



Against all odds, she survived...

the
sins
of
Noelle

VERONICA LANCET

THE SINS OF NOELLE

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PREFACE

This is the fourth book in the War of Sins Series and it is not a standalone.

It ends on a cliffhanger and Rafaelo & Noelle will get their HEA in the fifth book, **The Moral Dilemma**.

Please be mindful of the trigger warnings:

CONTENT WARNINGS: animal death, ableism, abuse, attempted rape, blood (gore), bullying, blood play, death, derogatory terms, descriptive child abuse/child death, domestic abuse, drugs, guns, extreme graphic violence, extreme graphic sexual situations, extreme depictions of torture, extreme depictions of torture, forced marriage, gaslighting, kidnapping, knife play, murder, mental illness, non-con/dubcon, necrophilia, ritualistic killing (gore), self-harm, substance abuse, suicide.

1. RAFAELO

“You can’t continue like this, Raf,” Carlos reproaches from the other end of the line.

“And what do you suppose I do?” I ask drily. “Try finding out your wife might be a psychopath who birthed your child without you knowing. A child that is no longer alive,” I add pointedly, anguish lodging in my throat anew at the thought of that poor little soul who never got the chance to live.

“That’s what Lucero said. You forget it was Michele who brought her in to confess. I would take everything she says with a grain of salt.”

“Maybe I would have. If I didn’t catch Noelle in Ortega’s room, his blood would be all over her. Maybe I would have, if she didn’t confirm it with her own fucking mouth, Carlos. She admitted it to my face. That it was my child who died. That...” I trail off as I take a deep gulp of air.

Already, I feel myself getting worked up as I remember the events from five days ago.

To think that I’ve been living with a stranger this whole time...

But that’s the thing, isn’t it? She fooled us all.

Even I, who I thought knew her best, knew her least.

God, but how could she have looked into my eyes and lie to me like that?

Every time we talked about her memories, she would give me one of her sweet smiles, assuring me I would be the first to know when she remembered.

Joke's on me, isn't it?

While I was wishing her memory would never come back so she wouldn't suffer the repercussions of it, she must have been laughing at me while remembering everything.

“But did you listen to her entire explanation? Did you hear the whole story?” He continues, pushing me into a corner because...I hadn't.

I'd been so angry that I'd simply shut her out after I'd gotten her confession. And for almost a week now, I've barely seen her.

Closed off in my office, I've slept and eaten here—anything so I don't come face to face with her.

How the hell could she have acted so innocent when I'd told her about my recent flashback about a woman raping me? How could she have assured me it was all a dream when it had been her. All along, it had been her.

Fuck... How the hell did she fool everyone?

Slowly, Cisco's little clues and ominous warnings come to mind, and I realize he'd known all along. Maybe not all the details, but he'd known her.

Suddenly, a lot of things are starting to make sense. Most of all the fact that Cisco may not have been the tyrannical older brother I'd believed him to be.

“I'll talk to you later,” I tell Carlos, closing before offering a reply to his previous question. Hanging up, I toss my phone on my desk, and I bring my fingers to my temples, slowly massaging them.

Do I want answers? Yes. Do I trust myself to be in the same room as Noelle without strangling her? Debatable.

At some point, I know I'll have to confront her and have everything out in the open. But not now. Not when my wounds are still raw and bleeding, reopened after so many years.

I'd thought the hacienda was the most dehumanizing experience there could be, and after suffering Armand for a few months, that's saying something. But to hear that it had been even more than I remembered? That not only had I been exploited physically through forced labor and drained emotionally with those drug-induced comas, but that I'd also been assaulted by the woman I loved most in the world?

And I'd loved her at that time too.

A sardonic smile pulls at my lips as I imagine how she must have done it. During the day she'd come to me, pretending to be my friend and forbidden love, sharing her soul with me—if any of that was even true—while at night she'd simply take advantage of me to fulfill some sick perversions.

Yet the questions abound.

Why?

Had it been a mere sexual perversion, or has she purposefully used me as her drug-addled stallion?

Days of ruminating over this matter and I cannot make any sense of...anything. And it's all because I don't know this, Noelle. I don't know this woman, who by all rights is my wife, yet is nothing more than a stranger.

Where before I'd thought her sweet, innocent and kind, it couldn't be further from the truth, could it? Yet, some of that sweetness still clings to her, to her expressions and the way her doe-like eyes regard me with deeply entranced sorrow.

But it's all an act.

She's sweet, but only to lure me into her clutches.

Cisco had known that all along. And as that thought crosses my mind, I pick up my phone again, dialing his number.

“DeVille,” he answers promptly.

“Noelle. What did you mean before when you said I don’t know her?”

There’s a pause, a faint chuckle echoing on the line.

“So, you finally figured it out?”

“What did you mean by it?”

“Meet me,” he says, clicking his teeth. “At the end of the week at my home. Four in the afternoon.”

“Why not say it now?”

“Because I can’t possibly summarize a lifetime, can I?” he drawls in a languid voice. “But if you’re calling, I’m guessing you’ve had some kind of epiphany about her. Who did she kill?”

My eyes widen in shock at his direct question.

“Ah, I see I’m right,” he continues when I don’t reply. “Noelle is...complicated.”

“She killed Ortega,” I state, curious to see his reaction.

“I was wondering if she would. She got the address from me, you know. Broke into my house and all that,” he whistles.

“What? When?” I frown at that piece of news.

“When you were in the hospital,” Cisco chuckles. “She’s quite the chameleon, isn’t she?”

“End of the week at four. I’ll see you then.”

Cisco continues to laugh.

“Be careful. You’re safe since you’re her weakness. But anyone else... You might want to put a leash on her.”

“Right. I’ll take that under advisement,” I add drily before ending the call.

My lip twitches in annoyance at Cisco’s blasé attitude and his sick sense of humor. But of course, he’d derive amusement

from his sister being a psychotic killer. Aren't they cut from the same cloth?

At the same time, his words echo in my mind—that Noelle had broken into his home to get Ortega's address. And then she'd gone and killed him herself.

Why, it's clear.

For me.

She'd killed him for me. Because he'd hurt me.

I bring my fist to my chest, banging lightly before rubbing at the spot over my heart.

Fuck, but I must be equally as sick to find that gesture sweet. Yet I can't deny that the thought that she'd go to such lengths for me makes me...hard.

Shit.

"Shit, shit, shit," I curse as I hit the table, the loud noise resounding in my entire office.

I need to shove all my tender feelings towards her in a box until I can resolve the messy ones—the confusion, hate, and disbelief I feel at knowing what she's done to me. And though thus far I've avoided confronting the problem head on, to fully move on I need to do it.

Because I'd been out most of the time and I have very little recollection of my time at the hacienda, I cannot conceptualize the fact that this could have happened to me. That Noelle would have...drugged me and fucked me while I was barely conscious.

For fuck's sake, she had my child!

Of everything, that is the one thing that hurts the most, both in the fact that it had been conceived without my knowledge or consent, and that he was gone before I could even meet him.

She'd said it had been a boy.

A son.

I had a son, and I didn't even know about it.

My lips twitch as a sad smile pulls at my features.

And now that I know about him, I can't do anything.

He's already gone.

God, but how do I come to grips with that? I can barely understand my own feelings—if what I feel is anger at what she's done, or grief at knowing I had a child...who died.

How does one deal with that?

So lost in my own thoughts I am that I barely notice the door as it creeps open.

My head whips up, my eyes narrowing on the small form tentatively walking inside.

Closing the door behind her, she fits herself to the wooden frame, her hands behind her back, her eyes big and fearful.

She's looking at me as if I might kill her any moment when it's her that killed my goddamn heart.

“What are you doing here, Noelle?” I snap at her.

She visibly flinches, her features paling as she swallows hard.

My eyes trace the column of her neck, sliding lower as I realize what she's wearing.

A flimsy dark violet satin nightgown that leaves little to the imagination as the material clings to her curves, hugging her breasts until her nipples are poking through.

“Can we...talk?” she asks uncertainly.

I raise a bored eyebrow at her, leaning back in my chair and giving her my attention—yet it's not in the way she wants.

Going by the way she's dressed, she doesn't have any discussion in mind. Rather, she's here to try her wiles on me—

use her body to seduce me where her words no longer have any effect.

I can immediately tell that is her goal, just as I know that she's convinced she will succeed.

Ah, my little liar. I have bad news for you.

My cock might get hard for you, but my heart is already made of stone.

“About?”

“Us. This situation... Will you let me tell you what happened? You can judge me after. But first, please...” she wets her lips as she starts towards me.

Every single goddamn movement she makes is the epitome of sensuality. She might fear my rejection, but she's banking on using her sexuality to ensnare me—as she's done from the beginning.

A twitch in my cheek alerts me to my mounting anger and the fact that I'm no longer doing anything to disguise it.

Who the hell does she think she is?

She sashays her hips as she walks towards me, stopping right by my desk as she places one hand to support herself on the surface of the table. She leans ever so slightly towards me, pushing her tits in my face.

I pretend to not notice the triumphant smile that tips at her lips as I purposefully glide my eyes down her chest, zoning in on the valley of her breasts before admiring the way her nipples pebble even further against her dress.

She thinks she has me, doesn't she?

For fuck's sake, does she think I'm such a mindless fool that I'll forget everything she's done just because she's flashing her tits in front of me? That I'm so weak I'll let myself be led by my dick despite everything that happened between us?

If she thinks that strategy is going to work, she's sorely mistaken. How could it ever work when it reminds me further of her crimes? By using her sexuality to get a reaction out of me, she's showing me that it's the only thing she has going for her.

God, but how could I have ever thought her innocent? How the hell could I have thought her naïve and pure when she's the furthest thing from it?

I don't answer, merely leaning back in my chair, my eyes narrowed at her as I wait for her to make her move.

Though I can't believe the gall of her, I can't help but feel a little curious as to what she has to say.

"I know I'm likely the last person you want to see now," she starts again, her voice trembling. "And I tried to give you time. I swear to God I tried... But I can't go on like this, Raf. I can't bear the thought that you might hate me... Forever..." she trails off, her eyes glossy with unshed tears.

"Whose fault is it, Noelle?" I finally speak, my voice coming out harsh and unyielding.

She blinks, swallowing hard.

"Mine," she whispers as she averts her gaze.

"At least you admit that," I scoff mockingly.

"Will you let me explain, please? Yes, I admit that I behaved badly—that I did bad things. But there's always a context isn't there?" she asks with half a smile, no doubt trying to elicit some sympathy from me. "You can judge me all you want after I tell you what happened, and I will accept whatever you decide. Just..." she licks her lips, her eyes wide and fearful—enough that it makes me wonder if this is all an act or not.

"And do you really think I would believe a word you say, Noelle?"

She flinches at my question.

“Do you think I’d trust you again when all you’ve told me so far have been lies?”

“I didn’t lie...” she’s quick to protest before her eyes go wide with realization.

“You didn’t lie?” I raise a brow at her, tilting my head and studying her.

She looks so small and frail in that flimsy dress of hers. She might have wanted to come across as sexy and seductive, but the more I look at her, the more I see only one thing—fear.

She’s only trying to put on a strong front, but deep down, she’s petrified.

My gaze dips to her fingers and the way she fidgets with her nails, digging them in her skin until droplets of blood pool to the surface. It’s one of her habits when she finds herself in an uncomfortable situation. That’s when I realize that she might be a veritable actress, but she’s still human.

The signs of her deceit had been there all along. I’d just been too fucking wrapped up in her to realize—too goddamn blind to anything but my love for her.

“I may have omitted some things, but I didn’t lie to you, Raf. I didn’t lie to your face,” she shakes her head vehemently.

Before I can stop myself, my fingers close around the delicate skin of her neck, gripping tightly as I bring her face close to mine.

“You didn’t lie?” I repeat, my tone biting.

She blinks repeatedly, surprised to see the change in me.

“Raf...” she yelps, her arms flailing by her side before her hands come to rest on my wrist, trying to escape my grip.

My lip twitches in disgust. At her. At myself. At this whole fucking situation.

With a push, I fling her from me. She stumbles back, her expression shocked.

“Leave,” I rasp.

She looks at me for a moment before she steps back.

My chest rises and falls with every breath as I try to control myself. Yet as she reaches the door, it’s not to open it and leave me the fuck alone.

Her fingers on the lock, she turns it to the side, effectively locking the door.

Swiveling to face me, she straightens her spine before she reaches for the thin straps of her dress, pulling them down her shoulders and letting the garment pool at her feet.

Stepping out of the dress, she tentatively walks towards me.

I grind my jaw in displeasure as I realize I’d been right about her strategy from the beginning. She didn’t come to have a genuine conversation—regardless of whether I may, or may not have been inclined to listen to her. She’s only here to get some fucked up ego boost, isn’t she?

“Raf,” she says my name in that throaty voice of hers, knowing it will get a reaction out of me. And oh, but it does.

I take deep, even breaths as I try to keep my anger at bay—so that I won’t fucking strangle her on the spot.

“I missed you,” she whispers as she approaches, undulating her body so every curve is emphasized.

My treacherous eyes don’t seem to get the memo that I should be indifferent to her as my gaze dips from her face to her torso, admiring the way her full tits bounce with every step. Going lower, I gulp down as I scan her trim waist and flared hips that give way to long, shapely legs.

Noelle might be small, but her body is the stuff of wet dreams.

But then there’s the triangle of dark hair at the apex of her thighs, taunting me with every little movement as I spot the glistening evidence of her arousal clinging to her pussy lips.

Fuck. Me.

My whole body tenses as she stops in front of me, sliding between me and the table.

“What do you think you’re doing, Noelle?” I ask in an unbothered tone.

Yet it takes everything in me to pretend to be unaffected when I’m everything but.

I might be mad at her. I might hate all the deceit and despise her for what she’s done.

But even the most horrible news doesn’t erase the fact that I still love her, or that she’s the only woman to ever have such a devastating effect on my body.

Her villainy doesn’t decrease her physical appeal—not one bit.

“Didn’t you come here to talk?” I raise a brow at her. “So talk. But you can do that clothed, too,” I remark drily, sneering as I look her up and down.

She’s so fucking close, I can smell her. And as my nostrils flare with the combination of her body wash and her natural musky scent, I find myself worse than before. I’m teetering on the edge, and if she poked me with one finger right now, I’d fall.

Fuck.

Since my days at the hacienda and knowing what it’s truly like to lose control of my body, I’ve done everything in my power to maintain it in all aspects of my life. And having her like this, so close—so fucking close—doesn’t help one bit.

I’m one second away from blowing, and she can sense it, too. She’s banking on it.

“I didn’t rape you,” she suddenly says, bringing her eyes to me. “Technically,” she adds after a brief pause.

My lips quirk up in amusement.

“Technically?” I repeat, doing my best not to succumb to laughter at her flimsy excuse.

Her nose scrunches up as she purses her lips.

“Yes, you were drugged and that blurs the lines,” she eventually admits, still fidgeting with her hands. “But even drugged you were conscious enough to give your consent. The drug at the hacienda was different from the one you’re taking now. You, yourself told me that. Then it stands to reason that it would work differently, too. And it did. It was never meant to intoxicate you. The goal was always to alter memory. And that means while you were on it, you were still you—still conscious. It’s just that...”

Damn, but what a sight!

My wife, standing naked before me and trying to argue what constitutes rape and what technically doesn’t.

“It’s just what?” I raise my eyebrows.

She takes a deep breath.

“It made you freer.”

I frown.

“Explain.”

Her eyes flash at my tone. She rakes her teeth over her lower lip as she brings her hands to my chest, trailing her fingers down my body. Her touch is light, but distracting altogether.

“You were uninhibited. No longer concerned with right, or wrong. You were you, but untethered to anything that held you back before,” she finally says.

“And you think that made it ok for you to fuck me while I’d have no memory of it afterwards?” I demand harshly.

Her hands suddenly still over my chest.

“No,” she whispers, shaking her head. “It doesn’t make it ok. I know this now, and I knew it back then.”

“And you still did it.”

A nod.

“I still did it.”

“Why?”

“Because it was the only way I could have you,” she confesses with a sad smile.

I’m stunned into silence as I can only stare at her, unable to believe the woman I’d fallen in love with and the one before me are one and the same.

I’d always felt there was a side of Noelle that hid beneath her sunny disposition and gentle nature, but I would have never believed it to be something like this.

“You were married,” I point out the obvious, curious to see how she would justify that.

She shakes her head, her mouth curling at the corners.

“I didn’t see myself as married,” she replies with a careless roll of her shoulders. “I never saw myself married to anyone but you,” she continues.

Despite the moral dilemma of the question, her answer pleases me.

“And you see nothing wrong with anything you did,” I state.

I’m not yet ready to question her about Mali. Not when I’m hanging by a thread and any mention of his name could be my trigger. But that doesn’t mean I don’t hold that piece of information close to my heart—the fact that not only had she technically raped me, but she’d also secretly had my child.

“No,” she says as she tips her chin up, confidence oozing from her voice. “I don’t. I would do it again. And again. And again.”

That surprises me.

“Is that why you came here?” I give a sarcastic laugh. “How did you think any of this would help your narrative when you know it was wrong and you’d do it again?”

“I don’t want it to help my narrative,” she suddenly mentions, her voice serious. “I’m not going to skew the facts and give you reason to doubt me again. I just...” she trails off as she takes a deep breath. “I want you to know me. The me I didn’t have the courage to show you before.”

I quickly mask my surprise at her words, especially since I don’t detect any trace of deceit. She really believes this, doesn’t she?”

“Is that so...” I muse. “What about the you until now? Who was that?”

Her lips spread into a tremulous smile.

“That? It was part me and part...who I wanted to be. Alas, we don’t always get what we want, do we?”

I narrow my eyes at her.

“Then it seems we’re at a standstill, are we not? Because the woman I fell in love with, by your own admission, does not exist. That makes our entire relationship invalid.”

“No,” she quickly says, coming closer.

She grabs my shirt, her fingers scrunching the material, her face inches away from mine.

“No,” she repeats with a shake of her head. “Everything we shared was real, Raf. If there is one person in the world I can be vulnerable with, it’s you—only you. It’s just that there is another side of me outside of us. One that doesn’t need protection, or to be taken care of. One that can take care of herself and her problems. It’s just that...if I’m with you, I don’t want to be that person. I just want to be yours,” she takes a deep breath, her words uttered with such passion, I feel them in my fucking bones.

Yet no matter how pretty her words are, or how much they affect me because they are what I’ve always wanted to hear, I

can't deny the truth of the situation.

"You should leave," I add quietly, not trusting myself to say more.

Disentangling her hands from my shirt, I push her aside.

She continues to shake her head at me.

"No. No, Raf. I can't leave," she says, her words becoming frantic. "Five days. One hundred twenty-one hours and five minutes. That's how long it's been since we've last been together. And I. Can't. Bear. It," she breathes heavily as she bangs her small fists against my chest. "Please don't send me away. I'll answer all your questions. I'll tell you everything you need to know. Just please..."

"Noelle," I sigh as I push her from me. "I don't want you here and I don't want to hear what you have to say."

"But...Raf..."

"As you said, I have no memory of those times I was under the influence. That means I don't know whether I gave consent or not. I don't know what you did to me. You or God knows who else..."

"No," she interrupts me. "I swear to you that no one else touched you," she adds anxiously. "I would have never let anyone harm you. You must believe me."

"But that's just the thing, Noelle. You could tell me the earth revolves around the sun and I would still doubt it. Please leave before we make this worse."

"No... Raf... Where does that leave us?"

The last question is barely audible as she stares at me with wide, teary eyes.

I don't answer her. The slight downturn of my lips is enough to convey what I think the future will bring—and enough to put more terror into her features.

"Raf... It's still me. I'm still the same Noelle, please."

“You need to leave, Noelle. I want to be alone,” I tell her once more.

When she doesn’t move, I do it myself.

I get to my feet and by-pass her to leave the room.

Despite my rather calm disposition until now, I know I won’t be able to maintain the ruse for much longer. Not as her words churn in my mind and make me want to explode with anger—at her, at my brother, at everyone who had a hand in what happened to me.

Suddenly, the past is no longer the past. I’ve worked far too hard these last two years to move on just for one moment to make everything unravel and the very foundation I built crumble.

But that’s what it’s about to happen.

Her presence. Her excuses. Her blatant indifference and her ambivalence towards right and wrong. Every single word that comes out of her mouth is slowly making me lose what little control I have left.

I only get to the middle of the room before she jumps in front of me, placing her slight body in my way to stop my advance.

“You can’t leave me,” she declares, her eyes searching mine.

I give nothing away as I blank my features.

Tension runs high as my body tenses at her touch. Yet I don’t give her the pleasure of seeing how much she affects me. I simply continue to show her my emotionless expression and the way nothing she can say or do will change my mind.

“I told you I wanted to be alone, Noelle. Do me the decency to respect at least that boundary, even if you don’t see it as such,” I add sarcastically.

“No,” she shakes her head. “We need to solve this, Raf. Now. Before it festers. Before...” she closes her eyes. “I can’t

bear it that you're upset with me. That you..."

"Have you even thought about how I feel?"

She blinks in confusion at my question.

"This is all about you and the effect the separation has on you. But have you thought about what your actions did to me? The hurt I feel?"

"Yes," she whispers. "Not only have I thought about it, I knew from the beginning that if..."

"And there it goes," I cut her off. "You say you didn't lie to me, but if you knew how I'd react to the truth, you sure went out of your way so I wouldn't find out. How is that not a lie?"

She stares at me for a moment, and for the first time, it seems I shut her up.

Shaking my head at the situation, I move towards the door.

"No," she repeats, placing herself in front of me again. "Please don't leave. Please," she begs.

And fuck me if her words don't manage to get a reaction out of me.

"I don't want to see you, Noelle. I don't want to hear from you. I sure as fuck don't want to spend another moment in your presence. What's so fucking hard to understand?" I grit out.

Before I realize what she means to do, she drops to her knees in front of me.

Her hands are on my belt as she quickly unbuckles it.

"What are you doing?" I enunciate each word carefully, but I don't stop her. Not when I'm curious what she's going to do—how far she's going to take this. It seems that if talking won't work to her advantage, then...

"You're not indifferent to me," she says, looking up at me with a hesitant smile on her lips as she traces the hard ridge of

my dick with her fingers.

I steel myself against the shudder that goes down my spine at her light touch, simply giving her a bored look.

“You’re naked. I’m a man,” I shrug. “We both know I find you attractive, Noelle. That’s never been the problem.”

“Then fuck me,” she suddenly says. “If words don’t work, then let our bodies do the talking. Your body knows me, Raf. It recognizes me, and only me, and it knows that I would never do anything bad to it.”

I blink in shock, unable to muster a reply.

She doesn’t get it. She simply...doesn’t get it.

Mistaking my silence for agreement, she slides my zipper down, reaching inside and wrapping her fingers around my hard cock. And I am hard—have been since the moment she walked in and flaunted her too fucking perfect body in front of me.

She nuzzles her face against my shaft, bringing it to her lips and laying a quick kiss to the head before sucking me deep in her mouth.

I bite back a moan at the onslaught of sensations as I struggle to keep my head about me.

She’s smart. I’ll give her that. She knows that our physical chemistry is one of a kind, and that her effect on my senses can have an intoxicating effect—ironically, almost as potent as drugs. She’s aware that I’m weak as fuck where it comes to my desire for her so she’s trying to use it against me.

My fists clench by my side as it dawns on me just how much of a stranger the woman in front of me is. At the same time, though, I realize that the only way to beat her at this game is to truly show her she cannot control me—not with her body, nor with these petty tactics.

So I don’t move.

I push back against the treacherous sensations she elicits off my body as I concentrate all my willpower towards not coming. Even if her mouth is a hot, wet heaven; even if it's been almost a week since I've last been inside of her, I won't give her that satisfaction.

She brings her gaze to mine, her lips wrapped around the head of my cock as she flutters her lashes seductively. Her tongue swirls around the underside, making it increasingly harder to maintain my composure.

“Are you done?” I ask in a bored tone.

Her brows furrow at my question and she draws back, my cock falling from her mouth and leaving a trail of saliva behind.

“Raf...”

I don't let her continue as I grab her chin between my fingers, jolting her towards me.

“Do you think this is going to magically solve anything?” I ask as I look her straight in the eye, my gaze as unyielding as my tone.

Her eyes are so damn clear and beautiful, reminding me once more of the ruse she'd played on me, pretending to be some goddamn pure little angel when all along she'd been the devil in disguise.

She licks her lips as she looks at me, not daring to reply.

“You're pathetic if you think a pity fuck would solve anything,” I shake my head at her.

“Pity...Pity fuck?” she repeats incredulously.

“What else could it be when I can barely stand the sight of you?”

She blinks, pain entering her gaze, and fuck if that doesn't affect me.

Why the hell do I have to be so weak when it comes to her? Even knowing all that she's done and it still cuts me on

the inside to see her hurt.

“I’ll take it,” she whispers. “Pity fuck or not, I’ll take it. I’ll be as pathetic as you want me to be. I’ll beg on my knees. I’ll do anything... Just don’t send me away. Don’t...” her breath hitches as she tries her best to keep her tears at bay.

“Fucking hell! Do you have no pride, woman?” I ask in disgust as her words sink in.

“No,” she states confidently. “When it comes to you, I don’t.”

Her statement takes me by surprise. Then it angers me.

So this is how she thinks she’ll solve everything? By offering to be my fucktoy?

Bitter laugh bubbles inside of me.

She doesn’t realize what she did wrong because she doesn’t see it as wrong. By her own admission, she’d do it all over again. And now she thinks that if she prostrates herself at my feet I’ll forget all about it and resume our relationship as it was before.

Yet, the biggest question is... What did we even have before? If everything was based on lies, was it even real?

My anger mounts at the situation, regret and despair mingling inside of me at realizing the most beautiful thing in my life had been nothing more than a lie.

A fucking shameless lie.

And as if I were back to the moment I found out about everything, I feel as though the rug’s been swept from beneath my feet, confusion swirling in my mind as well as a deep regret.

After I escaped the hacienda, I had one purpose—get revenge on those who wronged me. More than anything, I wanted to avenge what I believed to be the death of my beloved. Once that goal disappeared, I focused on Noelle as my entire reason for being, her happiness my happiness, her

mere presence the only impetus I needed to live. When you remove all that...

I'm left with nothing. Fucking nothing.

And it's my fault as well as hers because I should have never made her the entire reason for my existence. I should have never fucking put her on a pedestal, worshipping her rather than loving her.

As I stare down at her face, one I'd previously thought perfect, I'm suddenly struck by all the flaws reflecting back.

She's...human. She's not perfect—she never was. But the realization leaves a gaping hole in my heart—one that's bleeding as it's breathing out in relief. And for the pain it's causing me with each deflated breath, I want her to suffer too, not only for the past, but for the present, too. For taking away the only crutch I had, the only stable thing in my life.

For making me feel so fucking aimless when just days ago I thought I had it all.

She. Needs. To. Fucking. Suffer.

"Pity fuck," I shake my head, a dark laugh escaping me. "Fine. If that's what you want, that's what you'll get," I tell her in the most indifferent tone I can muster. "Go to the desk. On your belly. Ass to me."

Her lashes flutter in surprise, and I expect her to finally snap out of it, curse me and maybe get out of the room and leave me the fuck alone.

But she surprises me when she does neither.

She simply rises to her feet, unabashed by her nakedness as she moves fluidly to the desk. Leaning onto the surface of the table, she tips her ass up, her feet slowly coming apart as she wiggles her hips.

I swallow hard as I get an unobstructed view of her perfect pussy.

But no matter how fucking hard the sight of it makes me, I can't let this cloud my mind.

Pity fuck...sure. This is the only way to prove to her and myself that my dick doesn't dictate the show.

Stopping behind her, I bring one finger to her folds, arousal immediately coating my digit.

"You're a horny little bitch, aren't you?" I mutter, amused when I feel her body tremble at my touch.

"I can be anything for you," she replies in a subdued voice, forcing herself not to move.

"We've clearly ascertained that," I give a dry laugh.

She stiffens against me, but she doesn't reply.

I have to wonder how long she'll keep this up.

"Tell me, Noelle," I start as I circle her entrance with my finger. "How did I fuck you back then? Or did you have to do all the work because I was too out of it?"

"No," she shakes her head against the desk. "You were conscious. I told you..."

"How come I remember differently then?" I snap.

"It was one time..." she whispers.

Her words kick me in the chest with the power of a thousand bullets. Without even thinking, I dig my fingers into her ass, holding her still as I align my cock to her entrance and push inside her in a punishing thrust.

Her body tenses at the invasion, but she's so fucking wet, I know it's not pain she's feeling.

"Enlighten me then, how did I fuck you?"

She's breathing heavily as she grips the sides of the table to keep herself still.

"Tell me," I repeat as I hold onto her hips, retreating before surging forth once more.

She releases a sweet moan as she pushes her ass further into me, encouraging me to plunge deeper, fuck her harder. The sensations are heavenly, but when are they not when I'm fucking her? Yet I can't let myself be hypnotized by that. I can't let myself be sidetracked.

"Speak," I demand harshly as I grab her neck, squeezing lightly.

"Like this," she utters in a low voice. "Like an animal," she continues. "You fucked me like an animal."

I can't help the mocking laughter that escapes me.

"And that's how you want it, don't you? You want to be taken on all fours like a fucking bitch in heat, isn't that right?" I ask as I thrust into her, this time harsher than before—so much so she has a hard time muffling her moans.

"Yes," she pants.

"There we go," I chuckle. "Finally shedding that innocent act you had going on. God, but you had me," I grit my teeth as the memories of our time together assail me. "You fucking had me, Noelle."

"No," she shakes her head, her neck still in my hold. "None of it was fake. That's how I am with you—only with you," she says in a breathless moan.

"Does that mean you were different with other men?" The question slips past my lips before I can help myself, and the realization that not only is my wife not who she says she is, but she might have a whole different past, makes me want to fucking explode.

I still inside of her, my hand tightening over her neck as scenarios pile up in my head, the thought of her with anyone else tearing me up on the inside.

"No, no," she denies vehemently. "I swear to you, Raf."

"Funny," I scoff. "As if I believed anything you said at this point."

“I’ll do anything for you to believe me, Raf. You’re my Blue, you know that. My Blue that I love more than anything else in the entire world. How could I let anyone else touch me when you’ve been the love of my life since I was fifteen? When you’re the only man I’ve ever looked at?” The words pour out of her as she struggles to turn to me and convince me with her beguiling eyes.

And fuck if she’s not halfway there. Because I’m a goddamn fucking fool whose only weakness seems to be this one woman.

But that’s the issue. I’m too fucking weak for her and everything she means to me.

“Anything,” I sneer. “What about this?” I ask as I bring my hand to her ass, trailing one finger from her tight hole to her pussy that’s currently stuffed with my cock. “Did I fuck you here, too?”

She stills for a moment before shaking her head.

“Did anyone else?” My jaw twitches as I utter the question.

“No,” she cries out. “No one.”

“So you’ll give it to me?” I ask innocently. “You said anything.”

She nods effusively.

“Anything,” she confirms.

I don’t know what comes over me to ask for this, except that I’m seething with jealousy.

I fucking hate her for what she’s done and for her all lies but I can’t help but be cut to my core at thinking she might have been with someone else—that she might have let another man put his hands on her. So much so that I want to put my fucking claim on every little part of her body, take her in every way possible until I’m the only one she can remember—the only one to imprint on her.

How fucked up is that?

How fucked up is the fact that I hate her but I still want her—so much so that I’d fucking kill anyone who ever put a hand on her?

Goddamn, but if she’s insane—and all evidence points to it—then I’m just as much as a lunatic for craving her worse than any drug.

Yet at this point, everything has been set in motion, and I find that I don’t want to stop.

She’s mine.

She’s my fucking wife.

I may hate her, but she’s fucking mine.

Grabbing her ass with both hands, I spit between her cheeks. Sliding out of her pussy, I swirl my finger around her asshole, massaging in the combination of her arousal and my spit.

“Raf…” she whimpers as I bring my cock to her little hole, testing the tightness of her muscles.

“You said this is mine, Noelle. Isn’t that so? That I’m the only one to touch you here,” I murmur in a caustic tone.

She squeezes her eyes shut as she gives me a brisk nod.

“Say it. Ask me to fuck you in the ass,” I smirk.

She licks her lips, a shudder going down her back as I continue to stroke her ring of muscles with the head of my cock.

“Please,” she whispers.

“Beg me,” I echo her words from before.

“Please, Raf. You can do anything to me. Anything,” she pleads, her glossy eyes making contact with mine.

I don’t know what it is that I see in her gaze, but it makes me fucking livid. One moment I’m playing with her, the next I grab her hips as I thrust into her.

Her muscles are tight and unused to such an invasion, seeking to keep me out at every turn. She thrashes against the desk, her small hands clenched into fists as she breathes harshly in and out.

In another life, I would have been more gentle. I would have asked her if she was alright, going slow to let her accommodate to the sensation.

Now? I want her to feel every single thing. I want her to know who's fucking her and to remember it long after I'm gone from her body—long after I'm gone from her life.

“Ah,” she yelps, holding tight to the desk as I bury my cock inside of her in a way I'd never done before.

“Fuck,” I mutter in a low tone.

I take a deep, stabilizing breath in an effort to keep myself in check. She's so fucking tight, she's squeezing the life out of me. And as I surge forth until I'm buried to the hilt inside her ass, I can't help the loud groan that escapes me.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

She's breathing equally harshly, her cheek fitted to the cold table as sweat beads on her forehead before she turns away from me.

Gripping her hips, I withdraw almost all the way before thrusting again, establishing a rhythm for the both of us.

Noelle is quiet, holding on to the table as she keeps herself utterly still—letting me have my way with her completely.

Yet the more I fuck her, the more I realize something is wrong.

Despite her verbal confirmation that I can do anything to her, she's not in the least an active participant.

I slow down as I watch for her cues, something clutching at my heart.

Releasing my bruising hold on her hips, I move my hands higher, caressing her skin and feeling her flinch.

“Noelle...” I whisper.

“Don’t stop,” she murmurs in a dead voice. “Don’t you dare stop, Raf,” she grits out.

I frown at her vehemence just as she pushes herself back onto my cock.

“Fuck me,” she demands.

I hesitate for a second, something niggling at my conscience. But as I see her renewed attempts to get me to move, I give her what she wants, pushing into her again and fucking her harder, faster and so fucking deep my entire cock is enveloped by her warmth and tightness.

The sensation is entirely foreign but it feels so good I can no longer delay my release—not when every clench of her muscles has me fighting for my sanity.

Biting back a moan, I hold her tighter to me as I shoot my load into her ass, my breathing too erratic just like my mind flies for me in the face of this euphoria.

Yet it’s when the haze clears off my mind that I finally see the truth.

A low sound penetrates the air, and as I turn her to face me, I see the truth.

Tears course down her cheeks as she looks at me, her features desolate and echoing the emptiness I feel in my heart.

Why Noelle? Why did you have to do this? Why the hell did you have to kill my heart like this?

The questions are on the tip of my tongue, but I don’t utter them out loud.

What’s the point? What’s the fucking point to anything? To this situation or my attempt to humiliate her with sex? What’s the point of anything?

Disgusted at myself and at her, I release her, pulling out of her and stepping back.

She can barely stand on two feet as she slides to the floor, her body glistening with sweat. Drawing her knees to her chest, she regards me through misted lashes, her eyes red and brimming with tears.

My heart breaks as I take her in, and my first instinct is to go to her, hug her to my chest and tell her everything will be alright. That I didn't want to hurt her; that I will never hurt her again.

But that would be a lie.

"I'm done," I tell her, zipping myself back up.

I don't wait for her reply as I back out of the room, closing the door behind me for good.

2. RAFAELO

“You need to have a proper conversation with her, Raf,” Sisi says thoughtfully as she brings the cup of tea to her lips.

“What she said,” Vlad shrugs, pointing to his wife. “She’s the expert in her sex.”

Sisi rolls her eyes.

“You don’t have to be an expert in anything to have common sense, Vlad. And in this case, I think they both need to calm down and have an honest conversation.”

“Maybe. If I could be calm enough to do it...” I sigh.

A day after what had happened in the office, I couldn’t bear it anymore.

The guilt. The anger. The fucking love and hate that constantly warred in my mind. I couldn’t bear any of it anymore. So I’d asked Sisi to meet me, thinking I could get another perspective—this time a feminine one. Of course, where Sisi goes, Vlad follows, so he’d included himself in our little meeting.

I’d told her as much as I could without giving more intimate details. Why I’m still protecting Noelle’s privacy when she’s the fucking guilty party in this scenario, I don’t know. Yet for some reason I can’t bring myself to tell anyone details about the past aside from the general situation.

Sisi and Vlad are smart enough to read between the lines, especially as I’d told them about the baby situation and the

fact that I'm still trying to wrap my head around it—that I'd been a father once...and now I'm not.

To my greatest surprise, it's Vlad who decides to comfort me—though the word comfort might be a little too much for Vlad. He shares his own perspective for when he'd heard about Sisi's pregnancy and then her miscarriage, and that despite never in his life entertaining the thought of having children, the news had broken something inside of him.

"The pain won't go away, Raf. It's been years for us and..." She turns towards Vlad. "He's still not over it either."

I expect Vlad to be his usual defensive self, especially since this is a serious conversation and he never does serious. Instead, he surprises me as he takes a seat by Sisi's side, facing me and giving me a tight nod.

"You just take it one day at a time," he shrugs. "You don't have to pretend it didn't happen. But not discussing it with Noelle won't help you either."

"Raf, look," Sisi intervenes. "I may not have known Noelle for a long time, but I know she loves you and I am sure she would have loved your child just as much. By your own admission, you don't know exactly what went down. But I can tell you that Noelle doesn't seem like the person who wouldn't care about her child. If anything, I don't want to imagine what she must be living with if she remembers...that. If she actually remembers the death of her child," Sisi visibly shudders.

"Noelle isn't Bianca, Raf. Of that I can assure you," Vlad interjects.

"Right, as if that makes everything better," I reply drily.

"It should. At least she has some emotions. From what you explained, it seems that you're the common denominator in every case."

I frown.

"She's a lovely girl. Normal, until it comes to you. Then, all bets are off," Vlad notes. "She's not a sociopath like Bianca

who doesn't understand empathy. Noelle sounds as though she merely chooses not to let that rule her."

"You mean she's capable of switching it on and off at will."

Vlad nods.

"But isn't that even more dangerous? At least Bianca can be excused for not understanding right or wrong. Noelle does, and still decides to act as she wants. What do you call that?"

"Smart," he shrugs, his tone holding a certain type of admiration. "Morality holds us back. It's the chain that holds us from truly flying."

"And without morality, we'd have hell on earth," I note drily.

"Maybe. Or, maybe, it would truly be the survival of the fittest," he muses. "When everyone acts in their own best interests without minding others' sensibilities. Maybe at that point it will truly be about abilities instead of politeness," he gives us a wicked smile. "It would certainly be interesting to watch."

"You're getting ahead of yourself," Sisi elbows Vlad. "He's not here to hear your views on morality, Vlad. He's here for advice."

"And this isn't advice?" Vlad's brows go up. "I think it's wonderful advice. Get to know your wife, Raf—really know her limits and what she's willing to do. Only then you will be able to know how to proceed. Although if I were you..." he trails off.

"What?" I roll my eyes.

"If she's capable of all that for you, then I'd ask myself what she's capable of to keep you."

I narrow my eyes at him. He's not...wrong.

"Just...talk to her," Sisi releases a harsh breath. "We can all theorize here all day, but you will only get the information

you need out of her.”

“But how can I trust her?” I sigh. “I’d like nothing more than to hear everything, listen to her side of the story and try to understand the situation. But how can I trust her? How can I...” I groan at my conundrum.

That is exactly what I am afraid—what I’ve been afraid of from the beginning. That I would hear the entire story and I wouldn’t believe her; or, that I would listen and believe a lie. Neither situation bodes well for the future, for my peace of mind or my goddamn heart. Yet in this case, not knowing might be the least suffering of all.

“I’ll ask some of my contacts,” Vlad suddenly says. “Maybe we can get more information to corroborate her side. That way you’ll know whether she’s lying or not.”

“Thank you.”

“You could also try with her brother. You said he already warned you so he must have more information. If you don’t trust her, then try to get more perspectives to see what aligns and what doesn’t,” Sisi suggests.

“You’re right. It’s just that...” I take a deep breath. “I have a hard time even being in the same room as her. Knowing what she did...how she lied to me... I can’t reconcile it with the Noelle I knew.”

“Well, you’ll need to eventually,” Vlad shrugs. “And the more you put it off the harder it’s going to be.”

I nod, knowing they are both right but still dreading the confrontation. If what happened yesterday is any indication, then I know for sure it’s going to be messy.

But more than anything... I don’t know if I trust myself.

I love her. Despite everything, I still love her. So what I’m most scared of isn’t what she’s going to tell me. It’s that I’ll forgive her in spite of anything she might say.

“Thanks a lot for the advice,” I strain a smile as I get up to leave. “I really needed someone to talk to.”

“You’re always welcome here, Raf. You know it,” Sisi assures me. “Even Vlad can be a good sport about it,” she adds jokingly.

Vlad rolls his eyes at her playfully, his arm over her shoulder as he brings her closer to his side.

“You’re growing on me,” he makes an ultimate concession as I head for the exit. “Now go back to your own wife,” he shoos me out.

A smile tips at my lips as I shake my head at him.

“I’ll see you soon,” I wave as I head to my car.

I steer my car out of their driveway and onto the main motorway to head back to the city. After I plug in the coordinates for Cisco’s house in my GPS, I play some relaxing music, leaning back in my seat and trying my best to clear my mind.

The visit was a good opportunity for me to talk to someone other than Carlos and get another perspective—regardless of the fact that everyone will tell me the same thing.

I know I need to have a conversation with Noelle at some point—one that won’t end like the one yesterday. But in order to do that, I need to get myself in check, too.

I’ll be the first to admit that lately I’ve been too volatile, about to blow from the smallest thing. And it’s all because my reality has all but shattered.

Can this be fixed?

That’s the most important question.

Yes, I’ll talk to her. I will listen to her side. But can anything be saved? Can our marriage survive this?

Last week, if you had asked me, I would have told you that we could survive anything. But I would have never banked on Noelle being an entirely different person than the one I thought her to be.

She’s...

What is she even?

A psychotic murderer? A rapist? A villainous mastermind?

There's no way to label her correctly because there is simply no way to put her in just one box. At this point, I can only admit that everything I'd known about her at the hacienda was real.

La diablo.

She wasn't nicknamed the she-devil for nothing.

If what she did to Ortega is any indication, she's not just some deranged killer.

She's cold, calculated, organized.

While she is led by emotions, she doesn't let them rule her.

Yet more than anything, there's a lack of remorse.

I don't know if it's a general trend, but she'd never once been sorry about what she's done. Just about being caught. And to top it all, she admitted she'd do it again. What does that say about her?

Yet things don't fit.

She's not some emotionless killer. She's not Bianca.

She's just...a brilliant strategist and an even better opportunist.

As I muse over my current situation, it takes me a moment to realize there's a car following me.

My first thought is to roll my eyes in a not again manner. But I soon realize who is following me.

"What the fuck," I mutter as I swerve to the right, stopping the car and slamming the door on my way out.

She exits her car, too, coming towards me with a fierce expression on her face.

"What the fuck are you doing, Noelle?" I demand as I come toe to toe with her.

She's wearing high heels, and with the added height, her head reaches my chin. Still, it's quite interesting to see her wear such high heels.

"What the hell were you doing there?" she jabs her finger in my chest.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I frown.

"Sisi," she spits the name.

"What?"

"What the hell were you doing at her house?"

I frown at her outburst. Tension radiates from her as she keeps hitting me in the chest to emphasize her displeasure. Yet it's soon evident why.

She's...jealous.

"She's my friend, Noelle. I can go visit my friend as I like," I raise a brow at her, omitting the fact that Vlad was there the entire time.

Her eyes widen just as her lip twitches in displeasure.

"I'll kill her," she mutters. "I'll fucking kill her if you touch her in any way," she declares.

"What?"

If it was any other circumstance, I'm sure I would laugh. As it stands, Noelle doesn't seem to find this amusing.

"See her again and I'll kill her. I'm not kidding, Raf. See any other woman and I'll kill her," she continues.

"So let me get this straight. You're now following me around and I'm not allowed to meet anyone because you're going to kill them?" I ask mockingly.

"Uh-uh," she nods, her expression serious.

"And what makes you think you have any claim on me after the shit you pulled?" I suddenly ask, just to rile her up.

Fuck, but why does she need to be so hot while being assertive?

It makes my blood boil to watch her like this, knowing I won't be able to have her—that I shouldn't have her.

“You're my husband,” she grits out. “You're mine!”

I tilt my head, studying her for a moment before I burst out laughing.

She looks confused as she watches me bend over and laugh, her brows furrowing as she doesn't understand what my source of amusement is.

Before she realizes what I'm about, I grab her hand, pulling on the ring I'd given her and taking it off her finger.

“Not for much longer,” I retort, fisting the ring.

“W-what are you talking about?” she stammers, her eyes wide.

“I'm sure you can figure it out by yourself. Goodbye, Noelle,” I say, turning around and heading back to my car.

As I slide inside the driver's seat, I sneak a glance in the mirror, seeing that she hasn't moved an inch from her location.

She's looking at my car, a haunted expression on her face.

Shaking my head, I get ready to start the car and leave—after all, nothing else will come out of this confrontation. Not when she is too hot this time to see reason.

I'd always known Noelle was a jealous woman, but I never realized just how much. And this is when she knows Sisi is married and would never look at anyone but Vlad.

Signaling my return to the motorway, I'm about to hit the gas pedal when I see something glinting in the mirror. Frowning, I hit the brakes just in time to see my foolish wife do something I'd never thought her capable of.

She fucking takes a knife and cuts her own wrist.

In front of me.

My eyes widen in shock before fear overrides everything. I'm out of the car before I can even rationalize what's happening, already dialing 911.

"Noelle!" I yell at her, reaching her side in time to slap the knife from her hand before she does damage to her other wrist too.

Her left hand is bleeding profusely, and I have no way of knowing how deeply she cut herself. So I act quickly, taking my shirt off and tearing a strip of material to tie to her hand until I take her to the emergency room.

"You're not divorcing me," she slowly lifts her head to look at me. There's no trace of pain on her face, no fear—nothing. There's only a slight smirk that tips at the corner of her mouth. One that tells me she's never going to let me go.

Dead, or alive, she's never going to let me go.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing, Noelle?" I demand sharply as I tighten the material over her wrist. It's in vain, though, as blood quickly seeps through, telling me that she made a very deep cut.

"You're not divorcing me, Raf," she repeats, coming closer to me.

Going on the tips of her toes, she brings her mouth close to my ear.

"You wouldn't want to have my death on your conscience, now, would you?" she whispers.

"You'd do that? Kill yourself?" I force the words out, my entire body tensing at the mere thought. Fear and anger are mingling inside of me as I'd like nothing better than to take her over my knee for the stunt she pulled while also peppering her with kisses so she'll never try it again.

Damn you, Noelle. You're a wicked, wicked girl.

"Not before I killed you," she answers readily. "That way we'll always be together, Blue. In life, or in death," she smirks as she draws back.

I shake my head at her, an amused smile playing on my lips.

“You’re a wicked girl, aren’t you, Noelle?”

“For you? I’ll be anything you want me to be,” she replies, her eyes on mine.

The 911 sirens echo in the distance, but I can’t take my eyes away from her.

Who are you?

Yet it’s not a question of who she is anymore, as it is of who we are together.

The ambulance takes us to the nearest hospital where a doctor tends to her, stitching her wrist and telling me I was lucky I acted fast because she’d cut so deep into her flesh she’d almost torn her tendons.

“She could have lost her range of mobility,” he takes me aside to tell me. “If she’d cut just a little bit deeper, she could have damaged her tendons.”

“She’s a pianist,” I add grimly.

“She would have never played again.”

The implication is clear.

Noelle cares nothing about her playing ability if she doesn’t have me.

“As you know, since this was a self-harm injury, we have a protocol to follow.”

I nod.

“She... She has a history.”

“The psychiatrist on call will come to pay her a visit.”

After the doctor leaves, I give Cisco a brief call, informing him of what happened and asking him to meet me at the hospital.

At this point... I have a feeling I will need all the help I can get.

“So, what did he say? Am I going to be under medical supervision again?” Noelle asks when I go inside her salon, a knowing smile on her face.

“Why would you do this if you know what’s going to happen? Especially with your history. They won’t turn a blind eye.”

“Hmm,” she murmurs. “You won’t turn a blind eye, either,” she smiles.

“So this is all for me?” I chuckle at her resourcefulness.

“Everything is for you,” she says, coming to the edge of the bed and reaching out to touch me. Her uninjured hand goes to my chest, fisting the material of the new shirt I’d donned on.

“Where are you going with this, Noelle?”

“Soon, you will see my side, too,” she says, her voice back to her usual calm one. “Once you know the past, you will understand everything I had to do—all the sacrifices I had to make. Am I a bad person? I don’t see myself as one. Am I capable of bad things? Yes. And I did what I had to do in order to survive. I did what I had to do in order to protect you.”

“Protect me?” I scoff.

“You don’t understand,” she shakes her head, a sad smile playing at her lips. “From the beginning, all I’ve ever done has been to protect you. Maybe I got a little selfish along the way...” she trails off. Taking a deep breath, she leans in, placing her head over my chest right on top of my heart and listening for my heartbeats.

“Ask my brother, Raf. If you don’t trust me... Ask Cisco how everything began. He’ll tell you.”

Her doctor interrupts before she can say anything else. Heading outside, I come face to face with Cisco—almost as if he’d been summoned by Noelle’s words.

“How is she?” he asks, a grim expression on his face.

“She’s fine. For now,” I reply, taking a deep breath. “I need you to tell me everything you know about her, Cisco. Everything. I need to know who Noelle DeVille is.”

Cisco looks at me for a moment before giving me a brisk nod.

“Then we should probably start with the beginning...”

3. NOELLE

AGE NINE,

“S he worries me, son,” Elena, his mother, sighed as she took a seat next to him.

The room was quickly filling as they waited for the piano recital to start.

Noelle, Cisco’s sister, was expected to take the stage second to last. Though it was only a school event, Elena had insisted Cisco accompany her to make Noelle feel more confident. Deep down, Cisco suspected his mother wanted the opportunity to talk about his sister and suggest—not for the first time—an intervention.

“She’s odd—*asocial*. All the kids are too scared to approach her or play with her,” Elena continued, pursing her lips.

Cisco didn’t reply, simply regarding Noelle as she stood far apart from the other kids, seemingly minding her own business. He didn’t understand why that was frowned upon. Maybe she wasn’t like the other kids, but she had her own—*some harder to spot*—charms.

She was a piano prodigy, having such an exquisite talent anyone who listened to her, be it laymen or experts, were touched by the sound of her music. So what if she wasn’t exactly...social?

Genius rarely fit into a mold.

“Of course, you wouldn’t see it,” she chuckled when she noted his confused expression. “You were the same when you were her age. With your nose buried in those books of yours, always looking for answers even when there are none.”

“I always find the answers,” he answered curtly. “I have yet to encounter a question without an answer.”

Except he had. Something that had stumped and shook him to his core. But that was not for anyone else to know. It was his secret shame—his everlasting delirium. One he never wanted to wake up from. To divulge that would be akin to revealing its mysticism to the world, and he was too greedy to do that. No, *that* was for him and him alone—for his ever-revolving thoughts and no one else's.

“The same goes for your sister,” she shook her head. “There is one thing that characterizes the both of you.”

Cisco frowned.

His sister was sixteen years younger than him. He didn't see how his mother could compare the two of them when there was almost a generational gap between them.

Elena turned to him.

“Obsession,” she stated, unblinking. “Just like you, your sister has...obsessive tendencies.”

“I prefer to call it consistency,” he muttered, hating that she was putting him on the spot. Yet he would never dare say a bad word to his mother. He loved and respected her, that affection only growing as he'd seen her care for his invalid father, wholly dedicating herself to his well-being.

His mother smiled.

“Of course you would,” she chuckled, patting him lightly on the shoulder. “But I worry about her more than I ever worried about you.”

His eyebrows shot up.

“I didn't know you worried about me.”

“It took me a while to get used to your...peculiarities. I'm not saying this as a bad thing. You know exactly what I mean.”

Cisco frowned.

It had taken a long time for his mother and father to get used to him and his patterns. As the eldest, it was his duty to continue the family legacy and take on the business. He'd

never shied away from his responsibilities, but he'd also let everyone know that he was going to do things his way—which always meant an *unorthodox* way.

Maybe he was obsessive—though he would only ever call himself *consistent*—about seeing things to the end. He liked to see the beginning, the middle and the end of a task, and he *never* strayed from course. Once decided, the plan would be enacted minutely.

Any deviation could prove fatal. To his carefully crafted plans, and to his extremely organized mind.

Yes, he *was* obsessive about that.

Point A had to lead to point B and then to point C. If it ever happened that point A led to point C, mayhem would be unleashed and everyone knew to *not* be anywhere within Cisco's destructive path.

Fine, so he had *some* peculiarities. But he didn't see what was so worrisome about his sister. So she had her *own* peculiarities. He had to admit he sometimes saw himself in her and pitied her for it. As a male, he could *make* people accept his eccentricities. As a woman, she would be castigated for them.

"Her peculiarities aren't greater than mine," he told her evenly.

"She has no friends, Cisco. She doesn't *want* to make any friends. Why, last time I was told she embarrassed her teacher in front of the entire class for suggesting she join her classmates for a project. She embarrassed an adult!" his mother exclaimed uneasily. "All day she's just...there. She loses herself in her music and sometimes I wonder if there's anything to her aside from that," she paused, pursing her lips. "She scares me sometimes," she whispered. "And I think she scares everyone else too."

"She's only nine, mamma. She's a child."

"You were nine once, too. And though you were a loner as well, people loved you. You had that little clique at school that

always looked up to you,” Elena laughed. “I can still remember them following you around everywhere and trying to be like you.”

“You’re remembering wrong, mamma. I didn’t want anything to do with them. I just wanted to read my Descartes,” he added dryly.

He could still picture those days. He’d always been more attracted by metaphysics, by principles of knowledge and scrutinizing an issue until he got to the root of it. He preferred abstract principles to the dreary reality he lived in.

From the moment he learned how to read, he eschewed the normal texts for kids his age, going for more difficult ones—so difficult, in fact, that everyone around him had reacted with equal awe and mockery. His peers, in particular, thought him condescending because he didn’t want to engage in what he thought were inane, childish games. But there had also been those that had seen him as *cool*—those that tried to emulate him.

He’d never made an effort to be friends with them, but they’d followed him for so long that at some point he’d decided to allow them in his vicinity, sometimes even imparting some of his knowledge.

Yes, one might say he’d had a posse. But it had never been of *his* making. It had simply...happened.

Yet Cisco could understand the parallel his mother was drawing.

Noelle went out of her way to keep her distance from people.

Cisco might not have been a regular kid, playing or engaging in the same activities as others. But he had, on occasion, *pretended* to be normal.

He’d always known he was different from the rest, but he’d also sought to assimilate because he’d realized early on that different—*other*—made him stand out more than he wanted to. And if there was one thing he despised more than

the slightest deviation in his schedule, it was having to explain himself.

Noelle was the opposite.

She didn't mind being different—she reveled in it. She didn't mind standing out like a sore thumb in a crowd. She just wanted to be alone.

Alone with her music.

So she did everything in her power to drive people away.

Elena had always encouraged her to play and be like other kids. As the only girl in the family, their mother had been awfully excited at pampering her and teaching her how to be a lady.

But Noelle wasn't receptive to any of that.

She didn't like to play. She *hated* other kids. Sometimes she came across like an adult in a child's body—jaded about every aspect of life.

Even her clothes exemplified that.

Elena had always tried to get her to wear girly clothes in light, cheerful colors, but Noelle had been entirely adverse to the idea. Though she was just nine, she would not let anyone dictate how she dressed.

At first, Elena had taken it as a sign of a strong personality, allowing her to have an input into her wardrobe. But when she'd seen all Noelle wanted to wear were gray and black clothes, she'd put her foot down.

Easier said than done, because that was exactly when Noelle's *strong* personality had poked its head to the surface.

When Elena had forced her to wear a pink dress to school, Noelle had simply used the school's art supplies to paint it black.

Elena had been incensed when she'd been told by the principal what Noelle had done. She'd been even more taken aback when she'd seen her daughter smeared with black paint

from head to toe. And though she'd chastised her, threatening her with all types of punishments, Noelle had simply looked into her eyes with a blank expression. Slowly, the corners of her mouth had tipped up in a *you can do whatever you want, I'll still find a way around it*.

And that was the core of Noelle's personality. She was tenacious and too clever for her own good, circumventing any and all restrictions placed on her.

Ultimately, Elena had simply stopped trying. If she couldn't change her daughter, then she could bemoan about her to anyone listening—and that happened to be Cisco at the moment.

"I don't know what to do about her anymore," Elena released a dramatic sigh.

"Why don't you just leave her alone?" he muttered dryly.

That was what everyone had done with him, giving him a wide berth. He supposed it was another advantage of being born a male. He was celebrated as ruthless and intelligent in the business world, and though Noelle showed the same promise, she was chastised and put down for it.

"Cisco," Elena gasped. "She's my daughter. A *DeVille*," she mentioned in a scandalized tone. "She needs to uphold our family's standards. Just thinking what others must be saying about her and I'm getting a headache," his mother muttered, bringing two fingers to her temple.

Cisco gave her a side glance but refused to respond. He usually refrained from commenting when said comment would likely offend his mother. He might love her, but that didn't mean he agreed with her.

She'd never been so unyielding with him, or his brothers. As the first born, she'd attempted to fuss over him until she'd realized it was all in vain. Cisco lived in a completely different world, and it was impossible to change his ways. She'd mellowed a little for Thadeo before going in full force over Amo, coddling him to the point that when he'd broken off,

he'd gone off the rails—still *was* off the rails. When Noelle had been born—a surprise to everyone—Elena had seen it as her last chance to fulfill her parenting dreams. Even better that she was a girl, since he knew his mother had wished for one all along. Too bad that Noelle wasn't a team player.

Cisco's lips curled up at that thought. He couldn't blame his sister. Not when their mother had very rigid ideas of what being a DeVille girl meant, and Noelle didn't fit any.

Elena might have wanted her little princess. Instead she'd gotten a little devil.

“There's this school I've been reading up on,” his mother suddenly said. Cisco lifted a brow in question. “It's structured like a camp, so the kids live on the premises. The school promises to teach the kids discipline and manners...”

“Mamma, don't,” he shook his head. “Those *schools* are nothing more than prisons. And with Noelle's personality, you would just be doing her a disservice. You know how stubborn she can get. If you send her away to have some discipline nonsense drilled into her she is more likely to rebel than turn into the perfect lady.”

Elena pressed her lips into a thin line. She was about to say more when the recital began. In the order announced, the kids played their pieces one by one. When it was Noelle's turn, the difference in the audience was visible.

No one moved, not even one inch, their attention riveted on the stage as her hands glided over the piano keys, each note richer than the previous.

“She's so talented, isn't she?” Elena whispered, her eyes moist with tears.

“She is,” Cisco grunted.

He refrained from adding that by interfering with who Noelle was at her core, Elena would also be interfering with the way she played. The two were irreversibly linked, and Cisco had noted from the beginning that music was an

extension of her. What Noelle couldn't express with words or actions, she did so through music.

She may be aloof and seemingly unfeeling. Not her music.

There was something almost palpable in the way she played. And by God, she was just nine. He knew that with age and maturity, her talent would only develop more.

She could very well be *the* musician of her generation.

Besides her skillful handling of the piano keys, there was also the added fact that she personalized her pieces.

While every other kid of her age played faithfully by the score, to a trained ear it was obvious that slight modifications had been made to certain notes, giving the overall piece a new and fresh approach.

And that was where her true talent lay—innovation. Noelle loved to compose just as much as she liked to play, and despite continuous admonishments from her teachers that she was altering the classical pieces, she never stopped.

Cisco couldn't help but smile as he spotted her piano instructor in the corner, her mouth set in a grim line, her brows furrowed with frustration at Noelle's blatant disregard of rules.

"She did it again, didn't she?" his mother asked in a hushed tone, her gaze on the teacher.

Though Elena wasn't as versed in classical music, she knew her daughter well enough to realize she would never play by the rules—not even ones as simple as a piano score.

"She did," Cisco nodded appreciatively. "And she did it marvelously."

The recital came to an end, and Noelle reluctantly came to their side.

She was dressed in a pair of black trousers and a black button-up shirt. Her hair was plaited in one braid at her back, her face fresh and...blank.

His mother was right that she resembled him—both in appearance and in her demeanor.

She had the same olive complexion as he did, her eyes a light hazel color that wavered between brown and green depending on the lighting. His own eyes were similar with the exception that one was perpetually green and the other brown.

Yet it was her personality that reminded him so much of his own.

He'd never been a people person either, preferring the company of books or other nonverbal creatures. His deep dislike of the verbal variety had started early in his childhood when he'd realized his way of thinking was so different from anyone else's that he could *never* get his point across. It was almost like talking in a foreign language, of which he was the last known speaker. In the beginning, he'd tried to explain himself and his train of thought. But soon he'd realized it was futile as people preferred to jump to conclusions rather than try to understand him. So he'd stopped trying to communicate altogether.

He could see the seeds of that in Noelle, too.

Everyone around her misunderstood her—or, more appropriately, they never tried to understand her in the first place. They branded her a troublemaker simply because she didn't fit into a known mold and preferred to ostracize her than accept her as she was.

She had all the reasons to *not* want to interact if all interactions were a way for her to be chastised, reproached, and told all the ways in which she failed to be a good child.

Maybe because he'd had similar experiences he could understand that. Yet his mother didn't seem to. She continued on in her crusade to turn Noelle into the perfect girl.

“Well done, Noelle,” Cisco spoke first, breaking the awkward silence.

Noelle raised her head to look at him, nodding with the hint of a smile. Yet before he could coax her from her quiet

shell, her piano instructor was suddenly by their side.

“You went off the score, Noelle,” she said in a stern voice, the reproach clear. “This was a collective recital not your private show. Your job was to follow the piece, note by note, not to add those pesky alterations.”

Noelle didn’t turn, nor did she deign to reply, simply staring up ahead.

“Your teacher is talking to you, Noelle,” Elena intervened, taking a step closer to her. “It’s the polite thing to answer her.”

Still, nothing. Noelle ignored both women as she redirected her attention to the floor, studying her shoes.

“Noelle,” Elena burst out, her hand on Noelle’s arm. “Your teacher just told you what you did wrong.”

Noelle blinked.

“I didn’t do anything wrong,” she stated in an even voice.

Both Elena and the instructor were shocked at her reply.

“What do you mean you didn’t do anything wrong? I just told you what you did wrong, young lady,” the instructor grit out.

Cisco observed the interaction from the sidelines, noting that the woman was getting incredibly worked up for what were only a *few* alterations. He was sure that no one in the audience even realized it. After all, this was a recital for parents and staff who were likely not very acquainted with the intricacies of classical music.

Noelle slowly turned her head towards the instructor. Blinking innocently, she smiled.

“You should ask the audience if they think I did anything wrong,” she said in a sweet tone—*too* sweet for her. “Some even cried. And I don’t think it was from my *mistakes*.”

“W—what?” the instructor sputtered at the same time as Elena’s eyes widened in disbelief.

Cisco merely smiled, amused.

Who said nine-year-olds were easy targets?

“Noelle, that’s impertinent. Apologize to your instructor,” Elena suddenly demanded.

Noelle’s expression didn’t change, though Cisco could detect a small twitch under her eye. Instead of arguing with her mother, though, Noelle did apologize. In the same sweet tone, she addressed the teacher.

“I’m sorry, Miss Rawlins,” she said softly. “I apologize for showing your shortcomings as a teacher. I also apologize for being a better player than you can ever aspire to be.”

She said it all with the sweetest smile on her face.

Cisco brought his hand to his mouth to muffle his laughter while Elena and Miss Rawlins were rendered so speechless, they just stared at Noelle for moments on end.

“You...”

“Noelle...”

“Noelle, why don’t you go get your stuff and we can head home,” Cisco intervened, realizing that a scandal would arise if she spent another moment in the presence of the two women.

Noelle nodded respectfully, excusing herself like the dutiful child she decidedly was *not*. Yet to anyone else watching from the outside, she was the model of decorum.

It was only Miss Rawlins and her mother that had yet to recover from the set-down of a nine-year-old. And recover they did. After Noelle was already out of sight.

“I hope you can understand why I can no longer welcome Noelle in my class, Mrs. DeVille,” Miss Rawlins noted, her face red mottled with anger.

“Of course. I’m so sorry for my daughter’s behavior. She’s not always like that...”

As usual, Elena continued to make excuses for Noelle, doing her best to save face.

Only when Miss Rawlins left did she turn to Cisco, her hands in the air as she huffed out loud.

“At this point she *needs* a prison,” she said, hinting again at that school of manners.

“Mother, calm down.”

“How can I calm down? Didn’t you hear what she said to her teacher? My God, how could I have raised someone like that...”

Shaking his head, Cisco couldn’t help but chuckle at his mother’s outburst.

“And now you’re laughing at me, too. I’ve become a laughing stock for my own children.”

“You’re exaggerating, mamma. I’m not laughing at you. Just at the situation.”

“Of course you would. You’re not the one embarrassed every single time she does one of her little scenes.”

“No offense, mamma, but from where I was sitting I’d say the scene was well deserved. Instead of focusing all your frustrations on Noelle, you could also look at the people around her. The teacher’s tone wasn’t proper either.”

“What? Frustration?” Elena’s eyes widened in shock.

Taking a deep breath, Cisco set his eyes on his mother.

“Yes. Frustration,” he nodded. “Noelle may not be like other kids, I agree. And because of that you shouldn’t behave like a normal mother, either.”

“I don’t understand,” she frowned.

“You keep trying to put her in a box and tell her how to behave when that’s not who she is. You never did that to me, did you?”

“But you weren’t this rude to people,” she weakly made the excuse.

“No, I was worse. But because I’m a man, it was excused,” he pointed out, raising his eyebrow at her and waiting for another *excuse*.

“But...”

“My tutors lasted each a couple of weeks maximum. Or do you not recall that either?”

Elena blinked, taken aback by his sudden change in demeanor.

Cisco suspected it was because he rarely disagreed with her—and it was all because he knew it was a waste of time to do so. She had her views, he had his and they rarely overlapped.

But he couldn’t *not* intervene when he observed the way everyone was banding up against Noelle.

He may have been a loner growing up, but he’d been just as blunt as outspoken as his sister currently was. He’d never shied away from giving his opinion if asked. The only difference was that he’d quickly learned most people weren’t worth his effort. Why argue when he could just ignore them?

But he couldn’t ignore *this*.

“But it’s different. You were...”

“A boy. Yes, I think we’ve established that,” he muttered dryly.

Elena regarded him warily, taken aback by his sudden attitude.

“I’ll be completely honest with you, mamma, because I think it’s high time someone did that. You’re spilling your frustrations onto Noelle because she didn’t fit your expectations. You wanted a girly girl to parade around but instead you got an independent child who cared more about

Mozart and Handel than she did about Barbies and pink dresses.”

“But...”

“You know it’s true,” he didn’t let her protest for he knew she would just come up with more excuses. In her delusion about Noelle, she’d convinced herself there was something seriously wrong with her when she was just that. Different. And no one wanted to accept it.

“But she’s embarrassing us,” she added weakly.

“Someone can embarrass you only if you let them,” he rolled his eyes. “You’re adding too much weight to what other people are saying instead of paying more attention to your child.”

“Cisco... How can you say that?” She asked in a hurt tone.

He felt bad for doing so, but he suspected it was high time someone gave his mother a dose of reality.

“Instead of criticizing her all the time, maybe cut her some slack. I’m sure you’ll be surprised by the results.”

“The results? She’ll become even worse. God, you saw how impertinent she was and you want me to leave her alone? Continue to be so rude?” Elena asked, horrified.

“So you’d rather she let herself be a pushover instead of standing up for herself?” he fired back.

“How was *that* standing up for herself?”

Cisco realized that no matter what he told his mother it was unlikely to change her opinion. The teacher’s tone alone had been a cause for alarm, for it suggested a history of animosity. But his mother decided to overlook that and just focus on Noelle’s replies.

Belatedly, he regretted not looking into Noelle more closely as he’d never had cause to worry before. With his father’s poor health, he’d had to take over the family business and he’d been swamped with work for years. He’d had to give

up his dreams of a formal university education in favor of devoting himself to the family business.

Noelle soon reappeared with her bag and Cisco gave his mother a harsh stare which promptly shut her up. He may be her son, but he was also the head of the family, and his mother respected his authority.

As they went outside, Cisco turned to Elena.

“You should go home with your guards, mother. I’ll take Noelle with me,” he said before he steered Noelle towards his car, not waiting for his mother’s reply.

Noelle looked curiously at him, but she didn’t speak either, simply falling into step with him. As they neared the parking lot, Cisco’s bodyguard, Yu, was already by the car, nodding dutifully at him and handing him a cup of coffee. Cisco took it, surprised to see Yu remove a lollipop from his pocket and hand it to Noelle.

He expected his sister to refuse the offering, but she accepted it with a shy smile.

Yu opened the door for her, closing it after she got inside and taking his place by Cisco’s side. He was around a head shorter than Cisco, and though most thought it odd that he’d chosen Yu as his bodyguard, he would have never trusted anyone else.

“Didn’t go well?”

He shook his head. Taking a cigarette from his pack, he brought it to his lips, lighting it up and inhaling deeply.

“You were right,” Cisco grimly admitted.

But then, when was Yu *not* right?

“I take it she didn’t react well.”

“No. Good thing you weren’t there, too. Otherwise it might have been worse,” he chuckled.

His mother couldn’t stand Yu, and would often go out of her way to insult him.

“Me and Mrs. Elena in the same room? Heaven forbid,” Yu shuddered.

Cisco smiled, yet he had to give it to Yu. He’d been the one to point out to him that something might be going on with his sister and had advised him to make time for the recital. Cisco valued Yu’s insight as much as he did his own, so he’d agreed to do so, though initially a little skeptical about the situation.

Yet now he was convinced he had to do something about it before his mother sunk her claws into Noelle and destroyed what made her unique.

4. NOELLE

Noelle opened her notebook, turning to a blank page at the end and scribbling random figures in an attempt to ignore the noise around her.

After the debacle at the recital, she'd thought her mother would take her out of school, settling for private tutors as her brothers had before her. But Elena hadn't budged. She'd expressed her disappointment in hundreds of ways, but she'd been clear that Noelle was to finish the year at her school. Even her oldest brother, Cisco, had argued to her defense, saying that it was unlikely to be a conducive environment to any studying if the relationship between teacher and student was strained. Elena, though, hadn't wanted to hear any of it. Instead, she'd merely acquiesced that Noelle would change music teachers.

