' I mutter, as I wash my hands. I rush out of the Ladies and gasp for air. This is ridiculous, I chide myself. I've turned into a paranoid wreck, I have to get a grip.

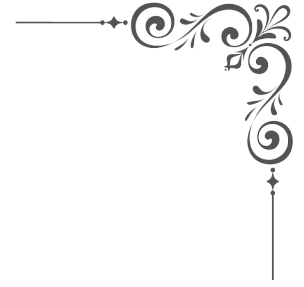
The exam hall doors are just opening when I get back to Sanne, and the queue starts to move in.

'Oh, I thought you wouldn't make it.'

'The line for the loos was long.' I run my hand over my forehead, wiping the perspiration away.

'Are you OK?' She peers at me. 'You look kind of red.'

'I'm just nervous. Good luck,' I whisper, as we walk into the hall and get steered in different directions.



The exam is three hours. We've got time to kill, so I gather the crew in an empty car park near the university. When Dylan and I arrive, Bram's already there.

'Where are Carl and Sepp?' Dylan asks, as we get out of the car.

'Gone for coffee.' Bram rolls his eyes. 'They are such accountants.'

'Accountants who earn us a whole load of money,' I say.

'Hell, yeah.' Dylan agrees.

'Here they are,' says Bram.

We look up as my brother's car pulls up and he and Sepp get out with takeaway coffee cups.

'Didn't get us any?' Bram says.

'Didn't think you fighters drank coffee,' Carl answers.

'You could have got us something else,' Bram mutters.

'What? Some tea?' Carl says in a high-pitched voice.

'Fuck you.'

'Let's get to business.' I call them around me. 'What have we got? Bram, you first.'

'We're nearly finished shifting the delivery from Bana. By tomorrow it'll be all gone. I'll get the last of the money to him.'

'And to us,' Sepp chuckles.

I nod. 'Has he rebuilt his supply yet?'

'Not yet.' Bram shakes his head. 'A lot of his dealers are looking around to join other crews.'

'Must be costing him a fortune,' Carl says.

'What's he doing about it?' I ask.

'I think he's got some stuff coming, but not as much as he needs.'

I nod and turn to Carl and Sepp. 'What about you? How are things?'

'The Highbar is looking amazing.' Carl smiles, which makes me smile. My brother's had his own share of hard times and it's good to see him so enthusiastic about this. 'Everything's on track for the opening next week.'

'Invitations gone out?'

'Yeah. Question: what we do about El Patron? Do we invite him?' Sepp asks.

I glance at Bram, who shakes his head.

'Bana's not invited, either,' he says. 'Not his kind of thing anyway.' He smiles. 'Could you imagine it? He'd turn up in his stinking clothes.'

‘They’re just his work clothes, surely. When he goes out, he wears something else?’ Sepp says.

‘Don’t think he does go out.’ Bram shrugs. ‘Maybe in Poland. All his money goes back there. Maybe he’s got a fucking mansion in Warsaw or something. He must be putting it somewhere.’

‘Marcel? What about El Patron? You want him there or not?’ Carl presses me.

I draw in a breath and look at Dylan.

‘Will Dale be there?’ D asks me.

‘Yes.’ I look at Carl. ‘Invite El Patron. As a gesture of peace.’

‘Peace?’ My brother’s eyebrow arches. ‘You think it’ll be peaceful? He sips his coffee. ‘I don’t want a domestic ruining our opening night.’

‘There won’t be a domestic,’ Dylan says. ‘If there is, we’ll handle it.’

‘Will Dale be OK if her father is there?’ Bram asks.

‘It’s business. She doesn’t have a choice.’

‘It’s not her business, though,’ Sepp mutters. ‘It’s her family.’

‘It’ll be fine,’ I tell him and shoot him a look. ‘Right, anyone got anything else?’

‘Carl and I visited a location for the fourth gym,’ Dylan says.

‘Where?’ I ask.

‘The one we visited was in Sportdorp, near the Feyenoord Stadium.’

‘And?’

Carl shrugs. ‘The location was OK but it wasn’t the best premises.’

‘There’s a better place coming up...’ Dylan says, and pauses.

‘But...?’ I prompt.

‘It’s north of the river,’ Carl says.

‘El Patron’s turf?’

‘Yup.’

‘Is there nowhere else? Do we really have to antagonise him any more?’ Sepp asks. ‘Seems like he’s already taken a fair bit from us recently. Might be wise if we back off.’

‘It’s the perfect location. We wouldn’t have to do much, it could be up and running without any real effort. It was a former sports school. There’s good parking and all the utilities.’

I look at Carl. ‘Take a look. If it’s as good as it sounds, why not?’

‘You’ve practically stolen his fucking daughter, Marcel, and now we’re going to set up on his pitch?’ Sepp says.

‘It’s just a gym, Sepp. We’ll clean as much of his money there as anyone else’s,’ Dylan says.

‘You don’t want him to think we’ve got a vendetta. You know what he’s like: old school. He won’t appreciate it,’ Carl says.

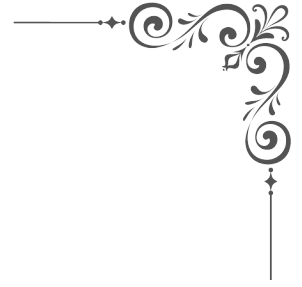
‘We’ll show him we haven’t got a vendetta. We’ll invite him to the opening of the Highbar. Show him that his business is important to us. Rebuild the relationship.’

‘Not sure you’ll be able to rebuild the relationship while living with his daughter,’ Sepp mutters, before crunching the coffee cup in his hand and drop-kicking it into the bin. ‘Goal!’ he crows, as it bounces on the metal.

‘Sepp, relax. El Patron will get over it. He’ll come to realise that living with me is the safest place for his precious daughter.’

I look at each of them to see if there’s anything else to discuss but they all shake their heads.

‘Right.’ I check my watch and nod. ‘OK. Let’s go.’



As soon as the exam finishes and the papers are taken in, I get up and leave, not waiting for Sanne or any of the others from my class. I head straight for the door, needing to get out of that room. I can't remember anything I wrote on the paper. I'm drained. The incident in the toilets before the exam showed me what a mess I am. Maybe Slater was right, maybe I should just forget about everything and focus on staying safe.

When I get out of the lecture hall I start running. I run through the reception and out of the front doors of the university into a sea of people. I search for him, scanning the faces. I don't see him anywhere. I can't stand still, though, or I'm a sitting duck for anyone who's looking for me. I move, running forward, running in the direction of where he left me. I stumble and fall. Strong hands grab me, catching me before I hit the ground.

I cry out.

'What happened?' Slater holds me by the shoulders, staring into my eyes, concern evident on his face. 'What happened? Is someone here?'

'No. No. Oh, Slater.' I throw my arms around his neck. 'I just freaked out.'

He wraps his arms around me and holds me for a few seconds.

'Come on.'

He takes my hand and walks back to the car, looking around as we go. Dylan is waiting, the engine running. Slater gets in the back with me.

'Go,' he commands Dylan, and the car races away from the kerb.

Slater's arms are around my shoulders, he's pressing me against his body, my face close to the crisp cotton of his shirt. I breathe deeply, closing my eyes, relieved to smell his scent again. The speed of my heart is finally slowing. For three hours, I feel like I've been running a marathon and now I'm finally in his arms, I'm safe again.

'What happened?' Dylan asks.

'I think she got spooked,' I hear him say.

I snuggle closer to him, just happy to feel him. Dylan stops the car outside Slater's place and looks back at him.

'You gonna be in the Take Down later?'

'Dunno. I'll see how it goes. Go see that place we talked about. Let me know what it's like.'

They bump fists, then Slater gets out of the car and takes my hand.

Inside his home, I get the familiar wave of warmth I got returning here last time. I'm safe here. With him.

‘What happened back there?’

‘I was stupid, that’s what. I just freaked out over nothing. I had to go to the toilet, there was a queue. I went to another building and there was no one around. I just kept thinking about what you said, that I shouldn’t go anywhere where I’d be alone, and I was totally alone in the toilets. Then someone came in.’

His eyes darken. I take his hand.