Though Cisco was Elena's favorite, she'd shut him out this time, stubbornly maintaining her idea. According to her, Noelle needed to learn how to behave herself in society. It was either that or the camp school option, which Cisco had been vehemently against.

And so she found herself back to school—her personal hell. Worst of all, her mother had once more forced her to wear a *pink* shirt. She could already feel all the eyes on her. No doubt, everyone was laughing at her and at her dignity, currently wasting away on the floor.

Bringing her eyes down to her front she couldn't help the shiver of revulsion that enveloped her. It wasn't just pink. It

was *bright* pink. So bright she wagered it could act as a traffic light.

Even worse, since her last stunt with the black paint, the art supply closet had been locked, only to be opened during art class.

Noelle had caught her mother's knowing smile as she'd watched her pitiful pink self trudge her way towards school in the morning. Elena had waved enthusiastically, ushering Noelle away and sending her flying *kisses*. As if she didn't know it was all an attempt to undermine her and make her quit her antics.

Alas, color torture was not going to work.

Noelle *refused* to let it work.

So what if the art supplies had been locked away? She would find another way.

“Noelle DeVille, are you listening?”

Slowly lifting her head up, it was to come face to face with her English teacher, Miss Lawson, who was currently glaring at her.

Of course she was.

Noelle didn't think there was one teacher in the entire school who didn't dislike her. She'd come into conflict with all at one point or another. Of course, everything had been made more potent by the allegations of nepotism circulating about her family—the reason why the principal hadn't expelled her so far.

Noelle grimly admitted that there had to be some favoritism involved since she'd done more than her fair share of trouble to ensure she'd be expelled. The result? Nothing.

No matter how many times her mother got called at the school, she still insisted Noelle continue to attend her classes.

“Yes,” she replied politely.

For the moment she didn't want more trouble. She was already getting a headache as it was from all the pink that had bled into her field of view.

"Can you tell me what we were discussing?"

"Yes," Noelle nodded, but didn't comment further.

All eyes were on her and she could detect the little sneers and mocking smiles.

"Well? Please share with the class," Miss Lawson added drily, clearly not appreciating having to repeat herself.

Noelle licked her lips, her hands tightening over her notebook.

Why now? Why was she asking her a question when she was wearing pink?

She could have answered it much better if she'd worn black.

Taking a deep breath, she struggled to compose herself, moisture accumulating on her forehead. She raised her gaze to her teacher, her head held high.

Pink might have rattled her. But she wouldn't give them the satisfaction of seeing her flounder.

"We were discussing the nineteenth chapter of *The Little Prince*," she replied in an even, confident tone.

"Go on," Miss Lawson urged, the corner of her mouth twitching while her eyes crinkled—almost in frustration. "Please continue the discussion."

Noelle noted the disparity in facial cues. The teacher was annoyed she'd gotten the topic right, but was still waiting for her to fail, ready to smile in satisfaction.

Everyone underestimated Noelle, and they mistook her lack of interest for a lack of intelligence. In the past, she'd done her best to answer questions accordingly and had even put effort in her homework. But no matter how much she'd tried, her words had always been misconstrued, and her

enthusiasm at getting something right would often turn into bitterness. At some point, seeing that all her effort was in vain, she'd stopped trying.

Smoothing her hands over her bright pink shirt, Noelle returned the smile.

"Inflexibility," she stated, watching a frown descend upon her teacher's face.

"Inflexibility?"

There was a low choir of voices repeating the same word, the other students as confused as the teacher.

"The little prince was in a new place but applied the same rules as in the old one. Instead of trying to understand the new planet, he judged it by the rules of his old one."

Miss Lawson tilted her head, frowning at Noelle.

"The little prince shows his lack of awareness of his surroundings. If he had observed more, he would have known that the echo was his own voice," Noelle continued, pinning the teacher with her gaze.

"That is enough, Noelle. You've already shown us that you weren't paying attention," Miss Lawson dismissed her with a wave of a hand, her lip twitching again in amusement.

Noelle narrowed her eyes.

She'd been at the receiving end of that type of behavior since the school year had started. She would be asked a question and then be put down because her answer wasn't the *right* one. It had happened one too many times that Noelle had become suspicious.

Why was she always the target?

And so she'd put her mind to do some *research* into the eminent figures of the respected establishment they called a school. What made Miss Lawson so special to emphatically declare her answers as *wrong* every time, especially since literature was supposed to have *no* wrong answer?

“You might learn a thing or two from the little prince, Miss Lawson,” Noelle continued sweetly—*too* sweetly, which indicated something decidedly *not* sweet was not coming. “You’re not an English instructor, are you?”

“W—what?”

Maybe if it had been any other day, Noelle wouldn’t have gone as hard on the instructor. But because it was a *bright pink* day, she couldn’t help but feel her body tense up, little intruders marching inside her brain and causing a deadly itch—one that wouldn’t be satisfied unless she did something. Unless she brought the class to an end faster. Unless she got out of the stupidly pink shirt she was wearing.

“Your resume said you finished a Masters degree in English literature from Pepperdine University, but you did not, did you?”

It was becoming increasingly harder to control herself, but she would do this. If she was correct, Miss Lawson would send her to the principal’s office, who would in turn call her mother and then she would be taken home to remove the dreaded pink shirt from her body—hopefully she might even get some days of suspension, and she could sleep in.

“You’re being impertinent, Noelle,” the teacher gritted. “Max, why don’t you continue reading,” the teacher instructed another student in an attempt to shift focus from her, but Noelle was not deterred.

“You failed to mention that you did not graduate,” she continued, her voice louder than the boy who started reading from the book.

“Noelle, I don’t know where you’re going with this but I will ask you to stop.”

“You wanted me to speak a moment ago.”

“And now I’m telling you to stop,” she emphasized the word, causing Noelle to smile.

“Does the school know?”

“Stop.”

“I don’t think they do, do they?”

“Stop.”

“My brother has a copy of your transcript and it shows...”

“STOP!” Miss Lawson screamed so loud, everyone froze in their seats.

Not a moment later the door burst open, one of the security guards dashing inside and looking around in confusion.

“What happened? Is everyone ok?”

Miss Lawson looked shell-shocked. Tears coated her lashes, her limbs trembling.

“Are you a policeman?” Noelle turned to the guard to ask.

“No, I just work security,” he answered, blinking.

“Then maybe you should call the police. I think Miss Lawson has been lying about her credentials. And if she lied about that, who knows what else she might have lied about?” Noelle’s tone went down a notch as she made herself look fearful.

“That right...” The guard sounded skeptical as he looked between Noelle and Miss Lawson. Though it was his duty to report any disturbance, there was something about the little girl speaking that stumped him. Did elementary kids speak like that? To his ears, it sounded awfully advanced and assertive and for a moment he thought it might be a prank, or maybe a scene from a school play. But then there was the teacher and she looked...not amused.

Bringing his radio station to his mouth, he announced the disturbance to the principal’s office. But before he could finish his report, the teacher did something wholly unexpected.

She grabbed a book from the desk and flung it at the student, hitting her in the chest.

“I hope you’re satisfied now, you little devil,” she spat at the kid before she dashed through the door, bumping into him on her way out.

But as he turned to check on the kid, he noted a smile of satisfaction on her face—one that simply baffled him.

Unfortunately for Noelle, her little game ended up not as she had planned, but as her *mother* had planned. Elena had talked to the school about her daughter’s persistent misbehavior and if something happened, instead of sending her home, the school was to punish Noelle by having her attend extra classes, extending her time at school until late afternoon.

A few hours later, instead of going home, she found herself attending another class. Thankfully, it was not taught by Miss Lawson, since Noelle could imagine how that would implode.

Odd though that for all the principal’s reproach of Noelle’s behavior, no one had said anything about Miss Lawson throwing a book at her. Yet another example that things were permissible for everyone *but* her.

Yet there was one bright side to this entire debacle. During the lunch break, Noelle had snuck to the bathroom and she’d mixed the ink from her pen with water before submerging her shirt in it, ensuring that the bright pink became a dark purple. It wasn’t perfect, but she wagered she could live better with purple than with pink.

Releasing a weary sigh, Noelle focused on her notebook, doodling some figures to pass the time. Though she’d been instructed to do her homework during the extra time, she couldn’t stomach thinking about anything school related after the day she’d had.

There were a few other kids in the class with her, including a group of girls she knew well and did not like to mix with.

Noelle knew well that it wasn’t just the teachers that didn’t like her. The other kids were the same. She didn’t know if it

was via example, following the cue of the teachers, or because she just liked to keep to herself.

She'd never had a friend in school, and though she'd been classmates with the same kids for a few years, she'd never exchanged more than a few words with anyone—and those words had never been of a positive nature.

Even now, as she turned her head slightly, she could hear the snickers, and the whispers. She could also note the harsh stares and the scrutiny.

In the best cases, they called her a witch. In the worst, they said she was the devil's minion—though Noelle doubted they knew the meaning of it. They just repeated what they heard.

So was the case when Susie, a girl from that group stood up and approached her. She had a pleasant enough smile on her face, but Noelle had come to distrust even the most benign intentions.

“Hi,” she said as she stopped by her desk.

Noelle had chosen the desk in the back of the classroom, all to avoid being too close with other kids. Yet even that didn't seem that far away as she slowly lifted her head to watch Susie through narrowed eyes.

The other girls were staring at them, no doubt anticipating the interaction.

Noelle wondered if this was a dare, or if they'd made a bet.

“Go away,” she said gruffly before she returned her attention to her notebook.

“Yeah, Susie, go away. You'll catch the nasty from her,” a boy hollered.

Noelle ignored the extra noise, bringing the tip of her pencil to the white sheet of paper, trailing it around and drawing a random shape—anything to look busy enough so she would be left alone.

Her mother had intuited well that this would be the worst punishment for Noelle. What she hated more than school, and more than her hateful teachers, was to be surrounded by other people—other kids. It was even worse that these kids knew her—or at least, knew *of* her—and would likely use that to yap incessantly and bother her for hours on end.

The girl didn't move though. She fidgeted with her hands for a bit before she spoke again.

“Why are you so weird?”

Noelle's hand froze mid-drawing.

Why are you so weird?

Why indeed. How many times had she heard the exact thing, and not only from her classmates?

Gritting her teeth, she continued to ignore her. Nothing good would come out from her answering the question.

But just as Noelle started moving the pencil again, it was taken from her hand.

“Why?” Susie repeated, blinking curiously at her.

“Define weird,” Noelle mumbled, snatching the pencil back.

Why couldn't they just leave her alone? The clock on the wall was moving with unprecedented slowness, and Noelle still had at least a couple hours until she could go home.

“You're being weird again,” Susie continued and Noelle rolled her eyes.

“Leave her alone, Susie. Told you she's a witch,” another said, causing everyone to erupt in giggles.

“Yes, go away, Susie. Before I put a spell on you,” Noelle muttered drily, lifting her head enough to meet the girl's eyes. Letting her mouth tip in a menacing smile she used her pencil as a wand and waved it towards Susie. Susie's eyes widened in shock before she gave a cry of alarm, running from her side and joining the other girls.

More murmurs resounded as she undoubtedly confirmed Noelle was indeed a witch. And they wondered why she didn't like talking to people.

It had all started when she was on her first day of school.

Since Noelle had always preferred to dress in dark colored clothes, she'd stuck out from the beginning. But it had been her demeanor that had separated from the rest.

Simply put, she had no filter.

If she liked something, she said so. If she didn't, she mentioned why. It didn't matter if the recipient was another kid or an adult. She always spoke her mind as if it was the most normal thing. Her mother had tried to curb her habit since she'd been a baby, but Noelle hadn't changed regardless of the punishments doled out. For her, speaking out was equal to breathing—it was simply who she was.

She might have been perceived as precocious and somewhat of a troublemaker before she'd started school, but Noelle had never seen herself as anything but normal. She couldn't understand why she was always berated for speaking the truth, or for making honest observations.

But just because she'd thought herself normal didn't mean she fit everyone else's standard of normality—a fact which she'd learned the moment she started school.

In a matter of days, everyone had taken a dislike to her, and the insults had started pouring. And since kids at that age could be truly vicious, their words had been even more so.

Noelle might have entertained the idea of making friends at first if she hadn't been so totally and utterly ostracized by everyone in her grade.

They laughed at her clothes. They mocked her manner of speech. They didn't hold back from criticizing any part of her. It was even worse when they directed those insults towards her talent at playing the piano.

It was a universally acknowledged fact that the moment Noelle's fingers touched the piano keys, silence descended upon a room until there was nothing left but pure, divine musicality.

Soon, though, the praise had turned into sourness as she'd been accused of witchcraft; that she'd made a deal with the devil for her ability to play the piano. A ludicrous thing to originate from an elementary-grade kid, but the idea had been first put forward by one of her first teachers who'd praised her talent as otherworldly and implied some less than orthodox forces might be at play. The kids who'd eavesdropped had taken the rumor further, until Noelle's name was the equivalent of witch, or little devil.

An outsider could very well see that the root of the issue had been a combination of her slightly odd demeanor and the jealousy of the others at her musical talent.

But for a young child, the entire experience had been jarring. Made even more so by her mother's response.

When Noelle had gone home crying about the bullying at school, her mother had told her to suck it up and face it like a big girl. But when she'd detailed the horrible names people were calling her, instead of taking her side, her mother had told her she must have done something to deserve being called that.

Noelle had been stunned by her mother's reaction and the fact that Elena had emphatically told her she would not get involved in any of the school matters.

In one last attempt at fitting in, Noelle had worn the ugly pink dress her mother had bought her. Yet that had been even more of a disaster.

She'd barely been able to hold her head high. Everyone had laughed in her face. Including the teachers. Why, Miss Lawson herself had asked Noelle if she'd decided to join the living.

A few hours was all she'd been able to survive, and ultimately she'd just doused herself in black paint to stop people from staring and commenting about her pink dress.

Since then, she'd had a phobia of the color. Every time she wore it, she thought she was the butt of all jokes.

But that had been the last straw, and Noelle's last attempt at being *normal*. And armed with her mother's *not so great* advice, she'd decided to take matters into her own hands.

She might be blunt and she might make people uncomfortable, but why should she change for them? Why should she compromise who she was for people who didn't like her anyway and only sought the next thing they could criticize and laugh about?

As she'd honed on that mentality, she'd stopped minding what others thought about her or her *odd* manner. Instead, she acted as she saw fit and she spoke as she thought necessary. She didn't sugar-coat things, and she certainly didn't mind anyone's tender sensibilities.

She was already a witch in everyone's mind.

Elena might complain about Noelle that she was a loner. But it had never been truly of her own making. It had been a by-product of society and the fact that people abhorred those who were different. Instead of fostering those qualities that made Noelle different, people crucified her for them.

So why would Noelle try to get along with people who only sought to change her; who hated who she was at her core?

No one listened to her anyway.

From the beginning, her thoughts had been received as incorrect, her opinions as worthless, and her entire personality as wrong.

Besides her talent at the piano, which more often than not was attributed to outside influences, there wasn't anything *right* about her.

And it wasn't just at school that she was met with that criticism.

It could be said that it was even worse at home.

Her mother was never satisfied with her, and she never missed a chance to tell her that she wasn't the daughter she would have wished for.

Elena had wanted a ladylike daughter. She'd gotten a rude hoyden who didn't know when to keep her mouth shut.

But if she'd gotten used to her mother's everlasting disappointment, it didn't help that everyone else in the house echoed her opinions. Especially the staff, who'd taken to referring to Noelle as the spoiled, impetuous child, sometimes going out of their way to snub her the way her mother usually did. If the mistress of the house did it, why couldn't everyone else do it too?

After all, Noelle *was* odd, and deserving of all the scorn.

Her father was sick and bed-ridden, but on the few instances Noelle could meet with him, he didn't shy away from telling her how disappointed he was and that he would have rather had another son than a useless daughter.

Her brothers weren't any better. Cisco, the oldest, barely bothered with her, more often than not absent for business reasons. Amo and Thadeo, twelve and fourteen years older than her, thought it *funny* to ridicule her clothes and her incidents at school. They didn't realize that their *good humor* was just another jab to Noelle's already battered front.

The insults stung. Especially at home, they created a hostile environment that had Noelle suffocating under the weight of her failures. Though she kept her true self tight to her chest, protecting it as best as she could, she was still human, with human feelings. And every little reproach eroded at the little armor she'd surrounded herself with.

Yet it was all that rejection that had made Noelle grow wiser far beyond her years. She'd seen the world not through idealistic, rose-colored glasses, but rather through the prism of

grim experience. And she'd learned that it simply wasn't worth it. Why should she try when her effort would never be appreciated?

Her eyes lingered for a moment on the girls laughing—most probably at her expense—and she felt a flicker of longing.

Everyone assumed she hated people. And she did. But she didn't hate them inherently. She hated them because they'd made her hate them.

There were too many times when her strong front cracked, little tendrils of longing slithering out and reaching for the world. Yet the world never reached back. Burned, she could only rein herself in. Time and time again.

It's not worth it.

She whispered the words to herself, seeking to convince herself she didn't want it, that she didn't need it.

But deep down, the sad fact was that she did want it.

Noelle wanted someone she could talk to. Someone who accepted her as she was without trying to change her.

She wanted to be...liked. For herself and for everything that she was.

Why was it so hard?

Why did everyone *dislike* her so much?

As she realized the direction of her thoughts, she shook her head, squeezing her eyes shut in an attempt to stop the developing pain in her chest. She was fine as she was. She didn't need anyone. She hadn't needed anyone until then, she wasn't going to need anyone from there on.

But it would be nice to have someone.

There was that voice in her head that whispered and beckoned—placing all her deepest desires in front of her before snatching them away.

But she couldn't give in. She'd already been let down one too many times in her short life.

Hope only brought disappointment. And Noelle didn't want to fall prey to it again.

Sometimes she wished she could shut down her feelings—that side of herself deep down that still fostered a certain kind of hope.

Blinking, she brought herself back to the present and to the realization that the girls had moved, coming to her side.

“What do you want?” Noelle frowned, asking the question in the same emotionless tone she always used—the one that signaled she wanted to be left alone.

“Alyssa told us what you did at the recital,” one of the girls said. Noelle struggled to remember her name, but she was sure she'd never interacted with her.

“And what did I do?”

“Don't play dumb,” she burst out just as she pushed Noelle, her palm connecting with her shoulder. Noelle reeled back, and catching the girl's wrist, she flung it from her person.

“She was supposed to be the star. She already has a concert lined up, didn't you hear?” The girl smirked.

“So? Good for her. Now please leave,” Noelle added in a quiet voice, returning her attention to her notebook and ignoring the girls.

They should soon get the memo and leave her alone.

Except they didn't.

One moment she was trying to doodle in peace, the next she found herself falling to the floor, her chair snatched from under her as echoes of laughter surrounded her.

“Come on, put a spell on me, too. I want to see you try.”

“Me too.”

“Let’s see what the little witch can do.”

The voices continued to resound, one layered on top of the other until Noelle felt the pressure in her ears build.

Staring up ahead, she did her best to calm herself down. But when she felt a liquid pour down her face—one that she belatedly recognized as ink—she couldn’t ignore it any more.

“She’s already messy, what’s more?”

“She’s a smurf now,” another girl laughed, pointing at her and at the ink traveling down her forehead, staining her cheek and the front of her shirt.

Slowly, Noelle brought her gaze up.

She didn’t blink as she stood up, not even bothering to wipe the ink from her skin. She simply regarded the girls blankly.

They were still laughing, but upon seeing her serious expression and the way she was reacting antithetical to what she was supposed to, they finally realized something was wrong.

“Run.”

One softly uttered word.

“Run,” Noelle repeated, this time a little louder.

Everyone blinked in surprise that gave way to fear before finally settling on terror.

With both hands, she grabbed onto the hair of two girls, pulling them towards her before she pushed them to the ground.

They fell like two lifeless dolls, their moans of pain the only ones permeating the air.

The boys were laughing by the side, enjoying the show but not involving themselves.

Good. Noelle didn’t have the energy to deal with them, either. And she was sure they would get more vicious than the

girls too.

With a determined look on her face she marched forward. Why should she let herself be treated like this?

If her parents weren't going to help her, then she would take matters into her own hands like her mother had told her to.

In no way would she allow herself to be trampled by some spoiled little girls who thought the world owed them something.

Noelle had first experience of it.

Even with a wealthy family, social status, and arguably a prodigious musical talent.

"The world owes you nothing," she spat out as she reached the other girl.

The girl blinked in fear, her palms up as she tried to keep the distance between herself and Noelle.

"Did you hear me? The world owes you nothing. It owes Alyssa *nothing*."

She reached a third girl, she drew her hand, gaining momentum before she punched her in the face.

A shrill sound erupted in the classroom.

The door immediately opened, the teacher who'd been supervising them bursting inside and witnessing the chaos and the girl whose nose was currently bleeding buckets.

"Who did this?" The teacher gasped in horror.

All fingers were pointed at Noelle.

Faced with the situation, she could only release a harsh breath. She already knew what was going to happen. After all, it *always* stood to reason she was the guilty party.

As she was taken to the principal's office, she wasn't even allowed to wash the ink off her face. And upon arriving there,

she was instructed to wait in a corner after which everyone ignored her.

Noelle was already anticipating the scandal, both with the principal and with her mother. She wondered what else could she be punished with. She was already not allowed to watch TV, or do anything except stare at the walls of her room. Maybe now Elena would take away her piano access, since that was the only thing Noelle was allowed to do. But she was sure her mother wouldn't go that far.

Not when the piano was the only thing that saved Noelle from being an utter failure. At least with that Elena could boast to her friends that she had a *special* daughter.

As she realized that short of forbidding her to play the piano there was nothing anyone could do to her, Noelle relaxed a little.

She wasn't sorry for what she'd done, and given the chance, she'd do it again.

She might not have anyone else standing up for her, but she would do it herself.

It was almost an hour later that Noelle was finally called to the principal's office, but it wasn't to be berated or further punished. In fact, she was entirely surprised when she realized that her oldest brother, Cisco, and his bodyguard Yu were waiting for her inside.

"If that will be all, Mr. Grange, I'll take Noelle home."

"Have a good day, Mr. DeVille," the principal said stoically, not even bothering to take a look at Noelle.

Cisco, nor Yu said anything to her until they exited the school and reached the parking lot.

"Here," Yu was the first to speak, opening a compartment in the car and removing a little bag with toiletries. Taking some wet napkins, he slowly started wiping the ink off her face and hands.

Cisco, on the other hand, was on the sidelines, his eyes narrowed as he watched the two.

“How are you feeling, Noelle?” He asked, debating whether to take her to the hospital or not.

“I’m fine,” she nodded, a small smile pulling at her lips.

“I don’t think she’s injured,” Yu confirmed. “The other girls, though,” he smiled, winking at Noelle.

A blush enveloped her cheeks and Cisco couldn’t help the twitch of his lips.

Yu’s natural charm was deadly to just about everyone. And Noelle seems to have become his latest victim.

“You punched that girl, didn’t you?” Cisco added, amused.

“I’m not sorry,” Noelle suddenly said, straightening her spine and looking him straight in the eye—a brave thing to do.

Almost everyone avoided looking him in the eye. He supposed it was a by-product of his unyielding demeanor and his rather unusual eyes. There was only one person who’d always unflinchingly met his gaze—the one currently lazily resting against the car door, watching him with a languid smile.

“Good,” he nodded at Noelle, sending Yu a tacit signal with his eyes. Immediately, he nodded, sliding into the driver’s seat and turning on the engine.

After so many years together, he rarely needed to verbalize anything for Yu.

“You shouldn’t feel sorry for putting a bully in its place,” Cisco clarified.

“Am I in trouble then?”

“No. On the contrary. We’re going on a little trip.”

Noelle blinked in confusion.

“What about mamma? She’s mad, isn’t she?”

“She doesn’t know yet,” Cisco added. “And by the time we get back home I wager she’ll have cooled down a little.”

Noelle pursed her lips, seemingly mulling over Cisco’s offer.

It struck Cisco that his sister did not behave like a nine-year-old—not that he knew how most behaved. But because she was so atypical than any child he’d ever met, he was unsure how to proceed.

Her speech, manner and intelligence all spoke of someone far more advanced than her years. But it was her eyes that struck him the most—the eyes of someone in pain but unable to speak out.

Not for the first time, he had to give it to Yu for orienting him towards the issue.

Though they were exceedingly similar in nature and intellect, Yu was more emotionally inclined than he. While Cisco excelled at intricate planning and horizon scanning, Yu was the perfect counterpart to bring him more in touch with the emotional side of human nature—which he could sometimes lose sight of.

That wasn’t to say Cisco was emotionless, as exemplified by the anger he felt at the mistreatment of his sister. He was just rather...unfeeling.

“Why are you doing this?” Noelle asked, tilting her head to study him with her shrewd gaze.

“Because we’re a lot more similar than you think.”

She blinked.

“And because I think you need someone to talk to, don’t you?” He asked in a soft voice, earning himself an even softer smile from Yu as he arranged his rearview.

“Ok,” Noelle added softly. “For now.”

Cisco chuckled at her last words, inviting her into the car as he took his seat next to Yu.

The drive took close to two hours before they finally reached their destination. On the way there, they only stopped once to get something to eat and drink, and Cisco switched places with Yu to drive the car. Noelle thought it slightly odd, and it didn't escape her notice that the exchange was made as soon as they were out of the city. But then she'd always found Cisco's relationship with Yu a strange one.

If there was someone Elena disapproved of more than her, it was Yu. Nevertheless, Cisco had always shot their mother down when she'd commented about Yu, going against the family's wishes and making him his right-hand man. They were always together, and sometimes Noelle thought they acted like one person rather than two.

But she couldn't complain.

She liked Yu.

He was nice to her, always with a treat up his sleeve to give to her. He might not speak much, but there was a certain warmth that emanated from him that drew Noelle in.

Whereas Yu was warm and affable, her brother was the opposite—which is why she was so confused by their dynamic.

She was even more confused that it had been Cisco who'd come to school. As far as she knew, he never involved himself in her matters, rarely even acknowledging her presence.

The fact that he'd been present at her school recital had been a surprise. But for him to come get her from school? That was unprecedented.

As the car drew to a stop, Noelle stepped onto the damp grass, her eyes taking in the small lodge and the vegetation around.

"We're in a forest," she frowned.

"So we are," Cisco chuckled, coming to her side. "This is my secret spot—*our* hidden spot," he corrected himself as Yu came around with the bag of food. "No one knows the exact

location, so I use this place when I want to get away from civilization,” he told her.

Noelle nodded as she carefully observed the area. The lodge was the only construction around, the entire area green and seemingly untouched by man.

At her brother’s signal, she followed him as they entered the house. Immediately, Noelle was struck by the size of it. From the outside it looked like a typical hunting lodge, small and compact. But from the inside she noted it was quite spacious and split into two levels.

Everything was made from wood, and the rustic atmosphere gave her a sense of comfort that she’d been missing in the city. The lack of noise was the first thing that registered. No longer were the car engines and horns filling the background. Instead, there was a dull thrum that lulled her into a sense of security.

A weary sigh escaped her, almost as if she’d been holding her breath her entire life and only now managed to find some reprieve from the stress of the world.

That small sigh didn’t go unnoticed by either Yu or Cisco, with the former smiling approvingly while the latter shook his head in amusement.

“I reckon you approve of the *away from civilization* part,” Cisco added.

Noelle’s cheeks went red as she realized how obvious she’d been.

“Yes,” she answered, still peering around. “It’s quiet,” she observed. “I like quiet.”

“That we have in common,” her brother said, beckoning her to him. “Let’s get you something to eat and we’ll do a fun little activity before we go back home.”

“Do we have to?” Cisco frowned at her question.

“Return home, that is,” Noelle clarified in a small voice.

Both Cisco and Yu shared a hidden look before Cisco sighed.

“Yes we do. But I’m hoping this afternoon will help you,” he said cryptically.

Noelle was about to ask him what he meant when her stomach announced loudly that she hadn’t eaten since breakfast, and she flushed from head to toe in embarrassment.

She’d completely forgotten about it, since she’d been faced with issue after issue. She might have gotten hungry at some point, but she’d overlooked it at the time.

Yu smiled, and unpacking the food they’d bought, he laid everything out on the table, including some already cooked dishes.

Both Noelle and Cisco took a seat at the table while Yu served the food, placing a plate in front of Noelle, then one in front of Cisco, his hand brushing against her brother’s in the slightest manner, yet one that didn’t leave either unaffected.

Noelle noted that they shrugged it off with practiced ease before Yu took a seat at the table as well, helping himself to some food too.

“Thank you,” Noelle murmured, giving him a small smile.

“You’re welcome,” Yu smiled brightly, patting her hair.

“Dig in, you’ll need the energy,” Cisco mentioned.

Not for the first time, Noelle had to wonder what the purpose of the trip was. She wondered if he was going to punish her in any way, but going by the way he’d behaved so far she didn’t think he was upset with her.

But he should be, shouldn’t he?

She’d been bad. She’d beaten those girls and had been rude to a teacher. It didn’t matter that they had deserved what Noelle had dished to them. She’d been the bad guy for so long, she’d forgotten what it was like for someone to take her side

because they thought she was entitled to her behavior—that she'd been provoked, not that she'd acted out of spite.

Because she was so *odd*, people liked to believe the worst of her. Certainly her mother did. She didn't want to think about her father, since she knew he would always side with Elena and the version of events she fed him.

Noelle ate slowly, savoring the food but also afraid that the cozy atmosphere would suddenly come to an end and her punishment would begin. She was used to be on the receiving end of all accusations, to be seen as the guilty party even when she'd done nothing, that she didn't think someone would accept *her* version.

She was wary—with good reason. But she was also enjoying the company too much and she didn't want to say anything that might destroy the ambiance. As such, she kept quiet, merely smiling and nodding along.

She'd become so inured to being on her own that she hadn't realized just how pleasant it was to interact with people—someone who didn't blame, sneer, or laugh at her.

So this is what it's like to have friends...

But then harsh reality dawned on her. Yu and Cisco weren't her friends. They were authority figures whose sole purpose was to curb her *odd* behavior. Maybe they weren't using her mother's methods, but she doubted the goal wasn't the same.

As she brought a piece of bread to her lips, she chewed slowly as she observed the easy camaraderie between Yu and Cisco.

They were laughing at something Yu had said, and Noelle marveled at the way her brother's entire face lit up. He wasn't like the Cisco she'd come to know—not the cold, indifferent, scary man. No, this was someone else entirely. And she didn't know what to make of it.

“You think they're going to try to come again after what happened last time?” Yu asked with a sly smile.

“I want to see them try. In fact, I wish they did come again because I haven’t had that much fun in years.”

“You need the exercise, old man,” Yu laughed, elbowing Cisco in his side.

Noelle blinked, taken aback by the fact that her brother was allowing it. In fact, he barely noticed it as if it was something that happened on a regular basis.

“You’re one to speak. You’re just two years younger,” Cisco lifted a brow.

“But I get more exercise than you,” Yu chuckled. “I’d wager even Noelle does,” he continued, somehow involving her into the conversation.

Her ears perked up, but she had a hard time catching up. What exercise was Yu talking about?

“With the way she punched that girl...” Cisco whistled.

“She deserved it,” Noelle suddenly spoke out, placing her hands firmly on the table and looking her brother in the eye.

Yu and Cisco stopped laughing when they noted her serious expression.

“No one was implying she didn’t deserve it, Noelle,” Yu was the first to speak, his hand covering hers in a warm, almost motherly gesture.

She bit her lip apprehensively. Better get it out in the open now than let herself enjoy an illusion and then watch it shutter.

“Did you bring me here to punish me?” She asked the question clearly, her tone even.

“What?” Cisco frowned. “Of course not,” he replied, his eyes searching Yu’s.

“We wanted you to take a break from the city. Maybe get a new perspective,” Yu said carefully.

“A new perspective?” Noelle frowned, failing to understand what was happening.

A silent signal passed between Cisco and Yu as he got up to remove the dishes from the table.

“Why don’t we go for a walk,” Cisco suggested, getting up and extending his hand to Noelle.

Her gaze lingered on it apprehensively before she decided to put her trust in him—temporarily, of course.

Following him, Noelle was surprised to see him stop by the front wall that housed a collection of hunting rifles. She was even more baffled when he picked a big one, quickly checking the barrel before grabbing another, smaller one.

“Here,” he said, handing her the smaller one.

Noelle could only accept the heavy object, confusion swirling in her mind.

Just what did her brother have in mind?

Saying a few words to Yu, he motioned Noelle to come with him. They exited the lodge, and Cisco led the way down a beaten path. All around, the forest was quiet, the fresh air helping ease her fears despite heading into the unknown.

“Why didn’t Yu come with us?” She found her voice a while later as they went deeper into the forest.

“Because I wanted us to have a chat—just the two of us,” Cisco answered.

“You’re not going to kill me, are you?” Seeing the weapons, she had to ask.

She’d seen action movies and knew how deadly guns were.

“Do you want me to kill you?” He turned, a smile probing at his lips.

“No,” she mumbled.

“What was that? I didn’t hear you.”

“I don’t want to die,” she repeated, louder.

“Good. Then that’s exactly what I’m going to teach you. How *not* to die.”

Noelle frowned.

Her brother didn’t make much sense. But then again, she’d never spent much time in his presence to get acquainted with him. He was still a...stranger. Despite their blood ties, he was nothing more than a stranger.

They reached a small clearing, and Noelle heard the sound of water—a river.

Despite the lingering doubts about her brother’s intentions, she couldn’t help the way nature made her feel—so free and capable of anything she put her mind to. She’d never experienced such a feeling before—as if the world was truly her oyster. Due to the stifling way in which she’d lived so far, she’d never even known this side of the world existed.

Noelle had ever had only one joy in life—playing the piano. The rest of her life was spent caught in between her circumstances, a cat and mouse game she played with the expectations placed on her and the ones she always failed to live up to.

From the moment she woke up until her head hit the pillow at night, her life was a constant stress of never being enough, of always being *wrong*. She stepped around people as one would step around a minefield—wondering when the next bomb would go off.

It was no life for a nine-year-old. It was no life for *anyone*. But to Noelle, it was all she’d ever known.

Noise. In her head. In her surroundings. In people’s opinions of her and their everlasting disappointment. She’d only ever known noise.

Yet now she was faced with something completely different.

Quiet. She saw the world as it should be—as it should *have* been. And she longed for it. More than she should have

ever had.

And that was how hope was born...Unfortunately.

“Here, let’s sit by the river,” Cisco motioned to a small patch of grass just by the river.

Noelle nodded, following him and emulating his movements. She carefully removed her shoes as she did and dipped her toes in the cold but fresh water when he did.

She couldn’t help the sigh of pleasure that escaped her as she tipped her head up, letting the sun rays streaming through the rich foliage brush against her cheeks in small, warm tendrils.

Yet her enjoyment of it was short-lived as she turned her attention to Cisco, needing to know why he’d gone through so much trouble for her—what was his goal?

“Why did you take me here? Why this?” she asked as she raised the small rifle in her arms. “Why...”

Why are you being nice to me?

“I was once in the same situation as you,” Cisco started, a smile on his face. “Not as violent,” he stifled a chuckle as he noted her frown. “But I was just like you growing up.”

“You didn’t go to school,” Noelle mentioned. She knew all her brothers had been homeschooled.

“Not initially. I did go for a period. But because things didn’t work out, our parents decided to pull me out of school and continue my studies at home,” Cisco said. “You’re the odd one out in your class now. I was the odd one out then.”

Noelle listened attentively as her brother detailed his own difficult years growing up and the fact that he’d been relegated as the *freak* more than once for being different from the rest of his classmates.

“Why are you telling me this?” Noelle asked in a small voice.

“Because I want you to realize there’s nothing wrong with you,” Cisco told her in a serious tone. “Regardless of what people think, and regardless of what our mother says, there’s absolutely nothing wrong with you.”

He spoke with such conviction that Noelle couldn’t help but be touched by his words—especially since no one had ever said something like that to her.

“Then why...” she swallowed hard. “Why do people hate me so much?”

There was a world of vulnerability in her tone, and Cisco recognized that slowly, she was letting him in—placing her precious trust in him.

“People hate what they do not understand,” he pursed his lips. “They hate what doesn’t line up with their idea of the world.”

“But doesn’t that just mean I’m...wrong?”

“There is no right or wrong, Noelle,” her brother turned to her, his mismatched eyes emphasized by the angle of the sunlight. “Just like there is no good or bad. There is only our perception of it.”

“I don’t understand,” she frowned, wetting her lips.

Cisco regarded her for a moment, thinking it was ludicrous to discuss something like that with a nine-year-old. But he saw something else in his sister as she regarded him with confusion. He saw something he recognized too well in himself.

He saw the thirst.

She may not understand, but she *wanted* to.

“Everyone has an acquired compass of what good and bad is. Through experience, we feed more information to that compass, and in turn, it helps us make decisions. But every human being is defined by different experiences, and different reactions to said experiences. As such, the compass becomes a highly personal thing. No two people are going to have the

same compass,” he paused, looking at her to see if she followed.

She gave a brisk nod, urging him to continue.

“Because of that, what is good to one person can be bad to another. And what is bad to someone, can be good to someone else. The same goes for what people consider abnormal, or *odd*. It all comes down to their experiences and how they relate themselves to that.”

“I think I get it now...” she spoke carefully.

“Do you?” Cisco smiled, pride shining in his eyes.

Noelle nodded.

“You’re saying that not everyone will think that I’m odd, right? That at some point, I’ll find people who won’t think I’m weird.”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying. You shouldn’t let those people drag you down just because they’re too ignorant to see what’s in front of them. You will find someone who appreciates you for who you are. So don’t change, Noelle. Don’t change for anyone in the world.”

She blinked at him, a ball of warmth unfurling in her chest.

“Ok,” she smiled shyly. “I won’t,” she whispered, lowering her eyes to the ground.

She paused for a moment before she whipped her head up.

“Then why did you bring me here?” She suddenly asked, frowning.

“Because,” he laughed. “Despite the fact that I don’t want you to change who you are, I think we need to regulate your outbursts a little.”

Noelle pouted.

“It’s not change,” Cisco cleared his throat. “Merely adjusting. Even though they deserved it, you can’t go around

beating up your classmates. It will get you in trouble, and at the end of the day, is it worth it?"

She shook her head.

"I know the people at your school aren't nice, and I'll try to make mother understand it too. But if you continue like this, you're just confirming their biases."

"Biases?"

"You're just feeding their compass more," he rephrased it, "making it so they will continually judge you negatively."

"But what can I do if they pick on me? I can't just...do nothing," she shrugged, almost defeated.

"I'm not saying you shouldn't do anything. You should definitely *do* something. But do it in a way that can't be traced back to you," Cisco winked. "A strategic, *less* violent manner."

Noelle's eyes widened, her lips trembling with amusement.

"I see," she giggled.

"The key, Noelle, is to find a balance."

"What do you mean?"

"A balance between your true self and your social persona. Keep your true self here," he pointed to her chest. "And show the world what they want to see."

"But isn't that still changing yourself?"

Cisco couldn't help but smile at her perceptive question. Yes, his sister was too damn similar to him.

"The world will always seek to change you, Noelle. It will erode at your self and force you to conform to its norms. And unwittingly, you will do it. Because who wants to live against the world?"

"I do," she quipped confidently.

"I know you do," he smiled. "Now. But give it a few years and you'll change your mind. Unless..."

“Unless?” She asked, her tone full of hope and curiosity.

“Here’s my advice. Tried and tested,” he added lightly. “Know yourself well and find someone who loves you for who you are—someone with whom you can be your truest self. Then, it won’t matter what face you show to the world,” he smiled wistfully. “It won’t matter what the world thinks of you. Because you will know the truth. And those who matter the most will know the truth.”

Noelle was quiet for a moment, mulling over his words.

No one had spoken to her like that before. No one had ever told her it was alright to be different—that it might even be a good thing. Everyone had tried to change her and make her conform to some silly norms.

Yet the more she thought about it, the more she saw the veracity of his words. More than anything, she realized she’d done the complete opposite.

The more the world had condemned her for her behavior, the more she’d striven to stand out, thinking she could force people to accept who she was.

She’d always been so in tune with her identity that she’d taken it personally whenever someone pointed out how *odd* she was. As such, instead of trying to adapt, she’d stubbornly held out.

Maybe that had been her mistake. She’d seen the world in black or white. For her, it had been either conforming, or rebelling. And she’d chosen the latter.

She hadn’t realized that there was a middle path. That she could still be herself, but put on an act for the world.

Now that Cisco had explained it to her, she could understand it a little more. Yet she had no idea where to start. Particularly since her *outbursts* were already second nature to her.

“And this is where we’re going to start,” Cisco started, as if he could read her mind.

Taking his rifle, he did a short introduction of the weapon, showing her everything she needed to know about how to operate it on a technical level. Once he was convinced she understood not only how it worked, but also the responsibility of wielding such a powerful weapon, he invited her to follow him.

Deeper still in the woods, they came to another clearing that had a few targets set among the trees.

Noelle looked up at Cisco, awaiting his instructions.

“Shooting a gun isn’t just about violence. It’s also about *tempering* violence,” he said as he moved into position. “It’s about learning to wait—to stalk the prey. Despite the gun’s immediate results, this is a long game,” he told her, holding on to the rifle and aiming at the target.

Noelle stepped back, watching him closely as he assumed his stance, his eyes towards the target.

“Instead of reacting impulsively, you need to weigh your actions and plan for the future. Plan for the moment in which...”

The wind howled through the trees, moving the target as it swept through the clearing.

And that’s when Cisco fired his shot.

“Why don’t you go check the target?”

Nodding, Noelle ran towards it, her eyes widening as she saw he’d hit the center.

“You hit the center,” she whispered as she returned. “But how? It was moving...”

“Because I was prepared for that. I calculated the odds of the wind interfering with the target and I knew to aim more to the right.”

Noelle’s mouth hung open in awe.

“There are three principles you need to know. Three principles you can apply to anything in life, not just shooting,”

he said, and Noelle looked at him in admiration. Never before had she been so amazed by someone.

“The three Ps. Practice, patience and...” he trailed off, the corners of his lips curling up.

“And?”

“Presence. You have to be present in the moment to be fully focused.”

“Practice, patience and presence,” Noelle repeated thoughtfully. “Can I try?”

“Of course. Let’s get you set up.”

For the next few hours, Cisco taught her how to shoot a rifle. It would take Noelle some time to fully understand the core of the lesson, but she was more at peace with herself than she’d ever been.

More than anything, she could feel a glimmer of hope taking shape inside of her.

It was dark by the time they returned to the lodge.

Yu had already made dinner, and upon seeing Noelle so flushed with exertion and glowing with happiness, he inquired how everything had gone.

“Awesome,” she jumped up and down. “Cisco taught me how to shoot, and I loved it,” she declared loudly.

The disparity between the quiet little girl who’d walked out of the lodge and the one who returned was astounding. Noelle displayed more excitement than anyone had ever seen of her.

Famished from all the effort, Noelle sat down at the table, eating with gusto as she recounted everything they had been up to.

Yu, having prior knowledge of Cisco’s plan, merely turned to him, giving him a soft smile. Reaching for his hand under the table, Yu mouthed *well done*.

Cisco merely smiled, squeezing Yu's hand.

That day at the hunting lodge was the first to come in Noelle's journey of self-discovery.

But Cisco had yet to teach her the most important lesson.

Sometimes, it didn't matter who, or what you were.

Life still found ways to fuck you over.

5. NOELLE

AGE FIFTEEN

Noelle hummed a quiet melody as she checked the time on her watch.

Two o'clock.

The piano room was all hers.

The corners of her lips tipped up in a satisfied smile as she opened the door, locking it behind her and taking a deep breath.

Few things brought her joy—true joy—but the piano was one. It was the only place where she could be herself, where she could lose herself among the myriad of notes and experience every emotion to the fullest.

She'd recently entered high school and her mother had allowed her to enroll in a special art school that allowed students to tailor their curriculum based on their strengths and interests.

Though she still had basic subjects like English and Algebra, the focus of her education was music—history, theory, composition. More than seventy percent of her time was spent focusing on music. And she'd never been happier.

More than anything, she was also allowed to conduct her studies independently, and for a few hours each day she was given exclusive access to one of the piano rooms so she could compose and practice at leisure. No longer did she have to walk on pins and needles for fear her conflict with her teachers would interfere with her passion.

Even her relationship with her classmates had changed. The school was so focused on excellence that *most* people minded their business, pursuing their own goals. That in itself had allowed Noelle to relax for the first time in her life and spend her time at school without the usual unfortunate incidents.

That wasn't to say that Noelle got along with people, or that people took to her. True to her nature, she preferred her solitude and had yet to make any friends. And though over time she'd curbed some of her wilder behavior, thanks to Cisco's advice and mentorship, she'd long given up the desire to create relationships.

She admitted she'd grown increasingly more cynical as the years passed, and that despite her continuous efforts to make herself likable to people, it never worked. So she'd just abandoned the idea.

If people didn't want her, why should she want them?

She was entirely more comfortable to be alone with her music. On her own. Always on her own.

Besides, though her reputation at this school wasn't as bad as before and people didn't go out of their way to pick on her, they still side-eyed her. She supposed it was because of her appearance and the fact that she stood out, once more, as different.

Noelle might have grown, but she had *not* outgrown her love for black. She draped herself from head to toe in black, and as she'd become more interested in makeup, she'd started kohling her eyes with a black liner too.

Her teachers had objected at first, as had her mother and her brother. Yet despite their many protestations, she'd continued to adorn herself as she felt comfortable. Eventually, given her scholarly excellence, her prowess at the piano and the many prestigious awards she was collecting left and right, the school had decided it was something it could allow.

Noelle might still be *odd*, but now, people tolerated it.

The price of genius—as some called it. But to her, it was simply the price of sanity.

Accordingly, this time it had been her talent instead of her unusual predilections that had gained her enemies. Of course, calling Ann Marie an enemy was an exaggeration. She was merely the girl who always had a bone to pick with Noelle—

mostly because they were in the same grade, and both specialized on the piano.

Though Ann Marie wasn't on Noelle's level, she was an extremely talented player. From the moment Noelle had entered the school, a competition of sorts had begun between the two. Unfortunately, they went to the same contests and took part in the same recitals, which meant that Ann Marie came perpetually in second place and was always compared to Noelle.

On her part, Noelle had tried to befriend the girl, thinking they could have fun together at the piano. She'd never had a friend before, let alone one who also played her favorite instrument, so for a moment she'd been excited at the prospect. But Ann Marie had refused all of Noelle's attempts at civility, turning even the most laid back exercise into a competition.

To a certain degree, Noelle understood where the girl was coming from. Her parents were both famous in the classical world—her mother a virtuosa violinist and her father a renowned conductor. She had a legacy she needed to uphold. Noelle could imagine how hard it must be for her to not be the best at something everyone expected her to excel in.

But that didn't mean Noelle was going to step aside just because she felt sorry for her. She valued her craft and she valued honesty and hard work. If at some point Ann Marie was going to surpass her, then so be it. Noelle would then work harder to regain her place.

She just wished Ann Marie didn't always turn everything into a bitter contest, especially now that the school was organizing its most important competition.

It was the most awaited moment of the year, and a student in each instrument would be chosen to take part in a concert at Carnegie Hall alongside renowned names in classical music.

It was also the reason why Noelle was currently in the piano room, ready to think about her next composition and the

main piece she would present at the school competition.

Dropping her bag to the ground, she took a moment to look around the room.

The chairs were all wrong, the windows closed and creating a stuffy atmosphere and the blackboard full of *foreign* musical annotations.

A tingle went down her spine, an itch developing at the base of her skull as she took in everything that was wrong with the way the classroom looked—everything that wasn't as *she* had left it.

Quick at work, she started with the organization of the furniture before cleaning the board and opening the windows to allow for some fresh air. Only when she was done could she finally breathe out relieved, her body slowly calming down as she took in the perfection of her space. It was only for a few hours, but for that time it was hers.

Making sure the door was locked, she proceeded to dump the contents of her bag on a desk.

She might have a *slight* obsession with things being a certain way, but she was far from the most organized person. In fact, the messy contents of her bag exemplified the way her mind worked. A chaotic and tumultuous foundation that slowly and steadily transformed into the calm before the storm—before disintegrating back into chaos.

As she stared at her belongings, she picked what she needed at the moment—a pencil, manuscript paper, her tablet and a pair of earbuds.

Seating herself at the piano, she carefully arranged her items on top of the piano, plugging in her earbuds and positioning the tablet in front of her.

Most of the awards Noelle had won had been for performing canonic pieces, but she wanted to be eventually known for her personal compositions. If she won the school contest she would be one step closer to establishing herself in the classical field.

In the previous year, she had her first solo concert performing her interpretation of various classical pieces. Though the event had been a success, it would be nothing compared to playing in one of the most celebrated venues for classical music. By winning the upcoming contest, she would have the opportunity to stand on one of the biggest stages and share her compositions to the world.

A smile pulled at her lips as she clicked play on the tablet, resuming the show from where she'd left off.

Her contact with the outside world was limited, her self-imposed isolation a result of years of accumulated mistrust and a fear of rejection. She may not have positive personal experiences to influence her compositions—though she had plenty of negative ones—but that hadn't stopped her from finding the most unlikely sources.

TV Shows. Movies. Books.

She lived vicariously through every single character she immersed herself in, and though she had limited experience with emotions, through others' happiness and sorrows, their struggles and their successes, Noelle managed to see the world through different eyes.

She could *live* without the burden of living.

She might not have firsthand experience of love, friendship, or heart-break. But by fully transposing herself into the stories she was consuming, she felt those emotions as if they were her own. In turn, she was able to lay them down on a piece of paper and continue the infinite circle of creation.

As she resumed the episode, Noelle couldn't help but blush as she watched a kiss between Buffy and Spike, the tension palpable even through the screen.

Pencil in hand, she grabbed the manuscript sheet, laying down note after note. Starting from the two lovers embrace she let her mind travel, closing her eyes and imagining it was her instead of Buffy. But it wasn't Spike she was picturing with

her. It was a faceless, nameless person, but someone who suffused her chest with the deepest emotion she'd ever felt.

Eyes closed, she let her hand move over the sheet of paper, the notes flowing out of her just as the image in front of her evolved, showing her different facets of *love*—of having someone so thoroughly hers there was no more right or wrong, just *being*.

And if there was no more right or wrong, no more black and white, someone could finally embrace her for who she was—accept her as she'd accept him in return.

Longing more powerful than the reflex of breathing oozed out of her pencil, black lines taking shape and contouring a story through soulful notes.

Noelle stopped thinking as she gave herself over to sensation and something that unfurled deep within her.

She didn't know how much time passed before she finally awoke from her reverie to find pages upon pages covered in a succession of notes. And before she could lose her impetus, she placed them in front of the piano, her fingers fitted to the keys as she felt for their familiarity.

Her gaze fixed to the sheet of paper, she began playing.

What started as a sensuous melody soon gave way to a richness of sound better fitted for an organ than a regular piano. Her fingers met the keys with such vigor, the sound emanating from the instrument was equally as energetic.

It was a tale of two souls. Of two tendrils of *being*—two sources of energy as intertwined as finely as the most expensive silk. And what started with a juxtaposition of black and white, of low and high notes, soon led to the blending of the two shades into one, mixing so thoroughly with one another there was no way to trace their origins anymore.

Two became one. One became the *only* one.

Yet as the melody came to an end, Noelle's eyes snapping open, her breathing harsh, she realized it did not have an end.

There was something missing.

She blinked, her mind whirling with befuddlement. As it often happened when she gave herself to the throes of music, she lost control of herself. Or, better said, she made contact with a part deep within her that was no longer ruled by reason—just feeling. There was a frenzy to her emotions as they oozed onto the paper before being unleashed into the world, dispersing into the air and penetrating every surface in their advance.

There was such madness to the way she gave herself to the music that she could not control nor foresee its course. Yet never before had she stopped right before the denouement.

The piece was powerful, evocative—a true heart-wrenching sound. But it was incomplete.

Noelle took a deep breath, her brows drawn up in confusion as she tried to understand where she'd gone wrong. Never before had it happened to her to compose an unfinished piece.

For a moment, she couldn't move.

She stared at her composition, letting the rational part of her brain take over and make sense of what she'd jotted down—trying in any way to find a solution to the end. Yet the more she focused on it, the more frustrated she became when the problem grew in magnitude.

She couldn't do it.

She couldn't find an end.

Her heart drummed in her chest, her ears closing in at the extreme sensation of failure that enveloped her.

She couldn't do it...

Suddenly, she stood up, moving around the room in an effort to relax her mind. When that didn't work, she stuck her head out the window, inhaling the fresh air in an attempt to calm herself and her rapidly increasing pulse.

From the moment she'd learned how to play the piano, she'd been one with the instrument—one with the music.

Nothing had been out of bounds for her, and her affinity for the instrument had made her special.

Where she was *odd* and people disliked her, she was also special, and though people still didn't necessarily like her, they enjoyed the sound of her music.

Up until that point, Noelle had *never* hit a wall in her musical endeavors.

She'd been a disappointment to everyone around her, but she'd never disappointed herself.

Until now...

“What the hell...” she whispered, panic swelling in her chest.

She returned to the piece, reading through the notes again. She did it again and again until she could close her eyes and visualize the entire piece.

Yet the end was still elusive. It was still out of reach.

Nothing made sense.

Like hitting a hard, concrete wall, she couldn't find a way out of the dead-end she'd locked herself in.

What started as mild trepidation quickly developed into a full blown panic attack as the walls of the room started closing in on her. Her breathing grew increasingly labored until she felt she was suffocating, and no amount of fresh air from the wide open windows was going to help her.

As she gasped for air, she realized she couldn't sit still anymore.

Dashing to the door, she unlocked it as she ran down the hallway. She ran and ran until she made it outside, the sunlight bathing her in warmth.

Placing a hand over her eyes, she oriented herself to the sky, asking the universe for an answer she knew she would never get.

Dropping to the ground, she felt tears accumulate at the corners of her eyes, before slowly slipping down her cheeks.

Why?

Why was she crying? She wasn't sad. She wasn't hurt. She was just confused, and lost and...

She sniffled, rubbing at her eyes until they were red and itchy, yet the tears still wouldn't stop.

"Why?" she whispered in a small, desolate voice.

She did not feel pain. But she did feel something. A void inside her chest. A hole that seemed to grow with each passing moment, with each lonely tear.

"Why?" she repeated again, staring at the sun and at the wide open sky.

Noelle didn't know what she was asking. She had no clue what was happening to her and why she'd had such a breakdown—why she'd been so shaken when she usually thought herself unbothered.

She tried to rationalize it as a perfectionist's reaction in the face of failure. But deep down she knew it was more than that.

It had to do with her—with what she lacked but pretended she did not. It had to do with all those dreams she held so tightly to herself she'd never dared tell a soul about them.

It wasn't failure, for to fail you had to try first.

No, for Noelle it was terror. A deeply ingrained fear that she would never be enough. That she'd forever be locked in place, unable to ever hope for more—strive for more.

She was afraid that this would be her life. Her *entire* life.

Suddenly, music wasn't enough anymore.

Noelle didn't know how she got her bearings together enough to return to the piano room. Her heart was in her throat, her soul so exhausted she felt like a million years old. Yet the one constant was that feeling of loss—that void that was now transferring to her music.

She supposed it was only fair since that was the source of her talent—the well of her inspiration. And no matter how much she'd tried to fill it up with empty words and the perception of fullness, the truth always prevailed.

She was hollow.

As she closed the door behind her, she slumped on a chair.

Begrudgingly, she had to admit that it was becoming harder and harder to keep going, the emptiness inside of her growing with each day. And she recognized it exactly for what it was.

Loneliness.

Bone-reaching, Soul-searing loneliness.

Although her relationship with Cisco and his wife had improved considerably over the years, he was often too busy to entertain her, especially since the birth of his son. On the other hand, her relationship with her mother had deteriorated further.

It had been worse after her father had died, since her mother had closed herself in, her criticism becoming harsher and more acerbic, her volatility even greater than before.

The only one who could calm her was Cisco, but he was absent and unable to deal with her.

And that left...*her*.

Noelle did her best to keep out of her mother's path, but that only made her home life an uncomfortable battlefield. Then there was her school and the fact that those few hours she was allowed in the piano room were her only solace.

Remove that and Noelle was left with...nothing.

She supposed she still had her computer with her games, shows and books. But sometimes those made her more melancholic as she realized there were things out there she would likely never experience.

Like traveling the world, going on an adventure...falling in love.

She sighed deeply as she realized her thoughts had taken her down a forbidden path.

Though she strove not to dwell on it, Noelle was aware that she was living on borrowed time. And that was the source of her frustration.

She knew far too well that she was only allowed to continue her education because she excelled at the piano—the only thing that made her worthy of the DeVille name. But as soon as she turned eighteen, her freedoms would be restricted, her entire life mapped out for her by her mother—as tradition dictated.

Throughout the years, she'd heard hushed conversations about her fate as the only girl in the family. From the beginning, the seed of dread had been planted, stripping her of any potential fulfillment even in the most exciting moments for she knew what awaited her eventually.

There had also been those times, during an argument, when her mother would taunt her with her future, promising she would eventually wash her hands off her and her impetuous self. Elena had never shied away from telling Noelle she couldn't wait until her future husband would finally take the brat out of her and teach her how to behave like a proper lady.

She'd been so vehement in her threats that Noelle was certain Elena had something planned for her—something to get back at Noelle for not being the daughter she'd always wanted.

So where did that leave her?

Adrift...

Shaking her head, she ground her teeth, steeling her spine as she brought her focus back to the present.

She couldn't let that affect her. There were still three years left until then, and if need be, Noelle was more than convinced she'd rather run away than be forced into a loveless marriage.

She couldn't stand most people, and she barely tolerated her family. She could *never* allow a stranger to own her.

Anger simmered inside of her, together with a new determination.

"I'm strong," she whispered to herself, her usual mantra. "I'm the strongest person I know. And I can overcome anything."

She chanted the words to herself a few times, feeling her resolve strengthen. Yes, she could overcome anything. Including the musical block she was currently facing.

Armed with the new conviction, she moved to the piano, ready to give the piece another go. Her mind was clearer than it had been, her heart open and ready to gaze to the future.

"I won't let them," she murmured, tracing the notes she'd already scribbled down. "I won't let anyone dictate my fate. It's mine and mine alone."

The more she cheered herself on, the more she let her imagination fly, opening herself to new ideas and possibilities.

Because if she wasn't caught...if she took charge of her own life, then the sky *was* the limit—or maybe more. Her piece *could* end.

It took her the rest of the afternoon, but she finally managed to finish her piece. And as she arrived home, she locked herself in the piano room, practicing and improving her piece.

Yet in her excitement to finish her piece she didn't realize that her music sheets had been moved, their location slightly different than she'd left them. She was too lost inside her mind to notice that.

6. NOELLE

The booming sound of thunder startled her. Blinking, she lifted her head as she looked around, noticing she was in the piano room—*home*, yet not her true home.

After her father had passed away, Elena and Noelle had moved upstate with an army of staff and bodyguards, leaving the main DeVille residence to Cisco as the heir. Still, for Noelle that was the house in which she'd grown up and where she had most of her pleasant memories, and she couldn't help but be melancholic about it.

She wished her brother would take her to live with them, but she was embarrassed to make the request since he now had his own family, and Noelle feared she would inadvertently impose on them. The last thing she wanted, or needed, was to feel unwanted—again.

Rubbing at her eyes, she peered around, spotting the countless drafts she'd discarded in her search for the perfect sound. And slowly, the information started to trickle inside her sluggish brain.

The school contest was at the end of the week. And Noelle felt far from prepared even though objectively she was *over*prepared.

Each student was supposed to present two personal compositions, each following a specific theme.

Noelle's first piece was done. She'd worked on it for months, and technically it was the best she'd done so far. Yet it

was the second piece that called to her more. The one she'd only recently come up with but had struggled to find an ending for.

She'd finally managed to complete it, but the seeds of doubt had been planted.

Usually, though she continuously worked to perfect her compositions, she always had an inkling of what the final product would look like. It was instinct that drove her just as much as her vast knowledge of musical theory.

But for this second piece nothing had worked as usual.

She'd written the first part in a frenzy, almost as if her creativity had a mind of its own, longing to burst through the surface through the tip of her pencil. It had erupted like a bubbling volcano until the magma had dried out, as had her inspiration.

Though she'd finished it, she still felt something was off.

Sighing, she rose from her seat, stretching as she went to the window. The drops of rain stuck to the glass before they trailed down. Her fingers absentmindedly traced their advance.

Noelle needed to win.

She might have had a mini mental breakdown the other day regarding her future and the futility of her dreams. But as she'd calmed down, she had realized her success was the key to *everything*. And Elena's vanity would be Noelle's way out.

Though she was certain her mother couldn't wait to use her in a much awaited arranged marriage to benefit the family name, Elena also loved to brag about her daughter's talent and encouraged Noelle to challenge herself with competitions, recitals and concerts.

By setting Noelle up for success, Elena was also setting her up for freedom.

So what if her family would eventually require her to marry someone of their choosing? It didn't mean Noelle had to

do it. If she became successful enough to make a living off her talent she would not have to depend on her family.

As such, she'd realized that her best bet was to give her absolute best and make herself known in the music world. If she became famous enough, no one would be able to force her to do anything.

She would be master of her own fate.

And so, with her mind clear, Noelle had set about making a detailed plan. Not only would she win the school contest and perform at Carnegie Hall, but she would take advantage of the opportunity to network with important people in the field in order to pave her way further.

Everyone had praised her as *the* pianist of her generation. It was high time she lived up to that name.

Looking out the window, she spotted her brother exiting his car, followed by his wife and their son, Val. Noelle decided to take a break and as she arranged her materials neatly on the piano, she went downstairs to greet them.

"Cisco," she called from the top of the stairs as she ran down.

Cisco stopped in his tracks, a smile tugging at his lips as he opened his arms for her to jump into.

"And here's my little Clara," he chuckled affectionately as he gave her a big hug.

Oftentimes, he liked to tease her like that, calling her Clara for Clara Schumann, one of the most famous pianists and composers of her time.

"How long are you staying?" She asked, hoping they could make the time to come watch her competition. Though Cisco and Yuyu still lived in the city, they were often away for business and had a busy schedule.

Noelle had no friends, and she didn't consider anyone else in her family remotely close, but Cisco and his wife were different.

They were the only ones to have ever taken her side.

Of course, there were her other two brothers, Thadeo and Amo, but they were even more absent from home. Thadeo had married some years before and he'd moved with his wife on the West Coast, while Amo was a self-confessed nomad. She supposed she got along better with Amo, since he had a more youthful temperament while Thadeo had always been the most serious of siblings.

Still, no one had been as good to her as Cisco, who'd made it his mission to help her navigate life and social relationships. Then there was Yuyu, his wife, who'd been more of a mother figure than her own mother. In her, Noelle had always found warmth and words of praise instead of the constant criticism she'd come to associate with Elena.

"A couple days," he winced. "I know you have your contest at the end of the week, but maybe you'll welcome us to the rehearsal instead?"

He gave her a sheepish smile, and she couldn't find it in her to be mad at him.

"Ok," she nodded. "The rehearsal is tomorrow. Mother booked me an auditorium in the city so I can practice in similar conditions."

"What he's not saying," Yuyu came from behind Cisco, laying a hand on his shoulder just as Val, her son, dashed to the living room, "is that he's already taken off a few days for the concert at Carnegie Hall."

Noelle blinked, taken aback.

"You... You did?"

Cisco smiled.

"Of course. How could I miss my baby sister making history on the stage of Carnegie Hall."

"But you don't know if I'll win..."

"Noelle, you *will* win," Cisco stated confidently.

Her cheeks heated, warmth spreading all over her body at their trust in her.

“I won’t disappoint you,” she whispered in a low voice.

“Of course you won’t, sweetie,” Yuyu came forward, hugging Noelle to her chest. “You’re the best and we have full confidence in you,” she murmured as she kissed the top of her head.

Yuyu was much taller than Noelle, who at barely five feet had already stopped her growth spurt. It was something that annoyed Noelle since people saw her height as one more reason to ignore her, or to diminish the importance of her arguments and opinions.

So what if she was slightly vertically challenged? She more than made up for it with the size of her personality.

“Is Elena here?” Yuyu asked, a grimace on her face.

“She’s visiting her friends,” Noelle promptly replied. “She probably won’t be back until tomorrow or the day after.”

Yuyu visibly exhaled in relief, and Noelle couldn’t help but chuckle.

Shrugging their coats off, Cisco and Yuyu made themselves more comfortable in the living room, and Noelle asked the staff to bring some refreshments.

Val had already made himself at home, dumping some puzzle pieces on the floor before focusing all his attention on them. He was five years old, but he’d been recently diagnosed with ASD. Cisco and Yuyu weren’t very worried as his symptoms weren’t too severe. Everyone else, though, had quite some thoughts, not only on their child, but on their marriage, too.

As much as Elena had an issue with Noelle for not being the daughter she’d wanted, it was nothing compared to how she behaved with Yuyu.

It all stemmed from the fact that Cisco had disregarded the family’s plans for his arranged marriage and had dared to wed

a Chinese orphan that had been masquerading as his bodyguard for years. Not only was it seen as highly inappropriate, but entirely outrageous.

Though Cisco had always been and still was Elena's favorite, their relationship had cooled over time to the point that he barely acknowledged her presence. He continued to be a respectful son, but only out of duty.

It was a well-known fact that the entire family was against the marriage. No one had welcomed Yuyu to the family aside from Noelle. And that was yet another reason why Cisco rarely came to visit, preferring to live in their house in the city rather than be the target of all the vitriolic gossip.

Noelle knew that if her brother caught anyone badmouthing his wife he'd react—in the worst of ways.

He was the calmest person she knew. Until Yuyu. It all came down to Yuyu.

Noelle had always been in awe of their relationship. Not only after they'd married, but prior to that too.

Before she'd known about Yu actually being Yuyu, she'd seen the small signs of their closeness and the uniqueness of their relationship. They acted in tandem with each other. Two bodies and one mind.

To Noelle, that was the height of romanticism, regardless of the rumors swirling around their relationship.

She only saw two people in love. And deep down, she was a little jealous of it.

There were guys at her school. There were even some who had expressed an interest in her—though Noelle suspected it had been the result of a dare. Regardless of her dating ban, she'd said no because not one of them had interested her in any way.

Not like that...

And to Noelle's mind, if she couldn't have what she wished for, she would never settle for anything less.

They spent the rest of the day together and Noelle prized every little interaction. It was rare for her to have company—and pleasant one at that. As such, she strove to ground herself in the present and enjoy it.

After Yuyu put Val to bed, the three of them gathered in Cisco's study to play board games, one of their favorite pastimes.

Noelle enjoyed herself as she hadn't in a long time. For a few hours, she put aside the stress of the competition and her fear at not being enough—not being perfect.

As she laughed and chatted with Cisco and Yuyu, she brought forth another part of herself—one that had been there all along, but had never been welcomed before.

For all their closeness, though, Noelle never shared with them her deepest worries and the fact that she felt she was drowning in the expectations placed upon her—by her family, her teachers, and especially by *her*.

That didn't mean it went unnoticed.

When everyone went to bed that night, Cisco couldn't help but note a tinge of worry on his wife's features.

“What is it?” he asked as he approached her.

Fresh from the shower, she'd donned a white silky nightdress. She was brushing her hair in front of the mirror, her hand hesitating every now and then as she lost herself to her thoughts.

Placing his hands on her arms, he caressed her gently, bringing his lips to her shoulder in the softest kiss.

“You've been deep in thought since we came back,” he noted as he took the brush out of her hand, proceeding to slowly thread it through her hair.

Yuyu's cheeks tightened with a sad smile.

“I'm just worried about her,” she reluctantly admitted.

“Why? She’s doing much better,” Cisco frowned. “She hasn’t gotten into a conflict in years, and her teachers truly appreciate her.”

“She doesn’t have any friends, love,” she sighed. “Did you notice her tonight?”

“What about it?” Cisco blinked, playing back the interactions in his mind. “She seemed perfectly fine to me. And she had a lot of fun with the games, didn’t she? I know you let her win a couple of times,” he chuckled.

He didn’t know how it was possible to love a woman more, but Yuyu proved him wrong every moment of every day. He was in absolute awe of her—not only her intellect but also her soul.

The way she’d taken care of his sister over the years floored him and filled him with so much emotion—a lot of which he would have thought foreign if not for her.

It had been *her* who’d taught him the meaning of love. And it was her who reminded him what it meant on a daily basis, teaching him something new every day. Without Yuyu, he would still be alone, in his own world, caged by his own intellect that struggled to make sense of humanity.

More than anything, it had been *her* who’d taught him how to be a better brother to Noelle. As such, he had absolute confidence in her instincts and observations.

“She has matured, that is for sure. But there is something that’s lurking just beneath the surface,” she turned to face him, taking the brush from his hand and placing it on the table.

“Noelle’s always been a loner,” Cisco said pensively.

“But do you think she wants that?” Yuyu parried, the question serious.

“I think she wouldn’t know what to do otherwise,” Cisco answered immediately, drawing from his own experiences.

“And that’s what worries me, love,” she admitted, raising her big eyes towards him and regarding him with

apprehension. “She reminds me too much of you when we first met,” she continued, cupping his cheek with her hand and stroking him lightly. “So closed to the world, so against it.”

“Was I?” his lips quirked up.

“You rationalized every little thing, every emotion. You still do, sometimes,” she smiled.

“Hmm, do I?” he lifted a brow. “Maybe I need another lesson,” he drawled suggestively as he brought her wrist to his mouth, laying a chaste kiss.

“You’re incorrigible,” Yuyu shook her head, though a blush appeared on her cheeks.

So many years and he could still make her blush. He didn’t take it lightly, and every time he spotted the stain of pink on her cheeks his heart did an odd somersault in his chest.

She was his woman—his wife. And he never tired of repeating those words.

“I mean it, Cisco. I’m scared she’s closing herself to the world before she has a chance to fully experience it. Music is her only focus, and while I know her talent is unique, what about everything else? What about...living?”

“But if it makes her happy?”

“Does it?” Yuyu tilted her head, her expression. “Or is it because she’s been told it *should* make her happy?”

Cisco frowned.

He’d always known emotions weren’t his strong suit—particularly recognizing them in himself or another person. It was why Yuyu was his ultimate partner—the yin to his yang. Where his IQ was off the charts, her EQ was equally so. Together, they were the perfect team.

“I’ve been watching her for years. Yes, she *loves* to play. But sometimes...” she trailed off, taking a deep breath. “Sometimes it feels like she’s only playing to cover for something else that’s missing inside of her.”

“What?”

“I don’t know,” she sighed in frustration.