‘I’m sorry, Slater. It was stupid of me. I’m sorry. You told me not to do that, but I did.’

He squeezes my hand, then goes to the kitchen and pours me a glass of water. He sits beside me, stroking my hair, his fingers running over my face.

‘It’s OK, little bird.’

I sigh. ‘I just got frightened.’

‘I know.’ He holds my hand. ‘You don’t have to be. Nothing’s going to happen to you. And I’m going to show you. Next week, the Highbar is opening, and you’ll come with me. Everyone will see that you’re with me. You won’t have to be afraid again.’

I stand in front of the mirror. The red full-length dress clings to my body and emphasises the darkness of my hair; my lipstick matches the dress. Turning to the side, I move my leg forward; the slit goes all the way up, almost to my hip, stopping right below the strap of my underwear. My hair is piled on top of my head, with a few loose strands curling around my face. The updo makes me look older, more mature, which I like. I look capable of being with a man like Slater.

There’s pressure on me tonight. I feel it heavy in everything I do. Everyone will be there, his friends, his acquaintances, his business associates. They’ll all be looking at me, judging me, and it’s up to me to show them that I’m worthy of him. Marcel Slater, the man who saved my life and who killed someone to save me.

He’s waiting for me. I can hear him talking on the telephone, his shoes clicking on the floor as he paces the apartment. He chose this dress for me. It’s what he wants me to wear when he presents me to his world as his. I take one last look at myself, then turn and leave the room to meet him.

He hears my step, finishes his call, drops his phone into his pocket and turns. The cut of his dark suit is perfect, skimming his broad shoulders, tapering at his waist. His shirt is white, a dark tie at his throat. His stubble is

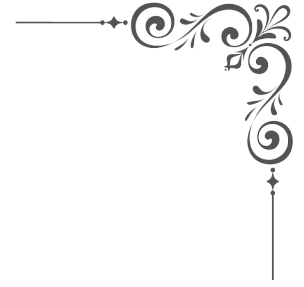
trimmed and emphasises the sharp line of his chin. His hair is gelled in a tousled style that begs me to run my fingers through it.

I stand before him, letting him appraise me. His eyes move over my body, to my face, my hair, then down to my shoes. I wait for his reaction. I hold my head up and look at him.

He likes it. I can read it in his eyes. He steps towards me, his hand cupping the back of my neck at the base of my hairline, and he presses his lips to mine. I smile at him when he releases me.

‘Will I do?’

‘You’ll more than do.’



Slater slots his car into a reserved spot outside the Highbar. The entrance is decorated with a blue and white balloon arch, and a red carpet stretches out onto the pavement. My heels sink into it and he takes my arm. The doorman steps aside for us.

‘Evening, Coach.’ He nods at Slater.

‘Barney.’ Slater shakes his hand and says something I don’t hear.

Barney nods to me as I follow Slater inside. We’re early, the party hasn’t started yet and the tables are still empty.

The bar that extends the length of the left wall is lit with cool blue lighting. The stone wall behind it is filled with bottles and spirits that glow in the light. Everything is shiny and new. The waiting staff are busy filling trays with champagne glasses.

We go to the back, walking past the low round tables and comfortable seats to a separate VIP area, near the DJ booth. Slater’s crew are already there.

‘Dale, you know D and Bram.’

Dylan comes over and puts a hand on my shoulder.

‘Nice to see you again.’

His blond hair is, as always, pulled back into a neat ponytail.

‘Hey, Dylan.’ I smile back.

‘Well, don’t you look lovely.’ Bram grins, nods in approval at my dress, shoots a glance at his brother then winks at me as Slater stiffens and moves closer to me.

‘My brother’s gotta learn to lighten up, control that jealous streak,’ Bram murmurs as he plants a friendly kiss on my cheek.

‘Never gonna happen,’ Slater retorts. He shoves Bram away. ‘Here’s Carl.’

I’ve seen him before, at my father’s club. Carl shakes my hand; he’s more formal than his brothers, without the rough edge Bram and Slater have.

‘And this is Sepp.’

I turn to the next man, who looks like a banker: sandy blond hair and a pinstripe suit. He nods.

‘Dale. Hello.’

A waitress arrives with a tray of champagne. Slater hands a glass to me and takes a bottle of water for himself. The doors have opened and people have started coming in.

‘Don’t you guys need to cut a ribbon or something? To officially declare the bar open?’ I ask.

‘Nah. The balloons are enough,’ Dylan says, looking at Slater.

‘More than enough. We wouldn’t have even bothered with balloons, but my brother insisted. Says it’s expected.’ Slater grimaces.

‘Bram insisted?’

‘Carl,’ Slater says, and snakes his arm around my waist, pulling me to him and kissing the top of my head.

‘The guys from ProteinWorld are coming tonight. Want to discuss that sponsorship,’ Dylan says.

‘What do the money men say?’

Slater nods over my head to Carl and Sepp. He circles his arms around me and cracks open his water bottle.

‘They say it’s a good deal. Easy money.’

‘You tried the products?’

‘Yeah.’ Dylan shrugs. ‘Not bad. Protein’s not my thing, though.’

‘No, but we’ve got lots of clients who do use it.’ Slater nods. ‘Let’s give it a shot. If they double the offer.’

Dylan grins. ‘That’s the spirit. We can get stands set up in each of the gyms—’

Slater interrupts him and nods in the direction of the door. ‘Didn’t realise she was coming.’

Dylan spins around, eyes following Slater’s gaze.

‘No, neither did I,’ he mutters.

His eyes are on a blonde girl making her way through the bar towards us. She’s gorgeous, in black satin trousers that hug her figure and a strapless black top, exposing smooth creamy skin. Her hair is loose, bouncing onto bare shoulders. I watch as she smiles uncertainly, looking around. I glance back at Slater and Dylan. Their eyes are fixed on her but the atmosphere is tense, and both their expressions are clouded. She comes to the VIP area and Bram greets her with a warm hug. He holds her by the shoulders and speaks to her and she laughs at whatever he says, throwing her head back, exposing her slender neck. He looks behind and points at us. Her eyes pass from me to Slater and land on Dylan.

‘Hey, guys,’ she says, coming towards us. Her gaze flicks to Dylan again then moves straight back to me and Slater as if repelled by a magnet.

‘Good to see you, Lina.’ Slater steps forward and hugs her. ‘You didn’t let us know you were coming.’

‘No.’ She looks down. ‘I kind of wasn’t. But then I changed my mind, I wanted to see how this place ended up.’ She looks at me.

‘This is Dale.’ Slater puts his hand on my back.

Lina looks at me then back at Slater. He winks in response to her unspoken question and her eyes light up.

‘Dale. It’s great to meet you.’

‘You, too.’ I glance at Slater, hoping for more information.

‘Lina used to work with us at the Take Down. She was kind of reception, admin and PA.’

‘Don’t forget cleaner.’ She giggles.

‘And cleaner.’ Slater smiles.

‘Wow. No wonder you quit, if they made you do all that!’ I laugh.

‘Yeah.’

She exchanges a glance with Slater. Neither laugh at my joke. Her gaze moves to Dylan, who steps closer.

‘Hi, D.’ She looks up at him from beneath her lashes.

‘Lina.’ He says it through gritted teeth, there’s anger in his tone.

Slater puts his hand on Dylan’s shoulder and leaves it there for a moment.

‘It’s cool Lina’s come down to support us for the opening,’ he says.

A waitress passes with a tray of glasses and Slater takes one and presses it into Lina’s hand.

‘You need more water, D?’

Dylan shakes his head. His eyes are still dark and fixed on Lina. She looks uncertainly at them both and I feel bad for her; the tension in the air is awkward.

‘Why don’t you and Dale take a seat, get to know each other. Dylan and I have some business to attend to.’ Slater plants a kiss on my lips. ‘Don’t go anywhere, little bird,’ he says under his breath so only I can hear, and grazes his fingers over my face. ‘You’re too fucking hot in that dress. I’ll be right back.’

He pulls Dylan by the arm as he walks away. Dylan glares one last time at Lina, then turns and follows Slater.

‘I love your dress,’ she says, as we sit.

‘Thanks.’ I smooth the fabric. ‘Actually, it was a gift from Slater.’