Cisco’s arms enveloped her as he swooped her up, taking her to their bed and lying her on the clean sheets. He fitted her body to his, his big hands tracing the contour of her curves as he divested her of her silky gown.

“Then we can only be more vigilant and try to help her,” he murmured, hoping to placate her.

She gave him a brisk nod before she melted in his arms, kissing his lips and opening herself to him—body and soul.

“You still feel guilty, don’t you?” He posed the question a while later, their bodies sweaty from the exertion, their hearts beating in unison.

“There won’t be a day in my life I won’t regret it,” Yuyu whispered, a tear making its way down her cheek.

Cisco found the feeling foreign, but Yuyu already knew that. She knew him far too well to not realize that the only time in his life when he’d felt anything had been with her—only ever with her. Everyone else was merely a pawn on a chess board.

“Do you regret us, too?” he asked, his gaze affixed to the ceiling, his heart stopping in his chest.

He’d never asked her that question before. They’d been through so much to be together—had hurt so many people in the process—and he’d never dared ask her the question.

“Heaven forgive me but I can’t,” Yuyu said. “I know it’s wrong—so, so very wrong. But there’s only been one right thing in my life, and that’s you, Cisco. From the first time we met, to every little furtive touch and every stolen moment, you’ve been my final destination all along.”

His arms tightened around her as her voice started trembling, her tone wobbly.

“We’ve been very selfish, haven’t we?” she mused softly.

“No,” he suddenly said. “*I’ve* been selfish. Don’t take my sins as yours, Yuyu.”

There was a brief pause before she released a dry laugh.

“Let’s not talk about sins, my beloved husband. We’re both drowning in them.”

He didn’t reply, so she added, whispered words unintended for his ears.

“I just hope we won’t add Noelle to the list.”

Though Yuyu was becoming increasingly worried that Noelle was losing herself in her music, eschewing all other aspects of life, Noelle was determined to do just that.

Music was her way out, and she would take advantage of each and every chance to further her career.

Yet Yuyu was right in one aspect. Although music was something Noelle enjoyed, it was also something she’d been *conditioned* to enjoy. Taking advantage of her talent, Elena had convinced her from the moment she started playing that her destiny lay in the piano—that her entire identity was wrapped in that one instrument.

Noelle DeVille was a pianist first and foremost. In fact, that was the only good thing anyone could say about her, and always qualifying it against her negatively perceived traits.

She might be odd, and a little difficult, but she was a masterful pianist.

She might be rude and impetuous, but at least she had a great talent at the piano.

She might be asocial, but she was a musical genius.

Noelle had been told the exact same things her entire life, not only by her teachers and all other adults who’d met her, but by her own family, too.

And just like them, she could not name any other quality about herself.

She'd been told so many times what people *thought* she was, that she'd started believing it herself.

Now, she only saw herself as *odd*.

Music mattered. The piano mattered. Her fingers which touched the piano mattered.

The rest of her? Not so much.

Music was the *only* thing she could offer to the world. So she would do it properly.

If before Noelle had, at times, taken her talent for granted, this time she was ready to give it her all.

The entire week was a succession of rehearsals until she was *mostly* satisfied with herself. Everyone else was, too. But ever the perfectionist, Noelle still felt something was missing.

Cisco and Yuyu attended one of the rehearsals, as promised, praising Noelle for her newest compositions and assuring her they had full confidence in her and her abilities.

But soon the time came for them to depart again, leaving Noelle alone once more to face Elena's biting words.

"One of my friends is going to be at the performance. She works for a newspaper and she said she will do a piece on you," Elena told her in passing a few days before the contest.

The meaning was clear.

Noelle must win so that her mother's friend could pen a glowing article about her.

Yet all those words of encouragement only made Noelle doubt herself more, especially since she was still hung up on the final part of her second piece. Though she had finished it, Noelle thought it far from perfect.

The more people praised her and declared that no one was more likely to win the contest than her, the more Noelle froze up, the expectations placed upon her making her falter under that massive weight.

As the days passed, the day of the contest getting closer and closer, Noelle found herself under such immense stress that she could barely sleep at night.

Even her beloved shows failed to help her. Her attention span was lacking, her anxiety spiking through the roof.

She felt herself on the verge of giving up, though she'd long decided those words could not be part of her vocabulary.

Yet it all came crashing down the night before the contest.

It was a little over ten, and though Noelle knew she should try to get some rest before the big day, she could not calm her rattled nerves.

Thinking a chamomile tea could help her, she went down the stairs to the kitchen to prepare herself a cup.

Everyone was already asleep, the house eerily quiet. Elena always retired at eight, and did not like anyone to bother her—with the exception of Cisco. Her oldest son was always welcome, despite the fact that he'd long distanced himself from her because of her treatment of Yuyu.

Noelle placed the teabag in a mug, adding some hot water over it before taking a seat at the kitchen table, waiting for the tea to cool down. Wrapping her hands around the warm mug, she released a deep breath in an attempt to calm herself.

She was still trembling.

On and off, she'd been trembling the entire week.

She supposed it was the nerves, for she was getting queasy the moment she thought of that damned contest. And she couldn't figure out why.

She'd held her own solo concerts in the past. She'd been to competitions since she'd been a little child and should have gotten used by now to the stress. Yet she felt worse than she'd ever felt.

A part of it was due to her musical block and the fact that her second piece was not at its peak. But then there was also

the fact that she felt everyone's eyes on her—some waiting for her victory while others watched closer for her failure.

She thought about the people at her school. There were thirty people enrolled in the competition, out of which at least ten could give her a run for her money.

Of course, stressed as she was, she saw everyone as better than her in that moment.

Then there were her teachers. There were those who truly wished to see her succeed and had been nice to her in the past despite her aloof manner. But there were also those that Noelle knew had other favorites, and as such hoped anyone *but* her would win the contest.

As much as she only heard the praises of those around her, she knew there were equally as many people, or more, who wanted her to fail.

“You should be asleep.”

Her mother's voice startled her. Noelle's head whipped around, watching Elena come closer, her eyes narrowing at her.

“I couldn't,” she murmured. “So I made myself a cup of tea.”

“You should have woken someone to do it for you,” her mother snapped, grabbing her hands and feeling for them. “What if you burned your fingers? What if you spilled boiling water on your hands and...”

“I know how to make myself a cup of tea without burning myself,” Noelle added dryly, snatching her hands back.

Her mother's nostrils flared at her tone.

“How many times have I told you to not use that tone with me, young lady?” Elena gritted her teeth.

Noelle simply regarded her with a bored expression.

Though her body was still experiencing the remnants of her anxiety, she willed herself to *not* show her weakness.

Especially to her mother, who only knew how to exploit.

Tilting her head, she gave her mother a slow, ironic smile.

“How many times have you deserved a better tone?” She asked, keeping the same tone.

She knew she was courting her mother’s anger just as she knew their interactions rarely ended peacefully. Yet something inside of her did not allow her to back down.

“You ungrateful little bitch!” The words flew from her mother’s mouth at the same time as her palm connected with Noelle’s cheek.

The blow was strong enough to make Noelle reel, tears pricking behind her lids from the force of it. But she pushed it down, as she always did. She wasn’t going to show her pain.

It wasn’t the first time her mother had hit her, and likely it wouldn’t be the last time.

“Are you done?” She slowly turned, schooling her features with the indifference she knew her mother couldn’t stand.

“God help me, Noelle, if you don’t win tomorrow...”

“You’re going to what?” She pushed her chin up as she regarded her mother. “There’s nothing you can do, *mamma*,” she sneered at Elena, rising from her chair and seeking to bypass her on her way out.

If there was one thing she’d learned over the years, it was that her mother hated when Noelle ignored her. She would get violent, she would yell, and she would make a scene. Despite knowing she would likely be hit, and cursed at, Noelle also knew the entire situation affected her mother more than it did her.

Elena wanted to be in control. Always.

And Noelle liked nothing better than taking it away from her. One step at a time.

Just as Noelle moved, so did her mother, grabbing her arm.

“I’m so happy your father isn’t here to see you,” her mother spat out, her eyes gleaming with anger.

“Or what? He would have died again?” Noelle rolled her eyes.

The slap that came her way this time was expected. Noelle moved her head to the side to avoid it, smirking as she saw her mother’s eyes widening in shock.

“You’re being impertinent!”

“Tell me something that’s new,” Noelle muttered under her breath, but Elena didn’t hear her. She was too busy listing all of Noelle’s faults.

“I don’t know what I did to deserve an ungrateful daughter like you. Why couldn’t you be more ladylike?”

“Maybe you got what you deserve, *mamma*,” Noelle replied sweetly. “Look at this big house. It’s *empty*. And why? Everyone left,” she paused, a sarcastic smile pulling at her lips. “Everyone left because of *you*. Even your beloved son would rather move from place to place than spend one minute in your presence.”

“W—what...” Elena blinked.

Noelle continued to smile. After all, she knew far too well that Cisco was her favorite, just as he was the source of all her heartache. Whereas with Thadeo and Amo Elena was cordial enough, with Cisco she’d always been a mother hen, worrying about her baby and trying to keep him to her side.

Cisco, for his part, had always respected her and never badmouthed her.

Until Yuyu.

The moment he’d married her everything had changed. Yuyu had become the *only* woman in his life and Elena had been relegated to the sidelines.

And so Elena had started taking out her frustrations on Noelle more and more. If before her disappointment had been

merely verbal, after a while it had become physical. A slap here, one there, who could stop her? After all, the two of them were the only ones residing in the house.

The staff saw, but never dared to speak where it wasn't their place.

"You only know how to drive people away, *mamma*. Don't worry. I *will* win," Noelle stated with increasing confidence. "I will win this contest, and the next, and every one after that. I will win everything until I will be the best. And you know what happens then?" She wrenched her arm from her mother's grasp, but instead of walking away, she took a step closer, looking her mother straight in the eye.

"You won't be able to control me anymore," she told Elena in a slow, even tone.

Without waiting for her reply, she turned and left.

If there was one thing Noelle had in spades, aside from the musical talent everyone acknowledged, it was her obstinacy. She was stubborn as a mule, but when she put her mind to it, it became the strongest determination.

That night, though the anxiety was still killing her, Noelle went to bed with unwavering conviction.

She would win the contest. She would win them all.

Easier said than done, Noelle had to begrudgingly admit the next day when she spent more than half an hour simply staring at the stage gown she'd been sent by the school.

To add more weight to the listening component rather than the visual one, the school had decided to have all contestants wear the same attire.

The girls would wear a creamy beige dress while the boys would be donning a standard black suit.

Alas, Noelle set aside her dislike of the dress and put it on, adding on some light make up and getting ready for her big moment.

As she went to the auditorium where the contest would take place, one of the teachers appeared on the stage to list the order of the participants. Unfortunately for Noelle, she was last in the piano section, with Ann Marie right before her. That meant she had more time for her anxiety to grow.

The contest started, with the first sets taking up the entire morning.

Noelle alternated between backstage and sitting in the audience. Yet as she studied everyone present, she couldn't help the pang of disappointment that assailed her.

Elena would come, of course. She couldn't miss the moment when she could finally brag with her daughter. But Noelle didn't particularly see her mother as the support she so desperately wished for. And though she understood why her brother and Yuyu could not attend, she couldn't help but feel a little sad about it.

Everyone's parents, friends and extended family had come. She could hear the words of encouragement around, and the way other parents behaved with their children, once more awakening the gaping hole inside her chest.

And once more she tried to assure herself she didn't need it—that she was lucky enough to have a roof over her head, food in her belly and the chance to exercise her talent. She already knew that was far more than others had. Yet all the riches in the world could not make up for the fact that she was utterly and terrifyingly alone.

So alone, in fact, that she would have given anything to have someone care about her—appreciate her. She would have given up even her talent at the piano.

Her eyes widened at that intrusive thought. Swallowing hard, she looked around the auditorium, taking in the smiles, warm hugs and sweet words of encouragement.

Yes, she would have rather been ordinary and have *that*. What was her talent if she couldn't share it with anyone?

As soon as that question arose in her mind, it dawned on her what she'd been missing all along in her music. Why it had been technically flawless but at times bleak and aimless.

Her music had always been composed at a distance—always about things around her but never around her.

On one hand, that could be attributed to her minimal experience of the world and a lack of range of emotions. Yet on the other hand, it was the clear manifestation of someone who was petrified of rejection—of putting herself out there only to be judged and deemed unworthy.

She'd been told that enough all her life about her perceived personality. Noelle didn't think she could bear it if she was criticized for her inner thoughts too—for that which she held most dear.

With one last look around, she sighed as she stood up, taking advantage of the recess to head backstage and eat something before the piano event came up.

The backstage area was busy with students preparing for their acts.

Noelle made her way through an animated throng of people, heading for the back where she'd left her bag and packed lunch. She didn't miss the slight sneers directed her way, or the belligerent gazes.

This was a competition. Of course everyone considered her the enemy. She tried not to take that to heart too much, instead thinking of it as a compliment. It meant that the other students were aware she was *that* good.

Making herself even smaller than she was, she dragged her bag into a corner, taking a seat on a chair and proceeding to look for her lunch.

Her stomach rumbled in hunger, but there was also the ever present anxiety that interfered with her appetite. Still, she needed to eat something to preserve her strength.

As she opened her bag, searching through its contents, a foul smell assailed her.

Her brows knit together as she moved her head to the side to avoid some of the stench.

“What...” she whispered. It couldn’t be her food. She’d packed her lunch herself in the morning, and she’d used fresh ingredients.

Yet as she placed her hand further inside, she felt a viscous substance coating her hand, the feel of it making her skin erupt in goosebumps. But it wasn’t just that substance that she came into contact with. There was something else. Something solid and...

Without any preliminaries, she grabbed whatever it was, pulling it out from the bag.

Years of being mocked and scrutinized had given her the experience to know what to expect—or at least to prepare herself. Before she even saw what she held in her hand she was aware of the sudden silence and the fact that everyone was staring at her.

Immediately, though everything rebelled inside of her, she schooled her features. And when she pulled the rotting body of a rat—a big, corpulent rat—she barely stopped herself from spilling the contents of her stomach on the ground.

Her hand came out covered in blood, guts, and some noxious substance that made the rat even more disgusting—was it feces? Noelle didn’t want to ponder that. Not when all eyes were on her.

What were they expecting? That she would swoon? Be sick? Or that she would devolve into hysterics and decide she would withdraw from the competition?

On the outside, she put on the strongest front. She lifted her chin up, straightened her spine and looked everyone in the eye.

Low gasps erupted in the room, just as whispers traveled from one end to another—some calling her disgusting, a freak, and some a psycho. Because how could someone *not* react at seeing the dead rat in her bag?

Of course, maybe she'd murdered it herself—another rumor that started floating around.

“Rat killer.”

Noelle was aware this must have been a coordinated attack. Going by the way they were all banding together against her, she wagered they must have thought they could deter her from entering the competition with this little prank.

She took a couple of steps, stopping in front of the crowd.

“I gather you’re not a fan of dead rat flavor?” she asked with a straight face, befuddling the other students even more.

From the corner of her eye, she could see Ann Marie at the end of the room, watching her smugly.

Noelle’s lip twitched, as did something deep within her—something that wanted blood.

Before she could help herself—before she could think *anything* through—she went to the water dispenser. Lifting the lid, she dumped the bloody rat into the water supply before anyone could move or say anything.

And as she turned around, she found everyone speechless.

“Well, too bad now,” she smiled sweetly. “Enjoy,” she said as she made to leave, not even bothering to take her bag with her.

On her way out, though, she stopped by Ann Marie’s side. The girl was still giving her a smug look.

Noelle lifted a brow as she regarded her, and before the girl could move, Noelle brought her bloodied palm to her face, wiping all the rat fluids on her face before pushing her fingers into Ann Marie’s mouth.

“Oops,” Noelle gave a fake cry of alarm. “Does that make you a cannibal now, Annie dear? Since you’ve tasted your own species and all that.”

Shock, then outrage appeared on Ann Marie’s face, but before she could give in to her outburst, Noelle was already gone, finding the nearest bathroom and locking herself inside to scrub everything from her body.

Disgust rolled inside her stomach, and she gagged a few times before she got herself under control.

She wouldn’t let them.

She couldn’t let them bully her into quitting the competition.

Noelle stayed in the bathroom until close to her designated time. Still shaken from the encounter, she didn’t know how she made herself presentable enough to go backstage and wait for her turn.

She barely stepped inside the room when the sound of the piano from the stage enveloped her, the familiarity of the melody startling.

Noelle blinked.

There were a few other people around, but they didn’t seem to pay her any attention. Not as she wobbly made her way to a chair and certainly not as she plopped herself rather ungraciously in that seat.

She knew the schedule well enough—she’d made sure to memorize it so she would be right on time. As such, she was more than aware that the one currently playing was Ann Marie.

But the piece... There weren’t just a few similar notes. It was an entire succession of them.

Her body froze, her eyes wide as she stared at the wall in front of her.

It was her piece. She was sure of it. But how...

How the hell had Ann Marie gotten her piece?

Worst of all? It was the one Noelle had been most proud—the one who'd squeezed every bit of emotion she was capable of. It had been a struggle to put the last notes on to the paper—one that had haunted her for days on end unlike ever before.

And now... It was all in vain.

Though Ann Marie was playing the unfinished version of the play, Noelle knew she could never play it herself again, nor could she explain that it had been *her* piece Ann Marie had stolen. Besides a few undated manuscript sheets, what proof did she have?

Her heart in her throat, she felt panic swell inside of her.

She didn't know what to do. It was as simple as that.

From the outside, she looked eerily still, sitting in her chair and simply staring up ahead. Yet inside, her entire being was weeping.

Not only for the sweat and tears she'd put into that melody, but also for the fact that it had been so intrinsically *her* that she felt her own personality had been stolen and modified into a mockery of a replica.

She noted the slight changes Ann Marie had added to it, and that only served to enrage Noelle further.

What the hell was she going to do?

She didn't know how long she spent so utterly still and deep in thought. She heard the audience clapping after which her name was called out loud.

Her head whipped up, panic welling inside of her. Her limbs felt like mush, her core trembling in fear, anger and sadness.

Yet she didn't run away.

She put one foot in front of the other until she reached the stage. Until she bowed in front of the audience, absentmindedly noticing her mother in the crowd. She moved

until she found herself in front of the piano, the haze covering her field of view leaving her absolutely lost and aimless.

But beneath it all there was still a glimmer of conviction.

Noelle was still determined to not let *anyone* get the best of her.

It took her a moment to get herself under control, but she'd always been able to show a strong front even when she was crumbling on the inside. So she took advantage of that experience to add an air of confidence to her movements. Her features were serene, but locked tight in concentration. To everyone watching, she knew exactly what she was about to do even though she was stepping into foreign territory.

She still had her first piece. So she played it. She threw herself into the music and the work she'd put in for months on end. Her hands were playing the rehearsed sound while her brain was quickly trying to catch up with everything that had happened in order to find a solution.

If there was one thing Noelle knew, it was that she would not let anyone step all over her.

She would win.

As her first piece came to an end, she paused, a slight smile on her lips as she accepted the clapping of the audience.

But soon, the moment of truth came.

Noelle stared at the white keys, and the black that made for a mosaic of extremities. She stared it for a moment too long before she released a deep breath.

She could do it.

Her previous piece had been about the power of love—albeit a topic she was entirely unfamiliar with. She'd composed it by vicariously experiencing the emotions the characters in her favorite show did. Retrospectively, she would agree that maybe that was why she'd been unable to finish the piece—why she'd been forever dissatisfied with it. Because it was all fake emotion, fake love, fake empathy.

It was all fake.

But this time, it wouldn't be.

Maybe it was because she'd tried so hard to make her sound everything she *wasn't*, she'd always gone for a brisk and bright tone. Despite what she felt inside—despite every experience that made her who she was.

Not anymore...

The moment her fingers touched the keys, a mournful, soulful sound escaped. It was the fates weeping in front of the tragedy even they were unable to prevent, for one event put the other into motion. Humans were given free will, which then triggered the fall.

Noelle had never been particularly religious, despite her family's catholic leaning.

Yet in that moment she could see it all in perspective.

She could see the potential for good. But more than anything, she saw the intention for evil.

One note after another, her eyes closed as her sorrows bled into the keys, the sound emanating through the auditorium one that spoke of hope and hopelessness—the two so intertwined there was no longer a middle path.

For the first time, Noelle didn't play about other people.

She played about herself. About the pain she'd never shared with anyone—the pain no one wanted to acknowledge.

Through a succession of notes, she was able to show the world everything it never wanted to see.

I am human.

I hurt.

I have feelings.

I want to give up.

But I won't...

Her melody was a testament to human endurance—one that no one could imagine a fifteen-year old would be capable of conveying, least of all understanding.

Tears coated her lashes as she gave herself to the music, drawing everything from deep within her.

She didn't dare to look at the audience, afraid she would be harshly judged for the truth she'd revealed.

But what she didn't know was that the audience wasn't judging. It was feeling. Every tear Noelle shed, everyone else shed it too.

And when the piece came to an end, an eerie stillness descended upon the auditorium. No one dared move, no one made a sound.

Almost as if they'd been locked in a trance, no one wanted to wake up.

On trembling legs, Noelle rose from the piano, walking slowly to the front of the stage and doing her obligatory bow.

Yet just as she bent to greet the audience, she was met with a standing ovation—one that shook her to her core.

People stood up. Some were still crying. Some were so overwhelmed they couldn't move.

And Noelle... Noelle felt *seen*.

7. NOELLE

“Didn’t I tell you she’d win?” Cisco sported a smug expression as he playfully teased his wife. Yuyu simply shook her head at him, a smile playing at her lips.

Noelle blushed, her cheeks turning a deep shade of red as she looked down.

Never in her wildest dreams would she have imagined she would, indeed, win after her piece had been stolen. She couldn’t even remember most of what had happened on the stage.

It was like she’d lost herself to the music.

For the first time in her life, she’d truly been one with the music.

“We saw the recording,” Yuyu commented, taking Noelle’s hands in her own and giving them a comforting squeeze. “You were spectacular. Truly, I felt the emotion and I wasn’t even there.”

They were celebrating at a restaurant in the city, and Noelle felt a little flustered at being invited to such a fancy establishment.

Though her family was rich, she’d never felt it. Her mother had always been the one in charge of her budget, and she could get a little stingy with money, especially when it came to all the items Noelle wanted but Elena disapproved of.

It had only been after her twelfth birthday that Cisco had intervened, personally handing Noelle an allowance—a sum that increased yearly as her needs increased, too.

Noelle bought only strict necessities, but the rest of the money she saved up, knowing she would at one point need it. As such, she'd never been used to riches, or the finer things in life.

Yes, their house was big, they had guards and servants. But to her it was all the same.

More than anything, because she'd always been seen as a pest—and a delinquent one at that—she'd never been out with her mother or her friends. And as Noelle had no friends of her own...well, she just never went out.

She tried to keep to a minimum the way she kept looking around in awe, the entire place was more luxurious than what she was used to. Then there was the food. Noelle didn't think she'd ever eaten finer food in her life.

“Thank you,” Noelle murmured in a soft voice.

She hadn't anticipated the response to her improvisation would be so intense.

Even her mother, who usually had something to criticize, had been dead quiet as she'd taken one look at Noelle and given her a sharp nod before leaving.

Her mother, quiet? That in itself was unheard of.

But though her performance had been received extremely well, Noelle couldn't help but feel self-conscious about it. In her mind, she'd shown too much to the world and she wished she could bury her head in the sand every time she encountered someone who'd heard her play.

Then there had been her meeting with Ann Marie after she'd finished her performance.

“So you're a rat and a thief, now?” Noelle had asked, regarding the girl with pity in her eyes.

“Can you prove it?” Ann Marie had raised her chin up high, meeting Noelle’s gaze head on.

Noelle had to agree that for their enmity, the girl had never backed down from an argument.

“Maybe I can’t,” Noelle had shrugged. “But does it matter now? I won and you...” she’d taken a step closer. “You lost,” she’d whispered in her ear.

Ann Marie had stiffened at the words, and for a moment Noelle had thought she was going to hit her. She wouldn’t put it past Ann Marie to resort to violence if she didn’t get what she wanted. She’d shown signs of it before but the conflict had always been interrupted by a teacher before it could escalate.

Looking in her eyes, however, Noelle had noticed the pure seeds of hatred.

Ann Marie wasn’t just jealous of her. She detested her.

Somehow, the vehemence of that emotion had given Noelle pause, a shiver going down her back.

Noelle may be snappy herself, and she certainly never took something without giving back with equal measure. It was just how she was built.

Hit me once and I’ll hit you twice.

She didn’t attack unprovoked. But once she was provoked, however, she tended to go for the jugular, biting and rarely letting go. And as someone who recognized herself as troubled, Noelle sensed something eerily similar in Ann Marie. There was something lurking beneath her polished façade, and Noelle didn’t like it one bit.

“I feel sorry for you, Annie,” she’d sported her signature smile as she’d looked the girl up and down with pity in her gaze. “You might have been a good player on your own. But like this... You’ll never be on my level,” Noelle smirked. “I’ll play at Carnegie Hall and you...” she’d paused at the girl’s murderous expression. “You’ll probably beg mommy and daddy for spare parts, isn’t that right?”

“You’re dead, Noelle,” Ann Marie spat, taking a step forward just as her hand had shot out, going for Noelle’s hair. She’d barely moved out of the way, catching her wrist. But she hadn’t noticed the other hand, and she’d felt the sting of a slap. “Enjoy your win for now. I promise it won’t last for much longer.”

Ann Marie had given her one last look of disgust before she’d walked away.

Noelle shook herself. It didn’t do well to dwell on unpleasant memories. And Ann Marie was becoming increasingly nastier. The rat prank, which Noelle was sure had been her work, then the theft and her parting words?

She was convinced there was something wrong with the girl—something *morbidly* wrong.

Otherwise how could she steal her piece and perform it in front of everyone so shamelessly? How could she look Noelle in the eye and not react at the accusation, merely inquiring on whether it could be proven?

Unfortunately for Noelle, they were bound to cross paths again and again until graduation. She just hoped nothing of this nature would occur again.

“I want to take you shopping tomorrow,” Yuyu suddenly said, shaking Noelle from her reverie.

“Shopping?” she squeaked, her eyes widening.

“For the concert. We’ll get you the prettiest dress,” Yuyu intoned excitedly.

Unlike the school competition, the actual concert did not require all performers to wear the same thing. While there was still a dress code, as was the case with every concert of that caliber, Noelle could have more input.

Yuyu seemed more excited at the prospect of shopping than her, so Noelle merely nodded. She wouldn’t mind spending more time with Yuyu as she loved her company.

“Then it’s set. You can have your girls’ day and Val and I will have a guys’ day,” Cisco winked and everyone laughed.

It was a known fact what a guys’ day implied for Cisco and Val—ignoring each other while focusing on their own games. In silence.

Noelle couldn’t help but giggle at the mental image. But if it worked for them, then why not?

The dinner went better than she could have imagined. Cisco and Yuyu listened to her thoughts and never belittled her for her opinions. She wasn’t very talkative, but slowly she found herself opening herself more.

It was even better the following weekend when Noelle and Yuyu finally found the time for their girls’ day.

Yuyu was so happy at the prospect of shopping that Noelle couldn’t find the heart to tell her she wasn’t very keen on it. Especially when Yuyu listed an entire itinerary she’d prepared for the two of them.

They started off with brunch before they went to a department store in search of the perfect dress.

“Isn’t this place expensive?” Noelle asked when Yuyu dragged her inside yet another store. This one’s name, however, even Noelle could recognize and she was aware it was a luxurious brand.

“You need the best. Don’t argue with me,” Yuyu pouted, and Noelle found herself smiling.

“Ok, have it your way,” she sighed, yet her expression was one of pure happiness.

She supposed other girls did this with their mothers, yet she’d never had that before. As soon as that thought crossed her mind, she was even more determined to enjoy herself.

They walked into the showroom, and Yuyu pinpointed a few dresses that would suit Noelle’s shape.

“You’re small,” Yuyu apprised her carefully, “but not so small here,” she winked playfully at Noelle as she pointed to her breasts.

Immediately, Noelle flushed and looked away.

She wasn’t used to people pointing out that part of her body. She knew her body had changed a lot as she’d gone through puberty, and her breasts had seemingly *overdeveloped*. But she’d always tried to mask that by wearing loose shirts, or anything that would cover the cleavage area.

“Don’t go shy on me, now,” Yuyu chuckled. “You look gorgeous, dear. A lot of women would kill for that shape.”

“Even pocket sized?” Noelle felt the need to ask in a dry tone.

Yuyu stilled, a smile playing at her lips.

“Pocket sized,” she repeated before laughing. “I like that. And I bet boys like it too,” she added suggestively.

Once more, Noelle found herself reddening from head to toe. She supposed it was due to the fact that she’d never had anyone talk to her about that before.

“Boys don’t usually like me,” she replied in a small voice, causing Yuyu’s brows to lift in question.

Clearing her throat, Noelle continued.

“They think I’m intimidating,” she mumbled. “Not that I want them to like me,” she had to clarify. “I don’t like them either.”

Yuyu merely smiled at her gauche attempts at explaining herself.

“If you do, you know you can talk to me, right? I never had anyone to tell me about those things either, so I learned everything on my own,” she told her in a soft tone, holding on to her hand and assuring Noelle of her support through touch.

It was something Noelle had noticed about Yuyu before. She was a very tactile person, and she always touched her to

convey her feelings. Noelle found she didn't mind it. Especially as she could feel the warmth radiating from Yuyu and transferring into her.

"What did you have to learn?" Noelle blinked, surprised to see Yuyu herself blush at the question.

"Romantic stuff. Emotional and physical," she quickly added when she saw Noelle's confusion. Though her cheeks were becoming redder and redder, Yuyu continued. "I had no experience with men before Cisco. Not that your brother had any either," she added with a giggle. "But it made for a few... interesting situations. A lot of misunderstandings," she smiled fondly as she remembered. "So if you need any help don't hesitate to ask me. Maybe I can offer some of my tried and tested wisdom."

Noelle blinked. She didn't know whether Yuyu was offering to give her sex tips, or maybe something else. Whatever it was, she didn't think she wanted to know. It was already more than embarrassing to think of Cisco and Yuyu like...that.

"Thank you," she murmured, her eyes going right and left as she looked for an opportunity to change the subject. And she spotted it in the form of the most beautiful dress she'd ever seen.

Though it wasn't entirely black, as she would have liked, the interwoven white piece added to the shape of the gown and Noelle knew somehow she'd found her dress.

"That. I want that," she declared.

"Heavens, that's wonderful. Try it on! I can't wait to see how it looks on you," Yuyu exclaimed as she waved over a sales assistant and asked for Noelle's size.

Not a few minutes after and Noelle found herself in the changing room. The dress fit like a glove. The entire upper part of the gown was a creamy white shade that slowly turned into black from her waist down. The cut was absolutely

stunning on Noelle's body shape as it emphasized her small waist and curved hips.

"It's perfect, Noelle," Yuyu declared in awe when she saw her. "You just need a pair of shoes to complete the look and you'll be absolutely stunning. So much so I'm afraid people might forget to listen to you play," Yuyu joked, and Noelle cracked a smile.

She'd never thought herself particularly beautiful. But in that dress she *felt* beautiful.

After paying for the dress, they checked a few more stores, finding a complementary pair of shoes before going for ice cream and calling it a day.

"Thank you so much for this, Yuyu," Noelle told her sister-in-law as they got back to Cisco's home. "I had the best time today," she told her honestly.

"I'm so glad to hear that," Yuyu replied, stepping forward to give her a big hug. "You're going to be spectacular. I just know it," she whispered in her hair.

For the first time, Noelle thought so too.

Everything was going well. Her relationship with music had improved considerably, almost as if by tapping to a hidden part within herself she'd unleashed her true potential. Temporarily living with Cisco and Yuyu before the concert made things even better because there was no more added stress of Elena criticizing her every move.

And though Noelle was bursting with happiness, she should have known that good things never last—at least not for her.

As the day of the concert quickly approached, Noelle practiced nonstop to make sure she would give her best on the stage. Though her performance was short, and just one of tens of others for the day, she had to make her time count.

After a few meetings with the musical director at Carnegie Hall, her piece had been approved and she'd joined the stage

rehearsals.

Noelle hadn't known what to expect, but she'd thought she would be able to interact with other musicians. As most of them were older, more experienced and concerned only with their own performance, she'd found it hard to connect with anyone. She'd get at most a few minutes of small talk, and though she tried more than ever before to be more open and social, she didn't manage much.

That was the only drawback of the entire experience. But she resolved to not let that stop her from enjoying herself. After all, she had the chance to perform on one of the biggest stages in the world.

With that in mind, she applied herself even more, so when the big day arrived, she was more than prepared.

That didn't mean that her anxiety wasn't at an all high peak.

"We'll be right in the front row," Yuyu assured her as they reached the venue. "And your teacher and classmates will be backstage. Everyone is cheering you on."

Noelle nodded, the urge to bring her fingers to her lips and bite her nails overwhelming.

"Thank you," she gave Yuyu a tremulous smile, turning back and heading to the dressing room.

A bodyguard was by her side, carrying her dress and shoes.

"Mr. DeVille asked me to stay by your side," he said as they reached the dressing room. "I will be outside the door."

Noelle nodded absentmindedly. The last thing she wanted to worry about was the safety of the venue. Given the fact that it was a public event, anyone could purchase a ticket and attend. She was aware her family had some...shady dealings, and as such had made many enemies. But she'd never given it much thought before.

From a young age she'd been shadowed by bodyguards that it had become second-nature to have them around.

Entering the small room she'd been allocated, she took a seat in front of a mirror. There were a couple other girls inside, both chatting animatedly.

Noelle gave them a shy smile as she opened her make-up pouch and proceeded to add some finishing touches to her face.

Her performance was in an hour, but she didn't want to dress too soon for fear she might stain the dress with make-up, particularly foundation. She loved the gown too much, and considering her penchant to forget to mind her clothes, she didn't want to take any chances.

"Noelle DeVille?" One of the girls frowned as she read her name on the dress cover.

"Yes," she attempted to smile.

"Odd. I thought Pierce was going to perform."

"Pierce?" Noelle frowned at hearing Ann Marie's last name.

"That's right. Everyone was so sure Pierce was going to perform today."

Noelle blinked, unsure why they would have thought that.

"I won the competition," she clarified.

The girls seemed confused, and as they started speaking to Noelle, it soon became clear to her that, for some reason, Ann Marie *should* have won. Maybe it had been arranged, or maybe highly expected. Suddenly, it dawned on Noelle why everyone had been so cold and aloof to her.

They thought she'd stolen the chance from Ann Marie.

But why... She'd won fair and square. Ann Marie had been the one to *steal* from her, and even that had not been enough for her to win.

Her mood soured considerably when she realized that Ann Marie's parents must have tried to influence the jury in some way.

Slowly, she turned back to the mirror, mulling over what she'd found out while pretending to apply some more make-up.

If she hadn't blown everyone away with her improvisation, she would have likely lost.

The realization was startling, and it only served to make her angrier.

Yes, she could admit that Ann Marie was a good pianist. But Noelle had always been *better*.

Her hands balled into fists at the injustice of it all. And she could never prove either.

The girls eventually left for their performance, and though Noelle initially watched each act on the screen, she quickly lost interest. It was only going to distract her more from her own focus, and the last thing she needed right now was to compare herself to other people. Instead, she continued to mentally go over her piece while putting on her dress and getting ready for the big moment.

Looking into the mirror, she took herself in, unable to believe it was *her*.

Though she'd tried the dress on before, it had never looked so...elegant. She felt as if she could conquer the world, let alone that one room of spectators. Confidence flowed through her veins and with a few words of encouragement, she was ready to go.

She'd worked too hard for this moment not to take advantage of it. She'd worked her entire life to be seen as her own person—not a freak. To an extent, she'd managed that through music. And that night she was going to give everyone a deeper insight into *Noelle*—what made her tick and what made her everything she was.

Finally, she was ready to reveal it all to the world.

If at the competition it had been an improvised and impromptu performance, now it was a purposeful succession of notes that gave everyone a glimpse into her soul.

She was excited. *She was terrified.* But she knew this was the only way she could leave her mark on her audience. By being her authentic self and playing about her life experience.

Deep in her thought, Noelle barely realized someone was knocking at the door. Startled, she turned, her eyes widened as she took in Miss Allison, her piano teacher, and a few of her classmates holding a cake.

“We wanted to cheer you on before you went on stage,” Miss Allison said, a bright smile on her face.

Noelle’s lips twitched and she couldn’t help herself from returning the smile.

“Thank you so much,” she said as she welcomed everyone inside.

There were five other students, some that she knew, but others she didn’t. But she was certain none were on the piano track. She assumed Miss Allison had done her best to get a group of people to show support even though it was clear no one from the piano department had wanted to come.

Noelle didn’t mind it, though, and she appreciated the gesture.

“Fifteen more minutes before the big moment,” Miss Allison said as she placed the cake on the table. “Do you think you can eat a bit of cake, or should we leave this for later?”

“Maybe later?” Noelle added sheepishly. She was so anxious that she couldn’t even bring herself to take a sip of water.

“Fair,” the teacher chuckled. “You’re probably overwhelmed right now.”

Noelle nodded. Overwhelmed was putting it mildly. She was doing her best not to visibly shake in front of everyone.

“You have nothing to worry about. You will be spectacular as always,” she praised gently. Suddenly, a few other students joined in to tell her the same.

“I’ve never heard anyone play like you before. I know you’ll do well,” one student added, and Miss Allison nodded.

“I’ve been teaching the piano for almost three, and I’ve never seen anyone play the way you do, Noelle. You deserve to be on that stage. You know that, don’t you?”

Noelle blushed at her words.

“Thank you, that means a lot to me.”

“You’re usually quiet and too humble for your talent. But I want you to grasp on this chance and show them what you’re capable of—what we all know you’re capable of.”

Noelle’s eyes widened at her teacher’s words, and she belatedly found herself nodding.

Everyone was so nice to her that she had a hard time getting used to it.

“I will,” she declared proudly.

And she would. She would take this chance and show everyone that she was worthy of being on such a big stage. She’d reworked her winning piece and Noelle thought she’d improved it, making it more emotional and immersive for an audience.

She chatted for a while with them and she couldn’t help the warmth that enveloped her. She realized people didn’t hate her—some actually appreciated her and her talent.

Suddenly, though, there was another knock at the door.

Everyone turned, eyes wide as they saw Ann Marie walk inside—the last person anyone would have expected.

She looked timid. Ann Marie was *never* timid.

Noelle frowned as she saw her advance into the room.

“I came to wish Noelle good luck,” she said in a soft voice. One that Noelle knew was *not* Ann Marie’s default.

Just what was she playing at?

But the more she talked, the more everyone relaxed, seemingly buying her words.

“Ann Marie, it’s so good to see you!” Miss Allison exclaimed, going to her and hugging her. “This is what I was talking about guys. Camaraderie. You must support each other in your journey,” she continued with her speech.

Noelle, on her part, did not believe for one moment that it was a good thing that Ann Marie had come to *wish her luck*. At least not after everything that had happened and what she’d just heard from the other performers.

Ann Marie was set to win the competition—probably had bribed some of the judges too.

And as she looked at her, all smiled and shy countenance, Noelle knew her appearance could mean nothing good.

“Go on. There are just a few more minutes before Noelle’s performance is set to start. You can give her your gift in person,” Miss Allison suggested.

It was at that point that Noelle noticed the nicely wrapped present Ann Marie was holding in her hands.

“For me?” Noelle blinked, taken aback by the turn of events.

“Of course, silly. It’s such a great opportunity to be on the stage tonight. I wanted you to have this,” she said as she tore at the packing to reveal a hair pin accompanied by a small white feather.

Noelle was so shocked by the fact that Ann Marie had brought her a gift that she was rooted to the spot, allowing the girl to march forward and place the pin in her hair.

“Why are you here?” Noelle whispered when Ann Marie was barely a breath away from her.

“Why do you think?” she asked in a blank voice. “I’m here to see the end,” she replied ambiguously.

“I won’t thank you for the pin. Not after you stole from me,” Noelle gritted her teeth. Still, she kept her voice low, not wanting her teacher or her classmate to become aware of the conflict going on between the two of them.

“I didn’t ask you, did I?” Ann Marie slowly smiled. Her lips stretched across her face, but the smile didn’t reach her eyes. Like it was painted on her face, it was as fake as the rest of her.

Noelle frowned. No matter how much she tried to study Ann Marie, she couldn’t read her. There was just this awful sensation as she looked at her—something akin to a thousand needles pricking at her skin.

“Why the hell are you here?” Noelle demanded, sick of her theatrics. “Because I know for sure you’re not here to congratulate me. So what’s your game?”

The first thought that went through Noelle’s mind was that Ann Marie wanted to sabotage her performance.

But *how*?

Deep down she knew something was wrong, yet she couldn’t pinpoint what.

“So paranoid, Noelle,” she gave a dry chuckle.

A loud sound announced the end of the first act and the beginning of the five minute intermission.

Everyone heard it.

Miss Allison’s expression turned soft as she looked at Noelle, giving her a quiet nod.

Noelle turned to grab her manuscript paper, preparing to go backstage. Yet as she moved, it was to find herself fitted against a blunt object.

Ann Marie's eyes were glassy as a sick smile tugged at her lips.

"Not so fast," she drawled slowly.

The people behind didn't seem to realize what was happening. Not until Miss Allison turned to look at Noelle expectantly but finding her unmoving.

"Noelle?"

She didn't answer.

Eyes fixed to Ann Marie, she looked the girl straight in the eye, not showing any type of fear.

"Don't tell me you're going to kill me now?" Noelle asked, a lopsided smile on her face.

Miss Allison moved, coming towards her before suddenly drawing to a halt, her eyes wide.

"Ann Marie... Is that..."

Ann Marie moved the gun higher, settling it against Noelle's temples.

"It's all your fault," she spat at Noelle, her gaze full of malice. "If it weren't for you, it would be *me* here. *Me* performing!"

Noelle didn't dare move an inch. Though she was about to faint at the sight of the gun, she didn't want to show any weakness.

"Ann Marie, please don't. We can talk about this. Right Noelle?" Miss Allison continued, putting one foot in front of the other.

"Don't!" Ann Marie yelled. "Don't move or I'll blow her brains."

Noelle stared unflinchingly at the deranged girl in front of her. Though she was afraid that Ann Marie would pull the trigger any moment, she also couldn't help but feel pity for her and what had brought her to this state.

But she also knew that pitying Ann Marie would only worsen things, as would trying to talk to her as Miss Allison was doing.

“Do it,” Noelle suddenly said, lifting her hand and placing it over Ann Marie’s. “Do it,” she repeated, staring into the girl’s eyes and the insanity she witnessed there. “Kill me. But that’s not going to give you a spot in the performance.”

“Noelle, shut up,” Miss Allison snapped. “You’re not helping.”

“On the contrary,” Noelle responded as she saw the slight twitch in Ann Marie’s lip. “This is exactly what Ann Marie needs to hear. That she’s a failure. That she couldn’t even win with a stolen piece.”

There was a gasp in the room, Noelle couldn’t be sure whom it belonged to. But she just continued.

“You didn’t know? Tell them, Ann Marie. Tell them how you stole your second piece from me. Or you’re too much of a coward for that?”

“Shut the fuck up,” the girl finally snapped, bringing the butt of the gun against Noelle’s head with enough force to make her wince in pain.

Yet Noelle didn’t move. She might hurt, but she was still alive. And as long as she lived, she would fight.

“Kill me. If you have the guts to do it,” Noelle dared again.

Miss Allison was freaking out, as were the other students.

Ann Marie gritted her teeth as she brought the gun against Noelle’s head again, this time settling the barrel under her jaw.

“Because of you, I lost everything,” she whispered in a broken voice, and Noelle noticed the tears swimming in her eyes before they fell down her cheeks. She was so close, she could see every little detail of her facial expressions. “Because of you...” she sniffled. “Everyone hates me. Even my own parents,” she croaked, evident pain in her voice. “Even my dad...” she trailed off.

Noelle blinked at the sudden confession. Yet as much as she wanted to feel sorry for Ann Marie, she couldn't. Certainly not with the barrel of a gun digging into her chin.

Taking advantage of that moment, Noelle leaned in. The gun stayed in place, as did Ann Marie's continuous threats.

Noelle's mouth was on the same level with Ann Marie's as she started speaking, telling the girl what she thought of her and her attempt and urging her to go on. She told her things she would one day be ashamed of, but she topped them off with two words.

"Do it."

Ann Marie was trembling from head to toe. Noelle would have felt similarly if she didn't know her life was at stake and every little word brought her closer to death or...to living.

And she wanted to live.

She might hate her life right now. She might hate herself. But there was one glimmer of hope that still existed—one that told her better days were to come. And she wanted to be there for it.

So she did it.

She told Ann Marie once again.

"Kill me."

"Noelle!" Miss Allison yelled. The other students were also talking. Yet she only saw Ann Marie's sorrowful expression.

A few more words and everything happened in a quick succession.

Noelle drew back, a smug smile on her face as she watched a terrified Ann Marie make the decision of her life.

The door suddenly burst open, Noelle's bodyguard taking his stance.

There were words spoken, shouted, *screamed*. Yet she didn't pay them any mind.

Her eyes were solely on Ann Marie.

Make your choice—she told her with her gaze.

The sound of a gunshot reverberated in the air, closely followed by a second one.

Noelle kept herself still, her eyes wide open as blood, bone, and brain matter splattered all over her face and gown, the viscous substance sticking to her skin. For a moment, she saw her own death flash before her eyes. Lifting her blood-stained hands, she moved them around, clenching her fists in an attempt to convince herself that she was still alive.

And once glance at the floor told her the reality.

She was still alive. Ann Marie was *not*.

The girl was on the ground, her brains blown out by her own gun, blood leaking out of her back from the bodyguard's gun.

Everyone in the room was frozen in shock.

Miss Allison said something, but Noelle's ears were still reeling from the gunshot sound. Like a zombie, she barely forced herself to move.

"Someone call 991," a voice said, while another asked for the cops.

All Noelle knew was that she was still alive. And when her name was announced on the stage, she didn't linger to bemoan someone who'd almost killed her—someone who'd chosen her own fate. No, this was *her* moment, as it had been from the beginning.

Ann Marie would not ruin it. Not even from the dead.

Stepping over the dead body, Noelle's cheeks twitched as she arranged her features into a plastic smile. People were staring at her, and at the way blood clung to her skin and hair, but she didn't care.

She still had something to do.

Miss Allison tried to stop her, asking her to stop and wait for the police and paramedics. Noelle gave her no mind as she continued to smile.

“The show must go on,” she murmured as she went straight for the stage, bypassing all attempts to stop her. She ignored the strange looks or the whispered words all around.

She simply stepped on to the stage and played.

For the audience, it was just a performance.

For Noelle, it was the end.

Just...the end.

8. NOELLE

“Do you realize what this means, Noelle?” Cisco asked her as he perused the contents of the document in front of him.

Noelle nodded.

“I don’t want to go back to school either,” she confirmed, though she didn’t have much choice after the school had decided to expel her.

In a moment of shock coupled with what a doctor had called a manic episode, Noelle had performed on the stage of the celebrated Carnegie Hall covered in blood and brain matter from head to toe.

Initially, the audience had thought the gory display was part of the performance since Noelle’s music had taken a lugubrious turn. But when the police arrived at the scene, evacuating everyone so they could conduct their investigation, they quickly realized the blood was very real.

Though Ann Marie’s death had been ruled a suicide, Noelle had been judged harshly for her actions and the fact that she’d gone on to perform in such conditions.

Multiple news outlets had run the story, calling her the *modern-day Carrie*, with some even going as far as to suggest she might have had something to do with Ann Marie’s death.

Of course, since there had been multiple witnesses at the scene who’d corroborated Noelle’s account that it had been a suicide, the police had not pursued the matter further.

Regardless of the lack of legal implications, Noelle's reputation was in shambles. Not only were people reviling her for her gall to go on stage covered in the bodily fluids of her deceased classmates, but they were also calling her a psychopath.

Multiple blogs had already published their own conspiracy theories, and with accounts from multiple classmates who'd never liked Noelle, she suddenly became *persona non grata everywhere*. It didn't matter that her name had been crossed out because she was a minor, or that her face had been blurred out. Everyone knew about *pianist N who'd caused her classmate's death*.

She couldn't even go outside for fear she might run into a media outlet looking for an interview, let alone go to school—*even if she hadn't been expelled*.

The school's reasoning had been simple. They did not want the bad publicity associated with Noelle and had done everything in their power to separate themselves from her.

"Noelle," Cisco sighed. "We tried to make this go away but..." he trailed off, a weary look on his face. He would have been able to make it go away had she not performed that damned piece. Worst of all, someone had obtained CCTV images which showed her smiling after she'd left the crime scene—all more evidence for people to condemn her as the worst type of monster.

"Why is no one talking about the fact that she tried to kill me?" She looked up, meeting Cisco's gaze. "Why is no one talking about her stealing my piece? Or playing ugly pranks on me? Why am *I* the bad guy?"

"People always love a show. And you gave them exactly that," Cisco added dryly.

"But you don't believe that I did what they say, do you?" She asked carefully, watching for his expression.

"Thomas gave us an account of what happened. It was clearly suicide," Cisco replied carefully.

It didn't escape Noelle that he never once said he believed her.

She blinked.

"If that's all for today, may I be excused?"

"Of course. We'll see you at dinner."

Noelle nodded absentmindedly as she went upstairs to her room.

The moment she opened the door, though, the first thing that caught her eye was the hair pin. The feather hair pin Ann Marie had given her.

"Do it. Kill me. It will only turn me into a martyr and you into an insane little girl who wasn't enough. Who will never be enough."

The words resounded in her head as she remembered the moment right before Ann Marie had died.

"I'll be the sacrifice and you'll forever be the lunatic who murdered me," she'd continued in an ominous tone. She'd taunted the girl, hoping to break her. Ironically enough, it had happened the other way around.

Noelle was the lunatic, and Ann Marie was the sanctified victim in the entire debacle—the innocent little lamb who'd succumbed to Noelle's vicious words.

Yet there was one gimmer of truth. Beyond all the unfounded insults thrown at Noelle, there was the unwavering reality that Ann Marie's death had not exactly been a suicide.

When her words had not worked, Noelle had realized Ann Marie had one goal, and one goal only.

To kill her.

She was too far gone in her hate and in her warped perceptions. She'd set out to kill Noelle and she was well on her way to do it.

And she would have succeeded had it not been for Noelle's quick thinking.

She'd leaned in and whispered all of the things Ann Marie would never be, striking her where it hurt. The moment she'd noted a reaction out of Ann Marie, her focus momentarily off, Noelle had pushed the gun away from her and towards Ann Marie.

They'd been so close that it had been entirely too easy to tip the barrel of the gun towards her face rather than Noelle's. And as soon as Ann Marie had noticed that, her finger had instinctively pressed down on the trigger, the bullet catching her in her jaw and blowing through her skull.

Noelle had been hit by the combination of bone and bodily fluids, and though it had hurt a little on impact, it had been nothing compared to what could have happened to her had she not moved the gun in time.

Thomas' shot had been fortuitous, but as Noelle remembered it, a few seconds too late.

Her entire body started trembling as she took a seat on her bed. Clenching her fists, she took a deep breath as she tried to regain control.

She had killed her—Ann Marie.

Yes, it had been a life and death situation. But Noelle had purposefully chosen herself over Ann Marie. She'd been in complete control, maneuvering the situation in her favor.

Did that make her a bad person?

She didn't know. And that was the crux of the issue.

Already one week had passed since the disaster from Carnegie Hall and she still did not know how to feel—or how to process what had happened.

She did feel revolted for the way she'd been portrayed online and maligned on social media. That *pissed* her off.

But guilt...where was the guilt?

She knew there had to be some guilt—*needed* it to be there. Yet she couldn't find it in her to be sorry.

She'd chosen herself. Like she'd always done before. She'd put herself first.

There had been a time when she'd tried to get to the bottom of it, asking herself why would she do that considering her life was far from perfect? That she barely had anyone cheering her in her corner. Ann Marie, on the other hand, had that in spades.

Noelle knew the girl had plenty of friends, and from what she'd observed, she was very well liked. The exact opposite of Noelle.

So what made *her* more worthy of living than Ann Marie?

Why had she chosen herself?

The more she thought about it, the more she realized she didn't *need* any external factors to be worthy. She didn't need others' validation to be a complete human being.

Noelle had always been on her own. She'd never had friends, and she'd never been liked by people. Still, that hadn't changed her own view of herself.

She *knew* who she was—blunt, honest, *real*. So what if people didn't like her for who she was? She liked herself plenty.

She was aware she had negative qualities—who didn't? The issue was that people had always overlooked her positive ones for her negative ones.

Online, it was even worse.

Though Noelle had been the rightful performer that night—though she'd won the competition fair and square—people accused her of bullying her classmate and driving her to suicide. The fact that she'd been so blasé about her death made her even more of a monster.

Noelle had been unable to help herself as she'd searched the internet about the incident. Yet the more she read, the more outraged she became.

Even in death, Ann Marie was being a pest.

So Noelle had done what she'd considered best at the time—which, admittedly, might not have been the *best* idea—and she'd created multiple accounts in which she'd tried to come to her own defense.

The result?

She'd been even more bullied online. Other users had been quick to point out it was probably a sympathizer or Noelle herself. Because it was impossible for her to have *anyone* on her side, wasn't it?

If before Noelle had felt alone, now that the entire world *and* the internet were against her, she felt even *more* so.

And if things weren't already bad enough, that night at dinner she received the worst blow of all.

“You should go back upstate,” her brother suddenly told her.

Her hand froze on her fork. Blinking, she asked him to repeat his words.

“It's not safe for you to be in the city anymore. I think it's best if you went back home.”

“But I won't go out,” she protested.

“It makes no difference. It's just a matter of time before people find our address and start camping out in front of the building to get a shot of you. You're better off upstate.”

“But...”

“I've already talked to our mother and she agrees with me.”

Yuyu was silent by his side, her gaze flickering between her and Cisco.

“I don’t want to stay with mamma,” she said in a small voice.

Normally, she would have reacted with outrage, yet at that moment she had none of her usual force.

Her mother...

She hadn’t seen her since the incident, and even then, it had been momentarily and with Cisco and Yuyu present. Elena hadn’t dared do anything she would have normally done—yell, slap, or curse her out.

But to move back home? To go back to living with her?

“I’m sorry, Noelle. But you’ll have to,” Cisco stated, his harsh tone indicating it was the end of the discussion. “The driver will take you back tomorrow. You should pack in advance.”

Too stunned at his decree, she simply excused herself from the table.

“You were too hard on her, love,” Yuyu commented after Noelle went upstairs.

“I was. And she didn’t even talk back,” he pursed his lips. “I’ll have a doctor discreetly check in on her. I don’t think it’s normal.”

“She could stay with us. You don’t need to send her back home,” Yuyu tried to reason with him, but Cisco wouldn’t have it.

“No. She needs to be away from all this for a while. It’s not good, Yuyu. It’s not good at all,” he added grimly.

Cisco, more than Noelle, knew that the situation was even worse than what was portrayed in the media. Despite the fact that various sources were speculating on Noelle’s involvement due to her behavior at the concert, there had been no evidence to condemn her as officially guilty.

But Cisco was the only reason why there had been *no* evidence.

With Thomas' additional shot, Ann Marie's parents had asked for an autopsy to determine the cause of death.

Though the autopsy had yielded no conclusive evidence as to whether it had been Thomas' shot or her own that killed her, it had revealed something very interesting about the angle of the shot.

It had been skewed.

So skewed, in fact, that Ann Marie couldn't have turned her hand in such a manner.

Ballistics experts had weighed in, and the conclusion had been that someone must have held the gun to her chin when she'd accidentally pressed on the trigger, making the case a homicide instead of suicide.

Of course, none of that information had ever seen the light of the day.

Cisco had made sure to bury everything pertaining to the case and pay off the experts from testifying. And with Ann Marie's parents demanding her remains be cremated, it had been the perfect opportunity to get rid of all the evidence.

The official reports stated that it had been suicide, and that was what *everyone* needed to believe.

Due to the controversial nature of the scandal and the fact that people were bent on scrutinizing Noelle's every move, he couldn't risk anyone looking closer into the case.

And just as he'd told Yuyu, he didn't think it was normal. Not how Noelle had reacted in the immediate aftermath of Ann Marie's death, and not now, a week after.

Yuyu was worried about her too, and Cisco had asked her to keep a close eye on Noelle and tell him if she noticed anything out of the ordinary.

While Cisco looked at the facts and concluded something was wrong, Yuyu looked at Noelle's emotive displays, determining the same thing.

“I wasn’t much older than her when I killed my first target,” Yuyu had told him. “Remember how I reacted?”

Cisco did remember. It had been one of the hardest moments in his life, and one where he could *almost* empathize with another person. Though her target deserved it, Yuyu had been guilt stricken for weeks afterwards, shutting herself from the world and becoming a shell of her person. She couldn’t even talk about it without bursting into tears.

That she’d become one of the most wanted assassins in the country’s history was a testament to her resilience and the fact that she’d learned how to regulate her emotions—how to separate her job from who she was.

Still, the fact that Cisco had basically forced her into a life that was so antithetic to who she was at her core was one of his deepest regrets. Yet once more, he’d only realized that too late.

Always too late...

He didn’t want to make the same mistake now with his sister.

And Yuyu’s conclusions about her behavior had only reinforced his worries.

Noelle had *not* acted as someone who’d had a hand in a person’s death. She didn’t even act as someone who’d seen death up close, which could be just as traumatizing.

And that begged the question...*why?*

The following day, Noelle was sent back upstate. Upon arriving, Elena pretended to be the model of decorum while other people were around, but as soon as they were alone, she finally showed her true colors—and the contempt she held Noelle for turning her life upside down.

Noelle was unpacking her luggage, still bummed about returning home when the door to her room suddenly burst open.

“Damn you, Noelle! Damn you to hell,” Elena yelled.

Noelle barely had time to turn when Elena pulled on her hair, her fingers lodged in her scalp. She gave a small yelp of pain as she stumbled to her knees. But Elena had plenty of time to continue, slap after slap coming down on her face.

“Stop,” Noelle pleaded. “Stop, please,” she whimpered when she felt the sting in her scalp, only to see a big chunk of her hair in her mother’s grasp.

“I can’t show my face anywhere because of you! Everyone is asking me about the murderer of a daughter—the monster I gave birth to,” she spat at Noelle, kicking her to the ground.

Curling into a fetal position, Noelle attempted to regulate her breath long enough to pull herself together. But Elena wasn’t done.

Slap after slap, she couldn’t dodge any of the blows as they reddened her skin, the pain almost too much.

Yet Noelle didn’t give her mother the satisfaction of seeing her cry.

A few whimpers were wrenched from her when the pain was too much, but other than that, Noelle kept a stoic expression on her face.

She didn’t know how long the entire thing lasted. At the end, both Noelle and Elena were breathing hard.

“You’re grounded,” Elena eventually said as she took a step back. “You’re not allowed to get out of the house until everything dies down, you hear me?” The unspoken implication was clear—*if ever*.

Noelle didn’t reply to her, merely sitting on the floor and looking away from Elena.

Her mother continued to curse her out for what she perceived as the loss of her social status. It didn’t matter that Noelle’s full name had not been released to the press. Everyone had intuited it had been her, and the rumors had swept through Elena’s social circles, turning *her* into an outsider too.

Only when her mother left did Noelle finally find the strength to pick herself up, her mother's words swirling in her head.

Until everything died down? And how long was that? A year? Two? Until Elena could find someone to take Noelle off her hands?

Suddenly, tears pricked at her eyes, but it wasn't because of the pain. No, this was all for the future she'd never have. All the plans she'd made had disintegrated in the blink of an eye.

All the freedom she'd dreamed of... Her career, her life...

It was over. Really over.

For the first time in a week, Noelle couldn't keep herself in check anymore. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she let herself be one with her grief.

She was always bound to be the bad guy. *Always.*

For once, just for once, she wished she could be the *good* guy in someone's life.

That night, she cried until no more tears came out. She cried for all the hopes she'd built, for all the work she'd put in. She cried for the chances she'd never had and the futility of the moment.

Somehow, she knew that this time there was no way out.

She was *doomed*.

With her movements restricted and with the way Elena was watching her like a hawk, Noelle didn't have much to do at home. Everyone was involved in damage control, one way or another, while she was becoming a prisoner in her own home.

Even playing the piano proved useless.

Every time she sat down, placing her fingers on the keys, she could *see* Ann Marie in front of her. The oozing blood, the

gaping wound, and the brain melting as it spilled from her skull.

Day and night, she could see all of that.

It wasn't just the piano that triggered the visions. The moment she closed her eyes to sleep was the moment she came face to face with blood. So much blood.

Rot, decay and the stench of death. It accompanied her *everywhere*.

And so, at the end of one week of her exile, Noelle determined she couldn't go on like that.

She was tired, unhappy, and quite possibly on the brink.

Yet she hadn't fought so hard for her life just to squander it like that. No, she *prized* her life and she knew that she may feel hopeless at the moment, but that would soon pass too. There would come a time where she could break free—that she vowed to herself.

Until then, though, she needed to learn to cope.

One day, as she was browsing the internet, her fingers itching to do another search of the incident and see what people were saying about her, she decided she needed to step away from that added stress. In turn, she clicked on the ad for an online game, thinking that might be just the thing to help her pass the time.

She'd played online games before, and she'd always enjoyed the competitive side of them. Though she'd always wanted to dedicate more time and effort to them, she'd always been busy with her piano. Back then, she'd reasoned that to be the best she needed to gain a tunnel focus where the piano was concerned, so she'd only allowed herself very few distractions—only enough to help her get more inspiration when she felt burned out.

“Well, nothing's stopping me now,” she mumbled to herself as she set up an account within the game.

With so much time on her hands, she supposed she could dedicate herself to something else—and given her personality, she always poured her heart and soul in whatever she did.

Her lips pursed as she released a tired sigh. Her thoughts brought her back to the piano—the fact that it was still her greatest love, yet at the same time it was becoming her biggest phobia.

She loved music. But now she hated the thought of people hearing it...and judging her.

And that was the root of all things. She was tired of being judged, of having every little action scrutinized and turned on its head.

For a moment she just wanted to be anyone but herself.

Not Noelle DeVille, but someone else. Someone...

Noelle stared at the screen as it asked her for her login information and preferred username. She'd chosen this particular game because it was a simulation of real life—a chance to become someone else.

Swallowing hard, she could feel excitement bubble inside of her as she brought her fingers to the keyboard to type. *Curiouscat26*—her new username. She set a password and was then asked to create an avatar.

Hovering over the choices of dress, hair style and features, Noelle decided she might as well truly reinvent herself. As a level one, she had limited coin to adorn her character, but she managed to create a girly version of herself. She chose pink hair, a pink dress and even pink shoes. She might hate the color in real life, but in the game she decided to be the opposite of who she was.

After she was done designing her avatar, Noelle read through some of the game's guides that specified how to win challenges, make alliances and win more money so she could buy better clothes or weapons.

When she felt comfortable with the rules, she entered the game.

In the beginning everything felt so strange.

She'd played games before, but never an RPG with this level of graphics or real life simulation. Though it all happened in a fantastical setting, everything looked so real, from her human-like features of her avatar to the items present and the landscape. That in itself allowed her to quickly get immersed in the game, not noticing how time was passing by.

For the first few hours, she completed some elementary challenges that gave her some coins and a few basic accessories. But soon she realized the aim of the game wasn't to be a solo player, but to forge connections.

Almost everyone she could see around was in a group, completing the challenges together.

With her usual apprehension regarding interacting with others, even if this time it was under an avatar, Noelle didn't know where to start.

She spent some time sightseeing the realm and checking out the areas, keeping her eyes open to other solo travelers that she could befriend.

The first person she met was another girl, Ginny—or who she hoped it was a girl. If Noelle disguised herself online, anyone could very well do the same.

They quickly started chatting and she realized it was Ginny's first day in the game too. As they got a little more comfortable and got to know each other more, Ginny suggested they use the audio feature of the game—one that allowed the users to speak but with a filter on to maintain anonymity.

Noelle might have been a little reluctant at first, but as soon as she tried it and settled on a filter that could never reveal her real voice, she realized it wasn't so bad.

Certainly, it was easier than typing everything.

Although they spent some time getting to know each other, they didn't share too many details about their real lives, striving to keep that anonymity.

“Have you seen the other teams? They are all balanced with the number of girls and guys.”

“We could have an all-girl team?” Noelle offered, though she could see the advantages of having some guys too.

The game was designed with a clear distinction between the genders and their roles in the society. As such, each had some exclusive perks. The men, in particular, had additional armor and weapon choices while the girls had more spells to choose from.

“We'd be struggling to keep up,” Ginny sighed.

Luckily for them, as they explored more of the realm, they met another loner traveler going by the name of Tiger. He was relatively new to the game, too, but definitely more experienced than the girls.

“There is one player,” Tiger started when he heard the idea of a team. “He's been solo from the beginning and has refused everyone who wanted to team up with him.”

“And you think he's going to agree to join our team?” Noelle narrowed her eyes.

From what Tiger told them, this player had been around for a while and he'd succeeded in a lot of challenges of his own—some that not even teams had managed before.

“It's worth a try,” Tiger replied. “We won't know until we try, will we?”

“Is he as valuable as you say?”

“He's already on level thirty,” he mentioned, and Noelle spared a glance to the icon in the corner that showed her own level—a measly three. But she'd quickly realized that unless she teamed up with someone it was impossible to level up.

“That’s impressive,” Ginny noted. “He’s probably been asked by everyone, though. I doubt he would align himself with us,” she sighed as she pulled up all their levels on the screen. Besides Noelle’s third level, Ginny was on second while Tiger was on fourth.

“We can try,” Noelle eventually declared.

If that was their best chance at competing with the other teams, then so be it. Even in what was supposed to be a relaxing game she couldn’t temper her competitive streak.

And as she’d seen when she’d first logged in, the top teams got their own hall of fame and other perks in the game.

Used from a young age to be the best, she couldn’t imagine *not* getting there.

A little planning with the other two, and Tiger directed them to the area where the elusive player was usually found.

As the three of them reached the clearing on top of a mystical hill, Noelle saw the lonesome figure in the distance. His avatar was dressed from head to toe in blue, his armor a light shade that shone in the sun. His hair was a dirty blonde, but she couldn’t get much on his features since he had a pirate patch on.

Though the avatars in the game were incredibly life-like, he, just like her, seemed to want to hide himself—even in the game.

He wasn’t paying any mind as they advanced towards his location. He seemed deep in thought until Tiger took a step forward and addressed him.

Immediately, his username popped up on the screen—*bluebird15*.

“Our team is looking for another member, if you’d like to join us,” Tiger said—straight to the point.

Blue turned, ever so slightly, and Noelle noticed the uncovered eye—an eerie blue that unsettled her.

He looked at the three of them with clear disinterest before he went back to ignoring them.

“You’ll need a team eventually,” Tiger continued but Noelle put her hand on his shoulder, stopping him.

“It’s not worth it. *Clearly,*” she added dryly at his rudeness.

Her tone made him turn, his head tilted to the side as he clicked on their icons to reveal their levels, his own showing atop his head. Noelle thought that he was going to laugh at them any time now with how big the difference in their levels was.

Yet just as she turned to leave, a message in the form of a scroll appeared on the screen.

“I will tell you what I told the others, too,” the scroll read. “I will join your team if you solve one of my riddles. If you are correct, I will be part of your team. If not, you will have to move on.”

The gall of the man.

That was Noelle’s first thought as she started fuming. How dare he?

He wasn’t insulting their intelligence, wasn’t he? Trying to imply no one was good enough to solve his riddles, since none of the previous teams have been able to.

“Fine,” she turned to him. “Let’s see your riddle.”

“Curiouscat...” Ginny trailed off as she joined her side.

“If we get it right, you won’t go back on your word, will you?”

“No,” Blue said, his pirate looks giving him a serious air.

Not a second later and the riddle appeared on the screen.

A word in the English language that is comprised of the following: the first two letters indicate a male, the first three

letters indicate a female, the first four letters indicate something great, and the entire word indicates a great woman.

What is the word?

Noelle frowned for a moment. Her chat window beeped with successive texts from Ginny and Tiger, both expressing their shock at the odd turn of events.

“Now it explains why he’s refused everyone so far,” Tiger typed.

“But why would he base it on a riddle?” Ginny asked.

Noelle pursed her lips as she regarded her screen. Why indeed. Unless...

“Maybe he is testing us,” she offered. “To see if we’re a good match. The game does focus on critical thinking. Maybe it’s not a matter of level number, but of *mindset*.”

Everyone was quiet for a while.

“Well, you guys think *that*. I’m out,” Ginny said before she logged off.

Tiger was still online, and Noelle could see him typing and deleting his words before he finally settled on a sentence.

“Maybe we should just give up.”

Noelle blinked in surprise. They hadn’t even tried yet.

“No,” she typed. “I’ll try,” she said before she could think it through.

Once more, she couldn’t stop herself from interfering—and she could definitely *not* let a challenge pass by her.

Taking a moment to herself, she simply repeated the words of the riddle out loud.

“Male. Female. Great. Great woman,” she mused, taking her notepad out and scribbling out some letters, her brows furrowed as she tried some combinations.

A beeping sound alerted her to her screen, only to watch Blue give them a salute before walking away.

“Wait,” she activated her microphone. “Heroine,” she quickly said, though the word had just come to her mind.

He did stop. Turning, the avatar displayed an odd smile as he took a few steps towards them.

“You’re the first one to get it right,” he chuckled. “I guess that means I’m in?”

“Yes, of course. You’re in,” Tiger suddenly said, sending Curiouscat a big thumbs up.

“And the team is complete,” she breathed out in relief.

“Now what’s the first mission?” Blue inquired.

His digitized voice was deep, and a little distorted from the filter he’d used. Still, that coupled with his avatar and his solo achievements sparked Noelle’s interest. So much so that she couldn’t even be mad at him for his stupid riddle.

As a team, everyone came together and set some rules, among which one stated that they shouldn’t give any personal details. Their personal lives were their business. For the team, only what happened in the game mattered.

Soon, they had the perfect routine. Weeks passed, and the four of them would meet daily at the same designated time to play for a few hours. They would chat, fulfill challenges and spar with other teams. It was all fun and Noelle soon found herself entirely immersed in her new virtual reality.

Everything was going better than she’d expected, and though the conversations never strayed into their personal lives, she felt as if she’d made some good friends.

But there was one thing that bothered her.

Blue.

Though she’d been the one to get the riddle right, he’d barely acknowledged it—certainly *not* as she’d wanted him to. Instead, every time she proposed something, he opposed it. Every time she suggested a different approach, he had another idea—which, of course, was always best received. So what if

his ideas turned out to be the best—it was all given his wealth of experience.