‘It was?’ She leans backwards in surprise. ‘He’s got great taste in dresses. Who knew!’

‘He has.’ I look across the bar where the men are standing talking. Slater looks back and catches me watching him. His gaze holds mine, sending a shiver of excitement running through my body.

‘How long have you been with him?’

‘Not long, a few weeks.’

‘That must be his record.’

‘Really?’

‘You can’t imagine girls who have thrown themselves at that man.’

‘And?’

‘He was never interested. At all. Always said he didn’t have time for anything more than a one night.’ She smiles. ‘How did you melt Slater’s heart?’

‘I don’t know if I’ve melted his heart.’

‘He seems taken with you.’

‘It’s kind of complicated. We ended up together.’ I drain the champagne glass and look around for another. Seeing a passing waitress, I get up and grab two glasses, and hand one to Lina.

‘Do you think Dylan looked angry with me?’ Lina asks, as she takes the glass.

‘He kind of did, yes.’

‘Oh.’ She sighs and looks at the glass in her hand.

‘Why’s he angry?’

‘I guess he isn’t too happy that I’m here. I probably shouldn’t stay long. I don’t want to spoil his night. They’ve been looking forward to this place opening for so long.’

‘Did you get fired?’

She shakes her head. ‘No, but it’s ... complicated.’ Her eyes are sad as she scans the bar. ‘Where did they go? I don’t want to leave without saying goodbye.’

‘Slater mentioned they had a business meeting. Something about a sponsorship deal.’

‘Ah, I guess they’ve gone out back or something.’ She stands up.

‘You’re not leaving already?’

‘I feel bad being here. I don’t want to ruin Dylan’s night.’

‘Are you ruining his night? He’s talking business with Slater.’ I get up and stand beside her. The VIP area is slightly higher than the rest of the bar, giving us a great view over the crowd. All the tables are taken and there’s a line at the bar three people deep.

‘This is a cool place. I love what they’ve done with those blue lights.’ She points at them. ‘Guess it was Carl’s choice?’

I shrug. ‘I don’t know.’

‘Carl’s got great taste. He’s the one who did all the offices at the gyms. Slater and D choose the equipment, Carl makes the places look special.’

‘Sound like a good team.’

‘They are. They’re the best.’ There’s sadness in her voice.

I look at her sideways; her eyes are fixed on the people in the club. She turns to me.

‘Do you want to go and dance?’

‘Sure, why not.’

She slides her arm through mine as we go down the steps and closer to the DJ. The dance floor is full, although most people are talking, not dancing. A small area opens up giving us space to dance. We dance for a while then move to the side of the dance floor to finish our drinks.

‘This champagne is great.’ Lina drains her glass, takes my empty one and puts both on a nearby table. ‘Another?’

‘Yes, but I need to go to the toilet first.’

I push through the crowd in the direction of the toilets. People move apart to let me pass. There are only a few women in here and it makes me uncomfortable without Slater by my side. I hurry to the Ladies, where it’s quiet after the loud dance music. I spend a while checking my make-up and adjusting my hair. Outside the Ladies, heading back to the bar, I walk straight into my father.

‘*Princesa!*’

‘Papa?’

He envelops me in an embrace and I bury my face in his neck, breathing in the familiar scent that I’ve known all my life, realising how much I miss him.

‘You look –’ he gazes at my dress and I see the hint of a flinch – ‘different. How are you? I’ve missed you, Daleylah.’

‘I’m doing good, Papa. Really, I am. You don’t need to worry about me.’ I smile and run my hand down his cheek. He looks older than I remember; his

hair is whiter, his face wrinkled and pale against the hue of his black shirt. A pang in my heart. He catches my hand and holds it to his lips, closing his eyes for a moment before releasing it and smiling.

‘You look so grown up, my little girl.’ There are tears in his eyes.

‘I am grown up, Papa. I’m almost twenty-three.’

‘I know. I know.’ He looks at me. ‘Maria misses you too, Daleylah.’

‘I miss her. I miss you both. I’ll call her.’

‘How is university going? How were your exams?’

‘Good. I hope I did OK.’

‘Ah, wonderful, my darling. You’re going to graduate, just like you always wanted.’

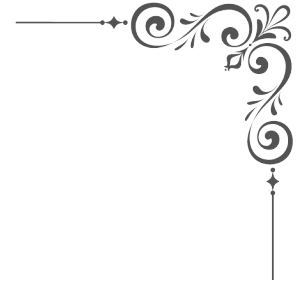
‘I am, Papa. I am.’

He puts his hand over his heart. ‘I’m so proud. My little girl.’ There are tears in his eyes again. ‘I want to be there to see it.’

‘Hmm,’ I murmur. I’m not sure what Slater would think about that. I don’t want to agree to anything.

‘It’s OK.’

My father reads my reluctance. He gives me a weak smile. I lean forward and kiss his cheek, then hurry back to the VIP area.



I watch El Patron go into the corridor that leads to the toilets. Moments later Dale comes out of the same place. My eyes lock on her as she pushes through the crowd, searching for someone. What did they talk about? I tip my head to the side, looking at her. She sticks out in here with that red dress and her dark hair, like an exotic flower in a tangle of jungle creepers. That was why I chose red, to be able to spot her in a crowd. And it makes her look fucking hot. I knew he'd see her, the moment he walked in. I wanted him to. She's looking so damn gorgeous, it'll make him realise how well she's doing now she's with me.

Dale spots me, her eyes light up and she changes course to head in my direction. She gets a trail of looks from the men she passes. My fists clench at my side when one of them, a kid from Carl's gym, deliberately brushes up against her. I force myself to breathe evenly and relax my hands. Not everyone knows she belongs to me. Yet. As long as they look and don't touch, they get to live.

'Slater.'

She blushes a little. Does she feel guilty for speaking to her father? I study her face. What was said between them? Is she hiding something? Or does she plan to tell me?

I open my arms and welcome her into them, turning away from Sepp and Carl who are boring me with talk of property investment versus cryptocurrencies.

'Little bird.'

'Have you seen Lina anywhere? I left her on the dance floor.'

'Yes, I have.' I kiss her forehead as she waits for me to explain. 'She's talking with Dylan.'

'Ah. Why was he so upset with her?'

'They have stuff to work out.' I don't elaborate. Their relationship is between them and, well, I've got no fucking clue what's going on there anyway.

Dale's gaze moves around the room, jumping from place to place. She seems nervous. I squeeze her hand. I want her to relax, enjoy tonight and realise she can feel safe with me.

'Come on, I want to show you something.' I take her through to the back, to the staff-only area, and up the stairs to the office door, where I type a code into the keypad. The door opens and I indicate for her to enter. I follow her inside and close the heavy wooden door behind me.

‘Wow, a bar in a bar.’

‘Cool, huh?’ I run my hand over the polished marble surface of the bar as she walks round, checking out our luxury office. She touches the felt top of the pool table and takes in the big TV screen. My eyes fix on the slit of her dress.

‘So, what do you think of our new place?’ I ask, leaning my back against the bar after she’s finished exploring.

‘I love it. It’s as cool as the actual bar.’

‘Yeah, that’s the point. The back office is an important place. We’ll be having lots of meetings here.’

She nods and looks down, and I wonder how much she really understands about her father’s business. She doesn’t speak and I watch her for a while longer. I’m drawn to everything about her. She looks up and smiles. That smile hits something deep within me and I’m overcome with an urge that I don’t want to resist.

‘Come here, Dale.’

She walks towards me, closing the distance between us.

‘Put both your hands on the desk, little bird.’

She doesn’t hesitate, she leans forward and presses her hands on the mahogany desk that Carl had imported from Indonesia for this office. Her back is to me, the red fabric of her dress taut over her bottom.

‘Open your legs.’

‘Here?’

‘Yes.’

She does as she’s told, stepping her high-heeled shoes apart. I peel her dress up until the pale skin of her bottom is exposed.

‘What if someone comes in? Your brothers?’

‘Fuck them.’ I touch the damp fabric of her knickers. ‘They can wait. This is important.’

She moans as I draw my finger over her, lingering on the soft mound beneath her knickers.

‘Do you want me, little bird?’

‘Yes, Slater. I do.’

‘Good.’ I rub my hand over her backside. ‘I want you to want me.’ I unbuckle my belt, the metal clinking as I open my trousers, and put on a condom.

‘I do want you, Slater.’

By the time she's finished speaking her voice is higher and trails off into a gasp as I brush over her knickers, then slide them aside and press my cock into her. She's tight and warm and feels so fucking good. I drive into her, all the way in one movement, holding her hips and pressing her against me, savouring her body. The skin of her bottom is soft and firm. I dig my fingers into her flesh, enjoying the sensation. She's so wet I can't stop myself from pounding into her harder and faster, until I hear her breaths shorten and feel her body tighten around me, then I allow myself to let go.

She collapses on top of the desk, her arms folded beneath her chest. I pull out of her put the condom in a tissue. I fasten my trousers and walk away, leaving her leaning across the desk. Her dress falls back into place.

'What did your father say, little bird?'

Her head whips around, her eyes fix on me. She stands up straight and smooths her dress.

'Just that he misses me. Why is he here, Slater?'

'I invited him. He's a business associate.'

'Do you work with a lot of people like that? Men like my father, I mean?'

I rub my hand over my face. I know what she's asking me. I haven't told her much about my work, but I can't lie to her, she has to know what she's getting into.

'Yes, I do. I work in a dangerous business, Dale. You have to understand that. I work with dangerous men. Like your father.'

I stalk across the office, pour whisky into a glass and swallow it. I shouldn't be drinking, not here, not tonight, but I need the release. Talking about this with her, having her here, is putting me on edge.

'Dale, you don't have to stay with me if you decide this life isn't what you want.' As the words leave my mouth, I know they aren't true. There's no way I would allow her to leave me. I would die first.

'I want to be with you, Slater.'

She doesn't even need to think about her answer. That pleases me.

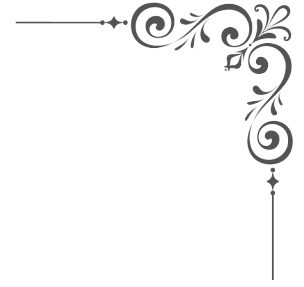
'Then this is it.' I open my hands and gesture to the office. 'This is the life. And it's dangerous. But I'll protect you.' I slide my hand over her cheek, looking into her brown eyes as she looks up at me.

'We could leave here, though,' she whispers. 'The two of us. Go somewhere no one knows us. Start a new life.' There are tears in her eyes and I know she's thinking about her mother and I can't imagine the pain she's felt. But I can't change that.

‘No, Dale. I belong here. This is what I am.’

There’s a noise outside the office, the sound of the code being entered into the security pad. I glance at the closed door, then back to Dale.

‘We’ll talk later.’



I turn my back to the door, wiping my eyes, hoping my mascara hasn't smudged. It's Bram who comes in, I recognise his voice. I fix a smile on my face and turn to greet him. Slater is by the bar pouring himself another drink.

'I'm impressed, Coach Slater. This is some hot shit,' the man with Bram says. His skin is black, which makes the diamond stud in each ear sparkle brightly and the thick gold chain around his neck stand out.

'You like the place, Cesar?' Slater throws back the whisky in one go then moves around the bar and offers his hand. Cesar takes it and Slater presses his other hand onto his shoulder in a friendly embrace.

'I do indeed.' Cesar nods approval and then sits down on the leather sofa, stretching his long legs in front of him and putting his feet up on the table.

'What you wanna drink?' Bram asks.

'Hennessy.'

Bram gets the bottle and a glass. He tosses a bottle of water to Slater, and the brothers exchange a look.

'You guys not drinking?' Cesar asks.

'We're working,' Bram says. His voice is tight and I can see he's annoyed with his brother.

Slater opens the water and swallows half of the bottle in one go.

'You never let loose?'

'We do,' Slater says. 'Just not when we're working. Health is our business and being drunk wouldn't be a good look for us.'

'Our bodies are our tools,' Bram adds with a grin, his irritation having dissolved.

Cesar shakes his head. 'You're so full of shit, Bram. My body's a goddamn tool.' He grips his crotch then looks up and notices me for the first time. His eyes sparkle as he smiles across at me. 'And who are you?'

'This is Dale.' Slater holds out his hand to me.

'Dale? You El Patron's li'l girl?'

I look at Slater.

'Yes, but now she's with me.'

Cesar nods his head slowly. 'I heard 'bout that. Nice to meet you, li'l girl.'

'You too,' I say, and mean it; there is positive energy around this man.

Slater's leaning against the back of an armchair. He pulls me between his legs and links his arms round my waist, resting my weight on his lap.

‘So, who’s going to work this bar of yours, then, bro?’ Cesar puts his feet on the floor and leans forward, resting his arms on his knees.

‘Nobody. It’s going to be clean.’

Slater’s voice is even and controlled. I want to look at his face but he’s behind me. I can’t tell if he’s annoyed or not.

‘Ah, c’mon, a place like this? And you ain’t gonna have no one in here?’

‘No. That’s not the purpose of this place. The Highbar has to remain clean. If I get even a hint that one of your dealers has been in here, you and I will have a problem.’

Cesar holds up his hands. ‘I hear you, Coach Slater. I hear you. Don’t go getting all kung fu on me.’

‘MMA.’

‘Whatever.’ He leans back on the sofa, turning the crystal glass between his fingers. ‘You got any fights coming up?’

‘I’m not competing any more.’

‘You’re not gonna defend your title? I’d have put a whole heap of cash on you to win.’

‘The odds on me would have been pretty short. You’d have had to stake a lot. But no, I’m retiring. I’m too busy these days, managing the gyms and now this place.’

Cesar tuts, shaking his head. ‘Don’t lose condition, Coach. You never know when you might wanna pick that shit up again. Once a fighter, always a fighter. It’s in your blood.’

‘I’m still training, just not competing. I’m focusing mainly on ju-jitsu. I don’t have time for the dieting, hitting the right weight to compete, all that shit takes effort and precision. And running a business isn’t easy. Far from it.’

Slater slides his fingers over the side of my neck and lowers his lips to my skin.

Cesar huffs. ‘Yeah, I can see why you’re real busy.’

Slater changes the subject. ‘How are things on the street at the moment?’

He repositions me on his lap. His cock is hard again and pressing against my bottom.

‘Off the chain. Has been for weeks.’

‘Bana still not got his supply back?’

‘Dunno. But whatever’s making business so good, I ain’t complaining.’

‘I don’t like it,’ Bram says. He stands up and moves around the office. ‘Bana’s taken too many hits lately. He’s gotta be getting pissed off. We might end up with a situation on our hands if we’re not careful.’

‘Too many hits? What else he taken?’ Cesar sits forward.

‘His supply, and now all the business he’s losing,’ Slater says, and I see Bram glance at him.

‘Oh, and I heard one of his crew was taken out. You hear that?’

‘Yeah, we heard that too,’ Slater says softly.

The thought of Slater facing trouble for defending me makes me afraid for him.

‘I just don’t think Bana’s going to take all this and hold his hands out for more,’ Bram says, his eyes on his brother. ‘He’s going to start a war, or try to take over new turf, or who knows what else that crazy man could come up with.’

‘Don’t worry about Bana.’ Slater’s tone is firm. ‘We can handle him.’

Cesar raises his eyebrows and shakes his head. ‘That’s one mean motherfucker, Coach Slater. Bram’s right. He plays dirty. You don’t wanna underestimate him.’

‘Bana doesn’t scare me. He knows not to make enemies out of us. He needs us.’

‘We all need you, bro.’ Cesar nods and finishes his drink. He stands up and looks at me. ‘What about you, you got any cute girlfriends here tonight?’

‘No. Well, there is Lina,’ I say.

‘Lina?’ He looks at Slater. ‘D’s Lina?’

‘Yup,’ Slater answers.

‘That girl’s back?’

‘No.’

Slater eases me onto my feet and stands up, his forearms resting on my shoulders. ‘She dropped by to see the place.’

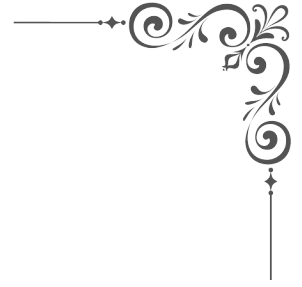
‘That’s why D ain’t around tonight?’