But what bothered Noelle the most was that she seemed invisible.

From the start, he'd seemed a little larger than life with his imposing presence, battle strategy, and even that damn digitized voice of his. She didn't know why she'd imprinted so much on him from the start, but as the days trickled by, she realized she *wanted* his validation.

Maybe it was because he was so good at what he did—the best really—and she was attracted to competence. But she wished for nothing more than to earn his praise.

That prompted a series of failed challenges that made her more of a mockery than the *heroine* she wanted to be. Instead of getting praise from him—*Blue*—all she'd gotten had been laughter.

It all came crashing down one day when her impatience got the best of her and she ended up falling into a trap, thus losing half her levels.

She'd entered the game a little earlier than the designated time in hopes she could secure some additional bounty before everyone else arrived. Instead, all she'd done had been to lose what she'd worked so hard for.

“You're a walking disaster, aren't you?” His voice resounded as Noelle's avatar was struggling to not sink into the quicksand hole she'd fallen into.

She noted he'd logged on earlier, too, and was now standing by the sidelines, watching her with amusement.

“You could help instead of watching me sink,” she mumbled dryly.

“What can I say, it makes for a nice sight,” he chuckled, and she heard the snap of a camera.

“You...” she ground her jaw as she realized he'd screen recorded her shame.

“Got to keep it for the others. I’m sure they will love to see this.”

“You’re dead, Blue,” she promised as she continued to struggle.

“Nope. *You’re* dead unless I help you.”

“Well? Please do,” she rolled her eyes at the screen. Really, just what she needed. To have Blue witness her failed attempts when she’d just been trying to impress him. Ok, maybe *impressing* him was going a little too far. But after all the other disasters she’d caused within the team, she’d wanted to do something good.

She’d wanted one word of praise from him—a tiny *good job* would have sufficed.

But now?

“Ask me nicely and I will,” he retorted, his voice tinged with amusement.

“Please?” she gritted her teeth as she said it. She was aware that the more her avatar struggled, the more points she would lose until ultimately she’d lose her life.

But his help didn’t come immediately. He waited at least a few more seconds, leaving her in suspense as she continued to sink before he procured a rope.

Throwing the rope at her, Noelle grabbed on to it just as Blue pulled her out of the quicksand with one effortless tug.

“Thank you,” she murmured as she saw the state of her clothing. It wasn’t enough she’d lost half her levels, now she had to part with some coin to replace her ruined clothes, too.

“You’re welcome,” he winked with his one good eye, and Noelle felt herself getting flustered.

Surely it wasn’t normal to feel drawn to an animated character, right?

Right?

Yet she couldn't deny the life-like appearance of the avatar, or the fact that despite the roguish look and the pirate patch, Blue looked...good.

Behind the screen, Noelle blushed to her roots as she covered her eyes with her hands.

She must be going crazy. That was the only explanation. Her time in isolation plus having to put up with her rather insane mother and the ongoing gossip surrounding her must have driven her to insanity.

Yet it wasn't the character itself that made her blush. It was the whole package and the fact that...his competence was appealing. There, she'd said it. She found his self-assured manner, his brilliant strategies and competence in battle very attractive.

Since he'd joined their team, they've been winning battle after battle—if it weren't for her stupid attempts at standing out, which ended up with their loss.

Like now...

"You need supervision, Curiouscat," he said. "I still can't believe that you were the one to answer my riddle," he continued, and Noelle felt her temper rise.

Did he mean... Did that mean she wasn't good enough?

But just as she was about to snap at him, he said something entirely unexpected.

"Come on, let's get your levels back."

Noelle gawked at the screen, unable to believe what she'd heard. Did he just...offer to help her get her levels back?

"I'm not your charity case," she found herself saying instead.

"No, you're my teammate. And that means your levels reflect on all of us. So come," he said more forcefully, his hand reaching out for hers and dragging her forward.

She protested—*of course she protested.*

Here she was, in front of the person she'd been trying to impress with her nonexistent skills, and what was the worst way of going about it other than have *him* see how bad her skills were?

"You're such an arrogant..." she trailed off as she heard him chuckle.

"An Arrogant what?"

"Pirate," she sputtered, throwing the first word that came to mind. "Knight-pirate or whatever your costume is."

"What I am is the person who's going to help you regain your points back. Now be a good girl and follow me."

"W-what?" Noelle blinked behind her screen, her outrage growing by the second.

But before she could give him another one of her not so great lines, they came to a crowd of people—a *trial*.

A guardian was holding a captive mystical beast, and anyone could offer to fight it. Whoever won, got one hundred levels split between the team members.

"You want me to play that?"

"Of course. It's the best chance to get back your levels and a little extra," Blue said, directing her to the line and signing her up before she could vocalize another protest.

"I'll help you, of course, like the good teammate that I am."

Noelle could hear the smugness in his voice, and her lip twitched in annoyance. But if he was able to get her the levels back, then she was not going to argue.

After they signed up, the screen changed, showing them inside a room together with the beast.

"Do you know what type of beast this is?" Blue suddenly asked as the creature circled around them.

"Should I?" She frowned.

“It was in the history of the realm book. But I’m guessing you didn’t read it, did you?”

Noelle flushed in embarrassment. Yet another thing she’d not done right.

“Skip the history lesson and tell me what I need to know,” she answered in a snappy voice, which she barely subdued.

Damn him, and damn the way he made her feel. Why was it that he was such an infuriating person but also someone whose approval she yearned for?

She couldn’t understand the dichotomy.

Maybe because he reminded her of her brother? Someone authoritative but who she looked up to? Yet at the same time, it felt wrong to put him anywhere near her *brother*.

Shaking herself, she focused on the game and what she needed to do, reasoning that it all stemmed from her desire to be the best. But in this case, *he* was the best.

Blue explained to her that this particular mystical beast was allergic to a plant *doryia*. As soon as he said the name, though, she remembered she’d collected that a few days prior.

“That’s it. You remember now,” Blue observed when she removed the plant from her collection.

“How are we going to use it, then?”

“Here,” he removed the same rope he’d used to save her, and coming to her side he took the plant from her hands and proceeded to lather it all over the length of the rope.

“Smart,” she was forced to admit.

“I’ll need your help to circle him with it. Think you can do that, curiouscat?”

“Of course,” she huffed.

“Good,” he said in an amused voice, followed by strong and sharp directions which she chose to obey rather than question.

She could always bicker with him more later—after her levels went up.

Like he told her, she planted herself on the opposite side of the room, holding one side of the rope while he held onto the other. They both started running just as the beast was set to attack, and in no time the rope started to coil itself around it.

Although a typical rope would have been useless, as seen by the way the beast broke free not a few moments after, the traces of *doryia* affected it, making it fall to its knees. Letting out a loud howl, it started writhing in pain before dying.

Right away, one hundred levels arose from its ashes, fifty going to her and fifty to Blue.

“I’ll set mine aside for the others.”

“Ok,” she agreed, ready to split hers with him.

Suddenly, though, he rejected the transfer.

“No. Those are all yours. You earned them.”

She hadn’t.

But that was all he said. And Noelle had never been more confused.

9. NOELLE

Despite her initial feeling of being trapped inside her home, Noelle soon found a routine that worked for her—or, all things considered, worked *as much as possible*.

She would wake up, take her breakfast in her room, read a book and binge watch a show while eating lunch. This would all culminate in her afternoon gaming schedule, dinner and watching another show before bed.

Knowing she wasn't entirely alone helped, too, especially since her brother and Yuyu had gone radio silent after she'd moved upstate.

Once more, she had to wonder if they were as disappointed in her as everyone else.

It hadn't been just her social life that had changed in the blink of an eye. Her mental state had suffered, too—perhaps the worst damage.

She was still fixated on Ann Marie's death and the moment the gun had gone off. She could still *feel* the blood on her body, sticking to her hair and skin. And she could still smell the stench of death...

Every time she closed her eyes, it was there. Every time she tried to touch the piano keys, she saw them covered in blood.

Lately, all she could see or think about was blood.

Even her media choices all revolved around blood in some capacity—from serial killers, to vigilantes, to gruesome horror shows, she voraciously consumed anything she could find in hopes it could explain what was happening to her. This... sickness that seemed to have taken shape inside of her. For as much as she still replayed the incident in her head, she could still not find it in her to feel guilty for it.

For the way everything had played out? Of course. But not for choosing herself. Not for living.

Maybe she was truly *odd*, for she'd been told time and time again how abnormal her reaction had been, or how scandalous her performance had been.

But that begged the question...

What was normal?

The more media she consumed, the more her questions multiplied. It was becoming to a point that even though she forced herself to accept her current situation, she could not.

She might have made new friends in her game—might have even found a way to pass the time without her piano. But she was continuously trapped in the past *and* haunted by it.

“Noelle?” A knock at the door startled her.

Removing her headphones, she shut down her laptop as she turned.

“Come in,” she cleared her throat.

The door opened, and Yuyu strode inside.

She was wearing a white floral dress and a pair of sandals that made her look the epitome of femininity and grace. Her hair had grown, too, and she now fashioned it in a long braid that reached her waist.

As always, she had a warm smile on her face that transformed her beauty into something otherworldly. Not for the first time, Noelle had to blink. It was easy to be blinded by the light emanating from Yuyu.

Noelle understood why her brother had gone against everyone's wishes when he'd wed Yuyu. She could see anyone willing to fight for her. She was just...the personification of kindness.

"What are you doing here?" She asked, rising from her chair.

Yuyu, however, stopped her. Coming to her side, she took a seat on her bed as she regarded her with curiosity.

"I didn't know you guys were coming," she repeated when Yuyu didn't reply to her.

"We wanted it to be a surprise. We would have come earlier, but we've been a little busy," she sighed. "But we're here now, and what better way to celebrate this than with a little trip."

"A trip?" Noelle frowned.

"The four of us," Yuyu beamed. "Back at the lodge. We haven't been there in a while, have we?"

"I guess not," Noelle said carefully.

"Perfect. Then prepare a small bag. We're leaving at dawn," Yuyu told her, rising and coming to her side to kiss her forehead. "The hunting season is open," she whispered in her hair before leaving.

Noelle blinked in surprise.

Hunting season... They were taking her hunting. Her eyes slowly widened as realization seeped in—as did the anticipation.

She'd been begging her brother to take her hunting for years, but he'd always said she wasn't old enough. It didn't matter that he'd taught her how to shoot a gun like a pro. It didn't matter that she'd mastered the environment. He'd always maintained that she was too young.

But now...

She couldn't help the giddiness that suffused her. Not only would she have a few days away from her mother—even though they barely spoke these days—but she would also get to participate in her first hunt.

That night, as the game was coming to an end, she let her friends know she would be absent over the weekend. Ginny and Tiger were both lamenting it, but Blue was generally quiet.

“Aha! Caught you, Blue. You just can't wait until I disappear, can you?” she asked in a dry tone.

There was a pause, and she didn't think he would reply.

“And miss our resident troublemaker? How else will I be able to play the hero if you aren't the damsel in distress?” he asked playfully.

She'd been ready to be peeved at his response, but instead she only found herself smiling like a fool.

“Good that you know,” she chuckled. “Don't miss me too much, Mr. Knightly Knight,” she said before she logged off.

Her cheeks were slightly flushed, her breathing accelerated.

In the time she'd gotten to know her friends better, she'd also gotten to know Blue better. And he... He intrigued her. More so than anyone she'd ever met before—more so than any living, breathing boy. He made her feel warm and tingly even when they were bickering. And it all came down to how he held himself.

She was well aware it was silly. Hell, probably *more* than silly to entertain such notions about someone she'd never met, seen, or even properly heard. But Noelle felt she'd gotten to know a crucial part of his character—his leadership *and* his kindness.

Despite his playful exterior and the fact that he often made jokes on her account—which, fair enough, she more than deserved sometimes—he was always there to help her. Just

like that time he'd gotten her levels back, he was constantly checking up on her, in his own, odd and not very obvious way, and he always helped her if he thought she was falling behind.

Noelle didn't think Ginny and Tiger had picked up on that, though. They mostly thought it funny when the two of them got into an argument, and sometimes they served as a buffer when the situation got too heated. But because of that, they didn't realize there was *more*.

Or, maybe, not even Blue realized it.

Only Noelle did as she accounted for his every action just as she held onto his every word. To her, everything had a hidden meaning—or she wanted there to be one.

“I'm so silly,” she shook her head, smiling to herself as her thoughts strayed to him again.

There was something inexplicable about the way he made her feel. And she admitted to herself that he'd been the only reason she hadn't gone completely insane from boredom during her isolation.

Simply put, he made her look forward to tomorrow. And the day after. And *every* day after. But sometimes she doubted he felt the same way.

Not with how he behaved equally as nice to everyone else around. It was simply who he was. The only thing special about Noelle was that... Well, she was the worst player *and* also the most stubborn one, which seemed to trigger his usually calm self into becoming more argumentative.

But was there something more? Or did Noelle want there to be something more?

Truthfully, she did not know how to read him. Never having interacted with guys before, she had absolutely no idea what to make of each conversation.

Of course, in her head they all had hidden meanings. But in reality? She feared she was becoming a little delusional.

You don't even know him. He could very well be an old pervert living in his mother's basement.

She was aware of that too. Yet her gut told her it wasn't. That it was a genuine person behind the avatar.

Or, maybe, she'd finally gone truly mad.

Everyone was present at dinner that evening. Elena kept her nastiness to a minimal. Not because she was wary of Cisco knowing how she really treated Noelle, but because she had a new target.

Yuyu.

It had been a relatively easy night for Elena's standards. But that all changed when she tried to take away Val's toy.

"We don't allow toys at the dinner table," she chided sternly, snatching his little lion away.

Not only was Val just five, but he also had a fixation on certain items and routines. The moment the lion was out of his hand, he cried out, throwing a tantrum and getting increasingly more aggressive.

Cisco reacted instinctively, taking the toy from his mother's hand and giving it back to the child while Yuyu moved to Val's side, taking him in her arms and trying to soothe him the best she could.

It took some time for him to calm down, but that was enough for Elena to uncouthly remark that Yuyu hadn't raised her son properly.

"I'm sure she takes after you..." she mumbled as she gave Yuyu a one over, the implication clear.

Noelle's eyes widened as she looked around the dinner table.

Cisco's fingers were quietly wrestling with the cutlery while his deadly gaze was set on his mother. Yuyu was too shocked to react, simply hugging Val to her chest.

Noelle knew her brother was not one to stay quiet in the face of such an insult, and if Cisco exploded, all hell would be unleashed.

“You’re trying to teach me about manners but you’re not capable of being polite at your own dinner table,” Noelle quickly said, redirecting the attention to her.

Elena gasped in outrage, while the cutlery snapped under Cisco’s vicious grip.

“Noelle!” Elena turned to her, no doubt ready to deliver a set-down of her impetuous daughter.

She didn’t get the chance, however, as Cisco suddenly stood up.

“We’re leaving,” he said in a clear, even tone. He didn’t yell, he didn’t even raise his voice.

He simply gave Elena a look of disgust as he went to Yuyu’s side to get Val. The child didn’t even notice the exchange as his attention was focused on his toy.

“Grab your bag, Noelle,” Cisco gave her a brief nod before he went out. To the car.

He was *really* leaving.

Yuyu, too, stood up then.

She shook her head at Elena, pity reflected in your gaze.

“You’re always accusing me of taking your son away, but it’s *you* who drives him away time and time again. Believe it or not, I’ve never tried to intervene in your relationship. I’ve never once spoken badly of you, regardless how you treated me—time and time again. Cisco might not say much, but he sees everything.”

Elena’s mouth parted in surprise, just as regret flashed across her features.

Noelle blinked in awe at Yuyu’s diplomacy and the way she shut Elena up. Not rude, nor belligerent, she’d simply said her piece and moved on.

And as she exited the dining room, Noelle, too, rose to her feet.

“I could say I’m sorry,” she paused, looking at her mother. “But I’m not,” she shrugged, smiling as she went to her room to pick up her bag.

Elena didn’t give them more trouble as they all left the house, boarding the car before Cisco drove away.

It was already dark by the time they arrived at the lodge. The entire journey had been quiet and tense. Cisco barely spoke, and though Yuyu tried to change the topic several times to a lighter one, she eventually gave up.

As they entered the cabin, Noelle hurried to the small room in the back to drop off her stuff. Used to getaways at the lodge, she already had her designated space while Cisco and Yuyu occupied the upper level.

“Noelle, wash your hands when you’re done,” Yuyu snuck her head inside the room. “I’m going to make us something to eat since I doubt any of us had much at dinner.”

“Sure,” she nodded.

But just as she expected Yuyu to leave, she didn’t.

“Is Elena like that with you all the time, too?” She asked in a tight voice.

Noelle shrugged.

“I’m used to her by now,” she replied honestly. “I know what pushes her buttons and I mostly keep out of her way.”

Yuyu pursed her lips.

“You can tell me anytime if she does something, you know that, right?”

Noelle’s cheeks stretched into a forced smile as she nodded, though she doubted there was anything Cisco and Yuyu could do at this point. Whether she wanted to or not, she was stuck with her mother until she came of age.

Noelle had to admit that she'd considered running away a number of times. But as she'd planned her escape, she'd realized that she would have never gotten away with it.

First, she had no real skills aside from playing the piano. She might be smart, which she wasn't shy to admit, but she was entirely useless in the real world. Running away *now* would just make her an easy target for others to take advantage of her. And she wouldn't trade one hell for another—better the devil she already knew than the one she didn't.

And secondly... Cisco would find her. She was one hundred percent sure that her brother could find her anywhere in the country, or outside of it. She had a vague idea of the business Cisco was involved in, and she knew it skirted the line of legality, sometimes veering into very dangerous territory. At times, he seemed larger than life with the things he was capable of. And as the head of the family, he would *never* let her go.

But when she came of age... She shuddered thinking what would happen then. The more time she spent with her mother, the surer Noelle was that Elena had plans for her when she turned eighteen. There was something in the glint of her eye as she spoke of the future—some type of knowing smile that made Noelle ill every time she recalled it. Elena had never shied from telling Noelle that one day she would eventually get what she deserved—someone to *tame* her.

If it came to that, then *maybe* her brother could help her. Noelle doubted Elena could make decisions without his permission. Since their relationship had evolved over the years to a degree that she considered her brother and Yuyu *friends*—or as close to that definition as possible—he couldn't possibly allow her to be bartered in marriage to who knows who.

Cisco himself had circumvented his arranged marriage. Why couldn't he do it for her, too?

Yes, Noelle nodded to herself as she regarded her appearance in the small ensuite bathroom. Her hands were still wet as she brought them to her hair in an effort to tame her

wild locks. Her lips tipped into a genuine smile the more she thought of it. Of course her brother wouldn't allow her to be married off to a stranger. She wasn't sure of many things, but this was one of them.

When she turned eighteen, Cisco would help her leave Elena and the family behind. Maybe continue her education in some way, or get a job. Noelle was willing to do anything as long as she could take control of her life. And without the piano...

Her smile fell. Shaking her head, she banished the melancholy that threatened to envelop her when she thought about her failed career—and the fact that she might never get to perform on a big stage again.

Dinner was a relatively quiet affair, after which they made plans for the weekend.

The first day, Noelle was going out to hunt with Cisco while Yuyu went out for a walk with Val. On the second day they would switch. Yuyu and Noelle would tend to the hunted game while Cisco would take Val on a little adventure in the forest, which usually involved picking up mushrooms, berries, and other edible plants they could cook alongside the meat.

In the past, that had been Noelle's task, either with her brother or with Yuyu. She'd never once failed to be amazed by Cisco and Yuyu's vast knowledge about the forest and about wild, edible plants. On one occasion, Yuyu had intimated the two of them had spent time in the wilderness before and as such they'd had to adapt.

That night, though Noelle was anticipating the day of the hunt, she couldn't help but feel as though she was missing something...or someone.

Her friends had become such a prominent part of her routine that she found it hard to spend the day without them. Of course, she could have brought her laptop with her, but the connection at the lodge wasn't as great and she would have likely inconvenienced her teammates.

Early the next morning, she was ready to embark on a new adventure. So she might not be the best at fulfilling the missions in the game, but she was pretty confident of her shooting skills outside of it.

Since the first time Cisco had taught her how to shoot, they'd regularly come to the lodge and practiced. He'd always told her that one day, when she was ready, he would take her hunting and she'd learned in practice.

Noelle was entirely too giddy at the thought of joining her brother for the day. So much so that everyone commented on it and the constant grin she was sporting.

"You know how much I've been waiting for this," she said in her defense when she felt all eyes on her.

"I know, I know," Cisco chuckled, bringing a cup of coffee to his lips. His eyes crinkled at the corners, and Noelle noted the sour mood from the night before was gone.

Yuyu was pretty cheerful too as she served breakfast. Even Val seemed to be in a good mood as he spoke relentlessly about his new anime obsession all through the meal.

"Sorry," Yuyu mouthed to Noelle. "You can never stop him when he gets excited about something," she smiled as she looked at him.

"He's too cute," Noelle giggled. And he was. Val had inherited features from both his parents. He'd gotten his olive skin tone from Cisco, together with the color of his eyes—a deep green. From Yuyu, he inherited the shape of his eyes, nose and mouth.

"He's growing too fast," Yuyu sighed. "I don't even know where the years have gone," she said as she ruffled his hair.

He pouted at her, but continued with his explanation of the latest episode of the anime he'd been watching.

After breakfast, they split into two teams, one going into the woods and one staying behind.

Noelle pulled her boots on, adding a small knife for easy reach as her brother had taught her. She filled her bag with everything her brother had suggested, and going to the main room, she grabbed one of the hunting rifles—the small one she always used.

When they were both done, they started on their journey.

Though Noelle was pretty familiar with the area, Cisco had never taken her beyond the immediate surroundings. This time, they would go slightly further into the official hunting territory.

“What are we getting today?” She asked in a brisk, cheerful tone.

“Whatever we find,” he smiled. “Something small for your first game. A rabbit, or maybe a bird. I won’t expect you to get a bear on your first try.”

“What if I can?” She pushed her chin up—*challenge accepted*.

Cisco stopped. Turning to face her, he lifted an incredulous brow at her.

“You’re five foot, if at that, Noelle. You’re *not* going to get a bear. And please. Don’t even try. If you see one, you call me, and you stay out of sight. Understood?”

“Yes, sir,” she raised her hand to her forehead, barely subduing her laughter.

They went deeper into the forest, and upon reaching the designated area, Cisco stopped, putting a hand up. He brought a finger to his mouth, signaling her to be quiet.

A wall of foliage was before them, obstructing the view. But as Noelle closed her eyes and listened, she could hear the wind and some small, barely detectable sounds.

“I hear it,” she whispered, pointing to the west.

Cisco smiled.

“The best way to catch something is to make it come to you, on your own terms.”

Noelle narrowed her eyes, the double meaning not escaping her.

“Once you control all the variables, you are inevitably the winner,” Cisco told her, the corner of his mouth tugged up in a lopsided smile.

“You want us to stay here.”

“Indeed,” he nodded, waiting to hear more of her observations.

Noelle twirled, letting her eyes take in every detail of the forest. Focusing on the ground, she pointed at the small prints in the muddy ground. But as she slowly walked around, she found other clues.

Feces. There were small, fresh feces in a few parts of the area.

“It’s a popular area, isn’t it?”

“It is, and it’s going to be our base for the next few hours,” Cisco told her as he showed her how to get in position and use the foliage to her advantage to disguise her presence.

“Remember our first lesson? The three Ps?”

She nodded.

“The second one is most important. When you stalk your prey, patience will prevail,” he told her just as another sound erupted in the air.

Noelle redirected her attention to the small clearing beyond the foliage.

The sound grew increasingly louder, small steps against the fresh grass, broken twigs snapping as the creature advanced.

Cisco gave her a signal and she propped her rifle, slowly pushing the barrel through the foliage until she could aim

properly.

Then, it was only a matter of waiting—*of patience*.

They stood unmoving for minutes on end. Noelle's knees were already feeling the strain, but she was determined to withstand it.

She'd been wanting to do this for years, and now that she'd finally been given the chance, she was not about to squander it.

Sure enough, after a while, the bushes started rattling before a small body jumped into the open.

Noelle's mouth dropped open in awe. A rabbit. And it was right there in front of her.

Excitement bubbling inside of her, she fitted her eye to the sight of the rifle moving it around until she had a clear shot. Without waiting for Cisco's signal, she pressed her finger on the trigger, firing into the rabbit.

The shot resounded in the quiet forest, startled birds flying out of trees.

Not one to miss a chance, Noelle pivoted.

The trees were tall and richly crowned, making it more difficult to spot the birds. Still, she kept her focus on the sight as she moved it around, following the sound of their flight.

It all happened so fast, she didn't even hear Cisco's words.

She saw a flash of black among green and she aimed, jerking her rifle slightly to the left to account for the velocity of the bird's flight.

The result was immediate, as a small bird fell to the ground.

Noelle couldn't help but grin as she turned to Cisco. But he didn't seem to share the sentiment. Instead, he was merely shaking his head.

Rising to his full height, he crossed to the clearing, grabbing the rabbit in his gloved hands and bringing it to Noelle.

“I got a rabbit *and* a bird,” she said excitedly.

“You did,” Cisco nodded, but his tone did not reflect that.

“You’re not happy for me?” she asked apprehensively.

Releasing a heavy sigh, he turned towards her.

“What did I say about patience?” he raised a brow at her.

Noelle frowned. She’d hit her targets. Should she have waited around for them to run from her?

But just as she opened her mouth to voice that question, her brother crouched on the ground, his hands on the rabbit.

“What do you see?” He asked her, turning the furry little thing around.

Noelle’s brows scrunched together as she tried to make sense of what he wanted her to see.

There was nothing out of the ordinary with the rabbit except for some blood staining his white coat—blood that didn’t fail to arouse Noelle’s interest.

Getting to her knees next to her brother, she reached for the rabbit, her gloved hands coming coated in the red substance. Staring at the viscous liquid, she was for a moment thrust back in the past—to the day her entire life had irrevocably changed.

“Noelle,” Cisco called her name. Once. Twice. Only on the third time did she shake herself, turning to look at him with question in her eyes.

“Here. What do you see here?” He asked as he pointed to the rabbit’s head.

She blinked in surprise, but leaned in to get a better view.

“Nothing?” she asked carefully.

“That’s right. Where is your shot?”

Trailing her eyes down the rabbit's body, she pointed to the side where she'd hit him—the place currently leaking more red liquid.

“And what did I teach you?”

Right away, the lesson came to mind.

Killer shot.

“You didn't kill it. You just wounded it, and now it's in agony. All because your attention was divided,” he chided in a quiet voice.

Before she could reply, he grabbed the rabbit's neck, snapping it with one twist of his wrist.

“I'm sorry,” she mumbled, feeling herself chastised.

“It's not bad for your first time. But you disregarded everything I told you.”

Her cheeks heated as she nodded, duly reprimanded.

“I'll do better next time,” she added.

He gave her a barely perceptible nod before he set about preparing the rabbit.

He made a few incisions along the rabbit's body before he skinned the fur off its back, placing it aside. Then it was only a matter of removing the extremities and intestines so that only the cavity and the meat remained. All the while, he explained what he was doing, detailing every cut and why it was necessary.

Once more, Noelle found her eyes affixed to what was happening. Cisco's movements were brisk and clean, as expected of someone who'd done that time and time again.

His hands were deep in the rabbit's intestines when he suddenly turned to her, meeting her gaze and seeing the fascination that lay in it.

Without preliminaries, he went straight to the topic.

“They did an autopsy on Ann Marie,” he started, and he noted the twitch in her cheek at the mention of her former classmate’s name.

“Oh,” she released a small sound that was by no means an answer.

“They approximated the angle of the shot,” he continued, speaking slowly to gauge her reaction. “I know it was you, Noelle.”

She blinked, her eyes fluttering in a mimicry of shock. But when she saw it had no effect on him, she abandoned all attempts at feigned behavior.

“Who else knows?” she asked in an even voice, and it was almost as if he was witnessing another person.

“Just me and Yuyu. No one else ever will,” he promised her.

Noelle nodded thoughtfully.

“Why did you do it?”

She shrugged.

“It was her or me. I chose myself,” she said very matter-of-factly. “Is that wrong?” she narrowed her eyes at him, her gaze almost accusing.

He would have laughed if he didn’t find the entire situation so disconcerting.

“Not at all,” he gave her an ironic smile. “Not to me or to Yuyu. But to anyone else, it would be seen as wrong.”

Her eyebrows furrowed.

“But you already know that, don’t you?” he mused, taking a deep breath. “You’ve seen the way the media villainized you.”

“Are you...mad at me?” She asked carefully. The last thing she wanted was for Cisco and Yuyu to be mad at her.

“No, of course not. I’m glad you acted fast in that situation. But you need to be more careful, Noelle. You need to be mindful of your actions and the way they may come across. We may agree with you, but most people will not.”

“I know,” she whispered, seeking some understanding in his gaze but finding none.

Her brother was nothing if not closed off with his expressions.

“Your social persona is important. You need to learn to curb your behavior because people *will* crucify you for it. And the last thing you want is for people to come at you with pitchforks.”

“Like they already did,” she added in a soft tone. She knew where he was going.

“Yes. If you want to succeed in life, you need to stop alienating the world. You need to gain the world’s *loyalty*.”

“How?”

“Two ways,” his lips curled in a smirk. “Two diametrically opposite ways,” he paused just as Noelle leaned forward, curiosity written all over her features. “You either make them love you or fear you.”

She blinked at his words. He didn’t let her speak, though, as he explained further.

“I know what you’re thinking. But in your case, it wasn’t fear that made them act like that. It was hate—malice. And as long as you continue to act *to spite* the world, it will continue to hate you. I’ve told you before and I’ll tell you again. Being different is great—in theory. But theory seldom translates perfectly into practice.”

“I understand,” she told him, her eyes straying to the innards laying on the ground and the blood that pooled around.

She’d understood him from the very first time when he’d told her, but she’d thought she could do it her own way. Although she’d curbed her outbursts and had sought to remain

in her own bubble, she'd still come across as *odd*—different. And Cisco was right. Everyone hated her for it.

Despite her talent, and despite the hard work she put into her piano, she'd always been hated. Noelle supposed that had it been someone else in the same situation, someone more lovable, they would have been rather loved.

The conclusion was always the same.

It was her fault. From the beginning it had been her fault.

At the same time she found the idea of someone *loving* her so far-fetched that she didn't know how she could ever pull that off.

And that left only one thing... fear.

“People can't sympathize with what they can't understand. So you must search for a common point. Give them at least *something* to relate to, and you will win them over—in love, or in fear,” Cisco continued, and Noelle nodded.

“I'll try...” She took a deep breath, her brother's words rattling her.

Finally, she could see the trip for what it was. An intervention. Cisco had given her time to cool off first, since he'd known she would have never been agreeable to such a conversation when the incident had occurred. But now he'd gone straight to the root of the issue.

She was the problem. Or, better said, her *stubbornness* was the problem.

Foolishly, she'd thought she was going to make the world accept her. That she could truly live *against* the world. And she'd been proven wrong time and time again.

The incident with Ann Marie had just been the cherry on top.

She was quiet as Cisco finished up with the rabbit before moving to the bird. Wrinkling his nose as he checked it up, he

pointed out some signs of disease and suggested they left it there.

Noelle merely nodded, already in her own world.

“Why don’t we split up? I want to see if I can find something on my own,” she forced a smile.

Cisco narrowed his eyes at her, slowly pondering the matter. He seemed to sense her need to be alone for a few moments. He knew he’d been rather direct with his observations, eschewing tact in favor of much needed honesty. But he couldn’t let her continue on her path and destroy her future.

Even if she hadn’t done anything to Ann Marie, the fact that she’d reacted so unlike a normal person in the face of murder had made her a prime object for speculation. That coupled with the dislike she’d earned from her classmates over the years had made the gossip travel fast, as did accounts of her weird habits.

The best Cisco had managed to do had been to remove her name from the online space and threaten to sue any publication who dared publish it. It had worked, but that didn’t erase the collective memory—or that of those who’d been present at the concert.

“Only if you stay within hearing distance,” he allowed. “Don’t go further than the demarcation I showed you and call if you need anything.”

Noelle nodded, still keeping a strong front. Swinging her bag over her shoulder, she turned and left.

Placing one foot in front of the other, she didn’t realize she was crying until she reached a deep part of the forest—certainly deeper than what Cisco had suggested. But she couldn’t find it in her to care. Not when tears were streaming down her cheeks, her heart breaking in her chest.

She was aware Cisco had told her the truth for her own benefit. That wasn’t why she was crying. It was because everything had been her fault. From the beginning, he’d tried

to help her see that going against everyone wasn't the answer—that she needed to find a balance.

And what had she done? The opposite.

She'd reveled in what made her different and had focused on that instead of finding a common ground with people. It wasn't that people didn't like her, or that she'd never had friends. It was that she hadn't given people the chance to do so.

And she only had herself to blame.

She had to wonder if deep down there was something wrong with her. Had she been born like that, or had she slowly become thusly?

Noelle could not answer that question. She only knew that she *wanted* more out of her life. Someone to love, and to love her in return. Friends. A career. She wanted all that, but she didn't know *how* to get them.

Cisco told her to relate to people. But *how*?

Though she'd long stopped doing that, she could remember trying and being burned for it.

Had she simply closed herself to failure? For it had been failure that had prompted her to close herself from the beginning. Failure and a deep-seeded fear of rejection.

If she had no one, then no one could reject her, no? If she kept herself aloof, then no one could hurt her.

Noelle came to a sudden halt as realization dawned on her.

At some point, she'd stopped trying because every time she put herself out there, she put herself at risk. Every time she opened herself up, it was to be left bleeding and blistering.

Even now, that was her biggest fear.

Rejection. Abandonment. Being...alone.

She was petrified of letting people in only for them to shun her. If she was alone from the beginning, then she'd never

know the opposite. But if she...

“If I tasted happiness, then how could I ever go without?” she murmured to herself, bringing the back of her hand to her face, wiping the tears.

She didn't get to ponder it further, as a deep, growly sound traveled through the forest.

Startled, she jumped back, looking around in bewilderment.

Where was she?

How far had she walked? She'd been so lost in her own thoughts that she hadn't paid any mind to it, carelessly marching ahead.

Just as she turned to trace back her steps, her entire body tensed, awareness pricking at her skin. Slowing her movements, she dumped her bag to the ground as she gripped her rifle tightly.

Whatever it was, it was close.

The bushes rattled as something stomped its way towards her. The ground vibrated with the force of it, and Noelle had no doubt that it was something *big*.

A coyote? A fox? No, bigger.

Her theory was confirmed as the small shrub collapsed under the weight of a heavy body right before a loud grumble made her take a step back.

She blinked.

Maybe she'd been joking before, but now she was face to face with an actual, real-life bear.

One that was quite possibly triple her size and over ten times her weight.

Noelle froze.

“What...” she gasped as the bear turned towards her, his head rotating just as his jaw popped in a loud sound that woke

her from her reverie.

For God's sake, she hadn't been killed by a delusional girl, she wasn't about to become a bear's victim.

The bear took a few more steps towards her before it stopped, its eyes seemingly looking her over right before another loud moan erupted from his throat.

Noelle's eyes widened just as she swallowed. Hard.

Was he going to charge her or was he going to leave her alone? Regardless, she needed to prepare herself for *any* outcome.

Taking a small step back, she made sure her rifle was loaded before she aimed it at the bear.

One second passed. Then two. On the third, the bear moved, propelling himself backwards to his hind legs and raising himself in the air.

"Good God," Noelle muttered.

On all fours he'd seemed gigantic compared to her. On his hind legs he looked to be close to seven feet.

"I'm dead," she blinked, gulping down as fear spread through her limbs.

He could crush her with one paw. She didn't want to know what he was capable of if he got to her.

But that seemed to be the bear's aim as he wobbled from side to side towards her.

Another step back and Noelle knew there was no way out of it.

Once more, it was either the bear or her.

And as always, she chose herself.

Squeezing her eyes shut, she pressed the trigger, the shot erupting in the air and injuring the bear in his side.

But going by the howl of pain followed by the loud growl, it wasn't enough. It certainly wasn't enough to stop his

advance.

Noelle's eyes widened, and she barely charged her rifle again before he was close to a foot away from her.

Though she was a good shot, at that moment, every atom in her body was shaking. She couldn't have gotten a kill shot regardless of how much time she had. She simply could not stop herself from trembling with fear and delayed adrenaline.

The bear's paw went up high in the air, and she knew it was a matter of seconds before it would hit her.

Breathing harshly, she looked around. She could run, but her legs wouldn't work, damn it. She could barely move her fingers enough to settle once more on the trigger. As the bear took another pained step towards her, she squeezed the trigger, the shot catching him right under his jaw.

For a moment, Noelle didn't know if she'd managed *anything*. She could only stare at the bear, he at her, and she believed that was her end.

But just as she was struggling to reload her gun, the bear teetered from side to side before falling to the ground. Not before he released one of the most earth-shattering sounds Noelle had ever heard.

The bear collapsed a few feet from her and she could still not muster the strength to move. She could only stare, dumbfounded.

She'd won. She'd...

A hiccup escaped her just as her legs turned to jelly. She barely kept herself from collapsing next to the bear too.

Especially as she took one step closer and noted that his eyes were still wide open. Wide open and blinking.

He wasn't dead, was he?

Noelle took one step closer until she reached his side. His legs moved, but barely. His eyes, though, were watching her intently. So much so that she felt herself lost in those depths.

She could see what he was asking for.

Mercy.

He wanted her to kill him, to put an end to the pain. Remembering Cisco had done the same to the rabbit, Noelle went back for her bag, removing a knife. She would never be able to snap his neck as her brother had done with the small bodied rabbit. But she could spare him pain like this.

Leaving everything behind but the small knife, Noelle tentatively walked to his side, getting too close for comfort but knowing it was necessary.

Though she saw he was still able to move, he didn't try to reach for her. He just watched, a silent plea hidden in his gaze.

Terrified but determined, Noelle took the last step that was separating her from the bear, her hand making contact with his fur.

A shiver went down her back, and for a moment her palm simply rested atop his fur.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, and she could almost swear the bear understood her. He blinked, as if he was telling her *it's ok*.

Tears pricked at her eyes as she brought the sharp edge of her blade to his neck. She needed to be swift and not cause him any more anguish.

Her face scrunched in pain as she placed her other hand on top of his head.

She'd shot him. She'd done this to him, so why was it so hard to deliver the last blow.

"I'm really, really sorry," she said once more as she dragged the blade across the thick hide of the bear, pushing with all her strength so she could cut his throat in one smooth line—not small, jagged ones that would prolong his pain.

It felt like an eternity before she finished it, blood flowing down his body and onto her hands.

Suddenly, she removed her gloves, throwing them to the ground. She brought her bare hands against his furry body, soaking in the blood and saying a small prayer—one accompanied by the sincerest apology.

She *was* sorry. Her heart was breaking just looking at the bloody display. But it was the order of nature.

There was predator, and there was prey. And Noelle resolved to *never* be the prey.

“I’ll always choose myself,” she whispered, her eyes fixed to the red liquid still flowing from the bear’s neck.

Before she knew what she was doing, both her hands reached for the bleeding wound. Palms open, she splayed them on top of the blood, moving them around until the entire surface of her hand was covered in the viscous substance.

Lifting them to her face, she inhaled deeply. First, she smelled it. Then, she tasted it, a tangy, metallic flavor that made her grimace. At last, she brought them to her cheeks, covering herself in it—his essence.

She truly did not know what had come over her, only that in some odd, obscure way, she was paying homage to the bear. And the more she stained herself with his life’s essence, the more she understood him, and her thirst for life.

Noelle didn’t want to *just* survive. She wanted to *live*.

“Noelle!” someone shouted her name, the sound coming closer and closer.

Like in a trance, she didn’t realize her brother had reached her side until he grasped her shoulders, shaking her thoroughly in an attempt to snap her out of it.

“Noelle, answer me, damn it,” Cisco demanded.

Blinking, she slowly brought herself back to the present. Back to the fact that she was still alive and well. She’d survived.

Next, she would live.

“I’m fine,” she replied, giving him an odd smile.

Cisco, for his part, could not believe his eyes. After he’d heard the consecutive gunshots, he’d worried something might have happened to her and he’d run towards the direction she’d taken. All the while, he’d beaten himself for allowing her to go alone when he should have kept her firmly at his side.

Still, nothing would have prepared him for the sight before him.

Noelle, in all her bloody glory next to a fallen bear.

She’d killed a fucking bear.

And Cisco did not know what to make of it—of her. He couldn’t read, nor understand her, but he knew something was wrong.

The following morning at dawn, Cisco and Valerius went out on their excursion, leaving Noelle at the cabin with Yuyu.

After they’d returned from the hunt, Yuyu had taken a good look at the state Noelle had been in and at her husband’s grim expression, and she’d understood something must have happened. She’d only heard the particularities later, when she’d been presented with the evidence of their hunt. Rabbit and...bear. And upon hearing the details, she couldn’t help but worry about Noelle.

Though they’d initially orchestrated the getaway to have a chat with Noelle, Yuyu would have never thought she’d have to talk to her about...killing a bear.

With how small Noelle was, she just couldn’t picture it.

“You should have woken me,” Noelle suddenly said, interrupting Yuyu from her cooking.

“I wanted to let you sleep in after what happened yesterday,” Yuyu smiled at her, inviting her to take a seat next to her.

“Let me help you,” Noelle immediately offered, washing her hands before taking a piece of meat and emulating Yuyu’s

movements with the knife.

“Are you sure you’re ok?” Yuyu asked, wanting to make sure.

After Noelle had washed the blood from her face, she’d suddenly made the excuse that she was too tired and had gone to sleep. That in itself had worried Yuyu even more considering how excited Noelle had been about everything—including the *preparation* of the meat.

“Yeah,” she shrugged. “I was a bit shocked, to be honest. It was terrifying on the spot, but I’m glad my reflexes worked, otherwise I wouldn’t be here.”

“You’re right,” Yuyu gave her a sad smile as she recognized the veracity of her words. Noelle had suffered a traumatic event. Instead of interrogating her about it, they should be happy she’d survived. “You did very well, Noelle. We’re both very proud of you. I hope you know that.”

Noelle flushed, burying her chin into her neck.

“Even after everything?” she asked softly—so softly Yuyu barely heard her.

She’d wanted Cisco to be the one to talk to her since he was her brother, and she’d always supported their bond. But seeing Noelle seem so unsure, she realized she needed to make her stance known as well.

“I’ve always been proud of you,” she replied, pacing her hand on top of the knife to stop Noelle’s movements. “We all make mistakes, Noelle. It’s human nature. But if you learn from them, they stop being mistakes, and they become experienced. No one is perfect.”

She nodded slowly, a small smile appearing on her face.

The rest of the day passed in a flurry and by late afternoon, Cisco and Val had returned with their own bounty—mushrooms, salad and a variety of berries.

Noelle and Yuyu had fun in the kitchen preparing the different recipes and having a contest for the best dish—all in

good humor of course.

Though in the beginning Noelle had started as shy and apologetic, by the end of the day Yuyu had managed to coax her out of her shell.

It was sometime after dinner that the phone call came. Noelle had already retired to her room and Yuyu had just put Val to sleep.

The call was through the satellite phone Cisco always kept for emergencies, and as they heard it ring, they knew to expect the worst.

Cisco and Yuyu went outside, walking a small distance from the cabin so their voices wouldn't echo. Only then did they answer the phone.

And the news was dire.

Sergio Villanueva had survived.

"No," Yuyu's hands went to her mouth as her eyes widened in shock.

Cisco pursed her lips, unable to react.

"We can't do this. We can't," Yuyu repeated.

"He wants his *promised* bride."

"She's fifteen," she hissed.

"And he will wait until she's eighteen to claim her," Cisco sighed.

"This can't be happening," Yuyu muttered as she paced around. "This can't be happening, Cisco. We've tried to shield her from everything for years. And now this? No, I refuse to let it happen."

"We have no choice, love," Cisco said in a resigned voice.

"I hate your mother," she spat vehemently—the first time she'd ever uttered that sentence. "I *hate* your parents," she repeated, her eyes misted with tears.

“We had no way of knowing they’d go behind our backs and offer Noelle for Val.”

“No, but they did. And you know what? I hate myself even more because *I*’m the reason this happened. *I*’m the reason,” she paused, choking on her tears. “If only...”

“If what? I would have never married Camilla and you know that. I would have only ever married *you*. You, or no one else,” he said coolly.

“But you married me. And that’s why they took offense. That’s why...”

Elena and Amato had never accepted Yuyu to the family and had openly told her so many times. Despite that, they had loved Val because he was Cisco’s child. Having seen that, Yuyu had simply come to terms that her in-laws would never like her, but she’d been fine with it as long as they treated Val nicely.

Yet that had come with a price, too.

When Cisco had refused to go through with his arranged marriage to Camilla Villanueva—marriage that his father had personally contracted—he’d set in motion a deadly chain of events that still had far-reaching consequences.

Camilla had ended up married to Thadeo, the middle DeVille. Sergio, Camilla’s brother, had been incensed at the slight since the contract had been for the DeVille heir, not for an ex-military spare that had no stake in the family business. And so he’d retaliated in his own way—by kidnapping Val.

Initially, it had been solely out of revenge for the slight to his pride, for which he’d been ready to wage an all-out war. But while Cisco and Yuyu had attempted to get their son back through *any* means possible, Amato and Elena had approached Sergio with a better offer—they would give their youngest daughter in marriage, together with a sizable dowry, in exchange for Val.

Sergio, thinking he could make use of the opportunity and the dowry Amato was offering, had been satisfied with the

deal and he'd returned Val to Cisco and Yuyu.

The deal had been signed in blood, and Sergio had been added as sole beneficiary of Noelle's trust upon her eighteenth birthday. He'd also been written as a clause in Amato's will.

Either Cisco fulfilled the deal, or every liquid DeVille asset would be transferred over to one of their first cousins—which would mean an automatic shift in leadership. The clause had been added strategically. Either Cisco fulfilled the deal, or his cousin Primo would do it once he got his hands on the DeVille assets. One way or another, Sergio would get his due.

The only bright side had been that Noelle had been too young—just shy of ten years old at the time. The marriage could only take place when she was of age.

Sergio, already a man in his early forties at the time, had wed another. And another. He'd gone through three wives in that time, and while Cisco and Yuyu hoped at least his last wife wouldn't drop dead, that had ultimately come to pass recently.

When Dolores, Sergio's last wife, had died, Cisco's first move had been to order a hit on Sergio. Mayhap his mistake had been in not sending Yuyu to finish the job, but the hit had failed. And Sergio had been angrier than ever.

He'd declared he wouldn't take another wife until Noelle came of age, after which he would wed her immediately as stated by the contract. If that hadn't been enough, Sergio had stated in no uncertain terms that DeVille either gave him his promised bride, or he would take her for himself—alive, or dead.

At that point, it had become more than just a legal gamble, but rather of survival.

Noelle's survival.

It didn't matter that she was the blameless party in the entire debacle. It only mattered that for some reason Sergio Villanueva had become obsessed with acquiring her.

“Don’t,” he took her in his arms. “Don’t blame yourself. It would have happened regardless,” he sighed.

When the contract had been signed, Amato had already known he was dying. Yuyu was convinced Elena had used her wiles to convince him that Noelle would never serve them for anything else, so she was the best casualty.

“How can I, when I know our happiness was built on her future *unhappiness*?”

“She needs to marry him to fulfill the contract. But after...” he trailed off, the implication clear.

“And until then?” Yuyu lifted her face, her eyes shimmering with tears.

“We’ll figure something out,” Cisco promised, though he himself did not know what.

For the first time, his hands were truly tied. His father had known he would attempt to do anything to prevent the marriage and he’d set in place a few safety measures. All because Cisco had dared to marry Yuyu instead of Camilla.

Cisco was aware it wasn’t so much the choice of his bride that had impacted his father’s decision as it was the fact that Cisco had directly disobeyed him.

He might not have signed the marriage contract with his own hands, but he might as well have.

Sensing Yuyu’s increasing distraught, he led her back to the cabin. But upon opening the door, it was to come face to face with a wide-eyed Noelle.

“Marriage?” she asked in an incredulous tone. “Me?”

“Noelle,” Yuyu tried to reach out to her, but she flinched.

“Who is it? Tell me?” she demanded in a dead voice.

Cisco swore under his breath as he realized she must have overheard part of their conversation. This wasn’t how he wanted her to find out.

“Who did you sell me to?” She repeated, more vehemently.

“Noelle, it’s not like that...” Yuyu tried to speak but Noelle wasn’t even looking at her.

She directed her gaze towards Cisco, knowing that only *he* had control over this as the current head of the family. And to an extent it was true. He had control over everything *but* this.

Damn it all, but if only the hit on Sergio would have worked... But he lived in a fortress with little to no outside contact and he almost *never* left its premises.

“His name is Sergio Villanueva,” Cisco started, pinning her with her gaze. “He owns a large area in northeastern Mexico. You are to marry him when you turn eighteen.”

He could have told her everything else she didn’t know—that he’d tried his damn best to avoid this from happening. But he didn’t. In the end, he *was* guilty. It didn’t matter the angle one looked at—he was the sole culprit.

“Why?” The words were barely audible, but they hurt Cisco in a way little else had over the years.

Despite what people thought of him, he did have feelings. Maybe he had a hard time recognizing and displaying them, but he *did* feel. And he loved his sister. To have her look at him as if he was dead to her was one of the harshest blows he’d been dealt.

“Because I said so,” he simply stated.

Yuyu stiffened in his arms.

“I see,” Noelle gave a slow nod before she turned, walking to her room and closing the door behind her.

“Why would you say that?” Yuyu whispered, raw emotion emanating from her voice.

“I failed her,” he closed his eyes. “I failed her when she needed me the most. I can’t fail her from now on.”

“I don’t understand,” Yuyu’s palms cupped his cheeks, turning him around.

“I can’t stop the wedding from happening. But I can ensure Noelle is strong enough to bear it. Until...”

“She’ll hate you,” Yuyu rightfully remarked, her eyes filled with turmoil. But she didn’t add more. She understood exactly what his goal was.

“But she will survive.”

The issue was that though Noelle put on a strong face in front of Cisco and Yuyu, when she was alone in her room, she didn’t think she *would* survive.

She didn’t even care who she was supposed to marry at that point. She *hurt* about the fact that the only people she’d *ever* trusted sold her over. They’d pretended to care for her and they’d slowly wormed their way into her heart before delivering the last blow.

Alone in her room, she sunk to the floor as she stared at the dark shadows on the wall. Her eyes were semi-dry, and for once, tears wouldn’t even come.

She just stared at the intangible forms on her walls, wishing she could be just like them—non-sentient and non-feeling.

Only then would she be able to go on without feeling herself bleed with anguish.

Only then would she be able to just *be*, without the burden of being.

10. NOELLE

AGE SIXTEEN

Her ear fitted to the frame of the door, Noelle snuck her head into the hallway, listening for the sign that her mother had left. When a loud bang echoed in the entire house, her lips spread into a big grin.

Closing the door to her room, she locked it—just in case—before she opened her secret hideaway to remove a diet coke six-pack and a couple bags of chips.

Her mother had a strict policy of no junk food in the house. But that never stopped Noelle from sneaking out to buy it, or for the staff to help her procure it.

Arranging everything in place around her desk, she turned on her computer, jumping straight into the game.

Yet the moment she opened the chat, her excitement deflated when she realized Blue was not online yet. Her eyes immediately went to the clock, and she sighed in relief when she saw it was her who'd logged on earlier. If she missed even one day of talking to him...

She shook her head. She wouldn't think about that.

After she'd found out about her inevitable marriage to a certain Sergio Villanueva, she'd realized she was truly all alone.

The blow from her brother had been a harsh one, and she was still reeling—on her bad days. But she'd learned to adapt and move on.

What had Cisco himself taught her? That patience was key.

She wasn't going to resign herself to what life had in store for her, but that didn't mean she wouldn't prepare for the worst.

When she'd been able to calm herself and look at the situation more objectively, she'd asked more questions. She'd

recognized the name Villanueva because it was Camilla's maiden name. And so she'd quickly managed to put two and two together.

From her understanding, the marriage contract had been signed when her father had still been around, which meant he'd been complicit to it, too. And it had all started with Cisco choosing to marry Yuyu instead of Camilla, his original fiancée. His refusal had resulted in another marriage arrangement. This time with Noelle as the collateral.

She'd learned that Sergio was thirty years her senior—*gross*, in her opinion—and that he was a landowner from northeastern Mexico. He'd already been married a handful times, which never bode well. All indicated that it was a disaster waiting to happen—for her, and for her future.

But Noelle was nothing if not determined. And though she'd already decided she would do whatever it took to avoid that fate, she'd started preparing in advance.

After all, knowledge was power.

She'd researched the entire geography of the region, and she'd started taking online Spanish lessons—all in an attempt to be prepared when the time came.

Her family might want to dump her in a foreign country and leave her defenseless, but she was not about to go down without a fight.

But her optimistic outlook would not have been possible without one variable.

Blue.

She'd never imagined that one day, when she'd been at her lowest, she would have confessed her problems to Blue—*privately*. She'd shared her situation, without any identifiable details, of course, and he had shared his own worries in return.

That one conversation had sparked the most precious friendship Noelle had ever dreamed of.

She'd gathered he was in college, so that made him a few years older than her. But that didn't matter to her. Not when they were on the same wavelength, communicating so effortlessly. They had the same sense of humor, and shared many of the same interests.

Though they still played games in the team format every now and then, she and Blue chatted daily.

Just the two of them.

Usually, it involved mundane conversations, watching movies or tv shows together or reading something and discussing the subject matter afterwards.

It might seem silly for her to be so excited for something like that, but for the first time in her life she felt seen. She was no longer Noelle, the odd girl who wore too much black, or the weird chick who played the piano. She certainly wasn't the psycho piano girl anymore.

No, for Blue she was just curiouscat. His *friend*—curiouscat.

He listened to her and she listened to him. It had been entirely eye-opening to find someone who actually listened to her opinions without mocking them, or without diminishing her intellect. Though Blue could be playful and sarcastic, he was never belittling. He made her comfortable to share her thoughts, and she liked to think he felt the same in return.

Suddenly, a green dot appeared next to his name and her pulse sped up.

“Hullo, stranger,” she drawled.

“My, my curiouscat. So early. Anyone else and they'd think you're too eager,” he chuckled.

“Is that so?” she raised a brow, her lips tipped into a perpetual smile.

“But I know the truth. You're just dying to see the next episode,” he added playfully.

“Maybe I’m dying to talk to you,” she fired back, inadvertently revealing the truth.

There was a brief pause, and she hoped she hadn’t said the wrong thing.

Though they’d been talking for months now, their friendship was still relatively new. She didn’t want to scare him away with her other thoughts—the not so clean or friendly ones.

“You’d better. Otherwise I’d wonder why you’ve been torturing yourself with me this whole time,” he laughed. “Especially after you took on the challenge to educate me in pop culture.”

“And I’ve taken my lesson seriously, haven’t I? You’re now familiar with all the American Pie movies, Blue. I’d say that’s a success.”

“Is it? Then maybe you should give me an award to add to my resume. Think about it: Beginner in pop culture—curiouscat approved.”

She threw her head back and laughed.

“I can certainly do that,” she told him, still giggling.

Opening a blank paint file, she scribbled a few words, adding a cat clip art and sending it to him.

“I’ll be sorely disappointed if you don’t tattoo that somewhere on your body,” she added, barely holding her laughter in.

The card read: *Blued to the television*. Then she’d signed herself with a cat picture.

“This is gold,” he exclaimed after he opened the file. “I might have to take you up on that.”

“If you do, send a picture. I want to see where my first and last piece of art ends up,” she chortled.

“Wait a moment,” he said, and Noelle blinked.

Was he... Was he really going to...

Not a minute later and he sent her a picture. It was of his arm, and he'd copied the sentence and doodled a very wonky cat.

"What do you think now?" He asked smugly.

"Well, I'd say I'm not the only one who should end her art career with that drawing."

"Curiouscat! I'm offended. Can't you see how life-like this is?" he intoned playfully.

"I can only see a mutant cat who," she paused as she zoomed in on the picture, "unfortunately grew a fifth leg."

"That's not a leg. It's the tail."

"It looks like a leg, Blue."

"Well, it's a tail. And I happen to think that it's a wonderful cat. You're just jealous that my cat is better than yours."

"Uhuh, if you say so," she cracked a smile. "I may admit defeat if you promise not to wipe that off for...a week?"

"A week? Deal," he laughed.

But just as she was about to say something else, she couldn't help but be intrigued by the picture he'd sent. Granted, it only contained an area of his arm, but Noelle studied it closely, noting tanned skin, green, prominent veins and hints of blonde hair.

Her eyes widened, just as her mouth spread into a wide grin.

So her Blue was blonde, tanned, and probably handsome. Of course, she didn't know the latter, but in her imagination he was always good looking. Almost like his avatar in the game. Blonde, blue eyed and having a roguish look about him.

"I think we left off at episode five, no?" Blue asked. She found herself blushing as she realized she'd been staring at

that picture for far too long.

“Yep,” she declared, popping the p. “And after that episode you can tell me what you decided to write your lit paper on. I’m curious,” she said as she opened a can of diet coke, taking a sip.

“Fine,” he chuckled. “Sometimes you’re more enthusiastic about my classes than I am.”

“I find the courses you chose fascinating,” she told him honestly. “I’ve always been a fan of literature, but I’ve never been able to discuss it with anyone,” her voice dropped a notch in disappointment.

She supposed that it all came down to the fact that she always seemed to have a different interpretation than the rest. Because of that, her opinion was often regarded as strange. Of course, no one would tell her that to her face. But she’d always felt it in the way her teachers and classmates regarded her—as if she’d said the most stupid thing.

Her love of literature had taken a hit then, when she’d become more and more self-conscious about speaking out and sharing her thoughts. And at some point, she’d stopped trying altogether.

It wasn’t the same with Blue. Although it had taken some coaxing for her to give her opinion on certain pieces, he’d praised her insight, calling it fresh and original.

She’d never been praised like that before! But she’d never been good at anything aside from the piano before, either. From the beginning, her identity had been wrapped in being a pianist—nothing else. It didn’t matter that she spoke two languages fluently—English and Italian—or that she was well-read and had amassed a great deal of general knowledge.

No, there had never been anything more to her than the piano.

“Really?” He sounded incredulous. “I find that hard to believe. Remember when we did that joint reading of the

Odyssey? You made such great points about it. I won't deny that I might have used some in the class discussion."

Noelle blinked, replaying every word he'd just said in her mind. Her cheeks reddened just as her mouth became dry.

"You did?" she whispered, giddiness taking shape inside of her.

"You're not mad, I hope? But the points you made about Penelope were just too good."

"No, of course not," she hurried to say. "I guess I'm flattered," she admitted, but she didn't tell him no one had ever told her she'd made *great points*.

It was a compliment she would keep close to her heart and cherish.

"You should be. In fact, I'm looking forward to hearing your thoughts about this one, if you want to read it together, that is," he offered, and she could sense a little hesitation.

He didn't want to impose on her with his schoolwork, not realizing that she *loved* discussing *anything* with him. And the more intellectually stimulating, the more satisfying the discussion was.

Sometimes, it felt like something akin to having their minds open up, connecting to one another through a pure vibrational energy that made them think—*be*—in sync.

It was an ineffable phenomenon that spoke to her core. A giddiness that had nothing to do with the fact that he might be a handsome man—though she imagined he was—and everything to do with the fact that she found his *mind* beautiful, and he found hers in return.

"What is it?"

"It's a more obscure work, called *The Plumed Serpent* by D.H. Lawrence. I chose it because it overlaps with my area of study."

Blue had shared with her that he was interested in ancient Meso-America and wanted to study ritual tools used in the area for his dissertation. She'd offered to listen to him talk about the subject whenever he wanted since she might learn a thing or two about the customs of the area.

"Count me in, Blue," she added cheekily, already curious about the contents of the book.

And with that, they jumped straight into the tv show. Noelle with her flaming hot Cheetos and diet coke, and Blue with his preferred snack of Pirate's Booty.

The conversation flowed naturally as they reacted to scenes and discussed events from the episode. But in no time, they were done, and Noelle felt her pulse speed up at the thought of ending the call too early.

Blue had become her safe haven, their interactions the only thing she was looking forward to in the day. And every time, she attempted to draw out the conversation more—anything to chat with him for a few more minutes.

"Are you going home this weekend?" she suddenly asked.

"Yes," he sighed. "My mother has been pleading with me nonstop to come."

He'd shared that his relationship with his mother was strained because of how she behaved with his other siblings.

"At least you have a mother who cares," she muttered under her breath.

"I'm sorry," he said after a moment. "I know my mom has good intentions when it comes to me, but I can't forgive her for everything she's done," he sighed.

"I think I'd rather have someone who was a villain but put me above everyone than someone who would sacrifice me in a second."

"Do you?" Blue mused. "Maybe theoretically, but she didn't hurt random people. She hurt my siblings whom I love."

“Maybe I am more selfish than most, but I would still choose that over nothing,” Noelle admitted, almost embarrassed. “Wouldn’t you want someone who accepted you and loved you for who you truly are?”

“But that’s the thing. My mother may love me because I am her son, but that’s never stopped her from trying to mold me into who she wants me to be. Yes, she loves me, but I don’t think she’s ever stopped to really look at me—to understand me,” Blue confessed, the words pouring out of him and revealing the depth of his issue with his mother.

“Then maybe we’re in the same boat,” Noelle said softly. “Everyone in my life has tried to change me one way or another. I’ve never had someone accept me for who I am—at least not without always criticizing me for what I *could* be.”

“And it doesn’t work like that,” Blue agreed.

“It only makes me feel inadequate,” she pursed her lips, her heart contracting in her chest.

“I know the feeling,” he laughed dryly. “I guess I would be selfish in that case too. If I found someone who accepted *all* of me, who loved me for who I am, then maybe I would be able to forgive everything.”

“Because she’d be yours and yours alone,” she mentioned, a heartwarming vision taking shape inside her head. Maybe it was silly to add a feminine pronoun to the equation. He’d never said he was looking for a woman to fulfill all those requirements. Yet Noelle, in her delusion, could almost see herself in that position.

“Yes. And I’d be hers and hers alone,” he replied in a soft voice—one that surprised her.

“You’ll have that, Blue. I’m certain of it.”

“You will, too. You’re pretty awesome, you know that?”

She blinked, the compliment hitting her in the chest and making her head swim with giddiness. Her cheeks heated, her pulse through the roof as she stared at the screen.

“You...” She cleared her throat. “You think so?”

“Of course,” he replied. “I’ve never met someone as cool as you. We may have started on the wrong foot in the game, but I’ve never been able to be this open with someone,” he paused, and she could envision him shrugging. “I know this might sound cheesy because we’ve never even met. But I really appreciate our friendship.”

“Me too. I’ve never met someone I could share these things with. And it’s not cheesy. I appreciate our friendship, too. I’m not very social in real life and people usually don’t like me,” she took a deep breath, feeling oddly emotional. Before she could continue, though, he spoke.

“Well, I like you,” he declared proudly.

Noelle was frozen to the spot at his statement.

“You...do?”

Damn it, but she sounded so insecure. Yet she was hearing those words from someone for the first time. And he wasn’t just *anyone*.

He was Blue.

Her best friend. Her... Ok, maybe her feelings for him weren’t quite so friendly, though she was still coming to terms with that. Because how could she possibly fall in love with someone she’d never seen—someone she’d never even heard though they’d been speaking for months?

It was beyond outrageous to think she could develop feelings—deep, deep feelings—for someone like that. It was absolutely delusional.

But she did.

Noelle DeVille was falling for Blue—an online person she’d never *ever* seen.

What if he was ugly?

In her mind, he was the most handsome guy. But she suspected it wouldn’t matter if he wasn’t traditionally good

looking. What mattered was the way he listened and understood her. The way he told her he *liked* her with all her idiosyncrasies.

“I wouldn’t be here, for hours on end, *every* day, if I didn’t like you. I like spending time with you, Curiouscat,” he told her, his tone different from before. It was more serious, more...

“I like you, too,” she admitted, a shiver going down her back. “And I hope we can continue like this for a long, long time.”

“You bet,” he chuckled, adding more levity to his tone. “You’re not getting rid of me so easily. We have another five seasons of Smallville to watch.”

She smiled, leaning back in her chair and staring at the computer, not for the first time wondering what Blue was doing on the other side of the screen.

Since they both had some spare time—Blue, because the following day was Saturday and he didn’t have classes, and Noelle because her mother wasn’t due for another few hours—they decided to continue with their show.

“I find it interesting that they chose to show multiple love interests when everyone knows Lois Lane is Superman’s endgame,” Noelle commented as she munched on her flaming hot Cheetos.

“Lana was his high school crush. I think they wanted to put an emphasis on his human side, and that he had normal human relationships,” Blue added.

“Is it that abnormal to *not* have a high school crush? I never had one,” she said deliberately, holding her breath and hoping he would offer some information about himself and whether he’d had one.

“It’s not. I didn’t have one either,” he said matter-of-factly, and Noelle felt like she could breathe again. “But I don’t think my high school experience was normal. I was only trying to graduate. I didn’t have time for other things.”

“So you’ve never had a crush before?” She probed, needing to know more.

“Nope. Dating isn’t in the books for me now.”

“But if it would be. What would you go for?”

“Someone who liked me for who I am, of course,” he answered immediately.

“What about physical characteristics? Or mannerisms?” Noelle knew she shouldn’t push much more, but she couldn’t help herself. She saw an opening and she took it.

“Someone feminine,” he paused, and she could feel the smile on his face. “Dainty.”

Well, that was easy enough—she was pretty dainty. Her lips spread into a smile.

“Someone who’d let me protect and provide for her.”

Noelle’s brows went up as a tingle spread down to her tummy. Now that was surprising, but why did it sound so appealing? More than that, why was Blue telling her everything she wanted to hear?

“What about you?” He suddenly asked. “What type would you go for?”

“Someone who loved me,” she smiled. “Someone who understood me, and always had my back. More than anything...Someone who trusted me and who I trusted implicitly.”

“I like that,” he commented.

“That’s why I think Chloe is the best choice for Clark. They have the perfect friendship, trust and understanding.”

“I agree,” Blue said, surprising her. “I like their relationship best, too. Who wouldn’t like to be absolute best friends with their lover? Actually, scratch that. Who would settle for anything less than being best friends with their lover?”

Noelle bit her lip, her heart hammering at her ribcage. Who, indeed?

She knew she would never want anything less. But she also knew something else. Something she might have intuited before but never quite acknowledged fully.

She was in love with her best friend.

11. NOELLE

“Don’t tell me I’m to be a prisoner in this house until you sell me off,” Noelle muttered as she stared mutinously at her brother.

Cisco puffed his cigarette as he watched her with narrowed eyes, his fingers drumming on the surface of his polished study.

“Come on,” Noelle persisted. “I haven’t been in the city in months. I need some new clothes too and...”

“You expect me to believe you will just behave?” Cisco raised a brow at her.

“I’m not going to run off, if that’s what you’re thinking,” she rolled her eyes. “Where would I even go, anyway? It’s not like you wouldn’t find me in a second,” she grumbled.

Cisco smiled.

“I’m glad you know that. Fine. I’ll let you go shopping. But,” he paused as Noelle’s eyes sparkled with renewed hope. “Yuyu will accompany you.”

Noelle frowned.

“Why?”

“It’s either that or ten bodyguards. You decide,” he shrugged.

“Ten?” Noelle blinked in outrage. “*Ten?*”

“You’re a prized commodity, Noelle. I won’t take any risk with your safety.”

“What do you mean by prized commodity?” She enunciated the words slowly, her upper lip twitching in displeasure.

“By now people should know you’re meant to marry Sergio Villanueva. He has enemies. As do I. Anywhere but at home you’ll be an open target, so it’s better to be safe.”

Her mouth curled up in a sardonic smile.

“You’re telling me Yuyu is the equivalent of ten bodyguards?” she asked ironically.

“No,” Cisco chuckled. “Yuyu is the equivalent of a small army. You’ll be safe with her.”

With that, the matter was settled. Yuyu would accompany Noelle to the city the following day, and Cisco was gracious enough to bestow a generous budget on Noelle for her shopping spree.

Trudging her way back to her room, Noelle was happy Cisco had at least allowed her to go out. After all, she had plans that she’d been carefully concocting for weeks now.

Ever since her conversation with Blue, she realized they might be compatible intellectually, but she wanted him to like her physically too. From what she’d managed to glean from their conversations, Blue liked feminine women, who were as dainty as they were graceful. And though Noelle might fit in the former category by virtue of her small build, she had no clue how to act or dress like the latter. In short, she had not one graceful bone in her body.

Yet not all was lost.

Despite having her arranged marriage looming in the distance, Noelle was not deterred. One way, or another, she would succeed in escaping that dire fate. And if everything went according to plan, she would enlist Blue’s help to do so. It wasn’t an entirely mercenary goal, for as much as she

wanted to be the master of her own fate, she wanted Blue even more.

Of course, it wasn't a simple matter, or an issue that could be solved within a day. No, she was merely laying the foundation for the future, quietly biding her time until everything would fit into place to perfection.

From the moment she'd heard about her *marriage*, she'd known that she would never solve anything by throwing a tantrum or crying about the injustices of the world. The only way she could exact change was for her to be change in itself, and that meant tackling everything in a non-impulsive, intelligent and calculated manner.

Noelle had never been one to quietly succumb to her fate, nor had she ever been the type of person to let life pass her by while others took her choices away from her.

She wanted to live, and she would do so on her own terms.

If she needed to show a rather obedient front to the world while she put her plans in motion, then so be it.

The following day, Noelle donned her a regular black shirt and a pair of dark sweatpants and went downstairs at the appropriate time.

Yuyu was already waiting for her in the foyer.

Dressed in a pair of loose dress pants, a smart dark shirt and combat boots, Yuyu had her hair tied up in a bun atop her head. Black sunglasses rested low on the bridge of her nose as she fitted her crossbody bag on her right hip.

"Ready?" she asked with a kind smile, turning to face Noelle.

Noelle flushed, averting her gaze as she gave her a brisk nod.

It would be so easy to hate Yuyu... So, so easy. But even when her thoughts had been darkest, Noelle had never managed to quite revile her as she'd attempted to.

Yes, Yuyu was the indirect cause of Noelle's current circumstances, and likely her relationship with Cisco had set everything in motion. But Yuyu had always been kind to her.

Since young, when everyone had criticized and blamed her for things that were out of her control, Yuyu had been different. She'd been the only one to be there for Noelle, be it with a kind word, a piece of candy, or an understanding gaze. She'd been the only one to make an effort to understand her when everyone had branded her abnormal, and consequently, she'd been the only one to try to engage with Noelle and make her *feel* normal.

How could she hate her when Yuyu was the reason she learned how to smile when she was little? When she'd given her more affection than her own mother?