‘He’s around. Somewhere.’

Cesar starts walking to the door and Slater follows him.

‘Catch you later, Dale.’ He touches Slater on the back. ‘Don’t take your eyes off that one, Coach.’

He and Bram disappear down the stairs to the bar.



We stay at the bar until late. When it closes there are still a few people left and the party moves to the back office. Carl opens a bottle of champagne and I see Slater's crew finally take a drink. Slater also accepts the glass that his brother gives him. Dylan is back but Lina is not, and I'm disappointed I didn't get to say goodbye to her. I sip my champagne, watching Slater and Dylan speaking in the corner by the pool table. It's almost 4 a.m. and I have to stifle a yawn. Slater sees it. He puts a hand on Dylan's shoulder then places his untouched glass on the coffee table and takes my hand.

'Let's get out of here.'

He doesn't say goodbye or tell anyone we're leaving, he just takes me to the door. I slide down into the leather seats of his car and close my eyes, realising how tired I am and how glad I am to be going home.

'What did you think of the Highbar?' Slater asks, his eyes on the road.

'I love it,' I murmur, my eyes still closed. I feel his warm hand on my thigh and I reach for it.

'I'm glad you love it, little bird. Those words mean a lot to me. I loved having you there with me tonight.'

His phone rings loud on the Bluetooth speaker and my eyes flick open. He presses answer.

'S'up Bram?'

'You left already?'

'Yup.'

'Jimmy just called, a girl's collapsed—'

'You're on speaker, Bram, one sec.'

Slater disconnects the loudspeaker and presses his phone to his ear so I can't hear both sides of the conversation.

'Where?' There's urgency in his tone and I watch him, sensing something bad is going on.

'What was it?'

A moment later he adds, 'OK, let me know.'

He hangs up the phone, then glances at me and takes my hand again.

'What happened?'

'Ah, nothing. Some drug addict has overdosed.'

'That's awful.'

'It happens.' Slater shrugs. 'The moral of that story is, *don't do drugs.*' He pulls into his parking space and cuts the engine. 'Let's go to bed.'

I wake the next morning alone. I hear the shower so wait for him to come out, stretching happily. Slater emerges from the bathroom, a towel wrapped around his waist.

‘Morning, beautiful.’ He grins, then sits down on the bed and kisses me.

‘You’re going to work today?’ I ask.

‘I have to, little bird. I’ve got classes.’

‘Can’t Bram or Dylan take them?’ I moan, not wanting to be alone again.

He laughs. ‘I think I’ll be covering their classes today, not the other way round. From what I can tell it was a late one at the Highbar.’ He gets up and puts on deodorant and starts dressing. ‘What are you going to do today?’

‘Ah, I don’t know. I’m done with studying. Assuming I’ve passed I won’t need to go back to uni ever again. Well, only for my graduation ceremony.’

‘So what are you going to do instead?’

‘I might read some of your books. Maybe I’ll finally start on *Crime and Punishment*. And I was thinking of applying for some jobs I’ve seen.’ I watch to see how he responds.

‘Oh, yeah? What sort of jobs?’

‘There’s lots of promising ones. I’ve seen an ad for an assistant copy editor, which could be interesting, and there’s one for a content manager at a bike company I might try for.’

‘Sounds good.’

He pulls on his polo shirt then stands in front of the mirror and styles his hair. I wonder what he thinks. He hasn’t reacted with shock, which is a good thing, and he hasn’t told me it’s not safe to go out so I should forget it, either. He turns and looks at me.

‘I’ll leave my card. You can order some stuff, you know, clothes and whatever, anything you need. If you’re going to interviews, you’ll need something to wear. Get them delivered to the drop-off place and I’ll pick them up.’

‘Oh, OK. Thanks, Slater. I’ll pay you back as soon as I start working.’

‘You don’t have to. Spend what you like. As much as you like, it’s fine.’

‘Are you sure?’

He comes and sits on the bed again. ‘Yes, I am. I want you to have anything you want.’ He sweeps a hand over my forehead and tucks a stray strand of hair behind my ear. ‘In a few days it should be OK for you to start going out on your own. I hate you being stuck inside like this. It must be horrible for you.’

'I'm used to it.' I smile.

'You just have to sit tight for a few more days.'

I laugh to cover my emotion and cup his face with my hand. 'It's OK. I can manage a few more days.'

'Good.' He kisses my forehead.

'You know, it would be a lot easier if you were here to keep me company.' I curl my fingers inside his polo shirt and trace the compact segments of his abs until I reach the fine hairs below his belly button. He groans and I feel his hard-on grow in his shorts. He catches my hand and presses my fingers to his lips.

'Dale, don't. I won't be able to stop, and I haven't got time.' He pulls away from me. 'I'm already running late.'

'Oh.' I cross my arms over my chest and pout. 'I'm going to be here all alone and bored all day.'

He grimaces and looks away. 'I'm sorry, little bird, but I have to go. Read that book. Tonight, we need to go to the Highbar again, but we won't stay late. Then we can spend some time together.' He turns and heads for the kitchen. I get out of bed and follow him.

'Here's my card. Order anything you want.' He puts it on the table.

'I'll probably just order a Ferrari.' I pick up the card and turn it over.

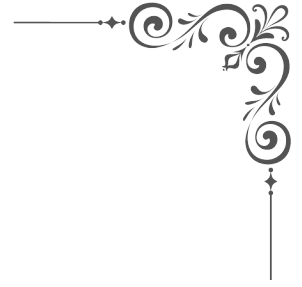
'Within reason, miss.' He takes a bottle of juice from the fridge.

'Slater, will you come and watch my graduation ceremony? If I pass, I mean. I need to submit the number of tickets I want.'

He glances at me, then back to his phone. 'I don't know, Dale. I might be working.'

'I haven't even told you when it is yet.' I laugh.

He gets up and kisses me. 'I'll have to see. I've got to go now. Be ready to go out later. Call me if you need anything.'



The sound of his key in the lock always makes me jump, even though I'm waiting for him. I've been expecting him for the past hour. He gets home at the same time most days.

We've fallen into a routine that I love. He goes to work, and sometimes he takes me to the gym with him. Most days I hang out at his place, reading, Internet shopping and applying for jobs. In the evenings we go to the Highbar, then come home and make love. And that's the part of the day I look forward to the most.

'Hey there, little bird.'

The way his gaze softens when he sees me still sends butterflies to my stomach. The edges of his eyes curve as he smiles at me. His hair is tousled and out of place.

I move to him and throw my arms around his neck, breathing in his smell, so glad to see him again after another day alone.

'You're ready to go?'

'I've been ready for an hour,' I say into his skin.

His hand travels up the back of my thigh, beneath my skirt and to my bottom. I took him up on his offer and have ordered lots of new clothes. I'm experimenting and trying to find my style, wearing tighter, more revealing things. I love having the power to turn him on with what I'm wearing.

'I'll take a quick shower then we can head out. Did you eat?'

'No, I was waiting for you.'

'We can pick something up on the way.'

He kisses me. I close my eyes and let my hands wander across his muscular back and down his strong arms, but he pulls away from me. He throws his keys on the counter and heads to the bedroom. I follow him and watch as he strips off his top and drops it in the washing basket. My eyes lock onto his stomach, his shorts hanging low on his hips. He turns on the shower, then slides his shorts off and dumps them in the basket, too.

I can't stop the sigh that escapes my lips at the sight of his naked body. His eyes flick up immediately, locking onto mine. He frowns and steps towards me, the coils of his muscles contracting and releasing with each movement.

'What's the matter? My little bird's been alone too long?' he murmurs as he approaches, and I feel the familiar swirling heat of excitement descending through my body.

‘Sorry. It’s just...’ My teeth sink into my lip as I stare at his nakedness. He’s hard, his cock thick and ready. I force my eyes away from it and to his face. ‘I’ve missed you, that’s all.’

‘You’re going to make us late.’ His voice is laced with impatience and he steps closer to me.

‘Slater, sorry, I just... I can’t help it.’

‘Neither can I.’ He presses me back against the wall.

‘It’s seeing you like that...’ I can feel his cock between us.

‘I know, Dale. I’ve known since the first moment I saw you.’

In one movement he lifts me, hands beneath my bottom, supporting my weight, and pushes into me. He enters easily and I moan with pleasure at the feeling of his body inside me. I throw my head back, banging it against the wall, and he pins me there, pressing his lips against mine, caressing my tongue with his. I claw his back; he’s so strong, solid and hard like steel. He pumps into me as I cling to him, my arms tight around his neck. I can’t get enough of him; no matter how much he fucks me, I just want more.

When he releases me and I slide down the wall and find my feet again, my forehead rests against his chest.

‘Beautiful?’ he murmurs. ‘We need to go. I told Dylan we’d be there.’ He looks at his watch. ‘In fifteen.’

He moves away from me and I refuse to let go of his hand. He comes back and presses a kiss on my nose.

‘Don’t go,’ I whine.

‘I’m only going to the shower. I’ll be two minutes. I stink, I need to wash.’

‘You don’t stink, you smell nice. Stay here with me a few more minutes. I want to hold you.’ I grip him, loving having him in my arms.

He laughs. ‘You’re going crazy, little bird. It’s time you started getting out more. Come to the shower with me, then.’ He pulls me to the bathroom.

He steps under the water and I watch him rubbing shower gel over his body. When he raises his muscular arms to wash his hair, I sigh and turn away.

‘We don’t have time to do it again, Dale.’ But I can see in his eyes he’s torn. He wants it as much as I do.

He shuts off the water and towels himself dry, then dresses in a grey suit with a white shirt. I don’t know how many suits Slater has, but it’s a lot. He wears one nearly every day and I don’t think I’ve ever seen him in the same

one twice. The fit is always perfect, smooth over his broad shoulders and tapering at his waist.

He holds out his hand.

‘Let’s get out of here.’

I watch as he drives. There’s something on his mind, I can sense it. He’s focused on the road, his eyes dark.

‘Is everything OK?’ I ask, reaching over and taking his hand. He glances at me.

‘Yeah, sure. Just got something going on at work. We won’t have time to pick up food before my meeting.’

‘I can go. It’s just across the road. I can pick it up and bring it back for you.’

He shakes his head. ‘No one will be able to go with you. All the crew need to be in the meeting and Barney can’t leave the door.’

‘I can go alone. It’s only, like, a hundred metres or so. Barney will be able to watch me pretty much the whole time. Anyway, I’ve got an interview in a few days; if I get the job I’ll have to start going out on my own.’

‘Yeah. I guess so.’

He pulls into the parking space. There’s already a line forming to get into the bar. We walk past it and I follow him through to the back. Dylan’s by the VIP area talking to someone. When he sees Slater, he comes over.

‘The others have gone up already, we’re just waiting for Bram.’

Dylan turns and heads towards the office. Slater looks at me.

‘You want your usual?’ I smile, giving him an I’ve-got-this look.

He brushes a strand of hair from my face. ‘Sure. Extra chicken.’

‘And the others? Should I get them anything?’

He glances at the back room. ‘I’ll go check. I’ll be back in a minute.’

As I slide onto a bar stool to wait I see Bram come in.

‘Hey there, Dale. How’s it going?’

‘Hi, Bram. I’m good. I think they’re waiting for you in the back.’

He grins. ‘Let them wait. They’re used to me being late. You’ve got your graduation tomorrow, right?’

‘Yeah.’ I sigh.

‘What? Aren’t you supposed to be happy about it? I know I’d be celebrating never having to study again if it was me.’ He rests his elbows on the bar.

‘I just wish Slater was coming to watch it,’ I say.

I ordered him a ticket, but he told me he won't come. He'll drive me there but doesn't want to come in and watch. Said it wasn't his thing.

'I didn't invite my father and now I've got no one coming to see me.'

'Ah.' Bram runs a hand over his face, takes a breath then looks at me. 'I guess Slater's got this hang-up about universities. He's got a chip on his shoulder because he never went. Thinks that makes him an inferior human in some way. As soon as we had enough money, he made a big deal about both Carl and me going to university to get a degree. It was really important to him. I flat out refused. I ain't no student, I'm a fighter like he is, I don't need no piece of paper to tell me how good I am. But Carl went and did his accountancy degree.'

'Why didn't Slater go if it was so important to him?'

'We didn't have any money at first. Then, when we did have enough, he was running the Take Down and fighting competitively, so he didn't have time. Why the hell he thinks some piece of paper from a university would prove something about him that he hasn't already proved himself I've no idea.'

'I didn't realise.' I look up and see Slater approaching.

'Don't mention I said all this. But maybe don't give him a hard time about it. He doesn't feel comfortable in those sorts of places.'

'Everyone's waiting,' Slater calls to Bram.

'Catch ya later, Dale.' He puts a hand on my shoulder and heads to the back room.

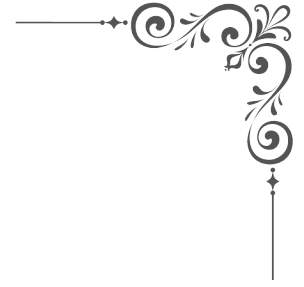
'No one wants anything, so just get for you and me.' Slater squeezes my hand and I turn and head out of the bar.

'Dale?' Slater stops me.

'Yeah?' I turn back.

'Straight there and back. If anything happens you scream for Barney. OK?'

'Nothing's going to happen, Slater.' I walk back to him, reach up and plant a kiss on his lips, then turn to leave the bar.



Everyone's sitting around the table when I enter. Bram has sat down and is already fidgeting with his bottle of water. He hates waiting just about as much as he hates sitting down, always was full of energy. I wonder how long it will take before he's pacing the room.

'Now can we start?' Carl asks.

I take my seat at the head of the table, noting that the atmosphere's tense. Ever since the opening night of the Highbar there have been more and more overdoses and people getting ill from coke bought on the street.

'Who wants to start?' I ask.

'Two girls passed out last night at Nio's. One's in IC with internal bleeding, the other is in critical care,' Dylan says softly, his tone laced with anger.

'I've heard from Angelo that they picked up a dealer carrying a load of coke cut with detergent,' Carl says. 'He called just now, wanting info.'

'Fucking detergent?' Bram mutters.

'Where's it coming from?' I ask.

'Where d'you think?' Bram shoves his chair back and starts pacing the office like a caged animal. 'Question is, what we gonna do about it?'

'Can't go on,' Sepp says, tapping his pen on the table. 'If it turns up in here...' He shakes his head. 'That's all we fucking need. This place has to stay super-clean with the amount of money we're moving through it.'

'What else did Angelo say?' I ask Carl.

'That they're about this close,' he holds up his finger and thumb, 'to blowing everything up to find the source. He wants answers, fast. The police can turn a blind eye to most shit, but coke cut with detergent that's burning kids from the inside out isn't gonna fly for long.'

I nod, imagining personally shooting Bana through the head for this. He's got no morals, we're probably just better off with him out of this game.

'What do we do?' Bram asks.

'Let's talk to him. Tonight. Tell him to get the shit off the street, now. If that doesn't work...'

My eyes meet Dylan's. He speaks for me.

'We shoot him.'

'You want me to call him?' Bram's already got his phone in his hand.

'Yeah. Set it up for tonight. He needs to clean this shit up immediately.' I stand up.

'We all going?' Carl asks.

‘No. Bram, D and I will go. You and Sepp stay here. Keep an eye on Dale.’ I move to the desk and check the security cameras. I spot her; she’s just arrived back with a white plastic bag from the takeaway. I run my hand over my face. I shouldn’t have let her go alone. It’s too soon, it makes me too nervous, there’s so much going on that I can’t control, and I hate not being in control.

I open the office door and wait for her to come. When she does, I take the carton she offers me and kiss her. She looks so proud of herself for having gone alone it squeezes my heart and I feel bad for wishing she hadn’t.

As we sit down to eat, Bram goes to the other room to make the call, Dylan disappears somewhere and Sepp heads down to the bar. Carl stays with us, sitting opposite me.

‘Tomorrow’s your big day, huh, Dale?’ he says.