And so she found herself in a seemingly unsolvable conundrum.

How could she reconcile the warm and kind Yuyu who'd been like a true mother to her with the Yuyu that she was looking at now—the cause of all her misfortune.

She couldn't. And if she were really honest with herself, she didn't want to.

She'd rather put all the blame on her brother as long as she still had this—the only memories of the past that mattered to her.

"I'm ready," she muttered in a low voice as she reached Yuyu's side.

"I'm so happy we're going out," Yuyu gushed. "It's been so long since we've had a girls' day, hasn't it?"

"So it has," Noelle strained a smile.

Before she could protest, Yuyu placed her arm in the crook of her elbow, steering her towards the exit and to the parking lot.

Since it had been confirmed that Noelle was to marry Sergio Villanueva, Cisco, Yuyu and Val had moved back

upstate. Noelle supposed it was to keep a closer eye on her since her brother was intimately acquainted with her stubborn streak and the fact that she was capable of doing something—*a rather drastic something*—in order to escape her marriage.

Alas, she might be stubborn, and she might be the type to defy authority, but she was also smart. And being smart in this instance meant acting against herself and planning every little step of the way carefully—not only to avoid that fate, but also to prepare for the worst in case it did come to pass.

She'd already started learning Spanish. With her background in Italian, and the fact that Blue himself was taking Spanish classes, it made everything easier. She'd also been studying the culture and history of the country. Since Blue's interest was in the pre-Columbian Americas, he'd been sharing things with her, and she'd been learning everything alongside him.

And that was her backup plan.

If you can't stop a train from collision, the least you can do is change its course.

If she couldn't escape her marriage—*despite the fact that it was her main goal*—she would do everything in her power to prevail even in such a dire situation.

At the end of the day, knowledge was her best ally.

Know thyself, as the Greeks said. But in Noelle's case, it was know thy enemy; then turn yourself into their biggest nightmare.

Coming upon the parking lot, Yuyu headed to a pink sports Lamborghini in the back, beckoning Noelle to take a seat by her side.

"I haven't seen this car before," Noelle said as she took in the pink interior of the car.

Everything was...pink.

"Cisco gifted it to me for my birthday. Do you like it?" Yuyu's eyes sparkled as she ran her hands over the equally

pink steering wheel.

“It’s...very pink.”

“It is, isn’t it? He had it custom made for me since he knows how much I love it.”

“But,” Noelle paused as she frowned. “I’ve never seen you in pink before. I didn’t know you liked it.”

“I can’t say I have too many opportunities to indulge in it,” Yuyu sighed. “As a Deville wife, people have expectations of me, just as they have a preconceived idea I have to meet. I can’t engage in frivolities.”

“But if you like it...” Noelle continued.

Yuyu gave her a sad smile.

“You should see our room. I have free rein there and I decorated it to my taste. Unfortunately, that is the extent of what is allowed of me. Well, that and now this,” she returned her attention to the car, her eyes gleaming as a blinding smile spread across her face.

“Is it because of my brother? Is he forcing you to live like this?” Noelle suddenly asked, never having entertained the idea before. She knew Cisco could be a tyrant when he wanted—the way he managed the family business being proof enough of it. But was he a tyrant to Yuyu as well?

Noelle bit her lip in worry, because just as the thought came to mind so did the fear that Yuyu could have been coerced into this situation. After all, she’d started out as her brother’s bodyguard, assuming a male identity in doing so. Had Cisco forced her to do that, too?

“Cisco, forcing me?” Yuyu laughed, shaking her head. “No, he would never force me to do anything, much less give up on things I love because it’s the *right* thing to do.”

“Then?” Noelle blinked, more confused than ever.

“It’s because I respect him and his position and I know that my actions and the way I comport myself reflect on him and

our family. Yes, I love this car and it's a small extravagance. But I'm not likely to drive it in an official setting, for a business meeting or an important social event. This is just for me to have fun," she explained. "I knew when I married your brother that my life would change. Hell, I knew it when I first met him. But I'm willing to make these small sacrifices to be by his side."

"So he's not...controlling your life?" Noelle probed further, somehow still unconvinced.

Her brother was the definition of a control freak with a good dose of OCD. Maybe she hadn't recognized that in the past since she'd been too young to see it for what it was, but since he'd moved back into the house, Noelle had noticed just how peculiar her brother was.

He always ate the same breakfast, at the same time, with the same type of cutlery and always with stark white dinnerware, devoid of any embellishment. The one time his plate had been mistakenly swapped with a white one that had slight decorations around the corners, he'd simply stared at it for the longest time, his eyes narrowed, his body tense. Breakfast had come and gone and he hadn't eaten one thing.

Not. A. Single. Thing.

And that was just one of the many things Noelle had noticed about her brother. There were other, smaller instances, where he simply befuddled her. He would *never* read a list from the beginning, like a normal person—only from the end. Sometimes he would stare at you for long periods of time, his features impassive, almost as if he was looking into your goddamn soul.

Noelle could understand that some people had quirks. But her brother seemed to be a quirk in itself. How Yuyu put up with that, she didn't know.

"No," Yuyu smiled. "Cisco is not controlling my life in any way. Despite your brother's gruff exterior, he's a teddy bear."

Somehow, Noelle doubted that. A grizzly bear, maybe, but even then he'd probably be in charge of an army of other bears, dictating when and how they could growl.

"Then I really don't understand. If he's not forcing you to behave a certain way and if he's not pressuring you, then why do it? Why not...do what you love? Dress and decorate the way you like?"

"One thing you'll learn as you grow, Noelle, is that being an adult means willingly giving up what you love if you know the situation demands it. And in my case, my actions have been scrutinized from the moment I married your brother. Everyone is waiting for the moment I screw up, or do something wrong. Everyone is waiting for me to fail. And I won't give them that satisfaction."

With that, Yuyu started the engine of the car, steering it towards the driveway before heading straight for the highway.

Noelle soon realized that she'd barely scratched the surface with Yuyu. Yes, she was kind, and warm, and just... nice, but she was so much more than that.

"Hold on," she smiled at her before stepping on the gas pedal and going at the full speed allowed on the highway.

Noelle's eyes widened in shock, but that soon gave way to uncontrollable laughter as she let loose and enjoyed the ride.

It didn't last long, however, as Yuyu returned to a moderate speed as they entered the city.

"What did you have in mind for today? I think I know a few stores that have your type of clothing..."

"No," Noelle interrupted. "That is, I don't want my *usual* type of clothes," she said as she nibbled at her lip. "I want to try something new."

Yuyu's brows went up in surprise.

"Something new? What did you have in mind?"

Noelle shrugged, trying to seem as blasé as possible.

“I don’t know. Something more...feminine? Dresses and that type of stuff. Maybe some other colors too. Something like purple, or violet,” she turned to gaze out the window so that Yuyu wouldn’t see the blush marring her cheeks.

Of course, she would also be looking for something yellow to complement their discussion, but she imagined that if she wore Blue’s favorite color, she might be more appealing to him if they were to ever meet.

It seemed like such a silly thought that she was immediately embarrassed. But all was fair in love and war. Why wouldn’t she use every weapon at her disposal to get ahead?

Once more, she realized how mercenary she sounded despite the fact that her intentions were anything but. She *genuinely* wanted Blue to like her—*want* her. Which, of course, was foolish considering she’d never even seen what *he* looked like. Yet despite all that, she knew she would find him attractive. How, she didn’t know. There was just something about him that attracted her on a deeper level, one that was as instinctual as it was ineffable.

Noelle had always trusted her instincts. And with regards to Blue they told her he was hers.

That was it. He was simply...hers.

“I’m glad to hear that,” Yuyu replied, and Noelle shook herself out of her reverie. It was so easy to lose herself in her thoughts when it came to Blue. “In fact, I might have some store suggestions.”

“Ok. Show me,” Noelle nodded.

To Noelle’s greatest surprise, Yuyu pulled into a private parking lot before leading her to one of the busiest streets in New York where all the luxury department stores were.

Even to her untrained eyes the stores seemed entirely too expensive, and she recognized a few high-end brands.

“Are you sure we’re at the right location?” she asked with trepidation. “Isn’t this a few thousand for a shirt?” she pointed towards the Chanel store, one she was familiar with since she’d watched a couple of seasons of *Gossip Girl* with Blue. That was her only introduction to fashion, and she was quite well acquainted with all the brands Blair Waldorf wore. After all, she’d been Noelle’s favorite character.

“Of course,” Yuyu chuckled, placing her car keys in her bag. “We don’t have money issues, Noelle. You can have nice things and it won’t break the bank.”

“Yes, nice things. Not exorbitantly expensive things,” she muttered. “I could buy an entire wardrobe with the price of one item from these stores.”

“Maybe, but you wanted something different, did you not?”

Noelle reluctantly nodded. She did want something different. But not...this. Or did she? Maybe because she’d never worn any designer stuff—at least not in recent memory—she could not qualify the experience. Her mother had certainly tried to get her to wear expensive, *girly* stuff when she’d been a child. But she’d categorically eschewed that then.

Ironic that now *she* was the one voluntarily seeking it out.

“Fine. Let’s do this,” she sighed, allowing herself to be led inside the department store. “Do you usually shop here, too?”

Yuyu nodded.

“I might go for more formal styles since Cisco and I are always on the go, but I have to admit that designer clothes are one of my weaknesses. I don’t know if I ever told you, but I grew up poor. *Dirt* poor. After my mother died, it was just me and my grandmother and she was too ill to work. So I had to do what I could to put food on our table. I could barely clothe ourselves for the winter, let alone allow for any extravagances but...” she trailed off, swallowing hard at the painful memories.

“I used to come on this street. Pickpocketing,” she chuckles. “That’s what I did to survive back then. But as I was waiting around, scouring for the next person I could rob, I couldn’t help but stare at the wonderful displays and be in awe at the colorful dresses and the modern styles. There was one dress in particular that simply mesmerized me. It was a pink Chanel tweed dress that represented everything I wanted to be. *Classy, feminine, rich*. Someone with no worry about money or for the future,” Yuyu smiled fondly.

“I promised myself that one day I would have enough money to buy one of those dresses for myself. And after I started working for your brother, it happened. It might have taken me an entire year of penny pinching, but it happened.”

“So fashion is personal to you, is it not?”

“You could say so,” Yuyu nodded. “It represents both a period of my life when it was out of reach, but also one of prosperity when I can buy anything I wish. More than anything, it symbolizes my journey and how far I’ve come.”

“Is that why you like pink? Because of that Chanel pink dress?”

“Yes. I think that one dress was imprinted on me. I still have it, you know. It’s been more than a decade, but it’s one of my most prized possessions.”

Noelle smiled at Yuyu. Odd how with one small anecdote she felt closer to her than ever before. But truth to be told, no one knew much of Yuyu’s past. Even the fact that she’d been Cisco’s bodyguard was known only to a select few who’d interacted with her as Yu.

“Then I’ll leave everything to you,” Noelle chuckled.

Yuyu took her assignment seriously, taking Noelle to every single store and introducing her to brands she’d never heard of before.

Despite wanting a change of style, Noelle didn’t expect to like the selection of clothes very much, merely *forcing* herself to bear them for the sake of her goals.

Yet as Yuyu pointed out dress after dress, coupled with some skirts and fancy shirts, Noelle found she didn't mind it much.

Especially as they entered the Chanel store and Yuyu led her to their ready-to-wear rack, pulling a tweed dress and showing it to Noelle.

"It's violet," Noelle whispered in awe, greedily eating up the design and imagining herself in it. Yet more than anything, she imagined what Blue would think of her dressed like that.

"Come on, you have to try this," Yuyu said, asking the sales assistant for her size before leading her to the changing rooms.

Just as the sales assistant brought in the dress, Yuyu found five more for Noelle to try.

Shaking her head at her sister-in-law's enthusiasm, Noelle set about trying the first one on.

"Oh, wow," she muttered to herself as she looked at the person staring back at her in the mirror.

It wasn't her. It couldn't be her.

No longer a combination of goth and tomboy, she looked like a woman—a dainty, *graceful* woman.

"You need to add some shoes," Yuyu declared, bringing her a pair of pearl flats. "And a bag," she added after a second thought, picking a black Chanel mini square and handing it to Noelle.

"Yuyu, this is..."

"Perfect, isn't it?"

Noelle could only nod, her throat clogging with emotion.

She...liked it. And not only for Blue. But also for herself.

She didn't feel sick anymore at the thought of wearing anything else but her comfort black clothes. She actually felt beautiful, a first for her.

“May I get it?” she asked in a tremulous voice.

“Of course! We’re getting the shoes and bag as well,” Yuyu added matter-of-factly before pushing more items into her changing room.

She spent an hour trying different Chanel dresses and two-piece sets, eventually buying all of them. When the time came for Yuyu to swipe her credit card, Noelle winced as she saw the number on the till.

Yet Yuyu said nothing, merely gushing about the pieces Noelle had chosen.

“I have more places to show you,” she said enthusiastically before asking someone to keep their purchases until they finished their shopping.

They went to a few more clothing stores, and Noelle picked a couple more flattering items.

“I think this is quite enough, Yuyu. I only meant to get a couple of things, but now I have an entire wardrobe.”

“And is it such a bad thing? Clothes are for you to feel good about yourself, Noelle. Don’t let anyone choose for you. I know Elena wasn’t the best at respecting your boundaries, but don’t think that everyone is the same as her. If you like something, we’re getting it.”

“How come my mother was never so free with money? I’ve always been on a strict allowance.”

Yuyu pursed her lips.

“Elena is...something else. Don’t mind her too much.”

Noelle nodded, noticing once more that despite their conflict, Yuyu didn’t say a bad thing about her mother.

“Let’s get you a watch, too,” Yuyu declared, stopping in front of the map for the department store. Tracing the locations with her finger, she finally found what she was looking for, somewhere on the third floor.

As she started in that direction, Noelle followed closely behind. She didn't think she needed a watch, but she supposed a pretty one wouldn't hurt.

Yet just as they reached the third floor, a loud scream permeated the air.

Noelle startled, while Yuyu simply tensed.

"What do you mean I can't return it? Can't you see it's scuffed?"

"I'm sorry ma'am, but this no longer has the tags on it, so we cannot proceed with a refund as we cannot ascertain that the shoes have not been worn."

"What are you insinuating? That I'd wear the shoes and bring them back when I scuff them?" the woman yelled in outrage.

"I'll never understand those types of people," Yuyu shook her head. "It doesn't cost you anything to be a nice human being. Especially towards those in the service industry."

"Aren't return rules known? I am aware you can't return anything if you remove the tags. Especially for luxury items..."

"You're right. But that doesn't mean some people will not try to get away with it. You think they don't know what they're doing?"

As they were watching the scene unfold, Yuyu's phone rang.

"Excuse me for a moment," she nodded at Noelle as she took a step back to answer the phone.

Noelle didn't mind being left on her own too much as she was a little too curious about the display in front of her.

Was it bad of her to admit she liked chaos? Of course, not of her own making. She just liked to witness it and watch the fallout. But then she'd always liked to be an observer. She

particularly liked to observe people at their worst, curious to see the choices they made.

Maybe this was a by-product of what had happened with Ann-Marie. Or maybe, it was simply her own morbid curiosity and the fact that, deep down, something was seriously wrong with her.

The woman continued to scream at the lady at the register, and Noelle walked slowly towards the entrance of the shop, getting inside and pretending to look around while covertly watching the situation unfold.

Would the lady succeed and get her refund? Or would the lady at the register call security?

If it were Noelle, she would have called security from the first moment the woman had yelled at her. That was no way for someone to behave, especially in society. Yuyu was right that those types of people were the worst. Yet the sad reality was that they rarely got their comeuppance, perpetuating the idea that they could get away with anything.

Then, there was also the stores' fault in accepting this by maintaining that the customer was always right.

A loud bang erupted in the air as the woman slapped her hand on the counter.

Noelle winced, feeling bad for the lady dealing with all this.

Not wanting to be obvious about her interest, she slowly walked around the store. As she turned to the next aisle of clothes, her attention was still on the register so she didn't realize when she bumped into someone until she was sent flying to the floor.

A pained whimper escaped her when she hit the ground, barely thrusting her arms back in time to cushion her fall.

"Shit, I'm so sorry," a deep voice uttered in a low tone.

Still wincing, it took Noelle a moment to get her bearings together.

The first thing she noticed about the person she'd bumped into were his arms. Big arms that stretched towards her in an attempt to help her off the ground.

Her eyes widened as she slowly perused the tanned skin, the light blonde hairs and protruding veins. Yet there was something else that held her attention more than anything.

On the inside of his arm, there was a semi-smudged drawing of a cat, blue ink smeared around the edges from wear. But it wasn't just *any* cat. It was a cat with five legs—or, at least, seemingly so because of the artist's lack of talent. Even if the cat could have been a coincidence, though Noelle didn't think she would ever mistake it for anything else—not when she'd imprinted the image in her memory—the words accompanying it could not.

A little smudged, but they were still right there for her to read.

Blued to the television.

It was the sketch Blue had drawn as a joke, promising to wear it for an entire week.

And it seemed he'd done so.

A shiver of awareness traveled down Noelle's back as she swallowed hard, unable to believe this would happen. That the man before her was actually Blue...*her* Blue.

Slowly, she raised her gaze to meet his, coming face to face with the bluest eyes she'd ever seen—and the most beautiful.

If before Noelle had been in love with the person Blue had been behind his computer, now she was totally, utterly, unfailingly in love with Blue before her.

Strong cheekbones and sharp jaw, his features were both soft and harsh at the same time, giving him a combination of masculine and boyish looks that was devastatingly beautiful.

She'd never imagined he would look like this, and the breath went out of her lungs the more she stared—the more

she found herself both speechless and unwilling to talk. For if she opened her mouth, then the spell would be broken, and their first meeting would be forever marred by the fact that he was clearly much older than her while she was...too young. Certainly too young for him.

If he knew her real age, she had no doubt he would stop talking to her, and she could never risk that.

Realizing she was staring, she allowed him to help her up, purposefully covering his hands with her own to feel his skin on top of hers. They were big and strong and warm. So, so warm they made her entire body heat up.

It was the oddest feeling she'd ever felt.

She recognized it as desire, but it was so much more.

It was the fact that she was absorbing the heat of the man she loved—of the man who'd been her best friend for so long and who'd given her back her confidence in herself.

God, how is this real?

She trembled lightly, unable to believe something like this would happen, that she would be so lucky to meet the object of all her teenage dreams. Yet it was more than that.

Where she'd fallen in love before with him for his kindness and his intellect, now she fell for him all over, his physicality impacting hers in such a way that she became lightheaded and intoxicated in his presence.

He was more than a foot taller than her. So much so, she only reached the middle of his chest as she stepped closer. She'd always been small, but in his presence she didn't feel *that* small, despite the obvious size disparity. There was just something about him that made her feel safe. Where someone else of the same size might have come across as threatening, Blue was the opposite. Noelle felt wrapped in a cocoon, ready to be swallowed up whole and protected by the strength radiating from him.

There were maybe only a few inches separating them. But it was enough for Noelle to inhale his scent, his aftershave filling her nostrils as well as something else. Something she knew it was him and only him—a scent that would stay with her for a long time to come and which she'd seek to recreate at every turn.

“I’m so sorry,” he uttered again in that same low voice, his features apologetic, especially as his eyes flittered between her and the woman at the counter, a small grimace pulling at his lips as the screaming continued.

His voice was deep and husky and pure poison to the senses.

Goosebumps spread all over her body as she absorbed its full effect, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath, almost as if she was savoring the timber of his voice—committing it into her auditory memory.

“Are you ok?” he asked, almost absentmindedly.

She nodded, more split than ever. On the one hand, she wanted him to never leave, while on the other, she couldn't wait for him to disappear faster so he wouldn't find out who she was.

He gave her a small smile, inclining his head before going over to the woman at the counter, leaning in and whispering something in her ear.

They were deep in conversation for a few moments, time that it took Noelle to realize how similar they looked and that she was likely his mother.

“Rafaelo! How could you?” the woman yelled, glaring at her son.

Noelle's eyes widened just as her mouth moved, tasting his name on her lips.

Rafaelo.

It fit, she thought as she continued to stare. It was almost like being caught in a trance as she took in every little detail,

from his body and impressive height to his expressive features and those beautiful, beautiful eyes.

Blue. Rafaelo. The most beautiful thing Noelle had ever seen.

“Rafaelo,” she whispered as she continued to look at him. “You will be mine. And I will be yours.”

She didn’t know how she would do it, but there was a conviction deep in her bones that Rafaelo was meant to be hers and hers alone. And she wouldn’t let anyone stand in the way.

“Noelle?” Yuyu’s voice barely registered as she reached her side. “You’re watching the drama, huh?” she chuckled as she pointed towards the register.

“I was curious,” she shrugged.

“It seems they solved it somehow, and I don’t think it was to the benefit of the customer,” Yuyu laughed.

“I think her son solved it,” Noelle added, still zoning in on Rafaelo. “He was the one mediating the situation.”

“Good for him. I’m surprised anyone could nudge that crazy woman,” she shook her head in disapproval.

“Yeah, me too,” Noelle said absentmindedly, still focused on Rafaelo.

How beautiful he is...

“Let’s go get you a watch. It’s the shop across.”

Noelle reluctantly let herself be led to the other shop, absentmindedly picking a watch while her mind was still replaying the encounter from before.

If only she weren’t so young... If she knew for sure that Blue wouldn’t turn from her, she would have introduced herself at once—only to see his reaction at meeting her in the flesh.

What did he think of her?

Did he like her? Find her appealing? The short encounter had not been enough to ascertain either, as he'd been wholly focused on his mother, not on her.

While for Noelle the entire world had come to a stop the moment she'd recognized who he was, for him it had been just another mundane occurrence—nothing out of the ordinary.

Somehow the idea that what constituted a monumental moment in time for her had been nothing more than a fluke for him irked her. It made her seethe and it made her want to yell at the world and the injustice of it all.

He couldn't be more than a few years older than her, maybe five or six. But because she was underage, she knew he would promptly cut contact. Because that was the thing. She *knew* Blue, and she knew how he would react in such a situation. He was too much of a good guy to do anything but that. Just as he was too much of a gentleman to ever make their conversations uncomfortable when they discussed sexual themes.

Her Blue was the perfect man. Of that, Noelle was sure. The only question remained...how could she make him the perfect man for *her*?

“There's a café a couple of blocks from here. Why don't we go grab a bite before we leave? I've already arranged to have all of our purchases brought to the car.”

“That sounds good,” Noelle answered automatically.

Yuyu beamed, taking Noelle to one of her favorite cafes in the area. Since it was one of her favorite places in New York, Yuyu knew the entire fifth avenue like the back of her hand.

As they reached the cozy little French café, they each took a seat and ordered a desert, a coffee for Yuyu and a milkshake for Noelle.

“Yuyu, how did you and my brother get together? I know you worked for him for a long time, but how did it happen?” Noelle suddenly asked, curious about the matter but also eager to learn anything she might use to her own advantage later on.

Her meeting with Blue—*though it had been entirely one sided*—has been nothing but serendipitous. Noelle was absolutely sure of it.

It had been...fate. There was no other explanation for it when it had been the perfect combination of moments in time—the drawing, his promise, and her sudden idea to go out. The succession of events had happened in such a manner to ensure that the two of them would be in the same place, at the same time, and that Noelle would be able to recognize him in the flesh.

Maybe she'd known he was meant to be hers before, but this one encounter solidified everything in her mind until she knew that she needed to plan everything carefully so that he would eventually be hers.

And now that she had her goal foremost in her mind, she only needed to think of the steps she needed to take in order to get there.

“It took us a long time to give in to our feelings,” Yuyu said, tilting her head to the side as she remembered the past. “For the longest time I thought I was the only one in love with him. But that’s only because your brother is like a robot. You can’t get anything out of him,” she shook her head in amusement. “We were best friends first. Partners. We shared everything. The rest... It sort of happened organically, even though we both knew we couldn’t be more.”

“Did he make the first move, or did you?” Noelle probed.

Knowing herself, Noelle would likely be the one to make the first move with Blue—but that was only because when it came to him she seemed to have no patience whatsoever. Yet at the same time, she found she wouldn’t mind it if *he* took the initiative. In fact, she might prefer it...

For once she wanted someone to gauge her needs and desires and act before she even rationalized them—someone who knew her so well, he intuited what she required before she ever had to vocalize it.

“Both?” Yuyu chuckled as she took a sip of her coffee. “We were on a mission and one thing led to another and things happened,” she explained nervously, a blush marring her cheeks. “But it was even harder after that. Cisco was all but engaged to marry someone else while I was a man to everyone’s knowledge. Of course, you know your parents’ opinion about me. Everything was against us, so I didn’t think we would ever be together. But it happened,” she smiled fondly. “Against all odds, it happened.”

Simultaneous attraction, Noelle nodded thoughtfully to herself.

She might be the one concocting the plan behind the scenes, but if she played her hand right, then maybe she could get him to think *he* made the first step.

“How? I’ve always wondered about this. My brother is a stickler for order and discipline. For God’s sake, the man doesn’t ever change his breakfast preference. I can’t imagine him going against the status quo when it seems to be the only thing that keeps him...sane.”

“You’re right,” Yuyu nodded, her entire face lighting up at the conversation. “Cisco is...a difficult man, and I’m sure he can seem quite unyielding to everyone who doesn’t know him.”

“But does anyone know him?” Noelle interrupted, raising a brow.

Her brother seemed like an unsolvable enigma. One she was fine *never* solving, for that seemed too much of a headache.

“I do,” she smiled. “But I’m probably the only one. Your brother... He has difficulties dealing with matters of an emotional nature. It’s not that he doesn’t want to, or that he thinks it’s beneath him as a man. It’s simply that he cannot understand emotions very well. He can feel them just fine, but he has great difficulty in conveying them, or recognizing them in others. Quite simply put, he is the epitome of rationality,

which sometimes can be quite tiring, and if I'm being honest," she paused, a mischievous smile pulling at her lips, "quite annoying."

Noelle giggled at that.

"It was a surprise to me, too, that he decided to go against the status quo and choose me," Yuyu grimaced, no doubt realizing that his choice had far reaching repercussions that Noelle was going to bear.

Noelle pursed her lips into a sad smile.

"I'll never experience that, will I? To be loved by a man so much he'd go against his entire family for me..." she trailed off.

"Noelle," Yuyu reached for her hand. "I promise you we'll think of something. Don't think for a moment that we're ok with this situation because we're not. We just..." she took a deep breath. "We need to find a way out of this mess so it won't blow in our faces."

Noelle blinked in surprise at Yuyu's words.

"But my brother..."

"Cisco didn't want this any more than I did. But it happened. And I'm so sorry this fell on you when it shouldn't have. But you have my word that we will fix this somehow. I don't want to give you false hope," she paused, looking increasingly troubled. "But I do want you to know that I am not ok with this. I don't condone it and I would *never* be on board with it."

There were things Yuyu wasn't telling her. Noelle didn't know the specifics of what had gone in the negotiation, but her senses told her Yuyu was being truthful—she didn't agree with the match, but she didn't know what to do to stop it.

"Thank you," Noelle wet her lips as she regarded her sister-in-law. "Thank you for telling me this."

Yuyu squeezed her hand in a comforting gesture. As the conversation continued, Noelle found herself more at ease than

before, able to let her guard down a little and enjoy their little outing.

It was easy to forget how young Yuyu was, too, due to her position by her brother's side and the fact that she usually assumed a far more serious persona in formal environments. Yet she was barely thirty years old, despite looking no older than twenty. And as they discussed fashion and pop culture, and other current events, Noelle realized just how much fun her sister-in-law could be. She might appear serious and sometimes frightening, but she had a bubbly personality just waiting to reach to the surface.

"It's getting dark out. Your brother's probably wondering where we are," Yuyu shook her head as she glanced at her phone. Not for the first time, she'd received texts from Cisco needing updates on them.

"And you say he's not controlling," Noelle joked.

"I wouldn't frame this as controlling," Yuyu laughed. "Cisco doesn't like it when I'm away from him."

"Don't tell me he's jealous," Noelle rolled her eyes, still not convinced that her brother wasn't controlling of Yuyu as he was of every other aspect of his life.

Yet as soon as she uttered that out loud, she realized she wouldn't mind it if her Blue were jealous—that would mean he cared; that he wanted her as much as *she* wanted him.

Because...

Her lips tightened into a thin line as she felt a surge of anger spark within her at the thought of any other woman getting close to *her* Blue.

She'd been jealous before, when she'd only thought of him as her online best friend. Now? After she'd seen how beautiful he was, how incredibly attractive and mesmerizing, she couldn't *ever* imagine him touching another woman with the same hands he'd touched her.

The moment her mind conjured up scenarios in which he was close to another, she felt herself slip.

“Hmm,” Yuyu paused, seemingly deep in thought.

Noelle whipped her head to her, giving Yuyu a tight smile so she wouldn't realize her train of thought. Here she was criticizing her brother when she exhibited the same tendencies.

“He is generally jealous,” Yuyu started. “But not in a way that he doesn't trust me. Merely that he doesn't want to share me with the world.”

“Same thing,” Noelle muttered under her breath, but her lips were smiling.

Yes, Noelle could very well understand not wanting to share her Blue with the rest of the world, either.

Laughing, Yuyu shook her head, grabbing Noelle's hand and they both headed out of the café and started back towards the parking lot.

They only walked a couple of blocks before Yuyu suddenly gave Noelle a sharp look.

“Someone's following us,” she whispered.

“Where?”

“Don't look now. There are three men on the other side of the street and two behind us. They were waiting outside and started walking the moment we did.”

“Why?”

“I don't know. I don't recognize them. It could be anyone,” Yuyu pursed her lips. “See that corner that leads to a back alley up ahead?” she asked as she pointed to the location with a tip of her chin.

Noelle nodded.

“We're going to turn the corner there, and see if they follow. But if they do,” she paused. “I need you to promise me

you will do as I say. If I tell you to duck, you do it. If I ask you to hide, you do it. No questions. You just listen. Ok?”

Yuyu’s countenance was completely different than before and Noelle found a hard time reconciling the cheerful and carefree Yuyu from before with the one she was seeing now.

She looked like a general in a time of war, giving strict instructions to his troops.

Noelle didn’t argue, following Yuyu as they rounded the corner, walking down the small alley. It was a cramped space, unpopulated and perfect to launch an attack on two unsuspecting women.

Dear God, but what was Yuyu thinking?

Noelle’s eyes flared in shock as she realized there was a dead end far ahead, making any type of escape impossible.

And as they walked further, surely enough, five men followed.

“Yuyu... What are we going to do?” Noelle asked in a small voice.

She remembered Cisco’s words that Yuyu was the equivalent of a small army, and given that she’d been his *bodyguard* in the past, Noelle supposed her sister-in-law was quite capable of taking care of herself.

But these were five men. Five burly men. And though Yuyu was a little taller than Noelle, she had a slight, fragile frame. Noelle couldn’t imagine how she could ever overpower even *one* of those men—not when the size differences were to her disadvantage.

“You’re not going to do anything,” Yuyu whispered. “You’re to continue walking until the end of the alley. I promise nothing will happen to you.”

“But what will happen to *you*?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Yuyu said. “This is actually better since no one will notice us. There are no cameras, too...” she

added, musing as she took in her surroundings. “Might be able to find out who sent them...” she trailed off.

Noelle was confused by the fragmented sentences and what Yuyu meant to do. But as she instructed Noelle to continue walking by herself, she obeyed.

She put one foot in front of the other until she felt she was far enough before turning to watch. She was far too curious to not do so.

The sky was a dark blue, night quickly falling. There were a few lights around from the buildings and the street lamps in the distance, but other than that, everything was quite dark. Yet even so Noelle could make out the outlines of the six people as they faced each other.

Yuyu was standing in the middle of the alley, her back to Noelle as she watched the five men approach. They were saying something—Noelle couldn’t hear exactly *what*. But her sister-in-law didn’t seem in the least surprised or scared.

She simply waited for them to come closer.

When the first guy was upon her, she simply sidestepped, tripping him before bringing her knee to his stomach, delivering a sharp but effective blow that had the man writhing in pain on the ground.

Noelle’s eyes flashed wide open with surprise.

Two of the guys were equally shocked, so they went for her at the same time. One of them removed a knife while the other aimed to hold her in order to hurt her. That might have been the plan in the beginning, but as Yuyu gave both men a beaming smile, she moved faster than Noelle had ever seen anyone move before.

In less than a second she had the man’s knife out of his hand, the blade jammed in his neck while the other man lay sprawled on the ground, clutching to his chest.

Noelle hadn’t even noticed when she’d hurt the other man. Everything was simply a blur as Yuyu moved like a shadow,

killing one man after another before they even got the chance to get close to her.

When only two men remained, they took their chances by charging against her in the same idiotic way the others had done, and that too resulted in their premature defeat.

Yet even as all of them were lying on the ground, Yuyu didn't stop. She crouched next to one of them, her fingers tight in his scalp as she asked him questions.

She was interrogating them, Noelle belatedly realized.

So immersed she was in what she was saying, she barely realized when everything was over and Yuyu was back at her side.

“We should go,” she said matter-of-factly.

“You... Ehm,” Noelle wet her lips as she regarded her. “You've got some blood here,” she pointed to Yuyu's cheek.

“Oh,” she merely shrugged, wiping herself before leading Noelle out of the alleyway and back to the main street. In the process, they bypassed the men on the ground and Noelle could see the full extent of their injuries.

How could Yuyu have done that by herself?

When Cisco had joked that she was a small army in itself, Noelle had thought it was merely that—a joke. But now she wasn't sure anymore.

Yuyu calmly led her back to the parking lot where their car was waiting with their purchases, sliding into the driver's seat and nodding for Noelle to do the same.

“Yuyu... What was that?” Noelle finally asked as they were on the way back to the house.

“Don't worry about it. Just a little...misunderstanding.”

“But you kicked their asses,” Noelle burst out.

Yuyu smiled furtively.

“You could say I did.”

“But how? I’ve never seen anyone move like that. How did you do it?”

“I’ve had some training,” Yuyu replied vaguely.

“Yuyu, that was more than just *some* training.”

“There was a reason I was your brother’s bodyguard for so long,” Yuyu winked playfully.

“Yeah but...”

Noelle was still in shock, and likely would be for a long time. Not at the violence itself, but at the fact that Yuyu, as a small woman, had been able to easily defeat five burly men in a matter of seconds.

“Teach me,” she suddenly said.

Yuyu turned her head to look at her, her brows drawn up in surprise.

“Please, teach me how to fight like that!”

“You want to learn to fight?”

Noelle nodded fervently.

“I don’t want to think of myself at the mercy of anyone. Please...”

Understanding what Noelle was asking of her, Yuyu gave her a brisk nod.

“Fine. But don’t expect me to go easy on you.”

“No! I promise. I just want to be able to take care of myself—protect myself if the worst should come to pass.”

Yuyu pursed her lips at her words, not liking the implications but knowing Noelle was right. They *were* throwing her to the wolves. The least they could do was make sure she knew how to handle herself.

“We start on Monday,” Yuyu declared.

Noelle’s eyes sparkled with enthusiasm.

“On Monday,” she agreed.

And just like that, another piece for Noelle's plans fell into place. If Noelle was able to take care of herself...then she was one step closer to becoming the master of her own destiny.

12. NOELLE

AGE SEVENTEEN,

“Are you nervous about the presentation?” Noelle asked.

“A little?” Blue chuckled. “I believe I’m prepared enough. But it’s still a public presentation, and I will likely have to answer questions too...” he trailed off as he took a deep breath. “I’m not the best at public speaking.”

“Why don’t I ask you questions? That way we can at least cover some bases,” she suddenly suggested.

He was quiet for a moment before agreeing.

“That’s a good idea. You’re as familiar as I am with the material.”

For the last few months, they’d spent almost more time on his research than they had on tv shows and other forms of entertainment. They’d read Lawrence’s *The Plumed Serpent* together, discussing the themes and motifs and attempting to frame it within a historical context.

Although Blue’s main area of study was minerals and precious stones in Mesoamerica, he’d become fascinated by their ritualistic use and cultural connotation. Slowly, that interest had extended to other areas and they’d both embarked on a deep dive into the religions of the region.

“Ok, here I go,” Noelle smiled as she pulled up his paper on her computer.

“I’m ready. Do your worst,” Blue retorted, waiting for her question.

“Can you explain why you argue that the novel shouldn’t be used as a cultural blueprint, but rather an observation on the dynamics of power via means of religion?”

Blue chuckled.

“Damn it, curiouscat, you went straight for the throat, didn’t you?”

“I aim to please,” she answered cheekily. “Now answer the question.”

He cleared his throat before he began.

“Lawrence wrote the novel based on his experiences on his short visit to Mexico. From the start, we’re talking about an outsider’s experiences looking into a culture that he can barely begin to understand. Though it can be dismissed as yet another attempt at colonial literature and a white man’s desire to understand the arcane, as these cultures were often regarded in the west, I don’t believe that was his intention. He merely borrowed the locale and the culture for the background, but at its core, *The Plumed Serpent* is about ideas that can be applied in different parts of the world. It doesn’t attempt to do an ethnological or anthropological study of the Christian and pre-Christian communities in Mexico, but it does try to put the two ideologies in juxtaposition to look at the dynamics of power.”

“Can you discuss these dynamics of power more?” Noelle continued.

“The main conflict of the novel is between the New World Order and the Old World Order. The former is characterized by the Catholic Church while the latter by the Old Mexican Gods. At the beginning of the novel, Kate, the main character, reads an article titled *The Gods of Antiquity Return to Mexico*, which is a foreshadowing for the conflict to come. Soon, men become the personification of these gods, come back to earth to save the people. A discourse soon follows on the theme of a *Savior* and that every culture needs this type of messiah. Though at a first glance the conflict is steeped in different religious sentiments, it’s soon clear that it had nothing to do with belief, or freedom or worship. Instead, the two warring religious entities embody different ideals—modern versus traditional; new and ancient; autochthonous rather than foreign. It’s all about a uniting sentiment that allows people to put their faith in *one* man—one Savior. And that is where power truly comes from.”

“From letting someone else make the decisions for you?”

“No. From trusting someone else to make the right decisions for you because they have been imbued with divine power.”

They continued back and forth for an hour, covering every potential topic.

“If anything, you’re overprepared, Blue,” Noelle said, proud of him.

He was the smartest man she knew and she had confidence in his ability to woo his professors. After all, who wouldn’t be impressed with him if they engaged in a debate? He had a way of seeing every little perspective, regardless of whether it served his argument or not.

Usually, Noelle was the one who was obsessed with one point while Blue was able to play the Devil’s advocate despite his own personal convictions. It was something she deeply admired about him. Whereas she could get wrapped up in one point, he could look at everything from a holistic perspective.

“You think so?” His voice held the slightest hesitation to it.

Noelle couldn’t understand how he couldn’t see his strengths and that he was nothing short of brilliant. Of course, in her view, he was the epitome of perfection, and as such, everyone must see him accordingly. It never crossed her mind that not everyone would agree with her assessment, or that she was looking at Blue through the eyes of someone in love, and thus was unable to be objective.

“I *know* it. I asked you anything I could think of and you nailed everything. You’ll be fine.”

“I wish you could be there,” he added in a wistful whisper.

Noelle pretended she didn’t hear him, though his words touched her heart unlike anything else. She wished she could be there too, supporting him and being his main cheerleader. She wished she could be by his side at all times, yet the reality was that she couldn’t. At least not yet.

“Now that you’re more relaxed about your presentation, why don’t we watch that new movie that came out?” She suggested instead.

“Deal. Let me get some snacks first,” Blue replied.

They both got food and drinks and started watching the movie.

All the while, though, Noelle couldn’t let go of his invitation. Their time for the day ended and they said their good nights and Noelle still couldn’t let go.

She wanted to see him more than anything.

It had been a few months since the department store incident, and since then, he haunted her thoughts constantly.

After seeing what he looked like, everything had changed.

Where before she felt a comfortable warmth at interacting with him, now she got butterflies in her stomach whenever she imagined his blue, blue eyes at the other side of the monitor. Her dreams, too, were full of him—of them together.

The more time passed, Noelle fell deeper and deeper in love with Blue. So much so she didn’t know how to deal with it anymore—with that impetus that had taken shape within her to see him, touch him, do...more.

But maybe she *could* go see him. He didn’t need to know. No one needed to know.

Yet.

If her plans went well, they would meet soon. Right before her eighteen birthday. Then, she would reveal her identity to him and beseech him to help her escape her fate.

Noelle was certain that Blue was meant to be her forever, just as she knew that once he met her, he would know it, too. Then, nothing would be able to separate them.

Since she’d been on her best behavior, her brother had allowed her more freedoms than before. Noelle was training with Yuyu a couple of times per week, and she was also

allowed to take piano lessons in the city with a new instructor. The latter was the perfect opportunity for Noelle to tarry around the city and be on her own for a while. Especially as she'd managed to convince Cisco that her piano lessons were three times a week when, in fact, they occurred only twice. That way, she had one lessons' time to move around freely.

Noelle had thoughtfully planned everything so she could meet up with Blue soon.

She had planned everything in detail so that she could escape before her eighteenth birthday when she was to be married off to that stranger. And Blue was a crucial part of her plans. As such, she couldn't meet him earlier than she'd planned for, even though her heart might constantly yearn for him.

Noelle released a deep sigh as she imagined how their first meeting would look like. For so long she'd made up scenarios—of how he'd react to her, how he'd take her in his big arms and never let her go... Every time, it was a different type of image, and she wasn't embarrassed to admit that she'd thought about other things, too—like kissing him.

A blush crept up her cheeks. God, she'd become so infatuated with him, she'd spent an inordinate amount of time researching kissing tips and watching kissing tutorials. She'd even gone as far as to watch porn, all in hopes she could envision how they would be together.

Unfortunately, everything made her want him more. Every day, more and more.

And so here she was. Suffocating with want. Needing him like she needed the air she breathed. Yearning for him with all the strength her seventeen year old heart could muster.

"I might not be able to meet with him yet. But that doesn't mean I can't see him, can it?" she mused to herself as she leaned back in her chair, her eyes on the computer screen and the chat room Blue had just vacated.

As long as he didn't recognize her following him around, she might be able to get away with it, no?

She already knew his name, the university he studied at and his department.

It had been easy enough to figure out what his schedule was, or when he was attending school events. If there was anything available on the internet on Blue, Noelle knew it. She'd even managed to find some of his social media profiles, some of which had actual pictures with him.

Noelle had a small collection of everything she'd managed to dig up on him, and she had every picture saved in a secret folder on her computer.

She might have become slightly obsessed with one of the pictures, but it was only because he was so damn beautiful it hurt.

Tapping her finger against her desk, Noelle resolved that she *could* seek him out without revealing herself to him. She would just watch him from a distance and get her fill of him—enough so she could withstand the long months ahead of her and the incertitude that ate at her regarding her future.

Yes, she could do it.

As she decided on that course of action, she opened a few tabs and started researching and cross-referencing dates.

She put down the dates she could get away from her house before checking to see what Blue's schedule was.

When she'd asked Cisco to resume her piano lessons, she'd specifically found an instructor within walking distance of Blue's university. Everything had been planned to perfection. And now... Noelle might finally be able to reap the benefits of her patience so far.

It was a few days later that she had her *piano lessons*.

Her guards drove her to her practice. Leaving them at the entrance of the building, she waved them goodbye and told

them she'd see them again in four hours—the average time of one lesson.

The timing was tight, but Noelle was confident she could do this.

Going inside the building as if everything was normal, she went to a bathroom and removed from her backpack the spare clothes she'd packed, as well as the accessories she'd used to disguise herself to the best of her ability.

She'd come dressed in a white dress. She went back out in a pair of dark jeans and a dark blue t-shirt coupled with a pair of glasses and a baseball cap. To further avoid detection, she tied her hair in a bun to keep her curls at bay. When she was done, she exited the bathroom, going to a lower level of the building that led onto the back street. No one was around, and it was easy for Noelle to get out of the building undetected.

As she went out, she glanced at her watch, noting the time she needed to get back. Then, it was all a matter of getting to the university and to the building she'd marked as being the one where Blue had his class in.

Walking briskly, she reached the university in record time. She went inside the lecture hall and took a seat at the very back of the classroom, her eyes wide open as she looked around for when Blue would show up.

It was a big lecture hall, and that would give her the anonymity she needed while still able to be on the lookout for Blue.

Minutes trickled by as she continued to scan her surroundings as students started to flood into the classroom.

It was a minute before the lecture was set to start that she spotted Blue.

He was perhaps the tallest guy in the room, towering over everyone as he made his way inside. His body was lean, but his perfect proportions were unmistakable. Big arms, broad shoulders and long legs, he was the epitome of masculine perfection in Noelle's eyes.

Dressed in a simple white shirt and a pair of black pants, he was still easily the most beautiful thing Noelle had ever beheld.

Her breath went out of her lungs as she let her eyes drown in him.

His hair was the color of ashy sand. His locks were so thick, Noelle could easily imagine running her hands through them, feeling the softness of his hair under her fingertips—and she *knew* they would be soft.

Blue stopped at the entrance. Seeing that the front seats had already been filled, Blue sighed deeply before proceeding to scan the room for an empty seat.

At the same time, Noelle followed his gaze, seeing that an available seat was right in front of her.

Oh God, he's coming!

By a strike of luck, he chose the seat in front of her, striding over to her side and overwhelming her with his sheer physicality.

All at once, she realized that what she'd felt when she'd first met him had not been a fluke. He was as intimidating as before, his presence a pure drug to her senses.

And up close... She took a deep breath, suddenly unable to deal with the mounting tension within her.

Her heart was racing, her eyes were wide open as she blatantly stared at him, and her stomach...butterflies were having a grand party in her stomach, flapping their wings around every little corner in excitement, almost as if they wanted to get out of her and reach out for him.

But then again, that was what she wanted, too. More than anything, she wished she could reach out to touch him, feel the warmth of his skin on top of hers, his deep voice in her ear and his lips... God, but what would it be like to have his lips on top of her own?

When he neared the seat, Noelle realized she was risking revealing herself with how direct she was in her perusal of him, so she tipped her cap lower on her face, her glasses offering a modicum of protection.

As expected, he took a seat in front of her, leaning back in his chair until he was so close to her she could smell him. And despite it being slightly too creepy, Noelle leaned forward, inhaling deeply.

Her eyes snapped shut as she barely contained the moan that threatened to escape her.

He smelled divinely. So intoxicating she wanted to bottle up the scent so she could have it with her at all times. Alas, unfortunately that wasn't possible, so she had to make do with the present.

From where she was sitting, she could see the olive color of his skin and the blonde hairs on the back of his neck. She observed every little detail about him, committing it to memory so she could access it later, when she was alone with her thoughts, when she could conjure up more intimate scenarios.

Her fingers itched to trace his skin, but she held herself in check, content to only watch him—for now.

She noted how attentive he was, taking notes of everything the professor was saying, and raising his hand every now and then to answer questions.

A smile tipped at Noelle's lips as she continued to watch him, warmth unfurling in her chest at his proximity.

Maybe it was silly of her to do this—risk everything for the sake of a man who didn't even know what she looked like. To an extent, she was aware her infatuation with Blue wasn't normal. But *to her* it was normal—it was *her* normal.

He'd been there for her when no one else had. He'd encouraged her to do better.

She'd always seen herself as independent and opinionated, but in a negative light, as told by countless people since childhood. It was only after meeting Blue that she'd started to appreciate herself and regard herself through his lens. Slowly, he'd helped her gain confidence in herself while becoming the best friend she could have ever asked for.

He'd shown her she mattered.

For the first time in her life, someone had told her *she* mattered, that her opinions mattered and that no one else should dictate her life *but* herself.

For that alone, Noelle was capable of doing anything for him.

All too soon, class was over.

Noelle didn't even realize when everything was over. She'd been so wrapped in her own thoughts and fantasies that to her it seemed as though only a few moments passed.

Everyone stood up and started walking out of the classroom.

Her Blue did, too.

She was of a half mind to go and follow him, but she knew she couldn't risk that much. Especially since she was running short on time.

With a resigned sigh, she made her way off campus and went back to the music building, putting away her disguise items and dressing back up in her regular clothes.

When she arrived home, she pretended she'd had a great day at her piano lessons.

Her mother was absent, as was her usual lately. Noelle supposed that was because Cisco and Yuyu were now living with them upstate and Elena didn't want to get into another conflict with her daughter-in-law—particularly after she'd seen that Cisco would *always* take Yuyu's side.

Noelle was grateful for that, however. Without the stress of having her mother on her back at all times, she felt more relieved. And the few times that they crossed paths, Noelle preferred to ignore Elena, no matter how much her mother liked to egg her own. Even that she could attribute to Blue, since he'd helped her to become more tempered and think before acting.

What her mother hadn't succeeded in a lifetime of nagging, Blue had managed in a few months by leading by example.

Noelle smiled as she remembered all the times she'd driven him to madness with her behavior, yet he'd never retaliated with malice. He'd always silently steered her towards the right path, getting her to admit her mistakes on her own rather than point them out and incur her belligerence.

"Are you ready for our practice?" Yuyu asked her after she'd had a shower.

Noelle nodded, changing into her workout gear and heading to the gym on the ground floor.

Cisco was ensconced in his office dealing with his business while Val was somewhere around the house conducting one of his many experiments. He was a very bright kid, whose sole focus seemed to be figuring out how things worked.

Noelle and Yuyu started with a warm up before they did drills, topping the training with one-on-one combat.

"You've improved a lot," Yuyu praised after it was over.

"Thank you," Noelle smiled.

"Remember it's never about size, but how well you use it. For us, since we're smaller than most men, we need to focus on speed and hitting critical spots."

Yuyu had taught her all the weak spots of the body, where to hit and how to hit it for maximum potential.

“Soon you won’t have much to teach me,” Noelle joked as they both stopped by the water station.

“Maybe. That doesn’t mean you should stop practicing. You need to maintain your speed and stamina, and you can only do that through practice.”

“I know,” Noelle nodded. “I’ve been doing cardio daily to increase my stamina, and strength training three times a week.”

“Damn,” Yuyu whistled. “I knew you were using the gym on our off days, but I didn’t realize you’ve been putting in so much effort. That explains why you’ve gotten so good in such a short amount of time.”

“Well, I aim to get better,” Noelle declared.

The time was ticking.

She was already seventeen, which meant that every month brought her closer and closer to her eighteenth birthday and the moment she dreaded more than anything in the world.

Everything she was doing, day in, day out, was to ensure she would never have to accept that face—that she would become master of her own destiny. And because she knew what was at stake, she knew she couldn’t slack off.

It was another week before she could find the opportunity to sneak out again. This time, she managed to track Blue to the library. Luckily, he’d told her the day before that he was going to spend the entire day studying at the library.

The only problem?

There were multiple libraries on campus and all required a student ID to get inside.

But Noelle wasn’t one to be deterred by that one small detail.

Biding her time as she arrived on campus, she spotted a girl that had similar build and features to her and she

accidentally bumped into her, successfully swiping her student ID.

With that in hand, it was all a matter of finding Blue.

The stars must have been shining for her that day, though, as she managed to spot him at the main library cafeteria. He was getting a coffee and a few snacks.

After he paid, he grabbed his stuff and went to the back where the book stacks were.

Noelle promptly followed, but making sure she wasn't too overt in her stalking.

He had his own station at one of the tables, surrounded by a mountain of books.

There weren't many people present, and the many bookshelves served as the perfect cover for Noelle. She could pretend she was browsing for a book while she studied him.

Situating herself behind the shelf in front of him, she fiddled with some books, enough to make some space through which she could have a direct view of him.

He was wearing a blue polo shirt today, coupled with a dark pair of pants. The buttons on his shirt were half done, and she could see a hint of skin peeking through, as well as his defined clavicles.

She swallowed hard.

She'd never given much importance to clavicles before, so she was completely baffled to find herself attracted to that part of his body. They had a manly quality to them, strength radiating from him even though he wasn't overly muscular.

His hair was messy, his blonde locks strewn over his forehead, his eyes narrowed at his computer as his gaze flittered between the screen and the book next to him.

He looked...hot.

Noelle had thought him beautiful before. But it was the first time she felt inflamed at the sight of him—so much so it

took every ounce of self-control she possessed to keep herself in the shadows.

Her Blue was so handsome...

Breathe, Noelle, breathe!

She tightened her hold over the book she was holding, grinding her teeth as she sought to bring herself down to earth again.

It was quite disconcerting, really, to realize that someone could have such an effect on her body.

In her attempt to understand guys and relationships better, she'd done extensive reading on the subject and she'd watched plenty of videos. All for research, of course.

This was the first time she was faced with the physical evidence of her attraction to him—the fact that she had to rub her thighs together in discomfort, her panties sticking to her private parts as a gush of wetness soaked the material.

Everywhere she looked, she spotted yet another alluring thing about him.

His neck. His strong jaw and straight nose. His arms. His big knuckles and the veins on the surface of his hands.

God, but she hadn't realized she could be *more* into him than she already was, but the pulsation between her thighs told her she was absolutely in his thrall—physically as well as emotionally.

If he'd come to her at that moment and invited her to a tryst in a darkened corner she wouldn't be able to say no. She would simply remove her clothes and present herself to him, inviting him to have his way with her—do whatever he wanted as long as he eased the ache that seemed to become more unbearable by the moment.

She didn't think this was the best place and time to slide her hand down her underwear and seek some relief. It wasn't as if she hadn't done it before to the thought of him, imagining it was him touching her. Since she'd learned how to touch

herself, he'd always been the object of her unfulfilled lust, always taunting her, always close but never within reach.

Maybe she should be ashamed. Maybe she should feel embarrassed.

But she wasn't. Not when Blue was the only way she could find that elusive peak. Because it was him she was picturing when she was closing her eyes. It was him, holding himself on his arms on top of her, his heavy body blanketing hers. It was him she felt when she pushed a finger inside of her, moving it in and out while chasing that sweet pleasure.

It was him. Always him.

Noelle slapped a hand over her mouth as a tiny sound escaped her. She rubbed her thighs together more aggressively.

God, just the thought of what he could do to her made her hot—too hot to withstand it.

She was behind a bookshelf, surrounded by other bookshelves. And there was no one in sight. Surely she could...

Before sense had time to win over instinct, she slid her hand down her pants, moving her underwear to the side so she could reach that sensitive spot. She gave a soundless whimper at the first touch as a spark of electricity traveled all the way through her body.

Her eyes on Blue, she dipped her fingers between her folds, marveling anew at the amount of wetness dripping out of her.

In her wildest dreams it hadn't been like this. But then she'd merely conjured up his memory. Now she was staring at the real thing.

So aroused she was, it only took a few strokes for her to come, the pleasure rocking through her body. Panting, she barely found her balance as she leaned into the bookshelf. Her legs felt like jelly, her brain foggy and filled with desire.

If touching herself with him present felt like this... She didn't know if she could survive if he ever touched her himself. God, but that would probably kill her with pleasure.

Just as she was coming down from her high, though, she noted that Blue rose to his feet and exited the stacks.

Noelle scrambled to put herself back together, ensuring her glasses and her cap were both in place before following him out.

Yet she was a moment too late.

When she stepped into the hallway, he was gone—and there was no trace left of him.

A panicked breath left her lungs just as her enthusiasm from before deflated.

She checked her watch, disappointed to see that she had one more hour. And if he didn't come back... That was one hour wasted.

"I'm sorry," she muttered as she turned and bumped into someone.

"It's fine," a guy replied.

Looking up, she noted he was as tall as Raf, but much more muscular, his physique that of an athlete. Just as she was about to turn and walk away, he suddenly pulled on her arm.

"It's you," he stated in an angry voice. "I saw you. You stole Britney's ID," he grit out, his fingers tightening over her arm.

"I'm sorry, you must have the wrong person," she insisted, her eyes widening with shock.

How could anyone have seen her? Had she been so careless?

But considering the way she lost her head when it came to Blue, she supposed she could have been a tiny bit too careless.

“Let me go,” she said as she tried to pry his fingers off her arm.

“Show me your ID and I’ll let you go.”

“I said you have the wrong person,” Noelle repeated, tipping her chin up with confidence.

“Show me your ID and I’ll let you go,” he continued. “Or else I’ll call security.”

Noelle continued to struggle in his grasp, and slowly, panic started mounting inside of her.

She could handle herself—she knew she could. But the last thing she wanted was to create a scene and attract attention to herself. Least of all, she didn’t want Blue to suddenly return and see her.

No, she couldn’t allow that.

She was about to kick him between his legs when another voice permeated the air.

One she was very well acquainted with.

“Let the lady go,” Blue called out, coming back from wherever he had been.

Noelle tipped her cap lower, pushing her glasses up her nose so she wouldn’t be recognizable.

Oh, God! She wanted the earth to open up and swallow her.

This couldn’t be happening to her. She refused to believe that the fates would be so wicked as to ruin her carefully crafted plan.

She’d already envisioned how their first meeting would go. He would invite her on a date. She would show up all dolled up and he would be absolutely smitten with her. So much so that he would realize they were soulmates and he could never be parted again from her—thereby stealing her away from her tyrannical family and running away with her in the world.

It was the perfect plan. But now, that was being jeopardized by Mr. Mammoth who was still holding on to her arm too tightly.

She sneered at him, baring her teeth as she gave another tug. Now she couldn't even vocalize her protest for fear Blue might hear her.

"Can't you see the lady wants to be released?" Blue continued, coming closer.

Dear God, I'm going to expire on the spot.

"What is it to you? I have business with her," the other man intoned in a harsh tone, clearly telling Blue to step aside.

"She doesn't want any business with you."

By God, why was he continuing? Noelle thought his past deeds as a good Samaritan that had bitten him in the ass would have been enough to stop him from going around trying to be a hero. But it seemed Blue wasn't the type to stay quiet in the face of an injustice. She didn't know if she wanted to be angry with him or kiss him for it.

Blue stopped in front of the other man, his body so close to hers she felt a shiver down her back.

"Let her go," he stated clearly, toe to toe with the much more muscular man and not backing down one inch even as the other guy attempted to stare him down.

Noelle yelped in pain as his hold became tighter and she sought to free herself once more. This time, Blue intervened personally as he grabbed the other guy's hand and forcefully unclasped his fingers off her.

"If I were you, I wouldn't cause a scene. There are cameras," Blue nodded to the CCTV in the corner. "You'll only look worse if there is an investigation. Assault isn't taken lightly," he spoke calmly.

The other man seemed to want to argue, but after a moment he decided to cut his losses and turn away.

Noelle was breathing hard as she massaged her arm, unable to believe what had just happened.

Blue, though, was on her at once.

“Are you alright? Oh no, he grabbed you so hard,” he murmured worriedly as he regarded her arm.

Noelle pushed her chin down so he wouldn’t look at her face.

“Does it hurt? Do you want me to get you a cold compress to put on top of it? Maybe some menthol cream?”

Noelle shook her head at him, her lips tightly pressed together.

This was everything she’d ever dreamed. Blue was before her. Touching her. But she couldn’t possibly reveal herself when she didn’t even go to his school!

The other guy had been right. She was an impostor and a thief. And to top it off, she was a certified stalker, too. If Blue found that out...

“You’re too shaken. I understand. But you don’t have to worry about me. I won’t hurt you,” he assured her as he massaged her skin lightly.

The touch of his flesh on top of hers was...heavenly.

Noelle couldn’t contain the sigh of contentment that escaped her lips. God, she wished for nothing more than to lean into him and cuddle in his arms—purr like a kitten at being enveloped in his warmth and scent.

And my, oh my, what a scent.

She took a step forward as she breathed him in. He smelled absolutely delicious—unlike anything she’d ever experienced before.

All at once, a wave of longing hit her, harder than ever before.

I need to get out of here.

She needed to leave. Before she made a fool of herself.

Yet her body had a mind of its own as it took one step forward. Then another.

One second she was in front of Blue, attempting to shield her face from his view, the next she was pressed against his hard body, her arms coming around his waist as she hugged him tightly to her chest.

Everything happened in the span of a few seconds as she buried her face in his chest, inhaling deeply and absorbing his warmth.

She mumbled a muffled thank you—the sound rough and distorted—before she was off him and running towards the exit, leaving him baffled behind.

It was embarrassing. But for Noelle, it was also quite possibly the highlight of her life.

She'd...hugged him.

As she hurried back to where her guards were waiting for her, she couldn't help the smile that pulled at her lips as she gave herself an imaginary high-five.

For a few seconds, she'd been in his arms. But those few seconds had been more than enough for her to realize she wanted to spend an eternity nestled in his embrace.

13. NOELLE

The weeks passed and though Noelle continued with her routine of seeking out Blue whenever she could, she didn't always find him. More than anything, though, even the occasional sightings were becoming insufficient.

Time was running out and she knew she needed to act somehow.

The situation became even more unpredictable as Amo, her brother, decided to move back home for a period of time. With another set of eyes on her, Noelle's circumstances were becoming more and more precarious.

One day, feeling more restless than usual, she decided to shoot her shot.

They were talking about his dissertation and that he would soon be done with it. Noelle, grasping on to the chance, suggested an outrageous proposal.

"You know what. We *really* should. After you graduate, you should take me on a trip to Mexico and officially introduce me to Aztec culture."

She paused as she waited for him to respond. Her heart was in her throat as the seconds ticked by, his reply still pending.

Maybe he didn't want to meet her. Maybe he wanted to keep their relationship strictly online and platonic. Noelle hoped to God that wasn't the case. She didn't know if she could bear it if he rejected her in any way, shape, or form.

In her mind, their relationship was a done deal. She'd already seen their future together and chosen the names of their future children.

She *knew* Blue was the one for her.

He just had to realize it too.

“Blue? Are you still there? Don't tell me I shocked you?” she croaked, doing her best to keep the imminent disappointment from her voice.

“You... You'd like to meet?” Blue hesitantly asked, his tone holding a note of awe.

Noelle blinked at his tentative question. Could it be that he was as afraid as she was?

“Sure, why not?” she added in a fluid manner—everything to mask the growing anxiety building in her chest.

“Let me get this straight. You want to meet? Me?” Blue repeated incredulously.

How could he think she would want to meet anyone else *but* him?

Who had been her constant companion for almost two years? Who had been her best friend, her confidante, the other damned half of her soul? Who if not him?

“Of course I want to meet *you*, Blue. Who else? But only if you want that, too. I have a family commitment later this year, but I can do it any time before that,” she explained, trying to make it clear that she needed the meeting to happen *now*, not later when she'd already be shipped off to Mexico.

There was a long pause before he eventually replied.

“I'd love to.”

He sounded sincere and confident about his answer, and Noelle released a deep, relieved breath. She would have never wanted him to merely meet with her because she pressured him into it.

“Good. It’s about time you took me on a real date,” she joked.

“Where are you? I can come to you,” he immediately added.

Noelle’s eyes widened at his enthusiasm. Her lashes fluttered as a blush stained her cheeks.

“You’re such a gentleman, aren’t you?” she teased. “I live in upstate New York. What about you?”

She already knew where he was, but she couldn’t let *him* know that.

“I’m in the city.”

“No shit,” she feigned surprise. “You’re serious?”

“Yep. But first, since we’re actually doing this, I have to ask something,” he suddenly said, his voice serious.

Noelle drummed her fingers over her desk, her heart hammering in her chest.

“Shoot.”

“Tell me you’re of age. You’re at least eighteen, right?”

Of course, leave it to her perfect Blue to inquire about that.

For a moment, she felt guilty that she was lying to him. From the beginning, she’d hinted at being older so he wouldn’t stop talking to her. She’d never said her age outright, but he hadn’t asked either. She supposed that in this case he was entitled to want to know it. But she was still lying and...

“I’m twenty,” she answered before she chickened out.

What was one more lie, right? She was already hiding so much from him, a few years wouldn’t matter, no? Not really, anyway.

“Thank God,” he mumbled under his breath.

“What was that?”

“Nothing. I’m happy that issue is out of the way,” he chuckled.

Noelle felt a pang of disappointment in her heart. She hated that she was doing this, but she was aware that if Blue knew her real age he would never entertain a relationship with her—much more than what she had in mind.

He would probably never talk to her again, much less sleep with her as she’d wanted.

“Good. Then we could set something up soon. I’ll be in the country until the end of the year, so we need to do it before that,” she reminded him again, emphasizing she didn’t have much time.

“Why don’t you go ahead and set a date and I’ll make it happen,” Blue offered.

Noelle’s palms were clammy with excitement at his words.

“Next week? I can do Friday afternoon. We can meet in the city since I have a class there,” she added vaguely.

“There’s this café we could go to. It’s pretty popular and this way you shouldn’t feel uncomfortable.”

Noelle couldn’t help but melt as Blue continued to talk, detailing all the features of this café so she would know what to expect. She realized he was afraid he would make her uncomfortable and wanted to assure her it was the last thing he wanted.

“You’re really sweet, you know that?” The words slipped from her mouth before she could stop herself.

But he was. He was so, so very sweet that she couldn’t wait to finally meet him. She’d show him in person just how much he touched her—how much his presence in her life had made a difference.

“I’ll wear a violet shirt so I’m more easily recognizable. I’m pretty tall, though, so you shouldn’t miss me,” Blue said, proceeding to describe his appearance to her.

If before he'd been rather hesitant, the more they discussed their upcoming meeting as a done deal the more he started to open up to her, his enthusiasm noticeable in his voice.

Noelle gave him similar details about her appearance. For the first time she was worried that he might not like her, but she pushed everything down. She would put more effort in her appearance than usual and she was sure he was bound to find her attractive. If she had to buy one of those pheromone perfumes advertised online, then she would do that too.

“But really, Blue? Violet?” she chuckled. “You really wear violet shirts?”

“I’ll have you know they are very nice shirts,” he retorted playfully.

“You and your fancy violet,” she teased. “Why don’t you just call it purple and be done with it? It’s the same thing.”

“It’s not. There are a *lot* of differences between violet and purple,” he said with a huff.

“Sorry I offended your color sensibilities, Blue. Please, enlighten me what those differences are.”

“Have you heard about synesthesia?”

“Huh?”

“It’s a condition where your senses are linked together. For me, all my other senses converge into taste. Sounds and colors have flavors for me.”

Noelle blinked in surprise.

Good God, but it must have been divine intervention that she’d been too tongue tied to talk to him in the past. Otherwise he would have surely recognized her voice if he possessed such abilities.

“Wow. That sounds awesome,” she breathed out.

She might not know too much about synesthesia, but as he gave her more details about it, she realized what it could mean for them—for *her*.

“So music has flavors for you?” She suddenly probed.

“Yep. It depends. Sometimes the notes themselves have a certain flavor and sometimes it’s the overall melody.”

God, but if he could taste sounds... She would play whatever he wanted for him for the rest of his life. She would *feed* him her sounds.

Not wanting to give herself and her enthusiasm for the future away, she cleared her throat as she brought the conversation back to their previous topic.

“You didn’t tell me the difference between fancy violet and purple.”

“It’s simple. Purple is man-made by mixing colors together. Violet is natural. It works the same with my tastebuds. There’s a counterfeit taste to purple whereas violet has a very pleasant aroma.”

“So it all comes down to your interactions with the color and how it affects you, no?”

“Precisely. You’re pretty smart, aren’t you,” he complimented her, making her redden from head to toe.

“Oh, I bet I can be smarter. Watch me,” Noelle declared, opening the shared screen, and pulling up the search engine to search for weird color names.

“Are you really looking for the rarest color names?” Blue asked with a chuckle.

“Of course. If you can be fancy with your violet then I can be fancy with my favorite color too.”

She was focused on finding something right as she scanned the list of names. Yet instead of settling on just one, she decided to mix two together.

“Ok, I got it,” she told him, moving her cursor to highlight two different colors. “You have your fancy violet and I’ll have...” she paused as she tried to pronounce the very difficult

words, her breath into the mic, as well as the whispers of her failed attempts.

Noelle cleared her throat.

“My favorite color from now on is *Cadmium Quercitron*.”

It sounded the most fancy out of all of them, so that would be her color from now on. And as she realized it was some type of yellow, she realized that she had a couple of shirts she'd bought in that color.

“Good luck remembering that,” he laughed.

“Oh, I will. And this is exactly how I'll introduce myself to you on Friday. I'll be Miss *Cadmium Quercitron*,” she added, pride shining in her voice.

Once the details for their meeting were ironed out, they continued to chat about this and that until late at night, forgoing their usual movie time.

It was the following day that Noelle realized this was actually happening—that she would finally meet the object of her affection. She didn't know exactly what to expect of their first encounter, but she needed to ensure everything would go smoothly.

She shaved every place that needed shaving, grooming herself to perfection. And when Friday finally rolled around, Noelle made sure her skin and hair were both soft and scented, adding a few pheromone drops to her wrists and behind her ears. She couldn't add make-up at home since that would raise concerns with her family, so she decided to visit a drugstore before meeting Blue instead.

When the time came to go to her piano practice, she left her guards behind with practiced ease, changing into the clothes she'd packed and getting out of the building undetected.

Luckily, the café Blue had chosen wasn't too far, so she could make the distance on foot.

Since she was about an hour early, she spotted a drugstore close to the café and she went inside to tend to her make-up and make a few purchases.

She wasn't the most experienced when it came to make-up, so she decided to go for the basics. She put on some foundation and blush, rimmed her lashes with a dark mascara and added some eyeliner at the outer corner of her eyes. She topped everything off with a reddish lipstick.

Looking at herself in the mirror, Noelle was satisfied with her appearance. She only hoped that Blue would like it, too.

She was aware she wasn't a born beauty, but as long as she appeared beautiful to him, that was all that mattered.

With that done, she proceeded to browse the shelves until she came to the designated spot. She was a little embarrassed about what she intended to buy, but it was necessary.

Now, if only she could figure out what *type* she needed...

She stopped in front of the many types of condoms as she surveyed the sizes, wondering which one she should get.

Her Blue was a big man, so she supposed that part of him should be equally big, no?

She pursed her lips as she released an annoyed sigh.

Yet just at that moment, someone else stepped into the drugstore.

Noelle looked up just in time to see a tall, blonde man go down the snack aisle.

She blinked in shock.

That was... That was...

He was there. Her Blue was there. And she was starting to freak out.

He can't see me now! Not until the perfect moment!

But even in her freak-out mode she could see that he was holding something in his hands.

Flowers.

He... He'd gotten her flowers.

Noelle's heart clenched in her chest as feelings of love for this man suffused her entire being.

But that wasn't all.

From her place in the back, she could see him go about the shop and pick up some chocolate and even a bag of spicy Cheetos—her favorites.

Tears stabbed at her eyes as she realized just how thoughtful he could be.

“My Blue,” she whispered, his actions touching her deep within.

He made his way to the cashier's desk, ready to pay for his items. Directly in her field of view, Noelle looked him up and down once more, surveying him from head to toe as she finally picked a few boxes of condoms. With how big he was, she doubted a small or a medium would do. So she got the biggest size.

As he paid and left, Noelle waited a while longer so he would have time to reach the café before she paid for her items too.

Exiting the drugstore, she walked slowly towards the meeting point.

She was nervous and excited, and her heart was beating a little bit too loudly in her chest.

All she could imagine was his expression when he'd see her—how they would spend the afternoon talking and getting to know each other.

But she also imagined something else.

The boxes of condoms took up most of the space in her tiny bag, and they reminded her of her plans. She wanted Blue to be the one to take her virginity just as she wanted him to be the only man for her—now and forever.

The thought of being naked with him, of having him touch her intimately and...

Her cheeks reddened just as arousal built inside of her.

She was ready. For him. For them. For the future she would be building with her own hands, not the one that would be thrust upon her.

Maybe her family would hate and disown her for what she was about to do. Maybe they would never speak to her again. But it was a risk she was willing to take.

She walked to the café, stopping a few feet away from it as a smile tipped at her lips.

Blue was already seated next to the window, his gifts visible by his side as he tried his best not to seem overly anxious.

It warmed her heart that he was just as nervous as she was.

She was about to take the final plunge and walk towards the café when a car suddenly skidded to a stop.

Noelle wouldn't have minded it if not for someone calling her name.

Her eyes widened and turning, she came face to face with her older brother, Amo.

"What..." she muttered in surprise.

One moment she was on the sidewalk, ready to meet the love of her life, the next she found herself forcefully shoved inside the car.

Amo didn't even deign to look at her as his lip twitched in disgust.

"What the hell have you done, Noelle?" his voice was marred with disappointment.

"I... How... How..." Noelle couldn't even form the words to ask how he'd found her.

But Amo intuited it well.

“You think Cisco hasn’t been aware of everything you’ve been doing?”

“What?” Noelle’s eyes fluttered in shock.

“He wanted you to have some freedom but we never thought you’d... For fuck’s sake, Noelle,” Amo groaned, shaking his head.

Yet that was the end of the conversation.

He didn’t talk to her until they reached their home upstate.

Dragging her to the living room, she realized everyone was waiting for her there.

Yuyu, Cisco and Elena were all seated on a sofa, deep in conversation. When Amo entered the room with Noelle, everyone stopped, turning to look at her.

She saw the disappointment in Yuyu’s eyes and the slight twitch in her brother’s cheek.

Elena, on the other hand, simply gazed at her with the usual disdain.

“You were right,” Amo nodded to Cisco.

Pulling Noelle inside the room, he pushed her on the sofa.

“Sit,” Amo said.

Yet the brusque movements made her bag slip off her shoulder, crashing to the ground, its contents spilling for everyone to see.

Noelle’s eyes were the size of two saucers as she tried to pinch herself—surely it was just a bad dream.

But it wasn’t.

The boxes of condoms rolled on the floor, in plain sight for everyone to see.

Elena was the first to react, a loud gasp as she came to her feet. In just a few steps she was in front of Noelle, slapping one cheek, then the next. She continued to do it until Amo pulled her back, restraining her.

Noelle didn't even try to put up a fight. Not when she was so mortified she wanted to run away.

“You slut!” Elena shouted. “You’ve disgraced us!”

More arguments ensued as everyone seemed to have an opinion on Noelle’s actions.

Noelle tuned everything out, though. She wanted to simply disappear.

All at once, her thoughts were a mess of disappointment, hopelessness and shame.

Blue... He was probably still waiting for her and she would never come. What would he think? That she found him faulty and did not want to meet anymore No... She didn't want him to think that he was deficient in any way. Not when this was absolutely her fault.

She'd dared to dream far more than she was allowed to, and now she was paying the consequences.

“Enough!” Cisco’s voice rang out through the myriad of voices arguing.

He got to his feet, pacing the surface of the living room before he stopped in front of Noelle.

“Is it true? Did you sleep with him?” he inquired of Noelle.

His tone was his usual bored and indifferent one. But Noelle could see his tense features and the fact that he wasn't to be underestimated.

Even so, her self-preservation had flown a long time ago—maybe at the same time she'd been told she was to marry a stranger.

Tipping her chin up, she regarded him squarely in the eyes.

“Yes,” she said.

Yuyu gasped. Elena yelled. Amo cursed. Cisco simply stared at her, looking eerily frightening as he did.

“I’ll ask you once more, Noelle, and I want to hear the truth. It won’t bode well for that friend of yours if you lie to me.”

“What... What do you mean?”

“You think I wasn’t aware you were talking to someone? That it’s why you’re obsessed with your computer? In the beginning, I let it slide since it seemed to help you get out of your shell. But I see I made a mistake. So answer me. Did you, or did you not sleep with him?”

Noelle was shocked at Cisco’s admission that he’d known all along.

“Yes,” she repeated.

She wasn’t going to back down now no matter what.

“Whore!” Elena spat.

“Mother. Shut up,” Cisco told her in the same bored tone.

Elena’s eyes flashed with shock. With a tip of his chin, Cisco instructed Amo to escort Elena out of the room.

“We’ll talk another time, mother. When you’re...calmer.”

Elena, being Elena, didn’t go down so easily, making a scandal the whole time she was being escorted out of the room.

When only Yuyu, Cisco and Noelle were left, Cisco took a step closer, giving Noelle a cutting glare.

“I’ll ask once more. You might want to tell me the truth, Noelle, or your Rafaelo will suffer too,” he gave her a wolfish smile. “Does he know you’re underage? He can go to jail just for talking to you.”

“W-what... You wouldn’t...”

“I would and I will. So let me tell you how we’ll do it. You’re going to tell me everything that happened between the two—*physically*—and I won’t make you take a medical exam.”

“An exam?” Noelle uttered in shock.

“An exam,” Cisco confirmed. “Now maybe you’ll be more inclined to tell me the truth. Otherwise, I’ll find out by myself.”

“I didn’t,” she whispered.

“What was that? I didn’t hear you.”

“I didn’t sleep with him,” Noelle finally admitted, her cheeks red.

“But you would have.”

“Yes,” she confirmed.

She averted her gaze, not wanting to see Yuyu’s disappointed expression or Cisco’s unyielding one.

“What the hell was in your head, Noelle?”

“I love him,” she stated confidently, tipping her chin up. “I love him and one way or another I’m going to be with him.”

“Not if I get to him first,” Cisco raised a brow at her.

Noelle frowned.

“What do you mean?”

“I know who he is. I happen to know his family too,” Cisco merely shrugged. “Try anything and he’ll be the one to pay for everything, Noelle. And just so you know, statutory rape charges *never* go away.”

“But if he didn’t touch me? There wouldn’t be any issue...”

“Let’s get a few things straight. He might not have touched you *now*. But to ensure he doesn’t *at all*, I’m going to leave you with a warning. Do anything to shame yourself and the family, and I will be forced to do something drastic.”

The threat was clear. It didn’t matter if she never slept with Blue. Cisco could make it so the authorities believed she did. And with her being underage... That meant Blue’s future will be forever destroyed by that stain on his record.

No matter how much she wanted her freedom, she couldn't do that to him.

“What do I have to do?”

“Don't talk to him again. Via *any* means. You'll lose access to your phone and computer, naturally. But don't try to fool me, Noelle. I will know if you do, and I won't tell you twice what the consequences will be. If you disobey me and get in contact with him, even if it's a harmless chat, the next time you'll hear of him will be from prison. Mark my words.”

She stared at him, unable to muster a reply.

Just like that she lost everything.

“So I'm going to be locked away until the wedding. That's what you're saying.”

“Yes. You are correct,” Cisco nodded.

At that moment, Amo returned to the living room as well. Seeing Noelle's desolate features and the tension rolling off Cisco, he intuited what had occurred.

“Dinner, anyone?” He asked jokingly in an attempt to diffuse the situation.

Cisco glared at him while Noelle simply rose from her seat, dashing up the stairs to her room.

“What happened?” Amo asked as he took a seat.

“Your brother backed himself into a corner and he doesn't know how to get out of it,” Yuyu shrugged. Getting up, she came over to Cisco's side, placing her hand on his shoulder in a comforting gesture. “You don't get to be both her dear older brother and her tyrannical guardian. It doesn't work like that, Cisco.”

“So I'm learning,” he ground his jaw.

“Next time try not to learn on Noelle. The poor girl has enough on her plate as it is.”

“And what would you have me do, Yuyu?” He took a deep breath as he turned to her.

Amo watched the show with amusement. After all, there was only one person who dared chastise the big bad wolf, and that was Yuyu. No way he was going to miss such a rarity.

“You could have cut their budding relationship before it became so serious,” she suggested.

“He was good for her. I didn’t realize her feelings would run so deep,” he sighed.

“I warned you,” Yuyu said. “I warned you there was something different about her.”

“I know,” he answered drily. “I made a miscalculation and now she’s going to hate me. I *know*,” he admitted, though it killed him to do so.

Yuyu had pointed out to him that Noelle had started to behave differently. More like a young lady than a child—something she’d never had an interest in before. Yuyu had argued that maybe his sister had more than platonic feelings for the boy she was talking to online, but Cisco had vehemently denied it. After all, he couldn’t see *how* his sister could fall in love with a computerized voice—the only reason he’d allowed the connection in the first place.

But he hadn’t counted on Noelle being so resourceful as to find out who he was based on the clues she’d glean from their conversations. And he most definitely hadn’t counted on Rafaelo being the epitome of what Noelle desired the most.

Cisco stifled a chuckle. Of course he would make a miscalculation when it came to matters of a sentimental nature. They were the bane of his existence!

He dealt with odds and possibilities, not people and emotions.

Yet even in this case, he’d made the mistake of not giving too much importance to what Yuyu had told him.

While the three of them continued their discussion downstairs, Noelle got to her room and discovered that her computer had been taken away. Every little piece of technology had been removed so she wouldn't have access to anything.

She stared desolately at the empty spot where her computer had been.

One second. Two. Three.

On the fourth she simply collapsed to the floor, her eyes still on the empty desk—as empty as she felt inside.

What was Blue thinking? That she had stood him up. And when she didn't reply to any of his messages, he'd think she was ghosting him, maybe even assume she'd done so because she hadn't liked him when it couldn't be anything further than the truth.

God... In the span of one hour, her entire life had changed, all her plans disintegrating.

And she was left...alone. Again.

Even the tears wouldn't come anymore. There was only a deep hole in her heart, becoming larger by the second until she feared she would become a shell of herself—a shadow of what it meant to be human. Unfortunately, there was only one cure.

Blue.

Her Blue.

And now...he was gone, too.

14. NOELLE

AGE EIGHTEEN

“Are we really going to keep doing this, Noelle?” Cisco asked in a weary tone as he escorted her out of the police station.

With only a few weeks until she turned eighteen, Noelle was running out of options just as she was becoming increasingly more desperate.

She might have been struck down momentarily in the past, but she was not going to submit to her fate without fighting back.

Unfortunately, Cisco always found ways to combat her ideas.

She'd just stolen his car, heading to the city when she'd been pulled over by the police. Despite the fact that she didn't really fancy getting into conflict with the law, she supposed that if she was behind bars she couldn't get married, could she?

Yet even that fact had been disproved when Cisco had been called to the station, and using his connection, he'd ensured that both of them walked away with only a slap on the wrist.

“Prison is better than the alternative,” she huffed.

“Don't tell me this is still about that boy?” Cisco narrowed his eyes at her. “I thought we convened you're not to contact him again.”

Noelle didn't reply, averting her gaze.

“Answer me, Noelle.”

“What do you want me to say, Cisco?” She finally turned, narrowing her eyes at him. “It seems only some of us get to live their happily ever afters, isn't that right?” she added shakily.

“Noelle...”

“Deny it. I want to see you deny it! I told you I loved him, that I’d give everything up for him. But it seems only you’re allowed to choose your spouse. Us, mere mortals don’t get the same consideration.”

“And you think he loves you so much he would risk jail for you?” Cisco suddenly asked, his expression thunderous.

“Yes,” Noelle answered without thinking.

She was confident in their connection just as she was confident in the fact that he shared her feelings.

“If he loves you so much, then why the hell is he marrying another woman?”

Noelle came to a halt. She blinked, took a deep breath, then turned to face her brother.

“What did you say?” she asked in a whisper that echoed the pain in her breast.

“He’s getting married,” Cisco rolled his eyes. And to pour salt over the wound, he took out his phone, scrolling through some news articles before shoving it in her face.

There it was.

Right in front of her.

Rafaelo Guerra was getting married to a certain Assisi Lastra in two days’ time. It would be a private event with only friends and family despite the elevated status the Guerras had in NYC society.

“No,” Noelle whispered.

A sliver of pain developed in her chest before her entire heart simply shattered into a myriad of pieces.

“No,” she repeated. “He can’t marry someone else. It’s a lie.”

“Noelle,” Cisco took a deep breath. “I have it on good authority that the wedding is happening. It’s not a lie.”

“No,” she continued to shake her head. “He wouldn’t... He didn’t love anyone,” she muttered. They’d talked about crushes and first loves before and she was sure he’d never been in love before.

“You have no way of knowing. You only knew an online version of him. He could have lied to you,” Cisco explained, but Noelle wasn’t hearing anymore.

All she could see was the picture accompanying the article where both Rafaelo and Assisi had been photographed on an outing.

Her hand tightened around the phone.

That woman... His fiancé... She was beautiful. So beautiful it hurt to look at her.

Blonde hair, dark skin and the lightest eyes Noelle had ever seen. She was the perfect counterpart to Blue’s stunning looks.

“No,” she whispered like a broken record, yet the pain was too much—too raw. She could only stare at them and find herself drowning in the magnitude of her feelings.

“You need to let it go,” Cisco sighed. “It’s done. You need to take care of yourself now.”

“You mean I need to play along with your plans,” Noelle spat out, giving him a deadly glare. “It’s only about that—playing by your rules so your business succeeds. But what about me? What about my life and what I want? What about *my* feelings Cisco?”

“Do you think I wanted this?” his voice rang out, so loud and crisp and so damn frightening Noelle straightened her spine and stopped moving. “Do you think this is what I would have fucking chosen? For my barely legal sister to be given away to a man three times her age?”

“Then why do it?” Noelle asked in a small voice. “Why do it at all?”

“Because I have no choice,” he closed his eyes, his fists clenched. “There is no other option but to fulfill this goddamn marriage contract.”

Noelle stared at her brother, seeing him display more emotion than ever before and wondering what exactly was going on. Based on what she was witnessing, she was certain there were many things she was not privy to—things both Cisco and Yuyu were hiding from her.

“Just... Marry the man to fulfill the contract and Yuyu and I will find a way to get you out of it. Just for a time,” he took a deep breath. “I know it’s unfair to ask this of you, but there’s no other option, Noelle.”

Why was it that the only option was for *her* to be sacrificed? When had she been number one for anyone in her life? Always an after-thought; always the one who only mattered as a scapegoat.

For the last few years, she would have sworn she’d found someone who cared for her in Blue—who maybe saw her differently.

Yet staring at the article once more, she had to admit that maybe it had all been in her head. Otherwise how could he marry another when it had only been months since their missed encounter? How could he want another when they’d bared their souls to one another.

Was she so foolish, so delusional that she’d seen signs where there had been none?

Maybe she was...

She didn’t speak as they headed back home.

Alone in her room, Noelle simply picked up her used copy of *The Plumed Serpent*—the one she’d bought at a flea market months prior. She hugged it to her chest for a moment, reliving all the memories that surrounded the context of it, before she opened it again, losing herself in its pages.

It was hard of her to admit to herself that for the first time in forever...she had nothing.

Nothing to look forward to in life and no one to keep her tethered to the ground.

She had absolutely nothing but herself.

And by God... She wouldn't go down without a fight.

Tears coursed down her cheeks as she tried to read the words through misted lashes.

People might see her as expandable—as someone so unimportant it didn't matter if she lived or died as long as she served a purpose—but she didn't see herself that way.

Even if she didn't matter for anyone else in the world, she mattered *for* herself. And that meant she would fight for herself. To the death. To hell and beyond.

If someone sought to bring her down, she would take everyone else with her too.

“They will all regret it,” she whispered as she swallowed a sob. “One way or another, I'll make everyone regret this.”

Blue's wedding came and went and Noelle was more of a prisoner than ever.

Intuiting that she wouldn't just give up at the news of her friend's marriage, Cisco ensured that the house was guarded twenty-four seven. And during the critical days of his marriage, there were even guards stationed outside of Noelle's room.

All in all, it was impossible for her to make one step without being monitored.

That meant that no matter how much she would have liked to crash the wedding—and she'd made plenty of plans to that effect—she couldn't leave her room.

After the day of the wedding, reality crashed on her and she became increasingly more withdrawn. If before she'd at least dined with the family, now she was taking all her meals

in her room, refusing to talk to anyone and simply wallowing in her misery.

Still, somewhere deep within her, she refused to believe that her Blue would have married another. Maybe she didn't have any claim on him previously, but she *knew* him. As such, she was sure that if there had been *anyone* in his life, he would have told her. More than anything, he wouldn't have let her have the impression that their meeting would be a romantic date. Her Blue would *never* do something like that.

So how could things have changed so drastically in the span of a few months?

The answer was simple.

They couldn't have.

Maybe in the beginning she'd despaired at the news and had spiraled out of control with hopelessness. But as time passed, she had more time to think logically about it.

Blue wasn't the type to marry someone so fast unless there was some other variable at play.

Then what could have happened?

Had he been coerced into the marriage?

Or had Cisco simply lied about it, manufacturing the article so he would crush Noelle's hopes once and for all?

Noelle was sure her brother was capable of that, and so much more. And that was why she kept all her suspicions to herself until she could verify them. And verify them she would. She refused to give it all up based on third party information.

Yet the days passed and Noelle's hopes were, indeed, dashed, as she realized she could not take a step outside her room without being followed at all times.

With no access to any device, she couldn't do anything.

One day melted into another, until there was only one week until her birthday—and her wedding.

“What do you mean we’re going to Mexico?” she asked, incensed, as her brother deigned to come to her room to inform her how the festivities would proceed.

“Villanueva doesn’t agree with our weather so he’s decided to host everything at his hacienda. We’re going to take a private plane for the ceremony,” he explained, and Noelle could hear the unspoken.

They were going to stay there for the duration of the ceremony after which they would leave her behind while they returned to their perfect lives.

“You’re really fine just throwing me to the wolves?” she uttered in a low voice.

“You’ll survive,” he replied, his lips pursed. “The alternative is much, much worse, Noelle.”

She frowned at him, but she didn’t want to look further into his words. It would just confuse her further. Nothing was simple with her brother, just as nothing was ever straightforward. For every one word that he said, he probably meant a thousand different things at the same time. He liked to use ambiguity to play the system.

Cisco’s words were final, however, and as the day before the wedding arrived, she became increasingly more desperate. Every attempt to get in touch with the outside world had been in vain. Here she was, hours away from the flight that would take her to a completely different world, and she didn’t know what to do.

She wanted to escape but there was no escape in sight.

She was simply...trapped.

“You haven’t tried the dress on,” Yuyu noted as she came to Noelle’s room that evening.

The clock was ticking until they were supposed to leave.

Cisco had allowed Noelle to pack a small suitcase to take with her, and Noelle had chosen some of her most prized possessions at the expense of her clothing. After all, if she was

to live in eternal torment, at least those little memories could help her hang on.

“I don’t want to,” Noelle shrugged, barely sparing a glance at the wedding dress—more aptly called her *funeral* dress.

“Noelle,” Yuyu took a deep breath.

“Don’t,” Noelle shook her head. “Spare me your platitudes, Yuyu. You’re not the one traveling to a foreign country to marry a man three times your age. You’re not the one forced to do anything you don’t want to.”

Yuyu pursed her lips, her features stricken.

“If we could have avoided it, this would have never happened.”

“I know the speech,” Noelle smirked. “It’s getting old, isn’t it? At least have the decency to take responsibility for your actions. This wasn’t my fate to suffer, yet here I am. All because of *your* choices. So don’t tell me how I should feel, or should not.”

“You’re right,” she nodded, her lips flattened into a pained line. “It would be disingenuous of us to claim otherwise. I just...” she trailed off, her eyes glossy. “I truly didn’t want things to degenerate this badly.”

“We can’t all have what we want. I think that’s the most important lesson, isn’t it?” Noelle looked her straight in the eye.

“Maybe in the future... Maybe you might learn to forgive us.”

Noelle kept her features blank at Yuyu’s words.

Yes, that was a good question. How had things degenerated so badly? How had she ever seen her brother and his wife as anything but the mercenary people that they were? How had she ever held any affection for them?

“It’s your right to hope so,” she simply stated. “Just as it is my right not to do it.”

Those words promptly shut Yuyu up. She looked on the verge of crying, but the sight of it could no longer move Noelle. How could *anything* move her when she was simply... hopeless?

“Mrs. DeVille. Mr. Val is calling for you. I think he hurt himself.”

The voice of the housekeeper echoed into the room. Yuyu spared Noelle another glance before she hurried out of the room.

“I’m coming!”

Noelle released a deep, relieved breath at being alone once more. Putting on a strong front was too draining, especially when she felt anything but strong on the inside.

Sighing, she looked at the wedding dress laid on the bed.

How could this happen to her?

It was the twenty-first century, for God’s sake. How could she be coerced like this into an unwanted marriage?

Yet it happened...

Her brows furrowed as her gaze stopped on Yuyu’s bag, still resting on her bed.

Maybe...

She didn’t stop to think. She simply dashed to the door, locking it, before rummaging through the bag.

Surely enough, her phone was there, too.

Though it was password protected, it didn’t take long for Noelle to guess it. After all, Yuyu’s life revolved around her brother. It stood to reason her password would be his birthday.

Successfully unlocking the device, she was quick at work as she scoured the internet for a phone number. Since she knew his last name was Guerra and his family was something of a local celebrity, it wasn’t hard to find a number.

Dialing the number, Noelle bit her nails in anxiety.

“This is the Guerra residence,” a voice answered on the second ring.

“Hello, I am looking for Rafaelo Guerra. I am a classmate from university,” she said glibly.

“I’m so sorry. He isn’t here.”

Noelle’s face fell.

“Is he still on his honeymoon?” She bluffed.

“Honeymoon? No, no. You didn’t hear? He didn’t get married.”

“He...didn’t?” Noelle repeated, her entire body relaxing for the first time in forever.

“No. It was all over the news. I’m surprised you didn’t see that.”

“Oh, I don’t follow the news,” she made up an excuse. “Do you know where I could reach him? It’s very important that I talk to him.”

There was a pause as the woman sighed deeply.

“No. We haven’t heard from him in over a week.”

“What do you mean in over a week?”

“He’s missing,” the woman replied.

Noelle didn’t get to ask more questions as a loud crash resounded in the room, her door falling to the ground.

Her eyes widened in shock as she turned, coming face to face with her brother.

Cisco looked murderous as his gaze swung from her to the phone in her hand.

He dusted his suit off, walking towards her as if he hadn’t just kicked the door open with sheer physical strength.

Noelle’s body started trembling, true fear claiming her at what she saw in her brother’s gaze. It was the first time she’d seen him so out of control, so...dangerous.

“Cisco, I...”

She didn't get to say anything. He snatched the phone from her hand, looking at the number before snarling at her and throwing it across the floor, smashing it to pieces.

“What did I tell you, Noelle?” he gritted out, his voice low and even but frightening, nonetheless.

Noelle didn't know what came over her, or where her bravery was coming from, but she couldn't stop herself from blurting out.

“He didn't get married. You lied to me.”

“Is that so?” His cheek twitched dangerously. “And where is he now?”

Noelle blinked.

“What...”

“I asked you. Where is he now? You couldn't speak with him, could you?”

“How did you...” she trailed off as awareness entered her features. “*You?*” she asked in a small voice.

At the same time, Yuyu ran up the stairs, stopping when she saw the state of the door and the tension rolling off her husband.

“What did you do, Cisco?”

“Let me put it this way, Noelle. You will marry Villanueva and you won't try any of your tricks. If you behave, I might behave, too.”

“You had something to do with his disappearance, didn't you?” she whispered, hurt radiating from her voice.

“Will you behave?” he fired back, neither denying nor confirming. But to Noelle, that was confirmation enough.

“Yes,” she uttered in a desolate voice. “I will behave.”

“Good. He will be alright, too.”

With that, he turned around and left.

Noelle's eyes connected with Yuyu's before she averted her gaze, not wanting to see the pity reflected there. Instead, she mechanically did as told, getting ready for her wedding.

She might never know for sure if her brother had anything to do with Rafaelo's disappearance, but he knew he was well capable of doing such a thing. And as long as there was even a one percent possibility that he did it, Noelle wouldn't take any chances with Blue's safety.

When everything was packed for the departure, the entire family went to a private landing strip where a jet was waiting to take them to Mexico.

Sergio Villanueva was the owner of a vast strip of land in the northeastern part of Mexico, in the state of Tamaulipas. Though he wasn't officially the governor of the region, from what Noelle had understood, he was the unofficial leader.

The flight took some five hours until they touched down in Mexico.

An entire entourage was waiting for them when they landed, yet the groom was nowhere to be seen.

"Señor Villanueva will be greeting you at the wedding. It is not good luck for the groom to see the bride before, is that not so?" the man who'd introduced himself as Fernando said politely as he greeted them.

Six Jeeps waited for them. Two to accommodate everyone and another four to act as security.

Noelle trailed behind Cisco and Yuyu, not deigning a reply even when Fernando directly addressed her, which earned her a harsh look from her brother. Still, she couldn't find it in her to care if she was polite or not. She'd already agreed to go through with the wedding without a fight, and that was the most she could do considering in her mind she'd already killed everyone in sight, making sure they suffered just as she was suffering on the inside.

“Noelle, are you alright?” Yuyu asked her as they got into the Jeep.

The terrain was arid and dry, the weather warm even though it was the end of December.

Noelle shrugged, turning her head to glance out the window of the Jeep.

The journey to the hacienda was long. On the way, Noelle made sure to memorize all landmarks, thinking that information might be useful in the future. Though it looked like a desert, there were a few buildings around, including some pyramid-like formations they passed by, as well as what looked to be tiny villages, all scattered along the way to the hacienda.

“This all belongs to Señor Villanueva.”

“Including the villages?” Noelle suddenly spoke.

Fernando gave her a nod.

“Everything within a hundred and fifty miles radius belongs to him,” Fernando explained. “He is the master here and everyone worships him for it.”

Noelle frowned. She could have understood if people *loved* him for it, but worship seemed to be quite an unusual term to use.

“What business is he in?”

“Noelle!” Cisco reprimanded her.

Fernando merely laughed.

“She is to be the wife of the master. It is alright if she is curious.”

Noelle gave him a tentative smile.

“You will find out soon enough,” he continued, giving her a non-answer. “The region is prosperous because of the master. Everyone owes their lives to him.”

Another odd thing to say, but one that Noelle took note of. If everyone was so loyal to her future husband, that might prove more difficult if she were to try to escape.

Not impossible. Merely more difficult.

As they neared the main area of the hacienda, Noelle noted that a crowd of people had formed two rows on each side of the road. There must have been at least a hundred if not more people as the lines were extending as far as Noelle could see. Every person, young or old, male or female, was holding a candle in their hands while chanting something in a language that was *not* Spanish. Even more peculiar was the fact that everyone was wearing colorful traditional clothing.

“What are they saying?”

“Oh, don’t pay too much attention. It’s our custom. This is how we welcome the new bride,” Fernando replied.

After almost an hour on the road, they finally made it to the hacienda.

Based on what she’d seen so far, Noelle had expected something luxurious, but she’d never in her wildest dreams imagined something of this magnitude.

It was the biggest house she’d ever seen—though a palace was more appropriate in describing it. It was so grand, she couldn’t see where it ended.

The house had two floors and was built in a square style, and Noelle was sure it must house an inner courtyard based on the outer design.

All around, there were well tended fields and a few other smaller houses. Yet what struck Noelle the most was the fact that she noticed another pyramid-like structure. Unlike the ones they’d passed by, this one was under construction, with only the base laid on the ground.

“What are those?” She asked Fernando.

“Temples.”

“Temples?” Noelle frowned.

“We have our local religion,” he smiled. “Sergio has graciously agreed to hold a Catholic ceremony as a sign of respect for your family,” he explained.

“So there will be another ceremony in your religion?” Noelle couldn’t help but inquire further.

“You’re already looking at it,” Fernando said cryptically.

Noelle didn’t get to inquire further as the car drew to a halt.

Everyone got out of it, and a slew of servants rushed forwards to help them.

“Please make yourselves at home. Señor Villanueva will meet you at the ceremony in two hours.”

With that, Fernando left them in the care of the servants, who led them to their rooms.

Yet even as they walked around the hacienda, Noelle couldn’t help but notice the odd looks that were being sent her way. Everyone was eyeing her suspiciously, and she could swear she heard a few of them curse her out too.

Good thing I learned Spanish!

She’d been right to account for all variables and prepare for the worst. And though she’d continuously hoped this wouldn’t be her fate, at least now she had a hidden asset—one she wouldn’t let anyone know she possessed.

Yuyu trailed behind Noelle, ready to help her dress and prepare for the ceremony.

“It’s not so bad, is it?” Yuyu added nervously as they entered the grand apartment Noelle had been assigned.

Noelle didn’t answer, merely surveying the area.

There was a big sitting room that led to a veranda with a private garden. In the back, the bedroom was separate, as was the bathroom, both extremely generous in size.

Noelle shrugged.

She didn't care about riches. She would have preferred a small room as long as she was with the *right* groom.

"Noelle..."

"I should get dressed," she interrupted Yuyu.

She didn't want to rehash the past.

It was done. There was no reason to argue again for a moot point. At least Noelle was smart enough to realize that there was no escape now.

Whether she wanted, or not, she would marry Sergio Villanueva.

And the last thing she needed was to hear more excuses.

Yuyu set about helping her unpack her dress and accessories. A few servants also came inside to offer a hand.

Noelle took a bath before changing into the dress.

It was a pretty dress, she supposed. But she hated what it symbolized.

The time passed quickly and it was time for the actual ceremony.

Cisco appeared in the doorway, dressed in a tuxedo as he offered her his arm, leading her to the altar.

Since it seemed that the locals were not Christians, the ceremony was to take place in one of the inner gardens of the house.

As they reached the location, Noelle noted there were quite a few guests present—all from Sergio's side. From her side, only her family had come, for once the ceremony was done, they were to depart promptly. She didn't know why, but she hadn't probed. She was too sick of interacting with them and hearing their stupid excuses to care what they did, or if they left earlier or later. As far as she was concerned, they were

already gone from her life—had been from the moment they'd sold her.

As soon as they stepped into the opening, music started playing. Noelle turned, startled, to see a band playing on the sidelines.

In the middle of the garden was a makeshift altar, a priest waiting on the other side with a book in his hand. But what captured her attention was the person standing *in front* of the altar.

It was him.

Sergio Villanueva.

Noelle opened her eyes wide to study him thoroughly—this man who would be her husband. This man who would wed a woman thirty years younger than him.

Cisco was tense as they slowly walked towards the altar, but that gave Noelle enough time to peruse her future husband.

He wasn't much taller than her. Maybe a few inches, but definitely not as much as she had imagined considering the reverence with which people around the hacienda treated him.

When she'd seen how the locals *worshipped* him, she'd conjured up some type of bigger than life figure.

But he wasn't.

He was just a man.

An *old* man.

There was absolutely no denying that his age was visible on his face, wrinkles marring his forehead and cheeks. His hair was almost completely white.

"This is who you're making me marry?" she hissed under her breath at her brother.

"Noelle, behave," the warning in his voice was clear.

She barely held her tongue, and only because she knew what was at stake.

“I do this and nothing happens to him. You swear to me,” she whispered, her eyes still oriented forward.

“I swear. Nothing will happen to him by my hand,” Cisco replied.

That was all Noelle needed to hear to push forward.

Finally, they reached Sergio’s side.

His lip curled as he gave her a one over, almost as if he didn’t find her that interesting.

To her surprise, he didn’t even introduce himself, didn’t say a word to her. He merely motioned to the priest that he could start.

Noelle was so shocked by his behavior that she was barely aware of the ceremony and what the priest was saying to them. It was only when he declared that the groom may kiss the bride that she was startled out of her reverie.

Sergio gave her an odd look as he leaned in to kiss her.

So disgusted she was by the prospect of having her first kiss with this man, that she instantly turned her face around so her lips merely brushed against her hair.

Someone cleared their throat.

Noelle didn’t care.

She’d accepted the marriage. What she did after didn’t concern her brother anymore.

Sergio pursed his lips, but he didn’t say anything, merely continuing with the ceremony.

They signed the marriage documents and finally, they were husband and wife.

Turning towards the guests, Sergio grabbed her hand in his, inclining his head to everyone present.

They walked like that to the entrance of the house, after which Sergio stopped to regard her.

He still had the same disapproving look on his face.

“I’ll call on you tonight,” he simply said as he took off in another direction.

Noelle was left staring at the place he’d just vacated, her mind in complete disarray.

It was done.

She was a married woman.

But why was it that she didn’t feel like one?

Why was it that this felt more like a fever dream than reality?

In no time, Cisco and Yuyu were by her side, offering to lead her back to her room. Her mother huffed loudly as she passed by Noelle—the first time she’d said anything to her since they’d left New York.

“Don’t mind her. She’s had too much to drink,” Yuyu whispered.

Truth to be told, Noelle had noticed her mother had started imbibing too much from the moment she’d stepped onto the private jet. At least she’d kept her comments to herself and hadn’t egged Noelle on as she was wont to do.

“Why did she even come? To make sure I get married?” she muttered dryly.

“Ignore her.”

Yuyu steered her back to her lodgings, going inside the bedroom with her as she helped her take off her dress and put on something more comfortable.

When they were done, they went back to the living room area where Cisco was waiting for them, hand in his pockets, expression tight and tense.

“We need to leave, Yuyu,” he suddenly said.

“Now? But it’s so early. They just finished the ceremony. Surely there will be a feast and...”

“Sergio believes we’ve stayed enough. There will be a feast in a few days’ time according to their traditions, and it won’t include the family of the bride.”

“But Cisco... We just got here.”

“And now we’re leaving.”

Noelle was silent as she watched the exchange. She didn’t understand why Sergio wouldn’t allow Cisco and Yuyu to stay longer. It was odd, indeed, that they were instructed to leave as soon as the ceremony was over. All at once, Noelle saw the red flags. But she didn’t voice them out loud.

“You should go,” she nodded.

She was done begging her family for anything. She would deal with everything on her own from now on.

“Noelle...” Yuyu turned to her.

“I don’t need you here. Your duty’s done, so you should return back to your home,” she repeated in an emotionless tone.

“I’m sorry. You’ll never know how sorry...” Yuyu continued.

“Spare me,” Noelle rolled her eyes. “If you’d hurt me, just me, maybe I could have forgiven that in time,” she said as she turned to her brother. “But you went after him. You went after my heart. That is not something I would forgive anyone. You are dead to me. Both of you. And from now on, stay dead. I will take care of myself.”

“I didn’t do anything to Rafaelo,” Cisco finally said.

Noelle narrowed her eyes at him before she released a deep sigh.

“But you would have.”

“To get you to the altar? Yes,” he answered without qualms.

“So it’s the same thing. It doesn’t matter if you actually harmed him. You would have and that is enough for me.”

“You’re more important to us than a stranger, Noelle,” Yuyu said.

“Really?” She mocked. “I hadn’t noticed.”

“That’s enough, Noelle,” Cisco snapped as he placed himself in front of his wife, his hand blanketing hers. Of course, when had Cisco *not* defended Yuyu?

“At least tell me one thing,” she swallowed hard. “Do you know where he is?”

Cisco shook his head.

“No one knows.”

She nodded, worry eating at her. Turning, she didn’t even bother saying goodbye to her brother and her sister-in-law as she went back to the bedroom, closing the door and locking it.

It didn’t take long for Cisco and Yuyu to get the message and leave.

Only then did Noelle get out of her room again, her eyes moistened by tears, her heart heavy.

If Cisco hadn’t been behind Blue’s disappearance, then where was he? How was he?

Her entire body was trembling as she leaned against the wooden frame of the door.

Where are you, my Blue?

“Give me strength, please. Give me strength to find you again,” she whispered.

She was in a foreign country. A foreign house. A foreign man’s wife.

And she didn’t know how to deal with it.

Staring at the outdoor veranda, she told herself she would be fine. That she’d survived until then, and she would continue

to survive. And because her goal was stronger than any hardship that could come her way, she could prevail.

If only to see him again...

Yet something told her that she would be clawing for her life. Because if she'd noticed anything since her arrival, it was that she wasn't welcomed. Sergio, himself, didn't seem to have much of an interest in her.

That made her question *why* he'd wanted her so much in the first place.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a knock at the door.

"Come in," she called out.

A young blonde girl walked slowly inside carrying a tray with her. She had a tentative smile on her face as she regarded Noelle.

"My name is Lucero," she said in a thickly accented voice. "I'm to serve you from now on."

"Nice to meet you, Lucero," Noelle strained a smile.

"The master instructed me to bring you dinner. He wants you to come to his room at ten sharp tonight."

"His room?" Noelle licked her lips, a shiver going down her back.

If before she'd managed not to think too much about married life and what it would entail, now that she was actually married, she realized she would need to do her duty as a wife. And that meant...

Revulsion filled her to the brim, and the mere smell of the food threatened to make her ill.

"Yes. There is a box under the bed and it contains the dress he wants you to wear tonight," she continued.

"Of course," Noelle muttered.

Lucero placed the tray on a table, and inquiring if Noelle needed anything else, she eventually took her leave.

Curious, Noelle went to her room and found the dress in question. It wasn't too scandalous. She supposed she could wear it, if only to make Sergio more agreeable to what she was going to propose. After all, marriage or no marriage, she had no intention of letting him touch her even with one finger.

Noelle could *never* let someone else touch her that wasn't her Blue. He alone owned her—body and soul. She'd rather die than suffer that type of torture.

First, she would deal with her new husband. She needed to set boundaries between them. Based on what she'd seen of him at the wedding, she doubted he had much interest in her.

Maybe he'd insisted on the marriage to have a young wife on his arm. She knew plenty of men did that to make them feel better about themselves—younger, more virile. It was all about how others perceived them, and she'd already realized that Sergio Villanueva was a man who prized his image above all. It was in the unspoken way he interacted with his employees and the people living on his lands.

Worship.

She remembered the way Fernando had spoken about him, always referring to him as something beyond human. To Noelle, that suggested two things: his reputation was extremely important to him and his hubris was unparalleled.

After all, who but the definition of hubris saw himself as some type of messiah of these lands? Who but someone so wrapped up in his own self asked for other people to worship him?

But with these observations also came the realization that she needed to tread carefully with him. She would be able to reason with him as long as she didn't injure his pride, as long as she didn't embarrass him in front of his people.

Once she dealt with Sergio, she would focus her attention on the most important thing.

Blue.

She had to find out where her Blue was.

But how could she do that?

While Noelle was struggling with her new reality, Cisco and Yuyu had just gotten home after their flight.

Ignoring Elena and her inane chatter, Cisco went straight to his office, closing himself inside.

His fists met the furniture indiscriminately as he hit and punched until the skin off his knuckles peeled, blood pouring down his hands. He no longer felt the sting of pain, only the ache of his heart and the fact that he'd quite possibly made the biggest mistake of his life—one that he would forever regret.

He continued to wreak havoc on everything that got in his way, only stopping when the sound of the lock turning claimed his attention.

“You’re not going to solve anything even if you tear the house down,” Yuyu told her in that quiet manner of hers.

Her eyes were rimmed with tears, and he knew immediately that she felt the same pain that thundered in his chest.

“Yuyu,” he croaked, the sound harsh and full of despair.

She took a tentative step forward. Then another. Until she reached his side. Fitting her hand against his cheek, she brushed her thumb against his lips.

“What have I done?” he rasped.

“What have *we* done? Don’t put this burden only on your shoulders. Not when I am equally at fault.”

“She’ll never forgive us,” he told her in a pained whisper.

“I know. But she’ll live. That’s all that matters.”

“Do you think he really would have killed her?” The implication was clear. Had they done the correct thing to force this marriage against all odds?

“Yes,” Yuyu nodded reluctantly. “The thugs that attacked us were a prime example. So were the other dozen people who followed us everywhere we went that Noelle had no clue of. He was serious about this, Cisco. I don’t know why, but he was serious.”

And that was the least of it.

Every time Noelle would go out, Cisco would receive reports of her whereabouts from Sergio’s men. It was how he’d found out about her excursions to Rafaelo’s university in the first place. He wouldn’t have been as hard on her if he hadn’t known Sergio would be worse.

Pictures upon pictures of her going about her day, all captioned the same.

You decide whether she lives or dies.

Maybe Cisco could have protected her better. But he was smart enough to admit his limitations. Even he wouldn’t have been able to be with her at all times. And with Noelle’s rebellious streak, it was only a matter of time before she found herself unprotected. And...dead.

“I don’t even think it was about her,” Cisco pursed his lips. “I think it was his injured pride and the fact that we dared to plan an attack against him. It wasn’t that he wanted Noelle. He wanted the bride we didn’t want to give.”

“How are we going to solve this?” Yuyu asked, slowly caressing his cheek.

“We’ll hurt him where it matters the most. Money. Power. We’ll go for his businesses until he has nothing left. I’ve already laid the foundation for this, but it’s a long game.”

“We’ll do it. Together.”

“I promised Noelle she wouldn’t have to be there for long and at least that promise, I aim to keep.”

“I know you will, Cisco. I know you will,” Yuyu gave him a tentative smile as she led him to his chair, seating him and proceeding to tend to his injuries.

He didn't make a sound as she applied disinfectant and bandaged his wounds, merely staring out in the distance.

Her heart ached for him and for what he must be feeling but which he didn't know how to show. She knew him too well not to see the pain and the hurt he was keeping at bay.

The fact that he'd acted violently towards the furniture was a small mercy, since he usually tended to keep everything inside until his pain became unbearable.

But she knew how to help him.

After she was done with her ministrations, she put everything aside, clearing his desk with one swipe of her arm.

Cisco's attention snapped to her as he watched her intently, his chest rising and falling as tension rolled him in violent waves even in this quiet moment.

He was a ticking bomb, her husband.

He was the *worst* type of ticking bomb; the type that imploded when everything became too much.

With the desk cleared, she turned to face him once more.

Her hands went to the fastening of her dress as she slowly slid it off her body until she remained naked in front of him.

"Take me," she whispered, beckoning him to her. "Let me be the vessel for your despair."

She didn't have to tell him twice. In the next second, he had her spread on the table, her legs locked around his hips as he drove into her in one powerful thrust.

They were both hurting, and they both *needed* to hurt.

Her nails were lodged in his back, tearing at his skin, just as his fingers were tangled in her hair, pulling roughly at her scalp as he brought her mouth to his for a searing kiss.

He took her hard and fast; pain, not pleasure, the main goal.

And as they both finished, their bodies sweaty, their breathing rough and uncontrolled, they finally allowed their emotions to reach the surface.

Yuyu wailed.

Cisco simply hugged her, a small, lone tear falling down his cheek.

15. NOELLE

Noelle's eyes were on the clock as she felt every second pass.

She didn't know how she would approach Sergio with her idea of an arrangement, but more than anything, she didn't know how he would react to it.

Since he hadn't seemed so interested in her until now, she had hoped that it would continue to be so. After all, she had absolutely *no* intention of being his wife in truth. And if he wanted to enforce that, then the fight would be on.

Taking a small bite of the steak left behind by Lucero, Noelle chewed slowly, her stomach not caring for any food at the moment. Still, she hadn't eaten in a day and she needed her strength.

Despite all her plans, she was smart enough to realize she was just a girl in a foreign country, surrounded by people who cared nothing for her. If Sergio wished to force himself on her, chances were that he could easily do so. In the eyes of the people, she was his wife. And no one would see anything wrong with him exercising his husbandly rights.

No matter how strong her conviction was that no other man but Blue would claim her body, she was afraid.

Her hand trembled as she forced herself to take another bite.

One more hour.

In one more hour she would find out if there was any honor to Sergio or not.

In one more hour, she would either defend her autonomy or die fighting for it.

After all, she'd only accepted to marry the man because Cisco had threatened her Blue. If he hadn't done that, Noelle was sure she would have found a way to get herself out of this.

Yet for Blue...

For him she would do anything.

Anything but bed another man, that was.

Noelle felt bile rise up her throat at the mere thought of someone other than Blue putting a finger on her. More than that, and she would simply die.

"I can do this," she whispered as she placed the fork down.

Rising to her feet, she changed into the gown Sergio had left for her. The dress was just as colorful as the clothing worn by the people who'd greeted them at the entrance of the hacienda. It was an intricate design that wrapped around her body beautifully. But it was also a design that allowed for hidden places.

Noelle didn't stop to think of the potential consequences for her actions. She simply arranged the dress around so it could conceal the sharp knife that had accompanied her dinner.

"Lucky me that it was steak," she muttered dryly as she finally fixed it in place.

Sharper than a usual serving knife, it could definitely injure someone if the situation required it.

Of course, Noelle hoped it wouldn't get to that point.

Her husband was, after all, the ruler of this land. She had no doubt she would be immediately caught if she tried anything.

Yet that didn't deter her—not one bit.

Gazing at herself in the mirror, she almost couldn't recognize the person looking back. It wasn't just the dress she'd put on. It was also the look in her eyes—almost blank, and just as hopeless.

Her family had finally done it. They'd finally managed to push her off the cliff, letting her fall into the merciless abyss.

Maybe she'd known all along it would come to this. Maybe she was just fooling herself in those nice, cozy moments spent with her brother and her sister-in-law. Yet now, reality was staring her in the face.

She was all alone. Left to the wolves to fend for herself. Simply...all alone.

But Noelle was used to loneliness, just as she was used to being treated like a second-hand person. That was nothing new.

What *was* new was the fact that they'd dared to mess with the only person who'd ever made her feel less alone. And in her eyes, that was unforgivable.

Yes, for now she was all alone. But it wouldn't be for long. Only until she found him again. Only until they would be reunited once more.

Until then, she just had to bear it a little while longer.

"I'm coming for you, Blue. One way or another, I'm going to find you," she whispered to herself.

One might say that her obsession with Blue was unnatural. That it was simply outrageous for anyone to be so fixated on someone they'd never met.

But in Noelle's view, they *had* met.

Their hearts had met. She'd learned for the first time in her life what it was like for someone to care about her and her opinions.

More than anything, he'd told her that *she* mattered.

For the wretched little girl who'd only ever been an afterthought to her own family, that had been...everything.

Blue hadn't only taught her things about herself she'd never known, or never explored before. He'd dared her to desire more for herself.

Noelle desired him.

And she would fight the entire world for him.

He'd saved her once from the precipice. Now it was her turn to return the favor.

Quiet determination shone in her features. Slowly, the hopelessness in her gaze melted away, replaced with a strong resolve and an even stronger love.

All her life, people had underestimated her.

No more.

Starting today, she would be the master of her own destiny. And against all odds, she would find her happiness.

That was a promise she made to herself.

"I choose *us*," she whispered, a smile pulling at her lips.

Before, she'd fought solely for herself. Now, she had another reason.

One that was arguably stronger than the former. One that would lead her down a path of no return.

Him.

"Señora? I'm here to lead you to Señor Villanueva's room," Lucero's voice interrupted her thoughts.

Fully armed, and with her conscience at peace, Noelle was finally ready to confront her husband.

Too bad things wouldn't go in any way she could have ever imagined.

Instead of peace...she was about to wage war.

Lucero didn't speak as she led Noelle down the darkened corridors of the hacienda.

Noelle was surprised by how eerily quiet the place was. But more than anything, she was taken aback by the distance they had to cross to get to Sergio's quarters.

One would normally think that a man would place his wife close to him. But as they continued walking, Noelle realized her new husband didn't seem that keen on her company—he'd placed her nearly at the other end of the house.

Noelle supposed it wasn't such a bad thing, and she hoped when they talked he would be just as keen on keeping that distance in all areas of their lives.

A slow smile tipped at her lips as she felt herself growing lighter at that thought—months of stress slowly melting away.

But it wasn't long lived as her entire face fell when Lucero declared.

“We're here.”

They stopped in front of a ceiling high double door, and the sounds coming from inside were unmistakable.

A woman was moaning.

Noelle's mouth opened and closed as she turned to look at Lucero with questions in her eyes. The girl did not show any outward reaction to the sounds.

She merely took a step forward, knocking on the door.

Noelle froze as Sergio's voice rang out, calling a sharp *come in*.

“Here, Senora,” Lucero said, opening the door for Noelle before retreating and leaving her alone.

Noelle swallowed hard, taken wholly by surprise by the new development.

As she widened the door, stepping inside the room, she tried her best to school her features at what she saw.

Just like her own apartment, Sergio's had a huge sitting room, a few couches in the middle forming a circle.

Sergio was sitting on one such couch, his expression bored as he leaned back in a relaxed manner.

In front of him, there were two naked girls having sex with each other while he looked on—two girls that looked barely older than herself.

By God, what have I gotten myself into?

Noelle could barely stop herself from trembling, and the only thing that helped was feeling the outline of the knife within her breast. It was within easy reach, and her fingers itched with the need to feel the cold handle against her skin, her mind already clamoring with scenarios in which she'd drag the blade along Sergio's torso, cutting him from head to toe.

"Come here," he ordered, turning his head and narrowing his eyes at her. His accent was barely detectable and that told Noelle he must have spent considerable time abroad.

She decided it wasn't the time to show her hand. She needed to be patient and wait for the right moment.

The girls stopped when they noticed Noelle, turning to look at her curiously.

Noelle walked inside the room, but she didn't get too close to either Sergio or the girls. She merely kept a cool distance.

"I said come here," he repeated, his voice gravelly.

Noelle took one more step towards him, but she didn't come *there* as he wanted her to.

A twitch appeared in his cheek when he noticed her subtle disobedience, and Noelle could swear she noted a glint of annoyance in his eyes.

"You look worse than in photos," Sergio suddenly said, his eyes roving over her body.

"Thanks," she replied drily. "I did my best."

She'd never expected a compliment, but neither had she expected an outright insult.

His mouth curled in disgust.

“You were fatter in the pictures. I told your brother I don't want an anorexic bitch,” he continued, spitting vitriol with every word.

The more he spoke, however, the more incensed Noelle became. At him. At her brother. At everyone who saw her as little else than cattle to be sold and exchanged.

“What can I say, the thought of marrying you burned calories,” she muttered under her breath, unable to help herself.

If before she'd been slightly afraid and anxious about the meeting, it only took for Sergio to open his mouth and utter those idiocies for her to lose all her fear. Instead it was replaced with anger and a need to tell him to shove every word up his ass.

But she wouldn't do that. Not quite yet.

“What did you just say?” He straightened his spine, leaning forward as his eyes flashed at her.

“Oh, nothing,” Noelle smiled sweetly, her cheeks hurting from the fakeness of it. “Just bridal nerves.”

He narrowed his eyes at her.

“I told your brother what would happen if you're not untouched,” he commented drily, still looking at her through hooded eyes. “I have free rein to punish you as I see fit.”

Noelle's eyes flared in alarm.

“What if I'm not?” she dared to ask.

“Oh, you won't like the outcome. But I have it on good terms that you are. If I'd been suspicious in any way, the wedding would have had a public medical exam.”

What...

“You’re crazy,” Noelle whispered.

The girls were watching her raptly, unabashed by their naked state.

“Maybe,” Sergio shrugged, not really paying her any mind. In fact, as he turned his attention to his watch, he completely tuned her out.

“Take off your clothes. The consummation is in thirty minutes,” he commanded in a perfunctory tone.

Noelle blinked, uncertain she’d heard him right. Thirty minutes? Why the hell was it timed? What was even happening?

“What?”

“I have to repeat myself? Take off your clothes.”

“No,” Noelle replied, pushing her chin up.

“W-what?” he sputtered, his eyes wide as he took her in.

“I will not take my clothes for you or for anyone else,” she declared.

The girls gasped at her audacity, while Sergio simply seethed.

Before Noelle realized what was happening, Sergio was out of his seat in and front of her.

The slap took her completely by surprise, as did the sheer strength of it.

One moment she was on her feet, staring defiantly at him, the next she was on her floor, her hand going to her stinging cheek.

He’d caught her in the ear, too, and a sudden ringing accompanied what she realized was her own harsh breathing and the sound of barely stifled sobs.

But she wouldn’t give him the chance of seeing her cry.

“You fucking talk back?” he sneered at her. “I gave you an order, you follow it, puta infecta. I *own* you,” he spat at her.

“You. Don’t. Own. Me,” Noelle replied through gritted teeth as she tried to regain her balance.

Her ear was still ringing. The flesh on her cheek reddened but she pushed against the pain and tried to get back up.

Sergio had an off putting grin on his face as he looked down at her.

“You’re a feisty one, aren’t you?” he chuckled. “I’ll have fun breaking you.”

She barely got up to her knees before he struck again. This time his knuckles caught her in the jaw, the pain blinding as she fell back down with a gasp.

His words echoed in her ear just as her new reality suddenly crashed in.

She was trapped. Fully, utterly trapped. And this man... This man before her *wanted* her to misbehave so he could punish her.

She noticed it in the way he was goading her, his foot tapping impatiently against the floor as his hands clenched and unclenched.

He was fucking waiting for her to say something more so he could hit her again. And again. Then maybe rape her.

“So young and ignorant,” he bellowed. “You’re in *my* land, puta. There is no way out,” he laughed. “Caro, Isabela, come here,” he ordered the other two girls. “Take her clothes off,” he nodded at Noelle.

The girls neared her, but Noelle, already hanging by a thread, struck out, hitting and pushing them away.

“Don’t touch me,” she hissed, holding her arms around her body in a protective stance. “Don’t fucking touch me,” she repeated as she glanced up at Sergio.

Sergio raised a curious brow at her.

“You dare disobey me?” he asked, amused.

Noelle blinked back the tears, the pain in her cheek pulsating almost unbearable. Still, she wouldn't back down. Gritting her teeth, determination shone in her eyes as she moved slowly, ready to remove the knife from its hiding place.

She looked up, her gaze perusing his form as she identified his weak points.

The throat.

She would go for the throat.

She would push the knife so deep in his flesh, he'll have no other option than to waste away right under her gaze. And then, only then, she would rejoice.

Yet she barely managed to make a cohesive plan in her mind before his hands went to his belt, quickly unbuckling it and taking it off.

No!

She would never allow him to touch her.

But it was only a moment later that she realized he didn't mean to touch her like *that*. When the harsh surface of the belt connected with her body.

The first blow was so sudden, she didn't have the time to protect herself. Only on the second blow did she put her arms up to protect her face, curling inward into a small ball to avoid getting hit to vital organs. Even so, every single blow was painful. One more than the other.

She drew pained breath after pained breath, almost suffocating under the biting pain of the belt. Welts appeared on her arms and her legs, but it was her back that took the brunt of it.

Blow after blow, he hit her across her back and lower, down to her ass.

He hit her so hard, she knew the skin had broken, blood pooling to the surface.

He hit her so goddamn hard, it was becoming harder and harder to maintain her consciousness.

The pain... The pain was just too much.

It was a hardship to even blink even though the tears wouldn't stop leaking from her eyes.

Yet in all this time, she didn't make a sound.

She didn't cry. She didn't yell. She didn't yelp in pain.

She bit her tongue until blood flooded her mouth, but she would not give him the satisfaction of hearing her beg for mercy. Not when she realized it was what he wanted.

“Are you going to talk back again?” He asked as he swung the belt back before using all his strength to strike again. The metal buckle was oriented towards her this time, and Noelle was unprepared for that cruel kind of pain—the type that made her moan in distress, a low, pitiful cry that she barely managed to contain.

“Let's see if you talk back again when you can't move for a fucking week,” Sergio continued. “Because of you, I missed the timing. I missed the fucking time,” he yelled a minute later, redoubling his efforts to hurt her.

Noelle tried to crawl away from him, but he wouldn't let her. He simply followed, striking her with the belt across her back until there was not one inch of flesh that remained untouched—not one inch that didn't bleed.

The material of her dress was soaked at this point, blood seeping through and flowing freely down her body.

She was so sticky from the viscous substance, she was horrified to think just how badly he'd hurt her...

It felt like an eternity later that he finally stopped. When she could no longer move.

He was breathing hard, his chest rising and falling from the exertion of beating his new wife half to death.

Noelle lay on the ground, blood slowly trickling down her forehead and getting in her eyes.

Oh...he hit me in the head too...

She no longer had the strength to be surprised by it.

She just lay there, unmoving, as her entire life flashed before her eyes.

She saw the good, and the bad. But more than anything she saw the missed opportunities.

Blue... Would he remember her?

Did he miss her? Was he curious why she never showed up for their date?

Would he...mourn her?

A whizzing sound escaped her lips, half-cry, half-moan, as the anguish in her breast became stronger than the pain of her flesh.

I love you, Blue. I'm sorry I wasn't stronger...

Was she dying? She didn't know, but the odds were not in her favor.

More than ever she was aware she was purely on her own and no one cared one whit what happened to her.

If she died right this moment, she had no doubt Sergio and the others would make it look like an accident and no one would be the wiser.

Why couldn't she act faster? She'd learned how to fight. Why couldn't she fight back when she had the chance?

All these questions went through her mind as Noelle became increasingly disappointed at herself and her weakness.

She'd been too stunned to do anything. And if she were honest to herself, after the first few blows, she'd been terrified.

For all her training with Yuyu, she'd never faced a real-life situation. Not like the one she found herself in. How the hell could she have acted any differently when she was just an

eighteen year old who was more talk than action? A girl, not yet a woman, who weighed less than a hundred pounds and was just shy of five feet tall.

What the hell did she know?

Noelle cursed her arrogance as much as she did her situation. She'd been so confident in herself that she'd dared to hope she could take the reins of her own destiny—master her fate and not let anyone else decide *anything* for her.

Yet here she was.

On the ground.

Bleeding.

Barely breathing.

She'd already lost control of her body. Soon, she'd have her dignity stripped from her and she couldn't stop wondering what she could have done more?

“It's fucking eleven,” Sergio gritted out, kicking her in the stomach—the only place he'd yet not touched.

Her lungs constricted as her breath suddenly stopped.

Noelle gasped for air, her eyes wide with fear as her nails scratched at the wooden floor in an attempt to hold onto something—ground herself when she thought her soul was about to fly from her body.

Turning, Sergio barked some orders to Caro in Spanish that Noelle could no longer focus to decipher, after which she heard the rustling of clothes.

True terror assailed Noelle as she could no longer discern whether it was her clothing that was being removed or not. So paralyzed with fear and pain she was that all sensation blended together until there was only pain.

Within moments, though, it was clear what was happening as loud, shrieky moans permeated the air.

Noelle finally managed to get her breathing back together as she slowly dragged herself towards the source of the noise. She witnessed one of the girls, Caro, on all fours, with Sergio mounting her from behind.

He had his pants around his ankles, his shirt half-open. His hand was in Caro's hair as he held tightly onto her scalp, pulling her back as he thrust savagely into her. He was grunting and moaning, his eyes half closed as he continued to fuck her.

The other girl was on the floor, her legs wide open for Caro to touch and kiss her.

Noelle was shocked at the sight.

At first, she felt relief that it wasn't her body he was violating.

But then that relief gave way to anger which promptly turned into pure rage.

How dare he...

How dare he hurt her like that?

How dare he expect her to take everything in and become his biddable little bitch?

In that moment, everything she'd held in until then suddenly exploded.

All the anger she'd bottled up at her family, at her circumstances and now at Sergio finally reached the surface, bubbling up like an explosive volcano.

Adrenaline rushed through her veins, and though there was not one place in her body that wasn't hurting, she somehow overcame it.

She had one shot and she wasn't going to miss.

It took superhuman strength for Noelle to crawl off that floor. It took even more willpower to bring her hand to her breast where she'd hidden the steak knife. And finally, it took Herculean force for her to stagger to her feet and attack.

Blood was pouring out of her wounds.

Down her back and legs. Down her face. She was one with blood.

But if she died that day... If she died, then she would take him with her.

By God, she would take him with her.

All her accumulated strength and years of stifled anger came to the surface in one brutal cry of war.

Noelle launched herself at Sergio, faster than she should have been capable considering her condition, and managed to catch him unawares enough to cut.

Both hands were on the handle of the knife, tightly held within her grasp, tightly wrapped in her rabid rage.

She didn't care where she hurt him as long as hurt him she did. She needed blood. *His* blood, as payment for her own.

Raising the knife up high, she built momentum, knowing she only had one shot at this. And as she reached her target, she swung it down with enough force that it cut through flesh.

Everything happened in a flash.

One moment Sergio was busy fucking Caro, the next Noelle was between them, her knife flashing in the air just as Sergio was thrusting out of Caro, the angle perfect to sever a good chunk of his erect penis.

Pulling back, Sergio barely had time to realize what was happening as he looked down at his dick, blood pouring out of what was left of it.

Caro screamed as she fell down, half of Sergio's penis slipping deep inside of her.

Pandemonium erupted, just as everyone panicked.

Sergio barked some orders, his voice teetering between a terrified scream and a pitiful cry. Caro was begging Isabela to take the dick out of her.

And Noelle...

A satisfied smile pulled at her lips as she met Sergio's disbelieving eyes.

"Now who's breaking who?" Noelle asked with what little strength she had left.

She wobbled on her feet, and when the blow from Sergio came, it was enough to knock her out of it, her consciousness finally slipping from her.

Still, no one could wipe the smirk off her face, or the smugness at having the last word.

I might die, but I'm taking everyone with me, too.

Yet even in those precious little moments she thought she had left, her thoughts were still on him. Always on him—her little piece of heaven.

Wait for me, Blue!

We might not meet in this life.

But in the next...

16. RAFAELO

“If I hadn’t threatened her with your safety, she would have found a way to escape before the wedding. Of that, I am sure,” Cisco sighs as he takes a deep drag of his cigarette.

I stare at him, speechless.

Noelle... She’d known who I was. From the beginning, she’d known who I was.

God, how the hell is that possible?

We’d had layers of anonymity on that platform, and we’d both agreed not to give too many recognizable details. So how the hell could she have found out who I was?

But that’s not even the most shocking aspect.

She’d not only *known* who I was, but she’d followed me around...

Fuck!

I can’t wrap my mind around this. She would have been so damn young too.

We’re more than five years apart in age. At the time we started talking, that would have made her...fifteen?

For fuck’s sake!

I groan out loud. I was twenty to her fifteen.

Fucking hell! This makes me feel like a goddamn predator.

Fifteen! She was fucking fifteen!

But no matter how much this piece of information throws me off, I have to admit that it's my fault, too, for not checking—for not asking her for her age from the beginning.

As we'd started talking, I'd thought both her thinking and her vocabulary far too advanced to be anything less than my age. At some point, I'd thought she might be older too.

There was a maturity of thought and ideas to her. It was what I most admired her then, and what I admire now.

Fifteen... My fucking God...

It's the first time I realize what would have happened had we met back then.

She would have continued to lie to me about her age, and if what Cisco is saying is correct, she'd been prepared to sleep with me. Knowing myself and my weakness for her, I wouldn't have been able to say no.

I would have done it.

I would have fucking slept with an underage girl and I would have been none the wiser.

A chasm opens in my chest as my mind and my heart find themselves in conflict.

Theoretically, I realize how fucking wrong everything is. But while my mind can compartmentalize right and wrong, my heart cannot.

Even back then, I *know* that I would have taken one look at her and I would have been ready to place the world at her feet.

If we had met, I am absolutely certain I would have done anything she would have asked of me.

Back then, I hadn't even dared dream of a kiss, let alone more. She'd only needed to bat her lashes at me and give me one of those sultry looks of hers and I would have been fucking gone.

Had she asked me to sleep with her? I would have done it.

Had she asked me to take her away and run off in the world, just the two of us? I would have dropped my entire life and followed her wherever she wished.

God, but it's quite unsettling to realize how one moment in time could have changed the course for all our lives.

If she'd made it to that meeting... If we'd seen each other back then...

We wouldn't be here, would we? We wouldn't have suffered everything we did along the way.

Noelle wouldn't have married Sergio, and I wouldn't have been sold to Armand.

A few seconds. A missed opportunity. And we both got a lifetime of misery because of it.

Yet despite everything, there is no certainty that we would have lasted. Both because of our families, and the fact that we were both far too young to undertake that type of commitment.

Ultimately, I know the me back then wouldn't have been able to protect her properly and cherish her as she deserves.

Wait a minute...

I frown as I realize the direction of my thoughts and the fact that I'm so quick to overlook *everything* wrong with Noelle or that she's been lying to me from the beginning.

What the fuck is wrong with *me*?

I hear that she's been in love with me since she was fifteen and all I can think of is what our lives would have looked like had we run away all those years ago?

Just like that, I'm ignoring all the red flags and looking at it from a far too romanticized perspective.

"I don't know how you managed, but with just a few online conversations, you won her loyalty forever. As far as I know, everything she's ever done has been for you," Cisco continues, interrupting my thoughts.

“It wasn’t just a few conversations,” I mutter under my breath in annoyance, a need to defend what we had rising inside of me.

It had been a true relationship. Maybe we’d never met face to face at that point, but she knew me better than anyone else in my life. Just like I knew her.

Our friendship was a lifeline. For me, and for her too. We found refuge in each other despite everything and we clung to that small connection.

She was my one tether to the world, and I was hers.

We’d both had our struggles in our day to day life but in each other we’d found the freedom of being ourselves without being judged for it—on the contrary, we’d appreciated one another as we were.

Like a flash, all our interactions appear before me, and I place new meaning to old conversations. More than anything, I realize how terrified she’d been of her fate but she’d tried to mask it.

One time, in particular, we were discussing a movie and she’d just burst into tears. It had been the first time I’d heard her like that. Retrospectively, the movie had been about a girl sold into slavery, which might have triggered her own fears as her wedding was slowly approaching.

Other little instances come to mind—how she’d theorize about free will, or about women’s rights and the fact that the world might have advanced, but women were still, and would always be, seen as less. The latter had been a recurrent topic of conversation between the two of us, as we’d debate over the different factors inhibiting equal opportunity between genders.

Looking back, I can see it for what it was.

She felt trapped. The only way she could have some control over her situation had been by attempting to understand it, dissect it, and theorize over it.

Despite our different circumstances, we'd been more alike than I'd ever imagined.

We'd both been...adrift. Alone. Unable to fit in.

Empty.

Thinking about all her suffering makes my heart clench. More so given the fact that for all my shitty past, I'd had parents who loved me. I may have shut everyone out after what happened with Michele, but my mother had stayed by my side throughout. I may have seemed broken to everyone else, but her love had never been...less.

Noelle hadn't even had that.

I don't doubt for one moment that what Cisco is saying about their mother is true. It's not the first time I've heard about the rift in the family and Noelle's conflict with Elena DeVille. Yet now, it makes sense why. Noelle hadn't been the child her mother had wished for. The more Elena tried to mold Noelle into the perfect child, the more Noelle fought back, resulting in an all-out war.

All her life she's been unwanted. Unseen. Unappreciated.

Until...me.

Until I saw her just as she saw me.

"Is that why you warned me about her?" I ask sharply.

Maybe Cisco didn't intend for his words to affect me this way, but instead of making me see Noelle in a bad light, I can't help but feel for her and the girl she'd been—the lonely child and even lonelier teenager. For the fact that I'm starting to read between the lines of our past conversations and see the extent of her solitude—of her desire to have someone be there for her.

Her own family had thrown her away. Time and time again.

I'm all she's ever had.

Before. And now.

And that breaks my fucking heart.

Will I throw her away, too?

The question echoes in my mind, but I have no clear answer.

No matter how much I wish the past never happened, that we didn't have this goddamn tragic bond between us, I can't deny its existence, just like I can't deny everything she's done to me.

Even so, I find myself reluctant to pin everything on her.

Not just yet...

There is still a lot I don't know about what happened at the hacienda.

Despite my disappointment and anger at the situation, I love Noelle far too much not to give her a chance to explain herself.

Maybe I'm foolish to think there's an explanation to this—to her fucking me and having my child without my knowledge. Maybe I am just a goddamn lovesick fool.

Yet I owe it to her just as I owe it to myself to find out the truth.

Just as I owe it to our relationship.

I did my fair share of fucked up mistakes and she forgave me. She *always* forgave me, even when I didn't deserve it.

It's time I gave her the same courtesy.

"You might be safe from her. But anyone else?" Cisco shakes his head in amusement. "She clawed her way from the grave for you, Raf. What does that tell you about her?"

"That she's stronger than anyone I know," I reply, unable to keep the admiration from my voice.

Cisco raises a brow at me, noticing my wistful look.

"I don't think there are any limits to what she's capable of. I don't know exactly what happened at the hacienda, but

something inside her snapped,” he continues. “I went back for her, you know,” Cisco gives me a sad smile. “It was a few months after her wedding. I’d been trying very hard to find something to keep Sergio in line, and I managed to put an embargo on most of his shipments to the East Coast. He agreed to let her leave when I asked him to choose between her and his business.”

I blink in surprise at the information.

“She didn’t *want* to leave,” he says, taking a drag from his cigarette. “I told her she didn’t have to stay there anymore and you know what she said to me?”

I raise a brow at him.

“Why would she leave when she had everything she could ever wish for?”

I frown.

“She said that?”

Cisco nods.

“She wasn’t coerced if that’s what you’re thinking. I had Sergio cornered. He couldn’t do anything but hand her over at that point. She refused to leave. In fact, she told me in no uncertain terms that if I tried to take her by force she would kill me,” Cisco mentions with a straight face.

“Why would she...” I trail off, but Cisco continues.

“The most interesting thing? Sergio couldn’t get rid of her fast enough. I would have expected some resistance, especially after he’d gone through so much trouble to acquire her. Instead, he told me marrying her was the worst mistake he’d ever made.”

“I don’t understand...” I trail off.

That...doesn’t sound like someone who’d been systematically abused.

Cisco turns brusquely to me, looking at me intently.

“There’s only one reason Noelle would think she had *everything*,” he states, giving me a knowing look.

“Me.”

He nods.

“I looked into it. You’d just been brought over to the hacienda.”

“But why... Why would she keep me enslaved? Why... “

“You’ll have to ask *her* that. I’ve done my part in telling you about her childhood and my role in her situation. It’s her turn to tell you the truth about what happened at the hacienda.”

“How can I trust her? You said it yourself. She’d do anything for me. Including lie. How do I know she won’t tell me what I want to hear?”

“Use your brain,” he smiles as he taps his temples. “And your instincts. My sister may be many things but...” he takes a deep breath. “She respects you, Raf. She isn’t just blindly infatuated with you, though I may have thought that at one point. She respects you and your opinion too much for that.”

Warmth unfurls in my chest at his words. Yet I don’t want to entertain any type of hope, or try to justify Noelle’s actions in any way. Because where the hell is the respect if she was hiding something as monumental as the fact that it had been *my* child she’d birthed. *My* child that had died. A child that I don’t even know how it was conceived.