She nods.

‘I remember my graduation ceremony. I never understood what all the fuss was about – those stupid hats and gowns, they’re so out of date.’

‘This is important to Dale, Carl. Don’t belittle it just cos you didn’t give a shit,’ I say. My brother never seems to appreciate how privileged he was to get a degree.

‘I didn’t say I didn’t give a shit. But my degree was more than some dumb ceremony.’

‘Carl.’ I shoot him a look.

‘It’s OK, Slater.’ Dale squeezes my hand. ‘It’s just a stupid formality, really. I wouldn’t be so keen to go myself, but after all the effort getting this degree has taken, I want to make sure I celebrate it properly.’

I lean over and run the back of my hand over her cheek. We are going to celebrate properly. I know she’s just talking it down. I know this ceremony is a huge thing for her and she’s disappointed I won’t be there for her, but just stepping into that place will make me feel like a useless piece of shit next to all those students. I can’t stand it. But I’ll make it up to her. I’m taking her to dinner tomorrow night, and I’ve ordered something for her. Something that she can keep, to remember the day. I’ll pick it up while she’s at the ceremony and give it to her just after.

Bram comes in, putting his phone into his pocket. ‘Ready?’

‘When?’ I ask.

‘Half an hour.’

Dale looks from my brother to me, and I put my hand over hers.

‘I’ve got to go out for something, little bird. Carl will stay here with you. Sepp’s around, too.’ I stand up and dump the food cartons in the bin. ‘I won’t be long. I promise.’

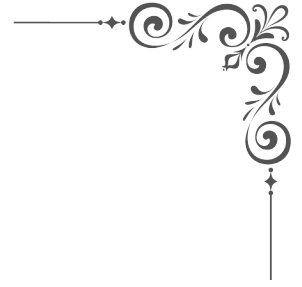
I pull Carl aside. ‘If this takes longer than I expect, take her home, will you?’

‘Sure.’

I hand him my keys.

‘Make sure you take her inside, and stay with her if she wants you to.’

He puts his hand on my shoulder. ‘I will, Marcel. She’ll be fine with me.’



The beat-up white van is already at the docks as we drive up. Dylan's driving and Bram's in the back.

'First fucking time he's been early for a meet,' D mutters, as he parks the car in front of the van.

Bana and Dex are standing beside the van, smoking. They squint in the glare from the headlights of Dylan's car. I check the gun clipped to the belt of my trousers as D cuts the engine.

'Let's do this.' I get out of the car.

Bana and Dex both nod to us as we approach. A third man sits in the van, behind the wheel, but he doesn't get out.

I don't bother with small talk. Anger is pulsing through my body and I can barely contain it.

'You know why we're here, Bana?' I practically spit his name.

'No.' He shrugs, sucking hard on the cigarette.

'What the fuck is going on with the shit you're dealing?'

'What shit?'

'There are kids in hospital, one girl has died. The police are ready to tear down the city.' My jaw aches with the tension. I should have taken this cockroach out a long time ago. It was a mistake to let him operate in Rotterdam.

'My supply got wiped out by your friend.' He grins at Dex, who lets out a snort of a laugh. 'By El Patron. I had to cut my shit. To make my money back.'

'You cut your shit with motherfucking detergent, you fucking idiot,' I growl through clenched teeth. 'Detergent, you piece of shit.'

I jab him in the chest, pushing him backwards until he bumps into the passenger door. I press him against the van. The driver opens his door, jumps out and runs round the vehicle, and both he and Dex draw their guns and point them at me. I hear the sound of D's and my brother's guns also being drawn. I don't care. My eyes are locked on Bana's and his on mine. He glares back at me, not a flicker of fear visible in his dull gaze.

'Kids are dying,' I say. 'You have to get that shit off the street. You've got twelve hours, I want it gone. I don't want to hear one more report of internal bleeding or burns. I want it all gone. Down the sink, in the Maas, wherever.' I back off to give him space and he steps forward.

'Who'll pay for my loss? You?'

'You've got enough fucking money, Bana.'

‘I lost a lot through that hit.’

‘So, pick it up with El Patron.’

‘Or his daughter, maybe?’ He grins, exposing his teeth.

I fling him backwards against the van door, the crash of the metal echoing in the dark dockyard.

‘You will not touch her. She’s mine. She’s nothing to do with this, or with him. You pick it up with El Patron, I don’t care how. But not with her,’ I yell. My heart is thumping and anger is blurring my vision. I fight for control of myself, glaring at him as he stares back. I could kill him easily now, with my bare hands. I know D and Bram would shoot Dex and the driver before either of them could get a shot off. But I restrain myself. He has to clean this shit up, first. This mess needs sorting out. I release my grip on him.

‘Get it off the street, Bana. I mean it.’ I step back.

He pulls his T-shirt down and puts another cigarette in his mouth.

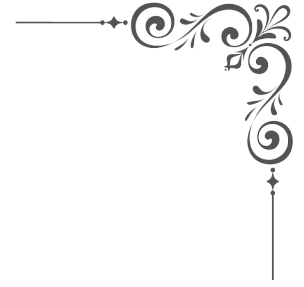
‘Go pick up a new supply. You can build the business back. But I want this detergent batch gone. Twelve hours.’

I turn and walk back to the car. Dylan and Bram wait, guns pointed at Bana and his crew until they get into the van. Then they join me.

‘And?’ I turn to Bram as Dylan reverses the car out of the docks. I’m panting, my heart is racing. ‘What’s he gonna do?’

‘I think he’ll clean up,’ my brother tells me.

I let out a breath. ‘I goddamn hope so.’



I'm awake long before him. He's on his stomach, one arm thrown around my waist. I don't know what time he got back last night, but it was late. I was sleeping. I don't want to wake him now, so I slide out from beneath the covers and tiptoe to the kitchen to make some tea.

Today is the day. It's finally here. Graduation day. It's funny what a big milestone it feels like to me. Carl said his graduation didn't make much difference to him, but to me it means everything. I've been waiting so long for this day. It was going to signify so much. My graduation was the fixed point in time when my life would change, one way or another.

That was, until I met Slater. I take my tea and stand looking out of the window. There's no way I could ever leave him. He's the air that I breathe, now. My body longs for him most of the day. I've never felt so safe, so special and so secure in all my life. Whatever the life is that Slater can offer me, I'll take it. As long as we're together.

'Hey there.'

I turn. He's leaning on the door frame, his arm above his head, his hair tousled from sleep and his boxers low on his hips.

'Did I wake you?' I can't help the smile that creeps over my face at the sight of him.

'No, I'm a light sleeper.'

He walks to me and wraps his arms around my waist.

'Lucky for me you are, or I wouldn't be here,' I whisper into the warm skin of his chest. 'I missed you last night.'

'I'm sorry. The meeting took longer than I expected. Carl brought you home?'

'Yeah. He's real sweet. He wanted to stay with me until you got home but I told him it was OK.'

'You nervous for today?'

'A bit.' I look at the clock. 'I better get going, I need to have a shower and do my hair.'

Slater takes his arms from my waist and releases me. He goes to sit at the kitchen counter, watching me, his head resting on his hand. He's still half asleep and at that moment he looks so damn hot, I have to force myself to go to the bathroom and not back to his arms.

As the water runs over me I squeeze my eyes shut, thinking how happy I am. I turn off the water then dress and do my hair and make-up.

Later, Slater joins me in the kitchen. He looks immaculate, as always, in a dark fitted suit, white shirt and tie. His face is covered with a sexy dark stubble. I feel a pang of sadness that he won't be coming in to watch. I would like to show him off to Sanne, but I remember what Bram told me about why he won't join in and immediately feel bad for pressuring him. He's already doing so much for me.

'Ready?'

'Yes.' I slip my hand into his and we leave the apartment. Nerves have gathered in the pit of my stomach and they intensify as we near the university. My hands are in my lap and I knot my fingers together. I glance at Slater; he's focused on the road, jaw set, eyes dark. I don't even know why I'm nervous. The hard part is done, all I need do now is not trip while walking on stage to pick up the certificate.

Slater pulls up outside the campus. I've never seen it so busy, there are cars everywhere and the car parks are full. He stops in a short-stay bay. We get out and he walks with me to the entrance, holding my hand. There are lots of people milling around and we stop before the steps.