Where is the respect if she willingly stuck around the hacienda while I was wasting away in that goddamn place? She could have asked for help. She could have gotten me out of there.

But what did she do?

She stayed behind and instead took the role of my abuser.

Where is the fucking respect and love in that?

My fists open and close as I try to regulate my breathing. It won’t do if I explode right now. I need to get a grip on myself

since this is the one time where all the thinking must be done cold—with absolutely no trace of anger or frustration.

So I change the topic.

“I can’t tell if you hate your sister, or if you genuinely admire her,” I joke.

“I’ve never hated Noelle,” he states seriously. “I may have failed her repeatedly, but that was never my intention,” he takes a deep breath.

Odd hearing Cisco admit this when the man comes across as infallible. Yet it’s clear he has many regrets regarding Noelle. And that only makes him more...human.

“I do admire her,” his lips tip up. “What’s not to admire? She’s smart and brave and she went head on with death and won. There aren’t many who could have survived what she did. So yes, I admire her. Because I also understand her,” he smiles wistfully. “We both operate on the same level, which is why I can tell you this. Listen to her. Try to understand her. Resolve your issues. Because she will never let you go, Raf. Dead or alive, she will never let you go.”

I narrow my eyes at him, but not before I hear the confidence in his voice.

“After all, I would do nothing less.”

“I can see where she gets that from,” I add drily.

“Raf,” Cisco suddenly turns to me. “She was capable of altering her own memory because of you. When we saved her from the fire, she thought you’d died. Her child had died. She had no more reason to live. Why do you think she went through multiple suicide attempts? Why do you think I pushed her so hard to survive? In the end, the only way she could go on was by forgetting everything.” He pauses. “Everything that had to do with you.”

I purse my lips. I’d intuited as much, but hearing it first hand doesn’t help my state of mind.

“Right. Got it. Dead or alive, I’m not getting rid of her,” I mutter ironically. “I’ll do my best to keep both of us alive.”

Thanking Cisco for his information, I head back to the hospital, increasingly more certain about my decision.

I grab two cups of coffee on my way as well as a little chocolate treat for Noelle.

What can I say? Old habits are hard to break.

As I enter Noelle’s wing, my phone rings.

“Tell me you have good news,” I say as I answer the phone.

Carlos chuckles.

“You know I do. I found someone who used to work at the hacienda but quit a while before the fire.”

“And?”

“He’s willing to talk.”

“I don’t care if he’s willing to talk. Does he have any information?”

Carlos pauses.

“Better yet. He has footage.”

I stop in my tracks.

“What do you mean?”

“He was in charge of the security at the hacienda. This was how he managed to quit working and leave the place. He blackmailed Sergio with videos he had of everything that went on.”

I swallow hard.

“What exactly does he have, Carlos?”

He pauses. Taking a deep breath, he answers me.

“He has all the footage from the facility where they experimented on people.”

“And?”

“You’re on...a lot of them.”

I close my eyes as my fingers clench around the phone.

“And Noelle I presume.”

“Yes. Now, I haven’t seen them myself. But the man described some of them to me. They are videos of you two together when you were under the influence.”

What...

Fuck! Just thinking about that threatens to make me ill.

Yet this is good news, isn’t it? This will prove or disprove Noelle’s words and show me exactly what happened to the hacienda.

“Ok, good. That’s good,” I say absentmindedly. “How much does he want for them?”

“He won’t sell unless you go there in person. He is very paranoid, Raf. He still thinks that there are people after him and he won’t risk it.”

“Fine. I’ll go to him. Where?”

Another pause.

“Mexico City. He told me he would only meet a potential buyer in Mexico City.”

I purse my lips at the information.

“Can you get me a flight to Mexico?”

“When?”

“As soon as possible,” I say, pursing my lips.

“You’re sure you want to do this?”

“I think this is the best opportunity to take a trip down memory lane with Noelle and find out exactly what happened at the hacienda. And what’s better than returning to the place where it all started?”

“You’re taking her with you?” Carlos asks, surprised.

“Even if I didn’t, she’d follow,” I give a dry laugh.

Ah, Noelle, Noelle. What am I going to do with you?

I have no doubt she would follow me wherever I went, but in this case I *want* her there.

While these videos might help elucidate some of the mystery of the past, I have to admit to myself that I care more whether she’ll be truthful to me or not rather than what actually happened.

Since I can confirm her account with the evidence, I can finally see if Cisco is right. If she respects me enough to give me the truth. Or if she wants me so much she’s willing to lie—again and again.

Is this a test? Maybe.

It’s the only way I can see if I can trust her.

That also means she cannot find out about the videos until she tells me her own version.

Deep down, I have to admit that I *want* to understand her, just as I want to forgive her. It’s just that what she’s done goes against everything I stand for.

My heart might still be wholly hers, regardless of anything she might do. But my mind... My mind cannot reconcile the Noelle I thought I knew with the one before me now.

“I’ll make arrangements for tomorrow,” Carlos grunts. “You’ll fly commercial to Ciudad de México. I’ll try to get you a first class suite. I have some contacts in Mexico, so I’ll be able to get you a private jet to get to the hacienda.”

Carlos details the itinerary he’d thought of and I just approve everything, pleased with how thorough he’d been.

He knows me far too well, and he’d anticipated most of my answers, already having in place a plan for this.

“Thank you for this. I know you’re busy, too. It means a lot,” I tell him.

“Any time, Raf. You know you can count on me.”

“And you on me. If you need help with anything, please let me know. Even if I’m not in the country. I’ll do my best to help.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Carlos chuckles. I doubt he’s going to ask for help since he prefers to do most things by himself, but I want him to know the option is always on the table.

I hang up the phone and head to Noelle’s room.

It’s already past visiting hours so the entire wing is quiet.

Reaching for the door, I slowly creep it open, expecting to find her deep asleep.

Yet as I step inside the room, I come face to face with her.

She’s sitting on her bed, her legs swinging off the side, her eyes on me.

“You were gone a long time,” she comments slowly, her throat bobbing up and down as she takes me in, her gaze traveling over me from head to toe.

“Did you think I’d disappear somewhere in the world and leave you here?” I ask drily as I hand her the hot coffee and the chocolate bar, placing mine on a table nearby.

She accepts them, staring at them longingly.

“Yes,” she simply states. “I know you, Raf,” she whispers with half a smile. “I know you better than you know yourself. And right now? You want to hug me as much as you want to strangle me. You want to take me back home as much as you want to walk away and never look back.” She swallows hard, her gaze dipping to the steaming coffee. “I don’t blame you for feeling that way.”

“If you know me so well, shouldn’t you have known how much I detest lies? Shouldn’t you have told me the truth before

I was forced to find it out from my brother of all people?”

Her lips tighten into a flat line.

“You have no idea how many times I wanted to tell you the truth... It’s been a burden living with this knowledge ever since I remembered everything. But at the same time...” she takes a deep breath. “I knew you wouldn’t look at me the same.”

“Noelle...”

“I wasn’t a good person at the hacienda, Raf,” she suddenly says, raising her eyes to meet mine. “I was the worst version of myself. I’m not proud of it, but I also can’t deny that it’s part of me—part of who I am. Because that’s exactly what I’m capable of to survive. To be strong. To...” she licks her lips, her expression strikingly vulnerable. “To protect you.”

“Protect me?” I ask incredulously. “In case you don’t remember, I was a *slave*. A labor slave at first, and then a lab rat for those fucking drug experiments. At what point did you protect me?”

“From the moment you went up that auction block after Armand died,” she suddenly says. “I lied, cheated and killed for you, Raf. I sold my goddamn soul,” her breath catches in her throat. “All to keep you safe. I did the best I could...” she trails off, shaking her head as she huddles within herself.

“Tomorrow you’re getting discharged,” I change the topic. “We’re going to Mexico.”

“What?”

Her eyes widen as her gaze snaps to me.

“Why?”

“Because I have some business in the capital and after that we’re going to go to the hacienda. I want to be there when you tell me everything that happened. Every. Single. Thing.”

“As you wish,” she nods, surprising me once more.

“That’s it? No protest?”

“No,” she smiles, shaking her head. “The ball is in your court, Raf. I’m well aware of that. And until you can trust me again, I’m willing to do anything you want me to. Just... don’t ask me to leave you alone. That I will never be able to do. You’re mine just like I am yours. *Only* yours,” she whispers, her expression so damn sad and vulnerable I feel it like a stab in my heart.

Before I can help myself, I’m in front of her, my hand cupping her chin, my thumb stroking her soft skin.

Her big eyes are oriented towards me, her lashes fluttering in confusion. But as soon as I touch her, she melts into me, releasing a heartfelt sigh as she leans closer, nuzzling her face in my hand.

As if burned, I remove my hand, unable to believe I’d have so little control over myself.

“Show me your wrist,” I bark, clearing my throat.

Why the hell do I have to be so fucking weak for her?

Why?

She lifts her bandaged wrist, slowly extending it towards me.

“It doesn’t hurt,” she whispers, answering my silent question.

“It should,” I add gravely. “It should hurt you as much as it hurt me seeing you bleed.”

Before I can reveal how much of a besotted fool I am, I turn to leave.

“Be ready tomorrow,” I tell her in a severe tone, opening the door and losing myself into the night.

Alone, I make my way back to our apartment.

Unwittingly, my feet carry me to the piano room.

I take a seat on the bench, lightly running my fingers over the keys of the piano.

God... What the hell am I supposed to do?

I've been conflicted my entire life about who I wanted to be and who the world wanted me to be. Yet now, I find myself at the center of another battle—the one between who *I* want to be, and who I *am* deep down.

Three selves.

The me I desperately want to be.

The me everyone else wants me to be.

And...me. The real me. The one I've tried to deny all along.

Who do I choose?

All my life I'd witnessed injustices around me. Lies. Crimes.

My own family was morally bankrupt to the bone.

Despite that, I'd tried to build my own set of values. I'd tried to look to the future and hope I could build a different path for myself—one away from the life of crime my family had planned for me.

More than anything, I saw in my parents what I didn't want to be.

Yet here I am...my mind split in two as I ponder whether I can forgive the unforgivable.

And if I do... Who am I then?

I want you to lose everything that holds you back. I want you to shed your fears, your morality, your principles...

Noelle's words echo in my mind.

Am I being held back by my own self? By my fear and the fact that my childhood marred me forever?

Am I shackled by my own trauma? A self-imposed exile of the soul?

Maybe Noelle is right. Maybe only by shedding every learned aspect until only instinct remains will I be able to find myself—my true self. Only by admitting that there is more to me than the social constructs that shaped me will I be able to redefine myself—not in pure, straightforward terms, but in arcane, only known to me ones.

Maybe it's time to admit to myself that the world isn't black and white; or good or bad. There are far too many shades of gray to firmly position myself on the side of the light, or on the side of the darkness.

Due to my predilection for extremes, I've always immediately labeled things good if they were in the least bad, and vice versa. I've never wanted to ponder the implications of being a mix of good and bad, because that in turn would also make me...bad. And growing up being labeled the *good* guy made me intrinsically position myself as such until that was all I believed.

I was the good guy.

I was *supposed* to be the good guy.

In the end, I've committed my fair share of mistakes that were not in the least good.

And while that doesn't make me a good guy, it doesn't make me a bad one either.

It just makes me...human.

With a sigh, I close my eyes as I realize that the only way to see this to the end and maybe have a chance at some future with Noelle is to let go of my damned moral superiority.

I need to embrace the less perfect sides of myself just as I need to open my eyes and accept the less perfect parts of Noelle.

That means hearing her out, looking at the context and considering every single factor.

Despite being mad as fuck at the deception and what happened at the hacienda, there is a part of me that still hopes I can find a plausible explanation so I can...move on.

I *know* Noelle. Maybe I don't know her darker side, but I know the one that shines so brightly it almost blinds me. And because I know that one; because I love her for it, I must let her show me the dark too.

After all, is it true love if I accept her light but reject her darkness? Is it true love if I drop her at the first sign of trouble with no explanation?

The answer is simple.

No.

She might be fucked up. She might be a fucking wolf dressed in sheep clothing.

But she's mine, damn it.

And I'm not going to give up on her.

In spite of her blatant unrepentance, I can clearly see she wasn't unaffected by the death of the baby. Now, and before. That alone tells me there is more to the story than I know. But more than anything, I refuse to believe Noelle would have killed the baby with her own hands. Until I see evidence to the contrary, I refuse to believe such things.

Yes, she might be guilty of many things.

But I do not believe for one moment that she's capable of something like that.

If anything, she seems just as traumatized by the topic, but she forces herself to put on a front so she won't succumb to her feelings.

To decipher her, I need to focus on what I do know of her.

And just like me, Noelle is a master at burying her feelings deep down.

Isn't that what got us here?

What had Cisco said? That she'd changed her own reality to cope with what had happened to her—that she'd lied to herself so well, she'd started believing the damn lie.

And that tells me the most important thing.

Behind her flawless conviction that she is a bad woman through and through—that she is the villain of the story—there's guilt, regret and heartbreak.

That is the best place to start.

Show me who you are, Noelle. Who you *really* are.

And maybe along the way I'll find out who I am, too...

When everything isn't perfectly tied with a bow; when we're clawing our way out of the gutter, who are we?

Who the hell are we?

17. RAFAELO

When I step into the salon the following morning, Noelle is up and ready. Looking her over, there are deep dark circles under her eyes, her cheeks sunken in.

“You didn’t sleep?” I raise a brow as I hand her a small bag I’d packed for her.

She gives me a tight smile.

“You wouldn’t sleep either in my position.”

I ignore her words and the echo of pain they cause in my chest.

“I signed the release forms for you, but you’ll be back in therapy after we return.”

She merely shrugs, her gaze holding mine.

“You don’t care?” I ask, surprised.

Cisco had told me how she’d protested the fact that she had to go to therapy, so it’s surprising to see her so willing.

She shrugs again.

“As long as it’s Gianna. I don’t think anyone else could handle the truth of my past without calling the police on me,” she gives me a hesitant smile.

“Do I even want to know how many people you’ve killed?” I ask, amused, though the topic is anything *but* amusing.

Just a week ago I would have never thought her capable of holding a gun in her hands, let alone pull the trigger on one.

If anyone had told me we would be in this situation, I would have laughed in their faces. After all, my sweet and innocent Noelle was too sheltered and far too kind hearted to ever consider killing someone.

Yet here we are.

“I haven’t kept count,” she replies. “If it makes you feel better, I’ve never once killed someone who didn’t deserve it.”

“Sure. Definitely makes me feel better,” I add drily. “Get your bag and let’s go,” I say before we go deeper down the rabbit hole.

My God but can she be more fucking obedient? I give her an order, she dutifully obeys, no hint of a protest—not even one of displeasure.

She looks at me with those fucking big puppy eyes of hers and I feel like a bounder for making her sad even for a moment.

Just fucking great.

She’s the guilty one but it’s making *me* feel guilty.

She follows one step behind me, her hands grabbing the hem of her shirt every now and then, her fingers itching to reach for me.

I know it and I ignore it.

Too bad mine are itching just as much.

Gritting my teeth, I go against myself and I *don’t* open the door for her to get in the car, simply sliding in the driver’s seat and waiting for her to get in.

She does. Slower than I would have liked, but she does.

Yet now that I’ve seen the lethargy of her movements, I can’t help but be worried, and before I know it, I open my mouth.

“Does your wrist still pain you?”

She shakes her head.

“No. They gave me something for the pain. It’s just a little sore.”

“That’s what you get for slitting your wrist in front of me,” I mumble under my breath.

“How else was I to get your attention?” she asks as she gives me half a glance.

“Definitely not by dying,” I grit my teeth, stepping on the gas pedal and deciding to ignore her for the rest of the journey.

Traffic is awful. It takes us almost an hour to get to the airport, and another two hours to check in and get through security.

Once we get to the plane, we’re led to our little suite. Carlos had gone above and beyond to get us a first class suite, knowing we’d like our privacy. How he’d managed on such short notice considering *not* all airlines even have a suite is beyond me.

Yet here we are.

The space is crammed as I’m forced to stare at Noelle less than a foot away from me.

Five hours.

In about six hours we should be there.

As long as I continue to ignore her, everything should go according to plan.

We make ourselves comfortable and soon the plane is ready for take-off.

I remove a Kindle from my bag, loading my selection of books as I decide what type of genre I’m in the mood for. Certainly, with my biggest distraction in front of me, it has to be something extremely immersive.

I pick a political thriller just as the plane goes into taxi mode, ready to go up in the sky.

I barely get to read one sentence as a low, barely audible sound echoes in my ears.

Looking up over my Kindle, I note the stiffening of her body, the harshness of her breath and the clenching and unclenching of her small hands.

Just as the plane takes off the ground, her eyes squeeze shut as she looks on the verge of fainting.

“If anyone saw you, they’d think you’ve never been on a plane before.”

She doesn’t answer for a moment.

A slow, torturous breath escapes her lips.

“I don’t have too many good memories of the last time I was on a plane,” she murmurs softly, her body still tight with tension.

“Last time...” I trail off as my eyes widen in realization. “When you were rescued.”

She gives me a brisk nod.

“I thought you were out of it,” I mention, a frisson going down my back as I remember how I’d left her back then...

“I was in *and* out of it,” she says, slowly opening her eyes. “There were a few brief moments of consciousness and...” she swallows hard. “The pain medication hadn’t kicked in.”

I stare at her as her words slowly sink in.

She’d been dying.

Her last memory on a plane had been when she’d been at death’s door.

“Every little turbulence reminds me of that pain,” she continues.

“Why didn’t you say so? I could have asked the doctor to prescribe you something for it.”

She shrugs.

“I didn’t want you to think I wanted your pity,” she admits in a low voice before looking away.

The plane is now well in the air and her breathing seems to be more regulated.

“Pity is the last thing I feel for you, Noelle. Anger? Disappointment? Yes. But not pity. *Never* pity.”

She slowly turns to me.

“Well... That’s even worse,” she whispers.

“Tell me about Ann Marie,” I suddenly say.

I don’t know what prompts me to open the topic—what makes me want to have a conversation with her in the first place. Yet after everything I’d heard from Cisco, I’m left with more questions. I know *his* version. What about hers?

“What about Ann Marie?” she licks her lips, her lashes fluttering as her eyes meet mine.

“Cisco told me you pulled the trigger.”

“I did,” she admits unflinchingly.

“She was the first person you killed, wasn’t she?”

Noelle nods, a sad smile pulling at her lips.

“I didn’t kill her, Raf. I saved myself. There’s a difference.”

“But it affected you, nonetheless, didn’t it?” I probe.

“Of course it did,” she huffs, her body seemingly slowly relaxing. “I spent years locked in my house because it wasn’t safe for me to go out without facing the scrutiny of *everyone*. And trust me, a few years between four walls, alone with your thoughts... It’s worse than a prison.”

“Did you regret it?”

“What are you asking, Raf?” She raises a brow. “Do you want to ascertain whether I *am* capable of regret? Because I

am. That doesn't mean I regret saving myself. Yes, I felt guilty about her death. I had nightmares about it for years. But if I were to go back, knowing what I do now, I would do everything exactly the same," she pauses as she leans forward. "I will never let anyone make me feel guilty about saving myself. Not even you."

My eyes widen. I must admit I didn't expect her words, or the vehemence behind them. Just like I didn't expect the warmth flooding my chest at her self-assuredness and her unapologetic manner.

"I would never ask that of you," I feel compelled to add.

"Good," she gulps down, a wave of uncertainty hitting her and affecting the confidence previously displayed in her body language. "Then you should know that ninety percent of the deaths that occurred by my hand were just that. Self-defense. Survival."

"What about the other ten percent?"

"*Your* survival."

And with that, she shuts me up.

She knows it too, as I detect a slight smirk tugging at her lips.

We don't speak for the rest of the flight.

I try my best to lose myself in my political thriller, while Noelle's attention is riveted on the on-flight entertainment.

Ironic how I'd been the one to try my damned hardest to ignore her, yet it's her who successfully does it.

My gaze strays to her every now and then, searching her features in an attempt to decipher her.

What's going through your mind, Noelle?

She hasn't once inquired about where we're going, or why I have business in Ciudad de Mexico. She's simply going along with everything I say.

And somehow that...pisses me off.

I don't know if I expected her to fight me—if I wanted her to fight me. But I certainly didn't want her to be this... complacent.

Any reaction is better than this obsequious bullshit she has going on.

How the fuck can she be so calm when I'm boiling on the inside?

I grit my teeth as I catch myself staring at her at one point, unable to believe I'm so fucking gone that I can only exist if my eyes are on her.

If I hadn't known better, I would have said she was a witch. A beautiful, seductive, out of this world witch that has had me wrapped around her little finger from the beginning.

Otherwise how can I explain this madness? The fact that I'm still fucking obsessed with her when by all accounts I should abhor the sight of her?

“Raf? Are you alright?”

Her voice startles me out of my reverie.

I blink, my mind still foggy—still full of her.

Before I can say anything, she gets up from her seat, coming to my side and kneeling before me. Her hands are suddenly on top of mine, her touch instantly waking my body to life.

“And here I thought I was the only one scared about flying,” she jokes as she uses her thumbs to massage the inside of my palm.

What...

“It's okay, I can be your rock,” she gives me a tentative smile as she continues to stroke my hand in a comforting gesture.

She...

I freeze.

Goddamn you, Noelle. Why the hell do you have to worm yourself into my mind, into my fucking heart, even at a time like this?

She's the one who has an issue with flying and now she's trying to comfort *me*?

I can't believe this.

"Squeeze my hand," she continues, wrapping my hand around hers. "I find that if I keep my hands busy somehow I stop paying too much attention to what goes on around me."

I don't answer, merely staring at her and the image she strikes like that—on her knees in front of me.

Yet even as the position is entirely *too* suggestive for my rather undeveloped brain, nothing lewd is on my mind. There's only a warmth suffusing my chest, spreading through my entire body the more her skin touches mine.

"You're getting lost in your head, aren't you?" she asks sympathetically. "That always happens to me, especially when I know I have no control of a situation."

"I think that makes you a control freak," I remark wryly.

But I don't want to remove her touch. Not when my skin is awfully starved for it.

Nor do I contradict her that I am not having anxiety over our flight and that in fact, I am merely too captivated by *her*. She doesn't need to know that—not now, when things are so damn precarious between us.

"I suppose it does," she chuckles. "When you've felt powerless your entire life, you learn to prize it above all else."

"Was that what happened with us?" I ask before I can help myself. "Was I an exercise in your control because I was powerless to do anything?"

A dry smile pulls at her lips.

“You were never powerless, Raf. In fact...” she licks her lips, looking at me from beneath her lashes. “You’ve always had control when it comes to me.”

I raise a brow for her to elaborate.

“Because I’ve been powerless my entire life, it’s my most prized possession. And it’s yours. It’s been yours from the beginning, Raf,” she says as she absentmindedly squeezes my hand. “The control is in *your* hands. I just ask that you don’t throw me away. Just... Let me be by your side. In any capacity...”

“In any capacity?” I repeat, frowning. “What the hell are you on about, Noelle?”

“Just...” she drags herself closer, fitting her body to my legs and placing her head on my lap.

God, her audacity is astounding. Yet it’s nowhere near my stupidity for allowing it, for not moving—for not being *able* to move.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

“What capacity is that, Noelle?” I repeat the question, curious what she has in mind.

After all, no moment goes by in which I am not surprised by her, or her words. She’s speaking freely for the first time—showing herself to me for the first time.

And I find myself...captivated.

I’m utterly fascinated by every little thing that comes out of her mouth.

“I don’t know,” she whispers hesitantly. “I could be...your servant. I’ll take care of all your needs. You don’t even need to talk with me as long as you let me be near you.”

“You’re telling me you’re fine with living the rest of your life in silence?”

She mulls the question over for a moment.

“Words are only for surface,” she murmurs. “I don’t need language to know you, Raf. I don’t need speech, nor hearing.”

“Noelle...” I start, ironically at a loss of words.

“This is the captain speaking...” the speakers suddenly echo with the announcement that we are about to land.

Noelle swallows hard, leaning back and taking one good look at me before returning to her seat.

She puts her seat belt on and doesn’t speak one more word as we start our descent towards Mexico, proving to me that she can, in fact, live without words.

It’s her *eyes* that do all the talking.

And in them I see infernal anguish, with almost no trace of hope.

In no time, we touch down in Mexico.

Carlos had arranged for transportation to our hotel, and as we pass through customs, I’m surprised to see Noelle’s flawless Spanish. Yet another thing that never made sense before, when she’d professed to not know the language. But as I remember our interactions online, and later at the hacienda, I realize how well she’d played me.

When she’d introduced herself as Lucero to me, she’d done so in Spanish, and I’d never once questioned that it might not be her native tongue. So well she spoke it, she completely fooled me—then, and now.

“You’re quite the proficient Spanish speaker,” I mention as we get into the car, unable to help myself.

She’s sitting daintily at the far end of the seat, her hands on her thighs as she looks ahead. Slowly, she turns towards me, her face expressionless.

“Control.”

One word, yet it explains everything.

Noelle is *all* about control, and someone like that would have never gone to a foreign country if she didn't master the language first. In fact, I can bet she started learning it the moment she found out where her future husband would be from.

This should be just one more piece of information to show me how scheming and manipulative she is. But it does the reverse.

Instead of becoming more disgusted with her, I...admire her.

Her choices had been taken away from her all her life, yet in spite of that, she'd still prevailed in regaining that control, even if that meant violently snatching it away from her oppressors.

What's not to admire about that?

And that is why I feel like such a goddamn hypocrite. If I'd been only an outsider, I would have praised her for her actions. But I am not. I am right in the middle of this goddamn disaster, and her actions have affected me as well.

Because of that, I find myself at a crossroads. And I know the only way to choose the right path is by having all the facts and knowing everything that occurred in the past.

We arrive at the hotel and we check in.

The suite Carlos had gotten for us has two bedrooms, and Noelle gets the hint that it was on purpose. She puts her stuff in the spare bedroom, after which she continues to hover silently around me.

It's odd how she thought to respect my decision to sleep separately, but she doesn't think that her presence in itself is not welcome.

Once more, I find myself conflicted.

She's an enigma I can't explain.

But do you want to?

The answer is a resounding yes...

I spend the rest of the day on phone conferences, handling the pending business back home and getting updates from Carlos on our mysterious seller.

Noelle is maybe two steps away from me at all times, doing exactly what she suggested on the plane.

If I look a little thirsty, she's there with a glass of water. If I'm tugging at my shirt, she takes it as a sign that I'm too hot and brings a fan to cool me. If she notices I've gone too much time without eating, she brings a little snack, leaving it in front of me.

All throughout, she doesn't speak.

Not. One. Word.

"He's meeting you tomorrow. He is a little scared. I'm not entirely sure why, but he said he will only sell if you're alone. If you bring anyone with you, the deal is off and you won't find him again."

"It will be just me and Noelle," I add. "I'm not letting her out of my sight," I say as I turn and almost bump into her.

She's looking up at me, a shy smile on her face as she holds up a plate with brownies.

"Text me the details. I have something to take care of," I tell Carlos before I hang up.

I fling my phone on the couch before I give Noelle my entire attention. After all, she's been wanting it from the beginning, hasn't she.

"What do you think you're doing, Noelle?" I raise a brow at her.

She doesn't speak, merely lifting the plate and pushing it towards me.

"Talk," I continue, impatiently.

She still doesn't say anything, just watching me, her smile becoming increasingly more strained. Once more, she pushes the plate towards me.

"For fuck's sake, stop this goddamn silly act," I sneer.

Exasperated, I don't even think as I swipe my hand, knocking the plate out of her hands.

It falls to the ground with a thud, the porcelain breaking just as the brownies crumble into small pieces.

I blink, surprised at my own outburst.

Noelle barely reacts, still watching me. Her smile falls, her lashes coated by unshed tears.

"Noelle..."

Getting to her knees, she slowly starts picking the pieces of porcelain off the floor.

It takes me a moment to realize what she's doing, or the fact that the sharp shards are perfect for...

Instinct takes over as I swoop her up in my arms, wrenching the shards out of her hands and dumping them to the ground.

Kicking open the door to her bedroom, I place her on the bed, kneeling in front of her and turning her hands palms up to check for any injuries.

Only when I spot not one drop of blood or even a scrape do I breathe in relief.

"You don't want to see me hurt," she says in a small voice.

Slowly, I raise my eyes to meet hers.

"Really? Was that some kind of test?"

She quickly shakes her head.

"Of course I don't want to see you hurt, Noelle. And you *know* it."

"Then why..." she asks the question in a whisper.

My ears perk up as I wait for her to continue.

“Why won’t you accept my apology? Why... Why won’t you forgive me?”

I squeeze my eyes shut as a wave of discomfort assails me.

“Noelle,” I start, but I stop myself as I realize my anger from earlier is resurfacing. Taking a deep, steadying breath, I open my eyes as I give her a direct look. “You don’t understand, do you?”

She gives a tentative shake of her head.

“How can I forgive anything when I don’t know what happened? How can I accept your apology when I don’t know the truth? When I don’t trust you to *tell* me the truth?”

“But... You hate to see me hurt,” she says hurriedly, reaching out and grabbing my shirt. “This hurts me more than anything, Raf. I can’t bear it,” she breaks off on a sob. “I can’t bear it...”

“How do you think I feel, Noelle?” I ask her in a serious voice. “Can you honestly not understand how I might feel? What if the roles were reversed? What if I raped you while you were on drugs? What if you had no recollection of it but suddenly you found out you’d had a child? That I took your child away and he’s now dead?”

She swallows hard as she breathes harshly, her chest rising up and down as her sobs quiet down.

“I...”

“You wouldn’t be able to forgive me either, could you?”

When she doesn’t answer me, I rise up, pursing my lips as I head to my own room. Remaining here would only be more torturous.

Yet as I’m about to go out the door, she finally speaks, truly surprising me for the first time.

“If you raped me, I could forgive you. If you abused me, I could forgive you. But I wouldn’t be able to forgive you for

taking my child away from me.”

The last bit is barely audible, yet it’s there.

“I would forgive you anything but our child...”

The woman who confessed to killing her own child is telling me she’d never forgive me for the same thing.

“Then you know how I feel,” I tell her before I’m out of the room.

If that’s the only thing she would never forgive, how the hell did she do it.

Unless... There is more to the story. There *must* be more to the story.

Vlad was right. Noelle isn’t like Bianca. She feels empathy, just as she feels guilt. And despite all evidence, I highly doubt she would ever be able to do anything to her baby.

Maybe soon I’ll have more pieces of the puzzle to make sense of this whole mess.

I fall asleep still thinking about her words, and my dreams are anything but calm.

The following morning after we take our breakfast, I finally tell her why we’re in Mexico.

“We’re meeting someone in an hour. Be ready,” I tell her as I fix my own clothing.

She dutifully prepares herself, and I’d be lying if I said I’m not following her every move. I can’t wait to see how she will react when she sees the man we’re meeting.

By all accounts, he would have been her person of contact at the drug facility, so I have no doubt she knows him.

Yet more than anything, I need to get my hands on the footage he has.

I’m willing to pay anything for it, too.

That, what is on that video is the only truth I'll trust. It will tell me exactly what happened between us at the hacienda and it should prove whether my shaky memories are real—that she'd taken advantage of me when I could barely move or fight back. Or...it might show me a different picture...

I'm both scared and excited at the prospect of watching those videos, but living with this uncertainty is slowly killing me. No matter how fearful I am of what I'm going to find out, I need to push forward.

"I'm ready," Noelle announces quietly as she comes to my side.

She's dressed in a pair of black high waisted loose pants and black a silky shirt tied at the neck with a purple ribbon.

The spot of color makes me raise my eyes, especially as I know the hidden meaning behind it.

When she sees my scrutinizing gaze, she gives me a tentative smile as she brings her hands to her front, fidgeting with her fingers.

"Do I pass muster?" she inquires softly.

"You do," I grunt, turning my back to her so she doesn't see my wandering eyes, and the fact that she *more* than passes muster.

Opening the suitcase Carlos had sent to our hotel, I take note of the array of guns he'd packed for me.

Damn, but the man sure values being extra prepared.

I choose two Glocks and holster them behind my back.

"Can I have one?" Noelle suddenly appears before me, peering inside.

"No."

"But isn't it dangerous if you're arming yourself? I can help...."

“No, Noelle. You’re not carrying a gun. You’re not to do anything except quietly stay by my side,” I tell her, harsher than intended.

“Alright,” she sighs, stepping away from the weapon suitcase.

A car comes to pick us up, and soon we’re exiting the city to an abandoned warehouse somewhere on the outskirts.

Apparently, the man is more terrified of anything happening to him than I’d given him credit for. Yet I can’t understand why.

Sergio is dead, as are most of the men who’d been involved at the hacienda. If anyone was left alive, I would have no doubt heard about it.

But he hadn’t wanted to hear reason, maintaining that there are people out to hurt him.

“You still haven’t told me where we’re going,” Noelle suddenly speaks as she sees us leaving the city, her eyes shrewdly assessing her surroundings.

“We’re meeting someone,” I say ambiguously.

“Who?” She frowns, and I can tell she’s growing suspicious.

“You’ll see shortly,” I add curtly, ending the conversation.

She purses her lips, clearly displeased about the fact despite promising me she’d follow me blindly. She might be able to relinquish her control in *some* instances—particularly in the bedroom—but in others, it doesn’t come easy to her.

Ten more minutes and we arrive at our location.

The driver parks a distance away from the warehouse, and I instruct him to wait for us there.

“Come,” I motion to Noelle to follow me.

We’re traveling light, and though I’m willing to pay any amount, the transaction will not be in cash. The man had been

too scared to carry it with him, so we'd already discussed doing the exchange via crypto currency—the perfect way for him to stay under the radar.

Pushing the door to the warehouse open, I hold my arm out to block Noelle in case it's not safe. We slowly move inside, and I look for any hint of movement.

“Santiago?” I call out, my voice echoing in the empty building.

“Are you alone?” Another voice answers.

“It's just me and my wife. You're safe. You can come out.”

There's a brief pause before I hear shuffling.

“Come to the center of the room,” he instructs.

“We're here,” I say as we stop right in the middle of the room.

A moment later, a scrawny man comes out from his hiding place, slowly coming towards us.

He's wearing a cap that he tips lower on his face. He still hasn't looked at us, his eyes skittering all around the warehouse, his body tensing at every little noise. It's almost as if he's waiting for an execution squad to jump out from the shadows and take a hit at him.

“Are you sure you're alone?” He asks again.

“Yes. I promised you and I won't break my word,” I add, a little annoyed at his paranoia.

He's maybe ten feet away from us when he suddenly stops. His gaze is still on the ground, his hands fidgeting in front of him.

He's jittery. Maybe this is more than simple paranoia...

“The money. I want one million dollars.”

I grimace at the amount, but I expected him to ask for an exorbitant sum.

“The footage?”

“I’ll give it to you after you transfer the money.”

“Of course,” I nod. “I just need to ascertain if the files do exist first. You have your own trust issues, I have mine.”

He mulls my words for a second before he gives a brisk nod.

“I’ll send a snippet to your phone.”

He takes out his phone from his pants, and with a few finger movements, he successfully sends me a clip.

A beep alerts me that I’ve received it.

I open it, seeing the familiar corridor at the facility and some known figures as they come and go.

Pursing my lips, I have to agree that it *is* the drug facility at the hacienda. Another beep and I see a screenshot of the list of files. There are hundreds if not more of videos, and the dates all fit with the time I’d been there.

“There are a thousand five hundred eighty videos,” Santiago mentions. “Well worth the one million.”

I nod, satisfied that Santiago is telling the truth.

“We can proceed with the deal,” I mention as I dial Carlos.

“Yes?” He answers promptly.

“Set up the transfer.”

“On it,” he replies.

Not one second passes before I feel Noelle bump into me. Half-turning to ask her what’s wrong, I watch with wide eyes as everything happens in slow motion.

One of my Glocks is in her hands as she aims at Santiago, her aim flawless as she hits him to the heart.

He falls to the ground, blood pooling all around him, and somehow, I know that he doesn’t stand a chance.

Even as I rush to his side and I try to put pressure on the wound, I know it’s in vain.

“P-pocket,” he whispers, the word barely audible before he gives his last breath.

My hands are stained with blood, but even in the madness of the moment, I try to keep my wits about me as I pat him down, finding his pocket and what he’d hidden inside—a USB.

I grind my teeth as I quietly slip it inside my own pocket before I turn to deal with Noelle.

Our eyes meet and she doesn’t shy away, looking me straight in the eye. She pushes her chin up, determination shining in her features.

“What the fuck, Noelle?”

She gives me a sweet smile and shrugs.

I stride to her side, grabbing her shoulders and shaking her.

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

She blinks, before she shrugs again.

My cheek twitches with realization. She must have recognized him from the hacienda, and she must have intuited what our transaction was about.

“How do you want me to trust you when you do shit like this?” I spit out, flinging her from me.

“I can tell you everything about what happened, Raf,” she finally speaks. “But I never want you to see that *me*.”

“God, you’re delusional if you think I’m ever going to trust you after this,” I shake my head at her, though the SD card in my pocket should provide plenty of answers—it should show me *everything* she doesn’t want me to find out.

“Raf...”

“Let’s go. The plane should be waiting for us,” I tell her in a clipped tone as I head to the car.

She follows closely behind as she continues to try to engage me in conversation and explain herself, but I don’t pay

her any mind. The more she tries to speak, the more I tune her out.

We make a short stop at our hotel so I can clean the blood off me and pack our stuff. Not long after, we're back on the road as we go towards a private airstrip where Carlos had arranged for a small plane to take us to the hacienda.

I continue to ignore Noelle, knowing that soon I'll have all of the answers I seek.

We get inside the small plane—the only two people aside from the pilot—and I place myself as far away from her as possible.

Fuck, I'm still seething after the shit she pulled. Not only did she take me completely by surprise, but she has the gall to act all prim and proper as if she were the epitome of innocence when she fucking murdered a man in cold blood. And for what? Because his videos would reveal her wicked face—her real face.

The plane takes off, and as soon as it's safe to, she unbuckles her seat belt and comes to my side.\

Of course, she would.

She's like a damn puppy waiting for her bone. It doesn't help that she's looking at me like a fucking wounded puppy when she's the one who pulled the trigger on that gun.

“Can we talk?” She asks as she comes to my side, dropping to her knees and fitting her body to my legs like before.

She's looking at me from beneath her lashes, her expression reeking of false innocence.

“Save all you want to say for when we reach the hacienda. There's about an hour left until then and I'd like to have some peace first.”

“I don't want you to be even more mad at me,” she whispers. “Let me tell you why I did it.”

“Why?” I ask point blankly.

She wets her lips, contemplating her words for a moment.

“I swear to you I will be truthful. I just... The person I was at the hacienda... It wasn't nice, Raf. And I'd never want you to see that side of me. I can tell you everything, but hearing about it and seeing it are two different things. If you saw me...” she swallows hard. “It would mar your perception of me forever.”

“And you don't think it's already marred?” I raise a brow at her.

She shakes her head.

“You don't understand. The me back then...there was nothing I wouldn't have done to survive. Nothing I wouldn't have done...for you,” she gives me a sad smile. “Before you, I had nothing to lose. But after you... I did horrible, horrible things, Raf. I don't regret them, because they allowed me to be here now, with you. But that doesn't mean I want you to see me—to see who they called *la diabla*.”

“Go back to your seat, Noelle,” I add on a weary voice. “We'll discuss this later.”

“But Raf...” she protests.

When I see she's not budging, I unbuckle my own seatbelt and stand up, swooping her in my arms and taking her back to her own seat.

“One hour, Noelle. Let me have a goddamn hour of peace, ok?”

Just as I place her on her seat, she grasps onto the material of my shirt, pulling me closer to her.

“You still love me. I know you do. You can't just turn off your feelings and I *trust* your love,” she says in a panicked voice.

“So?” I inquired in a bored tone.

“If you love me...please give me the chance to prove myself to you,” she pleads, her eyes glossy.

“We’ll see.”

“Please, Raf,” she repeats, leaning into me until her breath is on my lips. She closes her eyes, her hands tightening in the material of my shirt as she stops short of kissing me. She merely stays like that, close but not too close.

Slowly, her eyes open, and the sight of those beautiful irises cuts me to the core.

I open my mouth to say something, yet I don’t get to utter one word as a loud noise permeates the air before the plane suddenly dips.

For one moment suspended in time, we stare at each other, both wide-eyed, both knowing what’s coming. And in that moment, there’s no more animosity, or anger. There’s only a sense of belonging—of being with the right person even if it’s at the wrong time.

I reach for her, tugging her to me as I hold on to the only thing I’ve loved more than my own life.

The sudden loss in altitude makes us lose our equilibrium, our bodies colliding with each other and the blunt furniture.

There’s only pain and a marked feeling of loss.

The next moment, we’re falling.

18. RAFAELO

I groan out loud as I shift to my side, pain flaring from my ribs. My head throbs, my vision swimming as my consciousness slowly returns to me, as does the realization of what happened.

My eyes snap wide open as panic overtakes me.

Immediately, more pain explodes in my body as I attempt to move.

I'm in between two seats, my head right next to the metal body of a chair.

Lifting my hand up and touching my forehead, I'm not surprised to find blood oozing from an open cut.

Fuck! Something happened to the plane.

The last thing I remember was a loud noise before we started losing altitude. But something else flashes in my mind—a fire bursting from one of the wings. And as I look around, I note a gaping hole where the right wing of the plane should have been.

As I slowly come around, I forget all about the situation I find myself in and my own injuries as fear that something might have happened to Noelle.

“Noelle!” The noise is wrenched from my throat, ragged and filled with anguish, as I force myself to move. “Noelle! Where are you?”

Please answer me and tell me you're alright.

On my elbows, I use what little strength I still have to push myself in a sitting position.

The area around my chest hurts like hell, but I push against the pain. My only purpose is to make sure *she* is fine.

All previous anger fades away, replaced with a sense of desolation unlike I've ever experienced as I realize how pointless everything is if she's gone.

No! She can't be gone. She's fine. She has to be fine.

I take a deep breath as I wince at every little move, but I've suffered worse in my life. If there's something I've learned after everything I've been through it's the fact that the human body is capable of extraordinary things even when pushed to the limit. Because in the end, the desire to survive is more powerful than any transient pain.

All my life, I've done the best I could to survive, enduring unspeakable acts because I knew there was hope at the end of the tunnel.

But now... Now that hope has a name, a physical incarnation. That hope might be deceiving, and she might be a wicked liar, but she is *my* hope.

Beyond the desire to survive is the realization that I cannot survive *without* her.

My voice echoes back, but with no answer.

True dread overtakes me as I feel my heart sinking.

"Noelle, answer me," I grit out, managing to get to my knees. Holding on to the armrest of one of the chairs, I push myself up, barely able to rise to my feet.

"Fuck," I squeeze my eyes shut as my vision almost blacks out from the sudden bout of movement combined with the splitting headache from my injury.

I blink a few times, zeroing in on the destruction around us.

God...

Half of the right wall had collapsed with the wing. The seats on the other side are ripped apart, some hanging from their wires, some cut in half. And as I look into the horizon, I can't help but shiver as it dawns on me what had cushioned our free fall.

We're not on ground. We're caught in a tree—a very tall tree by the looks of it.

“Raf?” That small sound is a heavenly melody to my ears.

“Noelle, where are you?” I call out as I take a step forward.

“Here,” she coughs. “I'm...fine, I think,” she says before she pauses.

“I don't see you,” I bark out, still terrified that she might be injured.

A flutter of fabric grabs my attention at the other end of the plane.

First, I see her bandaged hand as she grabs onto a seat. Then it's the other hand, which is now wholly covered in red.

My heart seizes in my chest.

Slowly, Noelle hauls herself up, yet with all the black she's wearing it's close to impossible to ascertain if there are any other injuries.

“Noelle...” I breathe out, half relieved she's alive, half worried there might be something wrong with her that's invisible to the naked eye.

“I'm ok,” she says in a small, trembling voice. “I'm fine. *We're* fine,” she nods, her eyes greedily roaming over me.

As she puts one step in front of the other to come to me, a screeching noise erupts in the air.

My eyes widen when I realize where it's coming from.

“Stop!” I yell, putting a hand up. “Don't move.”

She frowns but does as told.

Swallowing hard, I move slowly, testing the floor of the plane with my foot. The more I advance, the more it creaks.

Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!

There's a fissure right where the wing broke from the plane.

At the rate it's going, I have no doubt the floor will collapse. In fact, the more we move around, the more it's likely to give in.

"The plane will break in half," I tell her. "Please be careful."

"But..." Her eyes widen with fear. "What will I do then?"

"You're going to come to me. But it will have to be done slowly and very carefully, okay?" I ask in a serious tone.

She gives me a brisk nod.

"Try to take one step," I instruct, my ears attuned to the noise the floor is making while my gaze is focused on the area for any sign. If I can find the exact area where the fissure is...

"Stop," I shout as I note a flare in the upholstering of the plane's floor.

It's about four seats in front of me, and two seats in front of Noelle.

"Do you see that?" I point to the minimal movement.

"Yes."

"It must be barely hanging on if your weight is making it tip this badly," I grimace. "We need to do this fast."

"Do what?" Noelle frowns.

I don't answer her as I take a tentative step forward. Then another. Slowly, I cross one seat, stopping suddenly when I reach the second and the sound intensifies.

Looking around me, I quickly catalog everything I'm seeing.

Since the plane got caught front first in the tree, that means this side is secure enough, while the other is barely hanging in the air, gravity pulling it down. Regardless of whether Noelle moves or not, it will eventually fall.

“I need you to listen to me and do exactly as I say, ok?”

My gaze meets hers as I try to convey everything I’m feeling at this moment. Yet more than anything, I want her to trust me that it will all be ok—that we’ll prevail.

We’ve been through too much already and I refuse to believe that this is the end.

No, it *cannot* be the end.

It’s just the beginning.

And I vow that if we make it alive after this, I’ll give her the chance to explain everything to me.

“Ok,” she whispers softly.

She’s trying to be strong, but I can see the slight trembling of her limbs and the way she’s watching me with trepidation. She’s scared but she’s trying to mask it—for my sake or her own, I don’t know.

“Whatever happens, I want you to know that I do love you, pretty girl,” I tell her, the words flowing out of my mouth before I can help myself.

Panic flares in her eyes as her lashes become coated with tears.

“Don’t you dare, Rafaelo Guerra. Don’t you dare,” she grits out. “We’re not going to die. *I* am not going to die today, you hear me?”

“You won’t,” I nod, my heart breaking as I weigh the possibilities—the fact that the odds are not in our favor... “You won’t,” I repeat, more for my sake than hers.

Tears are streaming down her cheeks as she grips the edge of the seat tighter, her knuckles turning white.

“I clawed my way from hell, Raf. I’m not going to let this goddamn plane take everything from me. I’m not going to let it,” she declares.

“And I’m not going to let anything happen to you. Trust me?”

“With my life,” she says confidently.

“I want you to run as fast as you can and jump towards me. I’ll catch you. Just...” I take a deep breath. “The floor will collapse. I don’t know when, but the situation is too precarious for you to take measured steps towards me. We need to do it fast.”

“Ok.”

“No matter what you hear, don’t stop, ok? Even if the ground feels as if it’s moving under your feet, you don’t stop.”

“I won’t stop,” she lifts her chin up, determination shining in her eyes as she wipes the tears away. “I’ll run to you, and I won’t stop no matter what,” she repeats, a smile pulling at her lips. “Ironic, but it’s what I’ve done my entire life. And if there’s anything I trust, it’s that you’re my destination.”

Her words hug my heart like a warm glove.

“Let’s do it on the count of three. When I get to three, you start running.”

“Ok,” she nods.

“One. Two,” I pause, my eyes on her as she slowly gets into position, her stance ready.

“Three,” I finally say.

I barely finish the word as she starts into a sprint—she’s literally running for her life.

Positioning myself right where the frail line is, I open my arms for her, ready to receive her.

With each determined step she takes, the ground shakes, the screeching sound becoming louder and louder. Still, Noelle

doesn't pay attention to it, her focus entirely on me.

"That's it, pretty girl, come to me!"

One more step and she jumps up towards me at the same time as the tail of the plane suddenly dips down, hanging off the other part of the plane by a few wires.

Just as Noelle jumps, I'm on her, leaning forward and reaching for her before she loses her footing.

Everything is surreal as the moments replay in slow motion.

One moment she's in the air, with no space to land as her half of the plane collapses, the next she's in my arms as we both fall backwards.

There's a loud sound as the tail of the plane hits the ground, something resembling an explosion.

Yet as my arms close around her frail form, I don't find it in myself to care about anything but the fact that she's here, with me. I can hear her heart beating—louder than my own. I can fucking feel her skin on top of mine, and I swear to God I've never been happier than in that moment.

I hug her tighter, so tight, my own injuries start flaring up from the effort.

But once more, that is just background noise as my attention is solely on her.

"You're fine. You're fine," I whisper in awe.

"We're fine," she replies, leaning back to look at me. "God, Raf..."

"We're fine," I echo, and before I know it, my lips are on hers, relief pouring from every atom of my body.

The kiss is unlike any we've shared in the past, and despite the still unresolved issues between us, it's sweeter than anything I've ever experienced.

It's the goddamn kiss of life.

We're both out of breath, panting as we taste each other and the flavor of our tears.

I don't know when I started crying.

My tears roll down my cheeks, as do hers, meeting together where our skin touches.

She's holding just as tightly onto me, her lips skimming back and forth over my mouth almost as if she's trying to convince herself that I'm here, with her.

"Shh, I have you," I tell her, a false platitude, yet because we're together it's nothing but the truth.

Fuck, but I can't even begin to contemplate the situation we find ourselves in. I'm only happy that in the face of such a disaster, we're together. We're both alive, and together.

The past feels like a tiny flicker on the horizon line as it becomes lost in the background until there's nothing more but the sheer joy at knowing she's alive.

At that moment I know.

I may be angry with her. I may resent her for what she's done to me.

But it doesn't change the fact that she's the love of my life—will always be the love of my life.

And for that... For what she means to me now, and for what she's meant to me from the beginning—from when she was just a disembodied voice behind a screen—and what she meant as the force that pushed me forward.

She might have been my hope at one point. She might have been just an illusion.

But at this moment, she is real.

"Are you ok? Does anything hurt?" I ask as I try to look her over.

She leans back, shaking her head at me and giving me a small smile.

“How do we get out of here, Raf?” She whispers as her hand reaches for my wound, her fingers lightly skimming the dried blood on my forehead.

Slowly, we both rise, turning to look down at the distance between our location and the ground. There must be more than a hundred feet...

“We’ll do it. Somehow...”

Even as the words are out of my mouth, though, doubt creeps in my mind. We’re fucking stranded in the air.

I remove my phone from my pocket, grimacing as I note the lack of signal.

Noelle does the same as she fishes her phone out of her pants, shaking her head when she sees hers doesn’t have coverage either.

“We need to find a way to get down fast, Raf,” Noelle says as she bites her bottom lip in worry. “I’m not sure how long we can stay here. If that half collapses, there’s no telling when this one will, too.”

“I know,” I sigh.

“What about the captain?”

My eyes widen as I realize I’d been so focused on her that it hadn’t even crossed my mind to check on the captain.

“I don’t think he’s still alive,” I add grimly.

With how the plane had crashed into the tree, the pilot cabin would have been the first to suffer casualties.

“I’ll go check,” she proposes. “You should stay here. I’m lighter than you and we don’t want to tip it over any more than it already is.”

“Noelle...” I groan, bringing my fingers to my temples and massaging them.

I know she’s right—we can’t afford to move around freely until we figure out a way to get down. Yet even knowing that,

I'm wary about letting her take even one step away from me.

"I'll be careful," she assures me, using her palms to cup my cheeks. "We're not dying here, Raf. I promise you."

"I should be the one with the assurances, not you," I give her a sad smile.

She chuckles.

"I think you've proven yourself already. If it weren't for you, I don't think I would have had the courage to make that jump."

I purse my lips, my eyes going to her arm and the blood that still drips down.

"Let me look at your arm first."

She shakes her head.

"We'll have time to take care of our injuries later. First, we need to figure out what we're going to do. If the pilot is still alive, maybe he has an idea. Surely, he must have trained for similar scenarios."

"You're right," I admit reluctantly. "Just tell me this. Are you in pain?"

"I should be the one asking you that," she counters. "You're stiff all over."

"I'm fine. I'll be fine," I lie.

"Then I'm fine, too."

"Damn it. Ok, go. We're never going to get to the bottom of this if we continue."

She gives me a nod, and slowly, she turns and takes her first step. Then the next. There is a slight creaking of the metal, but the plane doesn't seem to move.

"Go on," I say, studying every movement of the ground.

She takes her time reaching the pilot's cabin. Opening it, she steps inside.

The door is ajar, but I can't make anything from my position.

"Dead," she declares.

"Fuck!" I curse, my head throbbing even worse than before. "What about the communication systems?"

"The entire board is dead, too. It's a miracle it hasn't gone up in flames. It's all wrecked," she calls out.

Fuck! We need to figure something out.

"Can you check around the cabin if he has a satellite phone there?"

"Let me see."

I hear some shuffling before she releases a sound of happiness.

"Got it!"

"Good. Good," I say. "We can send a distress signal."

"But how long will it take until they come for us?" Noelle asks as she comes out of the cabin. "It can take days for them to find us. We're..." she looks around. "In the middle of nowhere. Those are mountains in the distance, aren't they? We don't have the time, Raf..."

"I know, damn it," I say as I pivot, looking around me and searching for an idea.

I look down again, gauging the distance. But it's in vain as we wouldn't survive a fall of a few feet, never mind one of over a hundred feet.

Think!

The pressure is too great, and my head is about to explode. Still, I can't let myself be consumed by frustration, or anger at our situation. As long as we're alive, there's hope.

There's *always* hope.

"Noelle..." I suddenly turn to her, knowing that what I'm about to say is going to sound absolutely insane.

She's already walking slowly back towards me.

"Here," I say as I move a few steps to the right.

Maybe luck had been on our side, despite the overall situation not showing it.

Opening a small trap, I remove a few parachutes.

Before our flight, the pilot had given us the spiel about the safety features and I'm so goddamn glad I paid attention.

"Parachutes?" She asks as she gets to her knees next to me. "You mean to..."

"If we don't want to be stuck here for days, this might be our only chance."

"That's suicidal," she cuts me off.

"Not exactly..." I take a deep breath. "It's called a base jump. It's been done before, but we'll need to be very careful and deploy the parachute immediately."

"There's no other way, is there?"

I shake my head.

"Not that I can think of."

"My God, I can't believe this," she mutters as she leans back. She's pale, and I'm not sure whether this is from the blood loss or from the anxiety of our situation. Just in case, I move closer to her, pulling on her blouse to reveal a nasty gash up her arm.

"You should have told me," I grit my teeth.

"We still don't have time for this," she mumbles as she slaps my hand away, pulling her sleeve back on. "Parachute. Tell me more," she changes the topic.

Muttering a curse under my breath, I realize I won't be able to get her to do anything about her wound before we solve our current issue.

"Here's what I think we should do. There's a medical kit over there," I point to her where the pilot had shown us before

take-off. “We’ll take that with us as well as the satellite phone. Just those two things. I’ll wear the parachute and you’ll be strapped to me.”

Her eyes widen at my words.

“Together?” She whispers.

“Together,” I nod. “If anything goes wrong, then we both...” I trail off.

Her hand is on mine as she gives me a quick squeeze, her expressive eyes doing all the talking as she conveys to me everything she’s feeling.

Fear. Frustration. Desolation. But most of all, there’s love.

So much fucking love, I don’t know how I could have ever doubted it.

I recognize every single emotion because it’s reflected in my eyes as well.

“It’s either the two of us or none,” she completes my thoughts.

“You’ll give me full control over your life?” I ask before I can help myself, recalling our previous discussion and the fact that it’s her self-admitted most prized possession.

“You’re asking as if you don’t know,” she laughs before her expression slowly sobers. “My life’s always been in your hands, Raf,” she whispers, her clear eyes on me. “Here, now. Back at the hacienda. You’ve always been my one requisite for living,” she admits.

I don’t speak as I merely stare into her eyes.

Slowly, I raise my hand, palming her cheek and swirling my thumb over her lips.

She closes her eyes, releasing a soft purr as she nuzzles her face closer, giving herself over to my touch.

We stay like that for a few moments.

Taking my hand, she brings it to her lips, laying a kiss in the center of my palm.

“I swear to you, Raf, on everything that I hold dear, that after we get through this I’ll tell you everything. No matter how ugly, I’ll tell you the entire truth. You have my vow.”

“Noelle...”

“And before you ask me how you can trust me...” she takes a deep breath. “You can check the SD card Santiago gave you.”

“You...” My eyes widen.

“I saw that you took it,” she admits, pursing her lips, “which made the entire debacle pointless anyway. I know I said I didn’t want you to see the videos—to see the me back then. But if it’s the only thing that will give me back your trust... If it’s the only way you’ll have some evidence to back up my words, then please do it.” She pauses for a moment as she searches my features. “I’ll just warn you that it’s not pretty. I might not know exactly what’s on those videos, but it’s not just *me* I didn’t want you to see. I didn’t want you to see yourself like that either.”

“We’ll have time to talk about this later. Now we need to focus on this,” I change the subject, though curiosity is eating at me.

What does she mean that she doesn’t want me to see myself? How was I in those videos? Was I truly passed out like in that one flashback I’d had or...

“You’re right. I just wanted you to know that I won’t hide anymore, and I’m ready to face everything head on. If we’re to have a future, then everything needs to be out in the open.”

“On that we’re in agreement,” I nod, getting to work on the parachute.

We secure the first aid kit and the satellite phone between us as I tie us to the parachute. Knowing we might need them; I add a couple of guns to the back of my pants. Luckily, they

had ended up on the right side of the plane. After that's done, it's finally time for the big moment.

I may have done this a couple of times before but never a base jump.

Noelle was right that this is dangerous. But at this moment, it's our only choice.

I feel the heat of her body next to mine, her thudding heart echoing in my ears just as adrenaline floods my body. I might be close to my limit, but I need to push on—especially since Noelle depends on me.

I can't let her down just like I can't let myself down.

After all this time... After all we've been through, she's right that we can't let this beat us.

We've survived far worse to die in a random plane crash.

"Before we jump," she says in a small voice as we get closer to the edge. "I have a question."

"What is it?"

"Regardless of what the future brings... Do you think at some point in the future you might find it in you to forgive me?" She asks hesitantly, her body stiffening against me as she awaits my answer.

"I can't predict the future, Noelle," I answer grimly. "I can't promise you something like that because I have no way of predicting my feelings."

"I see..." she trails off, her tone dropping a notch.

"Hey, no matter what happens, we'll take it one day at a time," I tell her, unable to bear leaving things off like this. "We'll talk and talk and talk and we'll find a solution. That's the best I can give you."

"I understand," she says tightly. "Your feelings *are* valid, Raf, and I respect them. I just... I need some hope."

“I love you. Despite everything, I love you, Noelle Guerra. That should tell you everything,” I confess.

Then there’s the unspoken.

Because I love you, I’m willing to put my anger aside and listen. I’m willing to see your side of the story and try to understand you.

Because I love you, I’m willing to put my principles aside for one moment, become that blank slate you wanted me to be and listen.

And I hope to God you won’t disappoint me...

Because I might love you, but this is the last and only chance I can give you.

“I won’t disappoint you,” she whispers. “Never again.”

“Let’s do this,” I grunt as I hold tightly onto her. “On the count of three, we jump.”

We take a step towards the edge of the plane as I start counting.

I steel myself against the wave of fear that assails me as I try to be strong for the both of us. I’m in charge of both of our lives, and that means I need to keep my head in the game.

Though I’ve jumped a few times before, mainly as a recreational activity, I’ve never done one from this low altitude. A base jump is only ever encouraged in extreme situations—which we most definitely find ourselves in. For a successful jump, I’ll need to pull on the parachute the moment we are in the air. The goal is to give it as much time as possible to extend so it attenuates our fall.

More than anything, that means I need to keep a clear head to not miss my time. It’s a matter of milliseconds, and if I said that didn’t terrify me, I’d be lying.

I’m absolutely terrified.

But I can’t show it because that would freak Noelle out too.

So, I push it all down and focus on the present.

Despite my ever-growing headache and the pulsating pain in my chest, I focus on this one defining moment.

“Three,” I say.

In the next moment, we’re in the air. I don’t let my mind wander; I don’t focus on fear or the fact that we’re free falling.

I simply pull on the parachute.

A sigh of relief escapes me when I see that it extends in the air with no issues, our fall slowing down until we’re almost floating.

“Raf... Oh my God,” Noelle exclaims, her hand finding mine as she gives it a squeeze. “We’re...we’re flying,” she gulps down in awe.

“That we are,” I chuckle as I try to steer the parachute a bit further from the crash place of the tail. The last thing we want is to hurt ourselves in the debris.

“Hang on. We’re almost there.”

“We’re fine,” she whispers.

“We are,” I take a deep breath.

The next moment, we’re on the ground, our fall a little more abrupt than I would have wished. Still, doing a jump like this successfully without the necessary experience to back it up is a miracle, so I can only count my blessings that we’re alright.

“Careful,” I call out as we roll on the grass.

I do my best to wrap my hands around her to cushion her fall, wincing as my already battered ribs get injured again.

Stifling a cry of pain, I squeeze my eyes shut as I try to breathe.

Fuck!

I must have broken a few ribs. And while that can typically be painful, and for long periods of time, I just have to hope it’s

nothing more serious—like my rib puncturing my lung. If that were to happen... I can't say I would have long. Especially not long enough until we're found.

God, but the scenarios pile up in my mind, and I do my best to not think about the worst.

We're alive.

That's all that matters.

We'll have time to tend to our injuries in a while, and I'll be able to see how bad it is.

I might feel like I'm dying, but I've felt like that plenty in the past and I've survived. What's one more time...

"You can let me go, you know," Noelle's voice penetrates the fog in my mind as I feel her wiggling against me.

"W-what?" I blink a few times.

"Raf? Are you ok?"

It takes me a moment to realize what's happening, or the fact that I'm lying flat on my back while Noelle's looking at me from above, the sun streaking through her hair and making my eyes hurt.

"Fuck," I groan.

"What happened?" She demands, worriedly.

"Nothing. Just..."

"I don't like this," she declares.

I don't reply though I'd like nothing more than to ask her what she means. Yet I can't find myself capable of speech, only pain.

"I'll do it," she murmurs softly, though I'm barely aware of what she means.

I only know that one moment I'm blinking furiously in an attempt to focus on the sight of her, the next my eyes roll in the back of my head.

19. RAFAELO

“Please wake up,” she murmurs in my ear. “You’re worrying me. Please...”

A moan escapes my lips as I shift to my side, pain flaring from my right side.

“Raf? You’re awake?”

“I...think...so.”

“Oh my God! Thank God!” Noelle exclaims as she barely stops herself from jumping on me.

Her eyes sparkle with unshed tears and optimism as she looks at me.

“What happened?”

“I think you passed out from the pain,” she says as she points to my torso. “I don’t think you have a concussion, and thank God for that, otherwise I don’t think you would have woken up. I tried to dress your head wound as best as I could. It’s not a pretty sight, but I think it’s just a bloody flesh wound. It’s your ribs that I’m worried about...”

“Wait!” I put my hand up. “Slow down. I can barely follow what you’re saying.”

Seeing me about to move, she hurries to my side as she helps me in a sitting position.

“The good news? Your head isn’t as bad as it looks. The bad news? You hurt your ribs. Your entire torso is bruised up. I

just hope that..." she trails off as she bites her lips.

"That I'm not bleeding internally," I add grimly.

She nods.

"You need to take this," she thrusts a small tablet towards me. "It's for pain. The best we can do is bandage everything up and manage the pain until we can get help."

"Shit! That's right. Help. The satellite phone. We need to send a SOS."

"I already did that," she tells me proudly. "I also scouted the area and..."

"Wait a moment," I interrupt her again. "Just how long was I out?"

"I'm not sure how much time passed to be honest. But a few hours?" Her lips flatten in a thin line. "I was so worried, Raf," she finally breathes in relief, scooting closer and taking my face between her two small hands.

Leaning forward, she places a light kiss on my skin.

"I'm still trying to catch up," I add drily. "But I can't say I'm not impressed with your efficiency."

"I think there's a river a bit further in the distance. I didn't get to it, but I could swear I heard the sound of water."

"I didn't realize you were so good at finding your way in nature," I raise a brow.

She shrugs.

"There's a lot you don't know about me, Raf. But I'm willing to tell you everything."

"I'm glad to hear that, but it might have to wait."

I grimace as I pull myself to my feet. Swaying a little, it takes me a few moments to stabilize myself enough to walk. At all times, Noelle is by my side, ready to help me.

Despite the pain, a small smile pulls at my lips.

In regular circumstances, I guess I would have expected her to cry and scream, maybe have a panic attack at the situation we're in. And I wouldn't have blamed her. After all, we're in the middle of nowhere, having just survived a deadly pain crash. We have plenty of injuries and just one small first aid kit that is unlikely to help much. We have no food or potable water, and no shelter. Most of all, we have no way of knowing when help will come—although I'm sure Carlos will mobilize people the moment he can't get in touch with me.

Yet at every step of the way, Noelle has surprised me with both her attitude and her ingenuity.

“Tell me how far you managed to go and what you saw,” I tell her in a stern tone.

As prompted, she recounts everything she saw and what her impressions were, telling me that the terrain is a mix of forest and arid desert and that we're most likely in a valley between mountains.

“Ok, I think we need to make a plan. First, we make a shelter, preferably within walking distance of a water source. I think we have maybe four or five more hours of daylight—if we're lucky—so we need to make the best of it. We need to treat our injuries, and don't,” I shush her when she's about to speak. “You think I didn't notice you didn't do anything about your wound?” I point at her arm. “You had plenty of time and you didn't, so that's the first we'll deal with.”

Once more, she protests, but I don't let her.

“It's non negotiable,” I raise a brow at her.

“Fine,” she grumbles.

“Good. After we're at least a little settled we can worry about food. We'll have to hunt.”

“Well, as it happens, that's one thing I'm good at,” she adds smugly.

“We'll see,” I chuckle, sending her silent dare.

She gives me a knowing look, a smile tugging at her lips.

We start slowly, and Noelle sticks a little too closely to me in case I might need support. The more we walk, though, the more I feel the effect of the pill I took, my pain numbing to a bearable degree.

“There,” she points to a clearing not too far away from us. “Do you hear?”

I nod. It is the sound of water, most probably a river.

Noelle turns giddy under my eyes, and she barely stops herself from running forward.

“You can go,” I nudge her gently, smiling at her.

She shakes her head.

“No. I’m not leaving you,” she says staunchly, leaving no room for discussion.

In no time, though, we reach a small river.

“We’ll need to boil the water,” I add pensively, already thinking how we could do that.

“Before that, why don’t we tend to your head injury?”

Noelle is already laying out our medical supplies, ready to clean and bandage my wound again.

“You first,” I give her a warning look.

“I thought you’d forget,” she mumbles under her breath.

Before she can make more excuses, I grab the hem of her shirt and pull it over her head. She squeaks in surprise, but she allows me to undress her until she’s left only in her black bra and underwear.

“Let me look at you,” I murmur as I circle around her, taking note of every little mark on her body.

Fuck...

Sometimes it’s easy to forget just how small and slight she is, and my chest constricts with a pain that has nothing to do with my injuries as I take in the gaping wound on her arm. The

blood is mostly crusted, but some is still fresh. There are a few bruises forming on her body, but I'm relieved to see that's all.

"Let me clean you up," I say as I steer her towards the river, inviting her to sit on her blouse as I open up the first aid kit and remove some gauze.

At first, I simply clean the dried blood with a damp piece of material, trying to soak everything in.

There aren't too many items in the kit, but we'll have to make do with what we have.

"I'll tie this up tightly for you but it's highly likely you'll need stitches when we get back to civilization."

Noelle gulps down, her eyes on me.

"It will scar, won't it?"

"Just a small hit to your vanity," I joke.

"It's not that. It's just... I already have a lot of scars," she whispers in a small voice. "I'd rather not get more."

I stare at her for a moment.

"You know I've never minded your scars," I give her a tentative smile. "Despite being an idiot about it the first time I saw them, I've never thought of them as anything but beautiful. Because *you* are beautiful. Every inch of you," I say, surprised by my own words.

"You're supposed to be mad at me."

"I know."

"Why are you nice to me?"

"Do you want me to stop?"

She shakes her head.

"I just want to be deserving of it when it happens."

She averts her gaze.

"You surprise me sometimes," I say as I continue to tend to her arm. Where is the Noelle who just a few hours ago was

begging me to forgive her?

“How so?” Her lashes flutter. She turns her head, leaning in until we’re a mere breath apart.

“You’re full of contradictions. I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone like you. Someone so...complex. You’re you, the you I know—because I refuse to believe everything was a lie...”

“It wasn’t,” she interrupts, a certain vehemence to her voice.

“But there’s another you. One I don’t think I’ve ever met before, have I?”

She licks her lips, her eyes on me.

“Even back when I thought you were Lucero. You still showed me *this* side of you. The sweet, vulnerable side. But there’s so much more, isn’t there? *You* are so much more.”

Suddenly, her hand comes to rest on top of mine, stopping my movements.

“You’re the only one I’ve ever shown that side of me, Raf,” she whispers. “I’ve never been described as *sweet* by anyone other than you,” she chuckles.

“Why?”

“Action and reaction,” her lips strain in a sad smile. “I’ve only ever behaved as a reaction to how others behave towards me. And besides you...” she takes a deep breath. “No one’s ever been nice to me before.”

“That can’t be right,” I frown. “What about your family?”

Cisco had told me that they had been close when she’d been younger, and both him and Yuyu had treated Noelle like their own child.

“Maybe Cisco and Yuyu in the beginning. But when they sold me... That suddenly negated everything that happened before. I couldn’t look at them and remember the good times anymore. I could only see their betrayal. And then you came

along and..." she lets out a soft laugh. "Do you know that I wore feminine clothes for the first time with you in mind?"

"What? Really?"

She nods.

"This is so embarrassing, but I had the biggest crush on you before I even knew what you looked like. You could say I was young and going through a little personality crisis, but I tried my best to imagine what you would like. You'd told me you preferred dainty girls so... I tried to be one," she blushes as she looks away.

"That's...flattering," I stifle a laugh, not wanting to embarrass her further since she looks as if she wishes the earth swallowed her up.

"I'm a different person with you, Raf. I've always been. With anyone else..." she trails off, her gaze far away.

"How did you find out what I looked like?" I steer the topic into a more comfortable zone.

While I continue to bandage her arm, she proceeds to tell me all about the first mall encounter and how she'd managed to track me down.