'You look beautiful, little bird. Good luck today.'

'Thank you.'

'I'm sorry I'm not coming in.'

'Stop.' I cut him off with a kiss on his lips. 'You've already done so much. Thank you for bringing me. It's enough. After today I'll be finished with university and all I want to think about is building my life with you.'

He looks into my eyes and runs his thumb over my lips.

'Fuck me, Dale, you're too goddamn perfect.'

'I'm not.'

'I'll be waiting here for you when you're done. In this exact spot.'

'And if someone else is standing there already?'

'Then I'll shove them out of the way. They might be smarter than me, but I can guarantee they won't be tougher.' He grins.

'Thank you for everything, Slater.'

He winks and lets go of my hand. 'See you in a bit, Dale.'

I turn and walk into the reception.

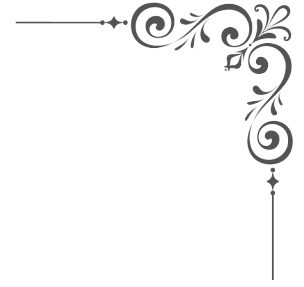
It's even busier inside the building. There are people everywhere. Students in their caps and gowns pose with their parents for photographs. I head to the place to pick up my own cap and gown. I get it fitted, and pose for the professional photographer, holding the mock degree. Then I look

around. It's early and I've got time to kill. I search the faces for someone I recognise, but no one looks familiar. I agreed to meet Sanne outside the main hall, but there's still fifteen minutes until we're supposed to meet. I head to the toilets and, of course, there's a queue at the main one.

Smiling, I go straight for the humanities block. To think, just a few weeks ago I had a total panic attack just going to this toilet.

There's no one in the humanities block, which makes me feel smug. They'll be waiting ages in that line for main toilets and just a few minutes away there's a Ladies that's entirely empty.

I push through the door to the toilets and feel arms around me. Something covers my eyes. At first, I think it's a joke, it happens so fast, then sheer terror descends on me. This isn't a joke. This isn't right. I try to move, but can't. The arms around me are too strong, too hard. I can't move, can't do anything. I remember Slater's words from the night before: if anything happens, scream. I open my mouth to scream but I can't breathe and no sound comes out. There's a rag over my nose and mouth, it's wet, and it smells of alcohol or some chemical. I'm dizzy, then drowsy. My legs give way and I'm going to fall, to hit the ground, but arms are around me, holding me up, taking my weight, carrying me. We're moving outside, away. I can't see. I don't know what's going on. I'm lifted up. I can breathe again, the rag is gone. I try to look, to see who it is that's carrying me, but I can't focus. My mind is slowing. I try to scream but nothing comes out. Then everything goes black.



I watch her walk inside, my eyes fixed on her arse. The way that skirt clings to her curves is just perfect. Only a few hours then I'll be able to peel that damn skirt off and bury myself in her. Everything about her body calls to mine. When she's near me, it's so hard to focus on anything but the overwhelming desire to fuck her.

I wait for ten minutes by the reception of the university, just to make sure everything is OK before I leave. The jewellers isn't far from here, and I'm keen to get there and see her gift. I take a final look at the university building. There are people everywhere. She's safe in there, so I head to the car.

It was a late one last night. After we met Bana we went back to the bar to debrief with the rest of the crew. He's got no sense of morality, that guy. Putting a bullet through his head is becoming a real option and, if I'm honest with myself, it's an option I would enjoy. I'm sick of his arrogance. He dares to mock me by threatening Dale? I'll show him that that's not a joke I appreciate. As soon as that shit's off the streets I'll pay him a visit.

I arrive at the jeweller's shop. It's one of those with two doors. The first door is buzzed open, and I stand in the lobby while the street door is locked before the inner door is opened. A lady with blonde hair greets me with a smile; I spoke to her last time I was here.

'Mr Slater, come this way.'

I follow her to the private viewing room. She unlocks a drawer and takes out a jade green presentation box and opens it for me.

'There it is.' She smiles proudly at the sparkling silver and gold Rolex watch. I pick it out of the box and hold it up, examining the face and the setting.

'It's engraved with today's date, as you requested.'

I turn it over and look at the engraving. 'Perfect.' I hand it back to her and she polishes it and replaces it in the box.

'Today is a special occasion?' she asks as she packages up the box, wrapping it in gold paper.

'It's a graduation gift.'

'Ah, lovely. A very nice gift indeed.' She ties a bow around the box. 'If you need any links removing just bring it back.' She puts the box in a thick paper bag and hands it to me. 'I hope you have a wonderful celebration today, Mr Slater.'

'We will.'

I get up and leave the store. In the car, I set the bag on the passenger seat. I've got time to kill, now. There's at least an hour until the ceremony will be over. I drive round for a bit and consider stopping in at the Take Down, but decide against it. It was so busy at the university I might as well go and search for a parking spot there.

I can't wait to see Dale's face when I give her the watch. She won't be expecting it, but I want to give her something to show her what she means to me. How proud I am of her. It's not been easy for her and she's made enough sacrifices. I glance at the bag on the passenger seat as I head back to the university.

I find a spot and wait in the car as long as I can bear, then I go and wait by the reception. I'm there before the first people start to file out after the ceremony ends, I'm so impatient to see her. I scan the faces, searching for her. I want her to have the watch, I'm desperate for it. I pace the steps in front of the doors, waiting. The crowd thins and soon there's just a trickle of people leaving. My fists clench at my sides. She should have come straight out, not hung around. She knows I'm waiting for her and I hate waiting. I told her to come straight out. What is she up to?

I look through the glass doors. There's nobody around. I swallow, and push through the doors. I follow the signs to the graduation hall and peer inside. It's empty; there are just a few cleaners moving between the chairs. A woman is by the podium on the stage at the front of the hall. I approach her.

'I'm looking for someone. Daleylah Martinez. I was supposed to meet her out front.'

The lady looks at me over her glasses. Her grey hair is pulled back in a low bun and she gives me that look that I've been expecting. The look that says *you're a piece of shit and you're wasting my time*. Then she glances down at her paper.

'Daleylah Martinez?' She shakes her head. 'No, I'm sorry.'

'What does *no, I'm sorry* mean?' Irritation rises within me.

'She wasn't here. She didn't come to pick up her degree.'

'What the hell are you talking about?'

She looks shocked, and I swallow, forcing myself to speak calmly.

'I dropped her off, Daleylah Martinez. You must be mistaken. She was here.'

'No, I'm sorry, sir, I'm not mistaken. She wasn't here. She didn't turn up to collect her degree. I have it here.' She holds up a certificate. 'We'll have it

sent to her.’

I can’t fucking breathe. It’s as if I’ve taken a mega blow to the stomach – all the air has left my body. For a moment, I spin around, struggling to focus. My hand is at my belt, fingers gripping the hard metal of my gun.

I stalk out of the hall, scanning the reception, searching for a sign of her. She was here, I watched her come inside. But she didn’t pick up her certificate. There’s nobody left in the building, everyone has gone. She’s gone. She’s been taken. While I was waiting for her outside, like a mug.

I push through the glass doors of the reception. There are still a few people hanging around out the front. I study them, knowing that it’s in vain, but hoping, none the less. I pull my phone from my pocket and dial Bram. He picks up on one ring.

‘Bram. Where the fuck is Bana?’ I shout into the phone.

‘Bana? He’s gone. He called me, they cleaned up the shit and they’ve gone to pick up a new supply. He left this morning. What’s up, Marcel?’

‘Gone? Where the fuck to?’ I can barely speak as every cell in my body is screaming at me to find her. The more time that passes, the harder it will be.

‘Poland, I think. When I spoke to him about two hours ago he told me he had something to do, then he was leaving.’

Red spots explode in front of my eyes.

‘Marcel. What is it?’ Bram’s voice is panicked. ‘Where are you?’

‘She’s gone, Bram.’

‘What?’

‘Dale. He’s taken her. She’s fucking gone.’

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About the Author

Thank you for reading.

I'm a mum of two girls and a lover of books; both reading and writing them.

I hope you love my books as much as I do.

Belinda x