The entire story blows my mind as I realize the extent of her loneliness back then and the fact that I had been her only refuge.

Maybe I should be a little more weirded out by the fact that she'd stalked me numerous times at my school—that she'd sat in the library with me, watching me. But I'm only mad about our wasted opportunities, the lost time and all the fucked-up things that had happened along the way.

She'd been so close, yet so far...

Most of all, I see the scared teenager she'd been—the one forced into a marriage she didn't want but didn't know how to get out of. And that breaks my heart more than anything else.

I could have been there for her.

As she tells me she'd planned to convince me to run away with her, I realize that everything had been against us from the beginning.

God... If only she'd have come to me before... If instead of waiting to meet at the cafe she would have come forward at the convenience store, maybe none of this would have happened.

Because despite knowing myself back then—despite knowing my failings and the fact that I was far too weak to do much—I know I would have dropped everything for her.

If she'd told me to run away with her, I would have.

“Your turn now,” Noelle suddenly declares when I'm done with her arm. “You're the one with the extensive injuries.”

“Ok,” I grunt, letting her switch our positions.

I take off my shirt and pants, laying them to the side. My injuries are mostly located on my torso, both sides purple.

“I'll do your head injury again. I stopped the bleeding before, but I didn't treat it properly since I wasn't very sure what to do,” she admits with a shy blush. “How bad is the pain?”

“Better now after the pills. My head doesn't hurt as much, but the spot is tender.”

She nods, pouring disinfectant on some gauze and gently dabbing at the wound.

“You really found me attractive back then? I didn't look like this...” I ask, unable to help myself.

I remember too well how I used to look back then—or, rather, how I'd seen myself. My mental health had taken a hit, as had my self-esteem. Maybe I hadn't been *too* bad, but in my eyes, no one could have ever found me attractive.

“I fell in love with your eyes,” she murmurs with a smile on her face. “You were absolutely perfect then, just as you are now.”

I nod, my cheeks heating up.

“Done,” she surprises me by saying. “Now we need to do something about your ribs.”

“I’ll be fine. If there’s no internal damage, they will heal on their own.”

“But it will be agonizing...”

“We have plenty of painkillers until I can see a doctor,” I note as I go through what’s left of the medical kit. “I’ll just need to not strain myself,” I grumble, already not liking the prospect of that.

We’re alone somewhere in the mountains, far away from civilization. I need my strength to protect her. And though I know I shouldn’t, if the opportunity arises, I’ll simply ignore the pain and push against the discomfort.

I may still be mad at her, but that doesn’t mean for a moment that I’m going to leave her defenseless. She is *my* responsibility—mine to protect.

God, but I could completely hate her, and my first instinct would still be to protect her.

How fucked up is that?

Well, not as fucked up as the realization that I don’t...hate her? Or at least hate wouldn’t be the proper word. Maybe it was the entire near-death scenario, but there’s an odd peace in my heart as I watch her fumble her way through the medical kit in her semi-naked state. There’s something utterly charming about this moment despite our dire circumstances or the fact that I still need answers for what happened at the hacienda.

Yes, there’s the creeping doubt of the past, but something inside of me tells me that I need to hear her out or I’m going to regret it forever.

I’ve already let regrets drown me my entire life. I’m not going to add Noelle to that endless list.

“This is the perfect area to hunt since animals are bound to show up for water,” Noelle’s voice grounds me as I turn my attention to her.

She’s so unabashedly naked, no trace of her previous maidenly shyness in sight. And that makes her...different. There’s a different confidence about her. I’ve noticed this from the moment she dropped her act. It’s still her, but now it’s more. And I’m equally wary as I am fascinated by it.

“It’s also the worst area for us to build our shelter in. I think we should go back to the crash site and use what we can from the collapsed half to make a shelter,” I point out.

Noelle is pensive for a moment.

“You’re right. But first let’s get food.”

Nodding, I watch her step closer to the water, dabbing some water over her body and washing herself before putting on her clothes again. I do the same, and when we’re ready, we find a good position alongside the riverbank and we wait.

Noelle insists on taking one gun.

“You said you shouldn’t strain yourself. The simple act of holding the gun and attempting to aim is going to cause a strain. I’m handling this,” she says confidently.

My first instinct is to argue. But then I remember how she’d shot Santiago—which I’m still mad about. She’d had perfect aim, and she’d done it without much fuss. That tells me she knows exactly what she’s doing.

“Fine,” I shake my head, a slight smile playing on my lips. “The stage is all yours,” I say as I lean back, simply watching her.

Her brows are pinched together in a frown as she focuses on her surroundings.

“I used to hunt with my brother before,” she adds “I’m not a stranger to this if you’re wondering.”

I raise a curious brow at her but don't comment. I think I need to stop being so surprised by every little thing she does since it's clear that I only ever scratched the surface with her.

"I haven't said a thing," I laugh. "You're in charge."

The corners of her mouth tip up.

"I'm in charge, huh? And you'll let me?"

Her head turns slightly to me as she watches me intently.

"I know I'm in charge where it matters," I add vaguely, but she clearly gets the innuendo as her cheeks redden.

She looks away.

Well, I might have been wrong on one account. She might be oozing confidence most times, but there's still something oddly innocent about her and *some* of her reactions.

And that... Strangely, that warms my heart.

Because it tells me *my* Noelle is still there. That it wasn't all a lie.

"You're taking this better than I thought," she notes.

"What do you mean?" I frown.

"I haven't injured your male pride yet?"

"Why would my pride be injured because you can handle yourself?"

She shrugs.

"I don't know. Other men would take offense to it."

"I'm not other men, Noelle. You know exactly what I take offense to, and it's not that you're a good shooter," I add drily.

She purses her lips, undoubtedly knowing what I refer to.

"I'm sorry," she whispers.

"We're not discussing that now. We have something more important to do," I say as I nod to the small clearing right up ahead where a deer trots towards the river.

Her eyes widen before a quiet determination washes over her as she assumes her stance.

I might have promised to hear her out, but God is it hard to put aside all my hard feelings and keep an open mind. Especially since I know what little snippets I do remember, and they don't paint her in a good light at all.

Not for the first time, I find myself assailed by doubts again, wondering whether I'm doing the right thing by giving her a chance to explain herself.

Maybe it's just the situation that we find ourselves in that makes me question everything and wish there were some other explanation for what happened at the hacienda. Certainly, facing death right in the face might have messed a little with my senses.

Still, despite my willingness to keep an open mind, my heart remains the most bruised part of my body—and it has nothing to do with the accident.

There's only the ever-remaining dilemma: I love her, but I don't fucking know how to forgive her.

And that's the crux of the issue.

My feelings for her have never been in question. I loved her then; I love her now.

But is love enough?

I stare at her as she focuses on her prey, aligning the weapon perfectly before slowly pulling the trigger. It's methodical and calculated—speaking of years of experience with a weapon.

And that reminds me exactly why I'm wary about this.

Yes, the Noelle I fell for might exist only for me, but there's still the other Noelle—the scary, immoral one willing to do anything to achieve her goals.

I might love the former, but can I love the latter too?

Can I love *all* parts of her even when our moral codes don't align?

In a way, I must confess that I'm afraid to hear what she's going to tell me because I know it's going to change my perception of her forever. And once we open that Pandora box, everything will change.

At the end of the day, what scares me the most is not *what* I will find out, but how I will feel about her afterwards.

Her shot is clean, her aim perfect.

The deer drops to the ground, and we go to her side.

I remove my knife as I make the initial incisions, cutting purposefully so we can get to the best part of the meat.

Since there's quite a bit of walking distance, we shouldn't take the entire carcass with us—just what we can eat today and tomorrow. Any more could attract another apex predator, and the last thing we need is to compete with a vicious animal in our conditions.

“This should be enough for now,” I say once I've cut plenty of stripes.

Noelle nods, taking them to the river to wash them before returning to me.

“Here,” I say, taking my shirt off and wrapping the meat in it. “Let's go back and see about a shelter. Nightfall is going to be upon us soon.”

We walk slowly back to the crash site, and we make our camp just a little further than all the debris.

After we manage to light a fire, I let Noelle deal with the meat while I head back to gather materials and see what we might use.

There aren't a lot of salvageable items, but I'm able to build ourselves a little shelter with a few pieces of metal. I use the material from the parachute as a roof, securing it around

two trees. It's not the easiest to do in my condition, and every little twist of my torso makes my pain flare up.

Being quite familiar with broken ribs, I'm aware it's going to take a long time before I'll feel like myself again—certainly long after we're out of this goddamn place.

With a little luck, I manage to find some remains of our suitcase, and though nothing is intact, a few tattered pieces of fabric should help keep us warmer for the night.

“How is it going?” I ask as I take a seat next to Noelle.

She looks back to our makeshift hut for the night, giving me a smile.

“That's not too bad,” she chuckles. “I hope there won't be any rain.”

“I think that would be the ultimate punishment from Mother Nature.”

“Here,” Noelle pulls a piece of meat and hands it to me. “You need to eat so you can keep taking your painkillers.”

“Thank you.”

The meat is hard to chew, but better than nothing.

We eat in silence, and after a while, Noelle is the first to speak.

“I sent another SOS. They should be able to find us, right?”

“I trust Carlos. He will find us,” I grunt.

When she sees I'm not saying anything else, she starts fidgeting with her fingers, her anxiety seemingly mounting.

“What about the drug withdrawal?”

“I'll be fine for the time being.”

I'd had my last dose pretty recently so that shouldn't pose any problems. I doubt it will take over a week for Carlos to find us. Only then would I start going into withdrawal.

“I know the original recipe,” she suddenly says.

“What?”

“I think it could help, no? If we recreate the original. I know you’re barely getting by with the cocktail you’re on now.”

“How long have you known?” I demand before I can help myself.

Her eyes flare with fear.

“Since I got my memories back,” she replies in a low voice.

“And you didn’t think that might help *before*?”

“I did... I was going to find a way to suggest it without revealing how I knew it,” she sighs. “But since the cat is out of the bag, I might as well come clean about that too.”

“About what?” I frown.

She licks her lips, her gaze apprehensive as she draws her knees to her chest, hugging herself tightly as she finally meets my eyes.

“I was the one who created that drug cocktail.”

The words slowly sink in just as shock and outrage overtake me.

“You...what?” I croak.

“I never meant to harm you,” she whispers.

“Somehow I find that hard to believe,” I shoot back in a dry tone. “Fuck... Come on, just tell me. What other shocking information are you hiding? Let’s have it all out.”

“I...” she trails off, looking around as if looking for an escape. Too bad we’re in the middle of fucking nowhere and for the first time, she truly cannot run.

“I lied,” she finally says.

“Tell me something *new*,” I roll my eyes.

“No, you don’t understand. I didn’t lie on purpose. When I...” she clears her throat. “After the fire, I wasn’t well... mentally. Amnesia wasn’t the only side effect of it. I reconstructed my entire reality so I wouldn’t hurt anymore,” she murmurs, her voice so desolate it fucking makes my heart squeeze in my chest.

“What do you mean?” I frown.

“I deleted everything that was traumatic and instead I made myself believe a different version of the truth. I think it was my mind’s way of protecting me, but all the little bouts of memory I had were manufactured scenarios that confirmed to me that I was a victim. That I...” she swallows hard. “Only by believing I’d been the victim—the wronged one—could I go on.”

“So, you’re saying that everything you told me before you got your memories back was false?”

She nods. “Not entirely false just...heavily edited.”

I gulp down as a wave of discomfort hits me.

God...nothing was real, was it?

“Did Sergio ever lay a hand on you?” I ask. And if he didn’t, then what about her scars? What could have caused *those*? I’ve seen her medical records and regardless of her lies, that much is true.

She *was* beaten. She *was* on the brink of death.

But how?

“Yes. At first. Before...” her voice clogs with emotion. “Before I found my footing within the hacienda, he wanted to make me pay.”

“Make you pay?” I frown.

“For what I did to him on the wedding night,” she whispers, a look of hurt flashing across her face.

Oh, God. No... No, no, no.

“Did he rape you?” I grit my teeth as I pose the question, because this was my biggest nightmare—that she’d remember the past and remember...

“He didn’t,” she says, and a relieved breath leaves my body. “I don’t know if he would have. He was the type of person who wanted willing submission, but he was also the type to get very, very mad at being defied.”

“What happened?”

“I hurt him. Bad enough that he wanted to kill me every single day but could not because of my family. So, he made me hurt, too, in other ways.”

And that’s when she starts telling me what happened. How she’d gotten to Mexico, confused about everything but still holding onto the idea that by marrying Sergio she was somehow saving me. She tells me about how worried she’d been when I disappeared and that she truly believed her brother had something to do with it.

But then come the worst details.

The damned wedding night. And she...

“My God, Noelle,” I whisper, pride reflected in my voice. “You cut his dick off?”

I’ve certainly come to realize how strong she is, but fuck me... I would have never imagined something like that.

She nods, a big smile on her lips.

“I don’t even think it was a conscious thought. I was in so much pain after he beat me that I simply struck out. That it happened to be his dick,” she angles her shoulders into a lazy shrug, but the smirk on her face tells a different story.

“So, he beat you some more for it,” I mutter, my fists clenching.

“Yes. Until I realized I couldn’t take it anymore. Until...” She takes a deep breath. “Your phone still has battery, no?” She suddenly asks.

“Yes, why?”

“Load the videos from the SD card. You’re never going to believe me fully until you see with your own eyes what happened. Watch that and then I’ll give you my side of the story.”

I frown at her.

“Just this morning you killed a man to ensure I wouldn’t get these videos and now... I don’t understand you, Noelle.”

She gives me a sad smile.

“That’s just the thing, Raf. By watching those videos, you will understand exactly why I never wanted you to see that. But if this is the only way I can erase the doubts from your mind, then so be it.”

I stare at her for moments on end, confusion swirling in my mind.

She’s a goddamn befuddling contradiction.

“Fine,” I sigh. “Let’s do that.”

Plugging the SD card into my phone, I watch as a miles long list of videos suddenly appears on the screen.

“Pick a video,” I tell her.

They are all ordered by date stamps, and I have no doubt Noelle knows the meaning of them.

She purses her lips in concentration as she browses them before her finger hovers over one particular date.

“This one. This is when you were first brought in at the drug facility.”

A little apprehensive but more than anything curious, I click on the video, fast-forwarding through the boring bits until I spot myself being injected with the drug for the first time, and the way I reacted to it.

“What was the original drug?” I find myself asking as dread accumulates in the pit of my stomach.

“You nailed it with the scopolamine compound, which affects memory and makes the subject more pliable. But at that time, Sergio was looking into expanding into other avenues. He figured that adding a downer to the cocktail would make the best sex slaves because they would be placid. But adding an upper would make people aggressive—enough to itch for a fight at every turn. The only thing they all had in common was that they would never remember anything they did under the influence.”

“Which one was I on?” I whisper, though the answer is soon evident on the screen.

She’s quiet for a moment, the sounds from the footage echoing in the stillness of the forest.

“You were still yourself, Raf. It’s just that some... behaviors were more enhanced.”

“Which one was I on, Noelle?” I repeat, wanting to hear it from her own lips even as I watch the horror show in front of me.

“The upper,” her voice is barely audible.

Noelle couldn’t have raped me, even if she wanted to. Because I would have ripped her to shreds.

I swallow hard, forced to end the video as I see myself like never before—truly behaving like a beast and not a human.

“Tell me then,” I put the phone aside, turning my attention towards her. “Tell me everything that happened after the wedding.”

She gives me a small nod.

“Just... I want you to bear in mind that everything I did was for survival. Mine and yours, Raf. I just never expected things to get that out of hand, or for there to be so many casualties.”

“Tell me,” I demand, finally ready to face the past.

“I don’t know how long I was out after the beating I got on the wedding night but...

20. NOELLE

Noelle groaned in pain as she struggled to open her eyes.
Everything hurt.

She could barely move, but as awareness slowly trickled in, she realized she was lying on her belly. At the same time, the events from her wedding night flooded her mind as she remembered the savage beating she'd endured at the hands of her new...husband.

And then...

She frowned.

She couldn't remember what happened after.

Noelle had struck with her knife after which...she'd been hit again, hadn't she?

The more she thought about it, the more she seemed to remember Sergio striking out, his features draped with terror despite his best efforts to hide it.

She'd fallen to the ground and then... She'd simply lost consciousness.

As soon as she realized that, panic flared inside her chest.

How long was I out?

If she'd been unconscious, anything could have happened to her and she'd be none the wiser. She certainly couldn't have fought back.

Her heart started beating loudly in her chest as she thought how defenseless she must have been. Enough for someone...

Noelle squeezed her eyes shut.

She didn't dare think of that. Not after she'd done everything in her power to protect herself—to keep ownership of her body and of her own person.

Yet no matter how much she tried to ignore it, the possibility was there.

As was the fact that she'd rather die than know that someone... That someone...

A sob caught in her throat at the thought.

She shuffled on the bed she'd been placed on, grinding her teeth as bursts of pain exploded simultaneously in different parts of her body. But Noelle wasn't deterred.

Despite the agonizing pain she was in, she forced herself to move her arm, sliding it half an inch at a time towards her until she managed to place it under her body.

She was wearing different clothes than the ones she'd worn that night. That alone made her fear the worst, especially as she noticed she was dressed in a thin cotton dress—likely a nightgown. Yet it was not one she owned.

When her arm was fully under her, she reached down, sliding the dress up her leg.

She breathed out in relief when she realized she still had her underwear on. Yet next came the confirmation.

Noelle swallowed against the sudden wave of bile that traveled up her throat as she slid her hand into the band of her underwear, dipping her fingers between her legs and lightly touching the entire area of her sex.

If something had happened to her... She would feel it, wouldn't she? Just like she was hurting all over, she was bound to hurt between her legs too.

She probed at her entrance, noting there wasn't any pain there. Pushing one finger inside, she could finally breathe out in relief when she found her hymen intact.

No one had raped her.

She wanted to cry of joy, yet the mere attempt to move her facial muscles made her howl in pain.

"I'm ok," she whispered to herself. "I'm still ok."

She wasn't dead. She hadn't been raped. She was...ok.

More than anything, she was even more determined that she would survive.

With great difficulty, she managed to haul herself off the bed, nearly falling to her knees. Her hand caught on the bed railing as she held herself immobile for a few seconds.

She took a deep breath, yet even that was too painful as her entire chest cavity hurt. She'd tried so hard to avoid getting hit in her stomach but Sergio had still landed enough blows to make it hard to even exist.

Looking around the room, she noted she was in her own suite. The first thing she could think of was to force herself to cross the apartment and lock the door so that no one could come in. Only then did she allow herself to go to the bathroom and slowly shed the gown off her body, wincing at every little movement.

A wall-sized mirror reflected back all the marks on her body.

She was purple from head to toe. Her lip was split, crusted blood all around her chin. Her eyes were so swollen she could barely keep them open.

Slowly, she reached to her forehead where a big gash extended into her hairline.

Noelle felt like crying, but at that point, crying would only make her hurt more.

A low, howl-like sound escaped her lips as she held onto the sink so she wouldn't crumble to the floor.

Is this why her family had sold her? To be beaten and abused like this? To be treated less than human?

She tried to climb into the bathtub and clean some of the dried blood on her body, but she could barely bring herself to touch the tender areas.

It took her a long time to clean herself. Between the cries of pain and the agony at having some wounds open anew, she knew she was close to her limit.

By some miracle, she managed to dry herself and change into dry clothes.

It was then that someone knocked on her door.

Dread accumulated in the pit of her stomach as she held herself still. She simply listened, afraid it would be Sergio—that he would come to punish her more.

“It's me, Lucero. Can you please open the door?”

Noelle released a relieved breath. Still, she didn't know whether she could trust the girl. She was a worker in Sergio's house, so naturally she would be loyal to him.

Yet despite that knowledge, Noelle found herself limping to the door and opening it for Lucero.

She was carrying an armful of supplies, and as she entered the room, she headed straight for Noelle's bedroom.

“I brought you something for the pain, and if you'll allow me to clean your wounds, I have some salve and...”

Noelle stood still as she stared at the young woman before her.

“You don't seem surprised to see me in this state,” she whispered as she took a tentative step towards her.

Lucero gave her a sad smile.

“I was the one who helped you to your bed and changed your clothes while you were out of it.”

Noelle blinked.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“Don’t mention it.”

She went back to arranging her supplies, inviting Noelle to sit on the bed for her to assess her injuries.

“You’re knowledgeable about medicine?” Noelle asked.

Lucero nodded.

“From experience.”

Noelle frowned. Did Lucero mean what she thought she did? Was she talking about having experience with medicine, or was she saying that she’d experienced Sergio’s wrath too?

She decided to ask the question openly.

“Is he so violent with everyone?”

Lucero pursed her lips.

“Only those that defy him.”

“Have you...defied him?”

Lucero looked down in embarrassment.

“Yes,” she whispered.

“I’m sorry. I gather you’ve been in my position before?” Noelle inquired softly.

“I was given to him five years ago.”

“Given to him?”

“To be his mistress,” Lucero nodded, carefully helping Noelle out of her gown before tending to her injuries.

“But five years ago... You couldn’t have been more than a child.”

“Thirteen,” Lucero nodded, and seeing Noelle’s bewildered expression, she went on to explain, “It’s customary

in this area, and Señor Villanueva is the ultimate authority. It's expected for him to receive tribute from his people."

"Tribute?" Noelle blinked. "We're not in the Middle Ages, and he's not some feudal lord."

"Maybe. Yet here I am. And here you are, too, a bartered wife. We might not be in the Middle Ages, but the Middle Ages are still with us."

"Good Lord. You're telling me you had to...sleep with him at that age?"

Lucero nodded, her expression shrouded in sadness.

"I refused, of course. I fought him at every turn, as you did."

"And you escaped that fate?" Noelle's voice turned hopeful.

"Maybe I received a worse fate," Lucero added quietly.

"What do you mean?"

"He didn't rape me, but he made sure I could never be with anyone else either."

"I don't understand," Noelle frowned.

Lucero stopped her ministrations for a moment, taking a step back and unbuttoning her tunic.

Noelle watched intently, her pain momentarily forgotten as she saw the marks seared on Lucero's torso. A series of rune-like symbols ran all over her torso, starting from her collarbone, circling her breasts and going all the way down to her stomach. They looked like they had been tattooed into her skin, but Noelle couldn't be sure.

"What does that mean?"

"It means that I've been cursed by the gods—an outcast. But that is not all," Lucero trailed off, her cheeks heating up as she buttoned up her tunic.

Noelle tipped her head, a worried expression on her face.

“He wanted to make sure no one would ever touch me,” she whispered.

“What do you mean?”

“My entire body. He made sure I was disfigured so no other would want me. If he could not have me, then no other man ever could.”

With trembling hands, Lucero lifted her dress, showing her that the same symbols ran all the way down her thighs, but the more pronounced ones were on her lower abdomen. Lines and circles went all the way down to her pubic area. There was not one inch of her flesh that had been left untouched.

Noelle went utterly still, her eyes roving over the young girl’s face. Lucero was around her age, so young and with her whole life ahead of her. And that goddamn man had dared do something so heinous to her just because his male pride had been injured. God... Noelle couldn’t believe that someone could be capable of such evil. To a child no less, because back then Lucero had been a child.

“I’m so sorry,” she murmured, her voice full of sincerity laced with anger on Lucero’s behalf. “I’m so so sorry that happened to you.”

Lucero swallowed hard, giving Noelle a slight nod.

“It’s in the past...”

“How can you say so when he hurt you so badly? My God, he deserves to burn for even contemplating such a thing.”

“One day... One day he will pay for all he’s done—to me, and to others. I have to trust that he will pay.”

“How many others?” Noelle was afraid to ask the question, yet it was clear Lucero wasn’t the first, nor the last. For all she knew, she’d be next to be mutilated as such because she’d dared to refuse him. God, but he really believed himself a feudal lord, entitled to everyone’s lives, didn’t he?

“All the serving girls at the hacienda have at one time, or another, been his mistresses. Those who agreed, were used and

then given a good position. The few who refused shared my fate.”

Noelle was horrified.

“You’re telling me that all those young girls I saw at the wedding...everyone?” Noelle croaked.

“They are gifts for El Señor for keeping our area safe and prosperous,” Lucero sighed.

“I’m shocked he allowed you to tend to me if you’re considered an outsider,” Noelle added pensively.

“I was sent to work at the temples. The big pyramids around the hacienda” Lucero explained. That’s when Noelle noticed the callouses on her hands and the many marks of labor. “It’s where I was working before I was assigned to you, and that was only because I’m the only one who can speak some English around here.”

Noelle digested the information, suddenly seeing the girl with other eyes. Still, she was afraid to blindly put her faith in someone when this could very well be just a ploy to gain her confidence before betraying her. While it was clear Lucero was afraid of Sergio and she hated him with her entire heart, fear was a strong motivator to make someone comply with orders.

“Why are you telling me all this?” Noelle asked, suspicion nagging at her.

She was alone in a foreign land, of course she would be easy prey for someone who seemingly shared a common enemy. It was a known tactic and one that Noelle was extremely wary of.

Without warning, Lucero dropped to her knees in front of her.

“Thank you. Thank you,” she murmured, her voice clogged with emotion just as tears streamed down her cheeks. “Thank you for what you did. No one’s ever dared... No one...”

“What... What did I do?” Noelle’s memory of that night was fuzzy. She remembered injuring Sergio, but nothing more than that.

“You...don’t remember?”

“My memory is a little choppy. Must be all the blows,” Noelle lifted her hand to her temple as she tried to make light of the situation.

Lucero dragged on her knees towards her, and in a hushed tone, she related what she’d heard.

“They’re trying to keep it very quiet but I eavesdropped this morning. El Señor... You hurt his member and there is nothing the doctors can do. They said he’s now impotent.”

Slowly, the events flashed in Noelle’s mind.

“I...did that?” She couldn’t believe it, yet a wide smile spread across her lips at the thought. “You mean he’s never going to be able to... you know...”

Lucero nodded.

“He cannot have any more children either.”

“God!” Noelle gasped, realizing the magnitude of it.

“But he’s still alive,” Lucero continued. “And I’m scared for you, señora,” she whispered. “El Señor, he doesn’t like losing face. More than anything, he enjoys inflicting pain on others. He *will* want revenge. Once he gets better...” she swallowed hard.

“I imagined as much,” Noelle sighed, that one simple action making her wince in pain.

“Let’s get you better for now. I have all the faith that you can stand up to him, señora,” Lucero smiled.

“Call me Noelle, please.”

Lucero was silent for a moment.

“Noelle,” she whispered. “Very well, Noelle.”

Lucero helped her disinfect her wounds and apply some soothing cream to it. Noelle held herself still, her eyes squeezed shut as the initial sting of the cream made her shudder with pain. Slow breath after slow breath, she did her best to withstand the treatment. The worst was on her back where Sergio's belt had split her skin open, deep lesions forming all along her spine and down to her bottom.

"You'll need to sleep on your belly for a few days so these don't get infected," Lucero advised. "I always say I can't believe how he could do something so bad to another human, and always, I'm proven that he can do worse," Lucero sighed. "He is truly a most horrible human being."

"Tell me more about him," Noelle said as Lucero started tending to her facial injuries. "Why is everyone so deferent to him?"

"Deferent?" Lucero frowned, the word unfamiliar.

"Fernando said something about worship. Why are people behaving as if he's larger than life?"

"Because to them he is."

"What do you mean?"

"It's difficult to explain to an outsider," Lucero pursed her lips. "El Señor is the savior of the region. Before him, there was no harvest, no food, *nothing*. People were starving," she bit her lip. "My family was in that position, too. We lived an hour south of here where it's more arid. My father was an American who only stayed here long enough to get my mother pregnant, so it's always been just the two of us."

"And she gave you to Sergio. Do you resent her?" Noelle inquired softly.

Lucero shook her head.

"She thought she was doing it for me," she whispered, her lashes misted with tears. "We were starving. It was either that, or we'd both die together. This way... I survived. She didn't."

“I’m so sorry,” Noelle hurried to say, her heart squeezing in her chest at Lucero’s story.

“Everyone owes their lives to el señor. He gave jobs to people from all over the area. He made sure the families had enough food all year round. For that, everyone would lay their lives for him. He is a god among people here,” Lucero imparted. “Some people even say he *is* one of the old gods—the incarnation of Tezcatlipoca himself,” she whispered.

“Tezcatlipoca?” Noelle raised a brow. She recognized the name from her many discussions with Blue. He was one of the main Aztec deities and he was associated with obsidian—and sorcery.

Lucero nodded.

“There is a legend that when el señor took power after his old man died, the night sky persisted for days on end. Everything was dark and gloomy. Until he stood in front of his people and promised them that everything would be fine; that as long as they followed him he would grant them everything they wished for. After his proclamation, there was light again, almost as if he had power over night. Since then, the earth has been fertile. People no longer starve to death, nor do they die of disease.”

Noelle frowned. That seemed rather...suspicious. People no longer died of disease?

“What do they die of, then?”

Lucero shrugged.

“Old age. No one has been sick in decades.”

“When you mean sick, you mean...”

“Disease. Plagues. Our lands have been free of disease for as long as I can remember. Or so they say... If there is ever a rumor, it’s destroyed before it can reach people.”

Noelle narrowed her eyes at that sentence. She knew the power of rumors and that they should not be given credence in most cases, but all rumors started from a seed of truth.

She was well-read enough to know there was no such thing as a disease-free community. Even in a fully vaccinated group there was always at least the common cold, and other types of air-borne ailments that anyone could get.

Yet Sergio claimed his land was some type of paradise where nothing could touch its inhabitants as long as they swore allegiance to him. He promised them something no man could achieve—only a god.

A smile tipped at her lips as she started to get a good idea of the politics of the area—why it was so closed off and why people truly believed Sergio to be some sort of old Aztec God who had control over human suffering.

Just like in the Plumed Serpent, Sergio was taking advantage of deeply rooted regional beliefs and using them to his advantage.

He was no god, just as he had no magical powers. Of that, she was certain. After all, *she*, a mere mortal, had been able to injure him so direly and according to Lucero, so permanently.

No, Sergio was nothing but a charlatan. A power-hungry, delusional charlatan that got off on having thousands of people worship the ground he walked on. In fact, Noelle could hazard a guess why there was no disease in the land—it wasn't the lack of disease, but of diseased people.

“Do *you* believe Sergio stopped disease and made the land fertile?”

Lucero stopped what she was doing, leaning back and frowning.

“I do not think so, for he is the most evil of men. But everyone else believes it to be true.”

“How? Why?”

“Things are different here,” Lucero sighed. “People believe in the old gods and the power they have over the living world and the spiritual one.”

“How come *you* don’t believe it? You grew up here, did you not?”

“I did... In the beginning. Until I realized a mere man cannot be a god. A man who enjoys hurting little girls cannot be the incarnation of a revered deity. Until...” Lucero trailed off, a look of pure desolation descending upon her features. “There was a man—Nicholas. He was a worker, too, but he was an outsider. He taught me English and he told me stories about the other world, of the big cities where people have no gods; a world where women are not required to do a man’s bidding or be a plaything. A world where...” she trailed off, blinking back tears.

“Is he still here?” Noelle asked.

Lucero shook her head.

“I helped him escape two years ago. He’s gone,” she whispered.

“You had feelings for him,” Noelle noted—it was obvious with the way Lucero’s entire face lit up when she talked about this man.

Lucero nodded, a sad smile pulling at her lips.

“He never knew of my feelings. But I’m happy he got away. This place... It has a way of sucking your soul out of your body. Those who don’t worship el señor end up in very bad places.”

Noelle could imagine what type of bad places. She’d only been at the hacienda for a short period of time but it was enough for her to realize that you were either with Sergio, or against him. There was no middle ground. And according to Lucero, the entire area controlled by the hacienda was the same. You either worshiped him as a god, accepting his word of gospel in exchange for his protection and the good fortune he shared with his people, or you were against him, never to be heard from again.

“Why didn’t you tell him?” Noelle probed. “He could have taken you away with him.”

“No, no,” Lucero quickly replied. “I was sixteen at the time, a child in his eyes. He was older, more mature. He never saw me as anything other than someone who eased his loneliness.”

“I’m sorry,” Noelle mentioned, seeing Lucero’s stricken expression. “I’m in love with someone, too,” she confessed, melancholy lacing her words. “I don’t know where he is, or *how* he is. I don’t even know if he is alive...” the last word caught in her throat as she choked on a sob. “He could be very well dead right now and I...”

Her swollen eyes were red and rimmed with tears. The conversation with Lucero had given her a small respite from thinking about her Blue, but that didn’t erase the pain in her heart—much greater than her physical one.

She hadn’t dared think he might be dead until that moment, never mind voicing it out loud.

But he was missing and not even his family knew where he was. If even his family couldn’t find him...

She couldn’t cope.

Bringing her hand to her mouth, she stifled a wail as she doubled over from the anguish bubbling inside her breast.

She couldn’t live in a world without him—she refused to.

How could she hang onto a better tomorrow if she could not see a tomorrow at all? How could she be strong when she had no one to be strong for?

The realization that she was nothing without him was startling—an echo in the barely alive chamber of her heart.

She’d always known how much he meant to her. But this was the first time it dawned on her that even self-preservation was moot if he wasn’t there—at the end of the tunnel.

All her life, she’d done nothing but fight against fate so she could free herself of the shackles of her own destiny and her wretched last name. All her life, she’d thought that as long as she chose herself, she would be fine—she would live

without regrets, in spite of the world that sought to put her down for who she was. Yet now...not even that was enough to give her hope, because there was none.

Blue was her very own haven. She loved him, not only as a man, but as a twin soul—one that mirrored hers exactly; one that sang in tune with hers.

And if he was gone... If he was truly gone... What was she fighting for?

What was happiness, if he was not there to imbue it with meaning?

“Noelle, you need to calm down,” Lucero whispered as she stroked her hair tenderly. “You’re going to open your wounds and bleed again if you keep straining yourself.”

She started hiccuping, her sobs turning into incoherent sounds.

She felt silly.

She felt despair.

She felt...anger.

It was bubbling deep inside her, taking its strength from her pain and the earth-shattering cries of her soul.

“He won’t win,” she said between broken sobs. “I won’t let Sergio win, Lucero. I promise you that.” Turning to the other girl, she gave her an intense look. “I’m going to leave here. And I’m taking you with me,” she declared.

“Noelle...” Lucero blinked.

Determination washed over Noelle just as her pain increased from too much movement.

Her Blue couldn’t be dead. She refused to believe it. And she would scour the entire earth to find him if that’s what it took.

She couldn’t give up.

Until she saw the evidence, with her own two eyes, that he was gone from this world, she would not even entertain the thought.

She would claw her way out if need be. She would hit Sergio where it hurt the most. But she would not—ever again—lose herself to her self-doubts.

“I’m fine,” she strained a smile. “I’m ok.”

“Let’s get you back to bed. I’ll apply more poultice to your back.”

“Thank you,” she murmured, turning on her belly on the bed for Lucero to work her magic on her back.

With Lucero’s help, Noelle started to heal slowly. Her wounds were tender for a few days but soon she regained her full mobility and could exit her room. Yet something even stranger occurred.

As she went about the house in an attempt to get more familiar with her surroundings, she realized that none of the other servants acknowledged her, and the few times she ran into Sergio’s man, Fernando, he gave her a harsh stare, a sneer pulling at his lip.

She imagined Sergio must have told him what had transpired on the wedding night. But despite this, she saw no sign of her *husband*.

Lucero, being more resourceful, told her that Sergio was still confined to his suite and he had yet to make an appearance outside of it. From what she’d overheard among the servants, everyone was worried about him.

Noelle was glad of it, though. If he was still absent, then maybe she’d injured him more than she remembered—maybe even mortally, and everyone was keeping it quiet. That gave her hope that she could somehow survive her until she found a way to go back home—back to her Blue.

With no one minding her business, Noelle started to gain more courage venturing outside and exploring the hacienda.

Lucero introduced her to the main wings of the house and showed her to the stables and the surrounding areas.

One of the things she was curious about were the temples Lucero had told her about—the pyramid-like constructions that surrounded the hacienda.

A couple of them were completed, and the constructions were extraordinary in their level of detail and magnificence. But there were also a few that were under construction, with tens if not hundreds of workers toiling daily to build them.

“There are so many people working there,” Noelle noted one day.

It was January, but the sun was up in the sky, the day unlike any January day Noelle had ever experienced.

“They aren’t here of their own free will,” Lucero leaned in to whisper.

“What do you mean? Aren’t they doing this because they see Sergio as their god?” Noelle rolled her eyes at the statement, yet she couldn’t deny the reality she was living in. For days on end she’d witnessed a level of obsequiousness she’d never seen before, with everyone working at the hacienda bowing down to Sergio.

He didn’t even need to be present, for there were plenty of reminders of him all over the house; outside, too. Paintings, statues and other *holy* objects were laid all over the area of the hacienda, and people treated them with the utmost deference as if each object was imbued with Sergio’s essence.

If Noelle had doubted Lucero’s tales at first, she’d soon become convinced that the entire region operated on a cult-like level.

Everyone knew everyone, and outsiders were rarely permitted within the premise—and then, only by special invitation.

Like any cult she’d read about, Noelle realized that Sergio’s power relied on the limited knowledge he provided

his subjects with. They didn't know what the outside world was like, they couldn't even imagine it. Lucero was the only one who'd been lucky enough to be exposed to some outside ideology that had made her doubt everything that had been drilled into her mind since young.

Most people were illiterate, too. The hacienda was littered with hieroglyph-like symbols that she recognized to be Aztec in origin, and the community only recognized those. Just one more way through which Sergio kept a tight leash over what his subjects were exposed to.

It was no wonder he was considered a god when it was all those people knew.

"No," Lucero shook her head, pursing her lips as a sad look crossed her eyes. "El Señor's subjects would never engage in such lowly work."

"I don't understand," Noelle frowned.

"They are slaves. Some don't even know where they are from. Others simply went against El Señor and they ended up there as punishment. The temple is the only place where you will ever find outsiders at the hacienda. But they are not allowed to engage with anyone else. Their only task is to build the temple. Every day. Work their fingers to the bone."

"That's where you were before, too, no?" Noelle's gaze dipped to Lucero's scarred hands.

She gave a brisk nod.

"I was lucky," Lucero said, her voice distant. "No one survives the temple. It's just work, work, work, until death claims every one of them."

"The man you were telling me about... He was a slave, too?"

"He was," she confirmed. "He told me he was being held up for ransom but his family decided not to pay it. He would have been dead if I hadn't helped him escape."

"So the temple work is like a labor camp, no?"

Lucero nodded.

“It’s the place where *everyone* is sent to die. You have to be careful, Noelle. If by any chance he sends you there...”

“He hasn’t done so yet,” Noelle said pensively. “What if he’s not well?” She suddenly asked. “What if he’s dying and no one’s said anything because they don’t want it to get out? It’s been three weeks...”

“Maybe,” Lucero took a deep breath. “Everyone would be happier if that were so.”

The idea that slavery was still being practiced in that day and age shocked Noelle.

Had her brother known about it? Surely, he must have. He knew everything. Then how could he have willingly left her there?

For the first time, she was forced to admit she’d lived most of her life in a bubble. Only now was she exposed to the true debauchery of human nature. Only now did she realize that Ann Marie was just a little dot on the horizon compared to the monsters in the world.

Everything she’d previously experienced suddenly seemed so insignificant as she thought of those people who were forced to labor continuously until they met their death.

She’d never heard of such a thing before, and she didn’t think there was a worse death than being physically tortured daily in that manner, with no more autonomy over one’s body.

Long after their conversation, Noelle could not let the topic go—especially after she coaxed more details from Lucero about her experience. So one day, Noelle convinced her to go closer to one of the temples under construction—as close as they could considering it was heavily guarded.

As Noelle got a closer look at what was happening there, she realized why Lucero was so apprehensive about it.

From afar, she caught glimpses of the men and women working there. Most of them were skin and bone, with open

wounds and blisters all over their bodies.

“You’re not allowed here,” someone said in Spanish.

“La Señora quiere ver el templo,” Lucero turned and gave an awkward smile to one of the guards.

“Pues puede ver el otro. Sabes las reglas,” he snapped, telling them they should leave.

Lucero apologized that they had come to the wrong temple and she promised the guard she would take Noelle to one of the already finished ones.

Noelle and Lucero spent the rest of the day chatting and having fun. Only a few weeks since they’d met, but they were already well on their way to becoming best friends.

For Noelle, that was the strangest thing.

Her only friend had ever been Blue.

It wasn’t entirely odd to her to find someone she could get along with so well.

Similarly, Lucero couldn’t believe her luck that she’d been able to find a friend in Noelle—was always so surprised by how kind the other girl was to her, a servant. And so she decided she would do her best to be her loyal companion and help her escape the hell she found herself in.

As the time came for Noelle to go to bed, she stopped in front of the door of her apartment and turned to Lucero.

“I’ll ask around if you can move in with me,” she suddenly said. She’d gathered that while Lucero’s position had changed, the condition of her lodgings was still poor. “There’s too much space for just one person and I would feel more at peace if you were by my side.”

Noelle didn’t say that she feared for her friend as much as she feared for herself. She didn’t want Lucero to be in danger for her association with her, but more than anything, she dreaded thinking of her living in her tiny and dirty quarters.

She was such a frail girl, and despite being a beauty, her body displayed the evidence of her harsh existence.

Lucero had ash blonde hair and light skin—both features she'd inherited from her unknown American father. Yet the rest of her spoke of her native ancestry—black eyes framed by thick lashes, dark eyebrows, full lips and high cheekbones.

She was beautiful, even with her scars and unkempt appearance, and Noelle had seen how some of the guards leered at her.

The last thing she wanted was for her friend to be unsafe.

She might be protected by the mark Sergio had carved into her chest that signaled her as cursed by the gods, but that would only hold as long as people feared Sergio. If anything happened to him and he was on his death bed... Noelle had no doubt mayhem would descend upon the hacienda.

"I'm not sure it will be allowed," Lucero blushed, averting her gaze. "But I thank you for thinking about me."

"You need to make sure you're safe, too, ok? I worry about you," Noelle whispered. "Always lock your door at night. You never know if one of the guards will get any strange ideas. I see how they look at you..."

Lucero nodded.

"Don't worry. All my life I've been fending off the advances of men. I've gotten rather good at it," she smiled.

"I'm glad," Noelle told her sincerely. "You're a strong woman, Lucero," she squeezed her hands. "And one day you're going to be able to be in control of your own life. I promise you that."

"Is it strange that I believe you?" Lucero whispered.

Noelle shook her head.

"Good night," she leaned in and kissed her cheeks.

"Good night, Noelle," Lucero returned the kiss, hurrying down the corridor.

Noelle entered her apartment and her first thought was to take a relaxing bath. With her injuries well on their way to healing, she could finally enjoy a hot bath and not worry about reopening some of her wounds, nor the water stinging her skin at the lightest touch.

Despite her still confining circumstances, she felt lighter than she had in a long time.

Yet it was all too soon. For nothing could prepare her for what she encountered right in the middle of her sitting room.

Her eyes widened in shock as she drew to a halt.

“You...” she whispered.

“Missed me, my dear wife?” Sergio smirked at her.

He was alive, and looking much, much better than Noelle could have expected.

“I have a little surprise for you,” he said before he was upon her, his hand closing around her throat.

That close to him, she could see he was still wan, sweat beading his forehead. But even in his feeble state she was no match for him strength wise. No matter how much she pushed, she could do nothing. She could only accept that he was suffocating her—that he was bent on killing her right then and there.

“Let...go...” she whizzed as she brought her hands atop his in an attempt to push him off her.

He sneered at her, his face turning thunderous before he gripped her tightly and flung her into the wall.

The shock of the impact knocked the breath out of Noelle. A pop permeated the air, yet it was a sound to her ears only that signaled that her old injuries had torn anew, the pain immediate.

Tears clung to her lashes as she hugged her chest in an attempt to find a modicum of peace.

“You stupid bit. Maldita puta,” Sergio thundered, coming towards her.

His steps faltered for a moment, and through the mist of pain, Noelle noticed that for all his display of strength he wasn't completely recovered.

“I should fucking feed you to the dogs for what you did,” he spit at her.

“You're still alive,” she spoke between harsh breaths. “It means I didn't do that good of a job.”

She barely finished her words before the first slap came.

He caught her jaw with the back of his hand, the blow so strong she thought she saw stars for a moment.

Losing her equilibrium, she fell to the ground, dragging herself towards the door as blood started flowing freely down her face.

She lifted her hand, touching the tender flesh and noting the red coating her finger. The same red was now clinging to her back, the liquid sticking to the material of the dress the more she struggled—the more her wounds tore open.

Noelle looked wildly around her in an attempt to find something to defend herself with. Yet it was all in vain because in the next moment he was upon her. Blow after blow, she had no way to stop them even as she curled onto the floor, shielding herself the best she could.

“Please...” She whispered in a dead voice. “Please... stop...”

But he didn't.

He didn't stop until she stopped moving. And even then, he only stopped because his own injury was paining him.

With one last look at her pitiful form on the floor, Sergio spat on her.

“I'll make you rue the day you were born,” he promised, though Noelle could no longer process words at that point.

There was only pain. So much pain, and the promise of oblivion.

21. NOELLE

“**Y**ou need to do something,” Lucero said in a hushed tone as she tried to help Noelle in a seating position.

Nearly two weeks after that encounter with Sergio in her room, it had become a common recurrence to find him there when she least expected him.

He wouldn't come daily. Only when her old wounds would begin to heal and the hope that maybe he would leave her alone would appear.

Sergio knew exactly what he was doing.

He wasn't only hurting her, beating her within an inch of her life every single time. He was also psychologically torturing her until she couldn't have one peaceful moment, the fear that she would open her eyes and see him in front of her growing with every moment.

“I don't know what,” Noelle croaked. “He's growing stronger every time and I grow weaker.”

Injuries upon injuries, even if she prepared herself thoroughly for the next time he came for her, she could never defend her because she could barely move.

Even going to the bathroom was out of the question if it weren't for Lucero's help.

“He's going to kill you, Noelle. You know that's exactly what he wants, but only after he's made you suffer for what you did to him.”

In an attempt to help her, Lucero had taken the risk to spy for her, going as far as to eavesdrop in Sergio's personal suite. She'd heard personal conversations between Sergio and his doctor that Noelle doubted he wanted anyone to know.

Due to the nature of the accident, the doctors hadn't been able to reattach his penis so they'd had to cauterize it where Noelle had cut it. But that wasn't the worst. Not only was he now impotent, but he couldn't even relieve himself properly, needing the use of a catheter.

Yet that wasn't the most outrageous thing.

To combat the rumors going around the hacienda that put his masculinity into question, Sergio had arranged for five more girls to be moved into the house as part of his harem. And according to what Lucero had heard, they were now going around praising Sergio as the greatest lover.

"I know," Noelle sighed. "A few more beatings and I can see myself..." she swallowed hard.

She wasn't about to give up. She knew that in the depths of her soul. Yet she was out of ideas.

She wanted to fight, but she didn't know how.

God...if only she had the strength of a man so she could fight back. If only she weren't so weak that she could only lay there on the floor while he kicked her, time and time again.

"Call your family," Lucero suddenly said. "Surely they wouldn't just sit by and watch you like this..."

"I don't know," Noelle whispered. "They must have known who Sergio was. My brother knows *everything*. I refuse to believe he would have been ignorant of what goes at the hacienda, or what Sergio is really like."

"At least try. I'm really scared that you're not going to last much longer in this state. Already," her breath hitched as her eyes traveled over Noelle's form.

Her entire face was a combination of yellow, purple and black. Where new wounds faded, new ones appeared. She

looked entirely unlike how Lucero had first seen her and that worried her.

“If he doesn’t come tonight,” Noelle swallowed. “Help me get to a phone?”

She didn’t have her own cell phone—she hadn’t been allowed one.

Though Cisco had left her with one, Sergio had been quick to search all her belongings and throw almost everything away.

The only way she could reach her family was if she managed to get to the phone in the living room.

“Tonight,” Lucero promised.

Lucero cleaned her wounds, applying healing ointment on each. Though it hurt to be touched even in the slightest, Noelle bore it with quiet dignity.

If it hadn’t been for Lucero, Noelle knew that she would probably already be dead. Her wounds would have gotten infected and she would have likely become septic.

After Lucero gave her one of her teas that helped with pain, Noelle went to sleep.

Already tortured for weeks with the promise of death, she realized that whether it came today or tomorrow, it was the same thing to her. The least she could do was have a moment of peace where she didn’t think of her impending doom.

The tea was godsent and Noelle managed to sleep uninterrupted until late at night when Lucero came to her room once more.

“It’s time,” she whispered. “El Señor isn’t at home, so we need to act fast.”

Noelle groaned as she shuffled off her bed, putting on a long tunic and barely holding off a wince as the material brushed against her wounds.

Lucero was by her side, holding her hand as she led her out of her apartment and to the living room where was a cord telephone.

Luckily, she remembered the phone number from her home upstate. But that only meant that there was every chance of her mother answering the phone, and that wouldn't bode well for her.

Biting her lip, she dialed the number while Lucero stood guard.

It rang once. Twice. On the third, someone answered.

“Hello?”

Noelle blinked.

“Camilla... Why are you answering the phone?”

“Noelle?” Her sister-in-law asked.

“Please put my brother on. It's urgent and I don't have time.”

“What's wrong?”

“I don't have time, Camilla. Please put my brother on...”

“Tell me what's wrong, maybe I can help,” she continued.

“Sergio,” Noelle took a deep breath, her rib cage flaring with pain. “He's going to kill me. Please get my brother. I need him to come for me and get me out of here. I don't know how much longer I have left at this rate...” the words poured out of her.

But out of nowhere, the line got cut, a succession of beeping sounds ringing in her ear.

“Hello? Camilla?” Noelle frowned.

With a quick glance to Lucero, she redialed the number, tapping her foot anxiously as she waited for Camilla to pick up again.

Moments on end passed, and still the line was busy.

She tried again. And again.

“Someone’s coming,” Lucero turned to her. “We need to leave. Fast.”

Yet just as they hurried to leave the living room, Sergio suddenly appeared before them.

Noelle’s eyes widened in alarm, for this time it wasn’t just her who was in danger, but also Lucero. And she wasn’t going to allow her friend to get hurt because of her.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing. I told you not to leave your room,” he barked at her, his eyes dripping with malice and a fierce need for revenge.

He hated her. No, he *abhorred* her. With good reason, of course, since she’d robbed him of his most prized possession. Yet despite all the abuse she’d suffered, she couldn’t find it in her to regret what she’d done.

She lifted her chin up.

For the first time, she wasn’t about to let Sergio walk all over her, nor would she allow him to abuse her again.

“I was just on the phone with my brother,” she lied.

Sergio’s eyes glinted dangerously.

“Is that so…” he spoke slowly, watching her carefully.

“Yes. In fact, I invited him to come visit soon. I thought he should see for himself the state of his sister,” Noelle looked him straight in the eye.

“You’re lying,” he accused.

“I’m not, and I think we both know my brother won’t allow this.”

His cheek twitched in annoyance.

Noelle slipped her hand out of Lucero’s as she took a step forward.

“You could have killed me from the beginning, but you didn’t,” she added, watching for his facial clues. “I wonder

why that is...”

“Because I’m going to break you first,” he gritted. “Until you will *wish* you were dead.”

“Hmm, I wonder about that,” she bluffed. “I rather think my brother won’t like that very much. Already I want to see you explain this to him,” she pointed to her bruised face. “Or maybe I should show him my back. I’m curious what he’ll say then. Will he congratulate you, or will he put a bullet through your head?”

“Your brother can’t kill me,” he said smugly.

“Maybe he won’t be able to kill you,” Noelle shrugged—she realized that Cisco would have long done that if he wanted to; if he could. “But are you willing to risk your little cult for it? Are you willing to risk your business?”

She took another step towards him.

“Are you willing to show these people you’re just a mere man, not a god?”

He looked as if he wanted to murder her on the spot.

His hands were clenched by his side, his veins bulging in his neck.

Already, his face was becoming red from anger, and Noelle expected him to strike her at any moment. She knew the risk, but it was one she was willing to take.

Seconds trickled by.

Sergio didn’t hit her. He didn’t come closer to her, though she *knew* he wanted nothing more than smother her with his bare hands.

“Hit me again and I promise you, you won’t like the consequences.”

“And what can you do?” He scoffed, though his body was tense.

“I’m not as defenseless as you believe, Sergio. Nor am I dumb. I have eyes and I can see this little cult thing you have going on. Your image. How much you care about what people think of you. It’s why you got a new harem, isn’t that so? To show everyone you can still...” she chuckled as she looked at him up and down.

“You can’t do shit,” he narrowed his eyes on her.

Maybe she was bluffing. Maybe she could never get away with unmasking Sergio to his loyal following. But maybe she could make him believe she could. After all, the only weakness she could exploit was his obsession with saving face.

She took another step forward until she was almost face to face with him.

“Are you willing to bet on it? Try to kill me again and I’ll make sure everyone knows you’re just a puny man. One who...” she let her gaze dip lower to his crotch, a cruel smile painted on her lips. “Can’t even call himself a man anymore. Is that what you want? For everyone to know that you’ve been castrated by your own wife?” She batted her lashes daringly at him.

“You fucking bitch,” he ground out.

“Do it,” she taunted. “Hit me. Hit me again and I promise you. I fucking promise you, you will regret every single blow,” she told him with all the strength she could muster.

He raised his hand.

Noelle didn’t blink.

And just like that, the blow didn’t come.

He gave her another harsh look before he strode out of the living room.

When he was out of sight, Noelle let out a big breath as she felt herself sway on her feet. Luckily, Lucero was there to hold onto her.

“Noelle...” she murmured, her voice laced with awe.
“You...”

“I think I did it,” she whispered. “I did it, didn’t I?”

“I think you did,” Lucero confirmed. “I’ve never seen him like that before. But the way you spoke to him... I have no words. You were amazing.”

“I don’t know how I managed to keep it together,” Noelle confessed. “I was trembling all over, but I couldn’t let it show.”

“You threatened him with the only thing he cares about, his reputation. Unless he’s sure you were bluffing, he won’t do anything for now,” Lucero noted.

“Then I must ensure he can’t find out I’m bluffing—ever. The only way to survive here is to gain the upper hand over him.”

“But how...”

“I don’t know yet,” Noelle shook her head. “I need to find out more about him and this goddamn cult he’s leading. I need all the information I can get.”

Slowly, they made their way back to Noelle’s apartment. Knowing their situation was still precarious, Noelle persuaded Lucero to stay with her, declaring that from now on they would live together.

“Somehow, I’m going to do it,” Noelle said a while later, determination washing over her.

Her small victory against Sergio had given her the conviction to push forward.

All her life she’d been powerless one way or another, unable to control her own fate. Her choices had been taken from her, even her future.

No more.

One way or another, she would reclaim everything that had been stolen from her. She would become Sergio’s biggest

nightmare if that meant surviving.

And to do that, she didn't just need *some* blackmail material, since that could just as easily be taken from her. Just because she won one battle she didn't fool herself that she'd won the war.

No, she needed something more tangible.

She needed *power*. True power. The type Sergio had.

But in her case, she needed power *over* Sergio.

Then, she could finally focus her attention outward—to her true mission. She could finally start looking for Blue.

Wait for me, Rafaello. Whatever it takes, I'll find you.

22. NOELLE

“Shh,” Noelle whispered as she shook Lucero awake.

“Que? What...” Lucero mumbled sleepily.

“There’s something happening outside,” Noelle whispered.

Lucero slowly got her bearings together and rose from the bed, following Noelle to the window to see a procession of people, all carrying torches, heading to one of the pyramids.

“Have you seen this before?” Noelle asked.

Lucero was quiet for a moment before she nodded.

“It happens once every month,” she replied. “I don’t know exactly what they are doing, but we’re not allowed to go out when it happens.”

“It has to do with the temples, does it not?” Noelle narrowed her eyes. “I’m going,” she suddenly declared.

Though she was still recovering from her injuries, she could move more freely.

Sergio hadn’t hurt her again after their last confrontation and for almost a week now he’d left her alone. She’d seen him a few times around the hacienda, but he’d ignored her every time. Still, she could see the contempt on his face whenever he saw her and she was sure the resentment was bubbling.

If she didn’t find a way to truly gain the upper hand, she feared he would soon snap and hurt her again. He hated her too much to simply allow her to exist after what she’d done to

him, and the threats she'd issued wouldn't protect her forever—not unless she found something more tangible.

Not unless she found a way to undermine his power.

“You can't,” Lucero's eyes widened. “You barely got him to leave you alone. If he sees you trespass into the temple...”

“I need to see what he's doing,” Noelle shook her head. “We know he operates on a cult-like system,” she started, though she realized Lucero didn't quite grasp the ramifications of the word. After all, she'd lived here all her life and it was everything she knew. “But we don't know *how* he does it. How does he control everyone? How does he make them believe he is a god?”

“I've told you how. He ensures the community is safe and that people live well. What else would he be doing?”

Noelle took a deep breath as she looked into her friend's innocent eyes. Despite her intelligence, Lucero was incredibly naive about how the world worked.

“That is only what we can see—what's at the very bottom. But I doubt that he can maintain his position by simply caring for the community. Other people can do that too and they aren't seen as gods.”

“I don't understand...” Lucero trailed off, her brows knit together in confusion.

“Just like with any power structure, Sergio is at the top while the regular people are at the bottom. But there are still those in between. The people he works closely with. You know who I'm talking about. There are those barons that get their own little piece of the pie.”

Lucero had told her that though Sergio was the supreme authority in the region, he had designated barons that oversaw the villages surrounding the hacienda and who were loyal to him. And just like Fernando, they *too* believed that Sergio was the incarnation of a god.

At first, Noelle hadn't been sure whether it was all an act—if those people acted that way because it was a beneficial ruse. But as she'd closely observed the workings of the hacienda and the people who visited Sergio and bowed to him, she realized there was more to it than personal interests.

Anyone could feign allegiance for their own gain, but not anyone could feign such a deep worship towards Sergio.

Noelle had always thought herself a good judge of people, mainly due to her observational skills gained from a life of living by the sidelines—always watching, rarely interacting. And what she'd seen had confirmed to her that the barons truly believed in Sergio's divine origins.

It would have been so much easier if they hadn't, because everyone can be swayed by the material. But as it stood, the only way she could see herself winning was by finding out what Sergio's secret was.

Despite her physical condition, over the weeks she'd been at the hacienda, Noelle had dedicated her time to learning. She'd absorbed everything she could, eavesdropping on conversations when people thought she could not understand the language and observing people's conducts in relation to Sergio.

She'd not only gathered information about the organization of his community, but she'd also learned about his businesses.

There were a few plants scattered across the region, with the closest one only a few minutes away from the hacienda, that produced drugs. And not just *any* drugs. Though Sergio had ties with the cartels in Mexico, he had his own brand of drugs that had absolutely no competition.

Lucero hadn't been able to tell her exactly what it was, only that Sergio was experimenting with different drugs in order to create his own, unique one.

Of course someone who saw himself as a god would want nothing less—his ego was truly too overblown.

Noelle turned from the window, going to her suitcase and fishing out a cardigan to shield herself against the night chill. Putting on her shoes, she was ready to get out the door when Lucero suddenly stopped her.

“Don’t,” she whispered. “Don’t go. It’s not safe.”

“If I don’t, I’ll never be safe anyway. I don’t want to die here,” Noelle said in a determined tone. “Regardless of my threats, he won’t stay still forever. One way or another, he *will* kill me. And then he’ll blame it on an accident so that my brother won’t ask questions. You know it as well as I do. He detests me.”

“But you can bide your time. I’m sure you could at some point get in contact with your brother and explain everything...”

“And then what? If my brother could have done anything, he wouldn’t have allowed me to get married to Sergio in the first place. He told me himself that he had his hands tied. It’s a small wonder Sergio is worried at all of what Cisco would do if he killed me, but the moment he thinks he can do it and get away with it, he *will* do it.”

“I’m coming with you,” Lucero sighed.

“You know you don’t have to.”

“I want to. We’re in this together,” she squeezed her hand.

Noelle gave her a warm nod, waiting for her to get dressed before they both went out into the night.

No one else was around the house. All doors were locked, the silence weighing heavy on Noelle.

Slowly, they walked out of the house, taking the same path the people with the torches had taken. The destination was one of the completed temples.

“Why does he need more than one anyway?” Noelle asked in a hushed tone as they reached the temple.

“I don’t know,” Lucero answered, looking left and right to make sure there was no one around. “But I think it has something to do with the location. They are all placed in very specific locations and I remember when I was working on the other temple that the guards were very strict with the placement.”

“Odd,” Noelle noted, storing that one bit of information.

“Come, there is a hidden entrance in the back,” Lucero said, leaving her to the back.

The structure was absolutely immense. If it had been under any other circumstances, Noelle would have found it breathtaking—so much so she would have loved to visit and admire it with her Blue. They’d talked about visiting Aztec ruins together, and the memory of those conversations stabbed at her heart.

Triangular in shape, it looked like one of those pyramids she’d only seen in pictures. The temple was made entirely of stone and measured more than a hundred feet.

So close to the construction, Noelle realized the effort it must have taken to build such a thing. It must have been incredibly costly to build *one* but more?

“The people you saw with the torches usually enter through the main steps. But there is another way in—we used this during the construction stage and Sergio didn’t want it covered.”

Noelle nodded as she followed closely.

They didn’t have any light source since they didn’t want to attract any attention, but Lucero seemed to be doing just fine without one.

“What’s inside?”

“There are a few chambers and a main room in the middle. I only know how they looked before, when we were working on them. I can’t say they are the same now,” Lucero added pensively.

Finding the hidden door, Lucero pushed it open and they were immediately met with darkness.

“Are you sure you know where we’re going?” Noelle asked as they entered the temple, their hands on the wall as they felt their way forward.

“I remember the layout. The chambers I told you? All of them feed into the main room in the center. And it’s the only safe way to sneak in without bumping into anyone.”

“You really took notes,” Noelle joked lightly.

“I had to,” Lucero said, but didn’t elaborate.

Given her tone, Noelle imagined it had something to do with the man she’d helped escape, so she didn’t pry further.

Without the guidance of light, it felt as though they were walking for miles, but they were only taking a few tentative steps forward. Yet after a while, a light appeared at the end of the tunnel. Slowly, it became more and more pronounced until they came to the other end of the chamber. At the same time, a choir-like sound permeated the air, echoing into the entire temple.

Lucero suddenly put a hand up to stop Noelle.

Carefully coming to Lucero’s side, Noelle sank to her knees right at the mouth of the chamber.

Peeking her head forward, her eyes widened when she took in the shocking image before her.

There were panes of black glass all around the main chamber, the effect immediate as it drowned the room into darkness even as the room teemed with sources of light.

In the center of the room was a golden throne, right in front of a large jaguar painting.

The more Noelle looked, the more she noticed the same motifs carved into stone or painted all over the walls.

Yet that was not the oddest thing about the room.

There was a hole in the middle of the room that diverged into smaller viaducts that covered the entire surface of the room.

Around the hole, eight men were gathered in a circle, their mouths moving in slow, precise movements as a foreign chant vibrated in the entire pyramid.

The sounds went on for moments on end before a booming voice ordered them to stop. All at once, the eight figures dispersed, bowing in a small gesture of reverence as Sergio appeared at the top, right in front of the golden chair.

Everyone was wearing strange, colorful garments that reminded Noelle of the traditional clothing she'd seen people around the village wear. But even stranger was the fact that all were wearing masks in the form of wild animals.

Sergio, of course, was the one wearing a jaguar mask.

Noelle could vaguely remember that Tezcatlipoca was associated with a jaguar.

At Sergio's command, everyone took their spot in a formation as a few other maskless men stepped forward, dragging two struggling girls with them draped in black cloaks.

"What the hell is this?" Noelle whispered in shock.

"Shh," Lucero whispered. "Just watch. We can't let them know we're here."

Noelle nodded, turning her attention towards the pit again and watching as the men dumped the girls right by the giant hole before retreating into the shadows. Once more, it was only Sergio at the top on his golden chair and the eight mysterious figures aligned along the viaducts.

"Is that mercury?" She murmured as her eyes widened.

Lucero frowned, not understanding her.

"Look, there's a liquid flowing through those ducts. Mercury is also called quicksilver and has been known to be

used in rituals across religions.”

Lucero blinked, taking in the information.

“What does it do?”

“Some say it has magical properties. But I don’t know why Sergio is using it.”

A piercing cry echoed through the pyramid as Noelle and Lucero turned their attention to the main room again.

One of the masked men from each row stepped forward and wrenched the cape away from one of the girls, leaving them naked and powerless.

“Let us see who is the first to go on this new moon,” Sergio addressed everyone.

Noelle’s eyes widened as she saw the same men bring forth small cups and force some type of liquid down the girls’ throats. Not a moment after, they were both given a dagger as everyone stepped aside to give them more space.

She couldn’t believe her eyes when she realized the goal was for them to fight to the death, and everyone was cheering on from the sidelines.

“What the hell is this insanity?” She muttered under her breath.

Looking at Lucero from the corner of her eye, she noted the girl was still as stone, her eyes the size of two saucers as she watched the girls proceed to attack one another.

Grunts of pain filled the air as the girls fought for their lives—a macabre spectacle for those sick men’s enjoyment.

Yet the more time the girls spent fighting, the more sluggish their movements became, until they barely seemed in control of their own bodies.

“He drugged them,” Noelle stated, aghast.

The fight continued, and one girl got the best of the other as she sliced the front of her stomach wide open, blood

flowing to the ground. Yet the other girl wasn't resigned to losing. She did everything she could to withstand the pain and attack her opponent.

For a while, no one knew who was going to win. Both girls seemed determined, yet only one wasn't mortally injured. Against all odds, though, it was exactly the wounded one who won by sticking her knife into the other girl's throat, buckets of blood flowing freely down her body.

She was breathing hard at the end, barely able to move—from the drugs *and* from the shock.

Suddenly, a loud round of applause erupted in the room. Sergio was the first to clap followed by the other men.

“It seems we have our lucky one,” Sergio intoned, beckoning the girl to him in front of the hole.

Her eyes sparkled with renewed hope as she dragged herself towards him, her hand on her bleeding wound.

Sergio gave her a deceiving smile, and the moment she reached him he grabbed onto her hair, removing a hidden blade from his back and slicing her throat in a smooth line.

Both Lucero and Noelle barely stifled their gasps as they watched the ensuing scene.

One moment, the girl was in his grasp, the next her body fell to the ground, oriented towards the hole in the center as the blood drained from her neck.

As the red liquid flowed into the central pit, it slowly trickled down the viaducts, the blood mixing with the mercury in a peculiar combination.

But Sergio wasn't done. Grabbing the head of the dead girl, he brought his blade down on her neck, hitting incessantly until he decapitated. Only the head remained in his grasp, and holding it by the hair, he raised it in the air for everyone to see.

The men cheered him on, and one of the unmasked attendants brought over a pike for Sergio to impale the head on before placing it like a trophy in front of his throne.

“The girls can’t have been more than fifteen,” she finally whispered. “Why...What...”

Noelle reached out and squeezed her hand.

“There isn’t an explanation for evil,” she said. “And that’s exactly what we’re witnessing. Evil.”

Noelle’s statement was further reinforced when the men lined up in front of the dead girl, pulling their cloaks off and remaining fully naked.

“What...” Noelle muttered in disbelief as she noted what the first man in line was doing.

He was already sporting an erection and grabbing the headless body by the legs, he lined his penis to her sex, pushing inside. His groans permeated the air as he started thrusting into her.

It wasn’t long before he was done, and withdrawing from her, he took a blade and cut his hand.

Blood slowly trickled to the ground and once the entire surface of his palm was covered in red, he gripped his still hard penis and took a step to the right, stroking himself to completion and shooting his seed into the combination of blood and mercury from the viaducts.

The same action was repeated by the subsequent man. He fucked the corpse before cutting himself and spilling his semen into the viaduct.

Every single man did it. All but Sergio, and Noelle could guess why he wasn’t participating.

When they were done with it, they resumed their positions alongside the center of the room while Sergio sat down on his throne.

Loud chants erupted in the air as the men raised their arms in the air.

“We need to go,” Lucero whispered. “We can’t get caught or we’ll end up like that...”

Noelle nodded, though her gaze was still drawn towards the main room. Slowly, she managed to get herself to step back, following Lucero back through the tunnel and back to the exit at the base of the pyramid.

“Those men,” Noelle’s lips flattened into a thin line as she regarded Lucero once they were both safely ensconced into her room. “They are the barons, aren’t they?”

Lucero nodded.

“I can’t think of anyone else and the numbers match. Here,” she beckoned as she removed a piece of paper and a pen. “This is the hacienda and these are the temples,” she said as she drew some figures. “Then here are the villages and the main prominent areas in the region. They are all led by El Señor.”

“Eight. Just like the eight men.”

“Yes,” Lucero grimaced.

“Then what the hell was that ritual? I can understand dedicating a cult to an ancient divinity, but that is too extreme,” Noelle shook her head. “I’ve read about the old beliefs, and nowhere did I see anything about fucking corpses. Sacrifices, yes. But that... Good God, I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything more fucked up.”

“What if it’s not part of the old beliefs. What if it’s just El Señor’s way to doing things?”

“What do you mean?” Noelle frowned.

“What if...” Lucero bit her lip. “I know you saw it too. Those men... They enjoyed fucking the headless body. It wasn’t a hardship for them.”

“Are you saying he’s doing this to fulfill some sick fantasies for those men?”

Lucero slowly nodded.

“You might be right,” Noelle frowned. “Didn’t we wonder before why these people agree to worship Sergio? It might be

because he fulfills those fucked up desires. Maybe there's more. We need to go back there."

"What? Of course not. It's too dangerous," Lucero protested.

"You don't have to come, Lucero. But I'm going. I need as much information I can get if I'm to beat him at his own game," Noelle added in a determined voice.

"What do you mean? What do you have in mind?"

"What do the people around the hacienda think of me?" Noelle suddenly asked.

Lucero tilted her head to the side as she studied her.

"The foreign bitch," she answered with a straight face.

"They hate me, don't they? Even when they saw me with bruises all over my face, they still hated me."

Reluctantly, Lucero nodded.

"I don't blame them. To them, I *am* a foreigner, especially someone who doesn't seem to obey their master. But what if I wasn't?"

"I don't follow," Lucero frowned.

"What I mean," the corners of her mouth curled up, "if I want to get out of here alive, I need to have the same power Sergio has. More, even."

"But Noelle... You must know that is impossible."

"No, it's not," Noelle smiled, a plan slowly unfolding in her mind. "I just need to become a symbol, too."

23. NOELLE

The months slowly trickled by and Noelle did her best to learn more about the hacienda while keeping her distance from Sergio. She did her best to stay out of his way, hoping he would forget about her existence and the grudge he carried for her. After all, that was the only way she could put her plans into motion without being interrupted.

Luckily for her, though, Sergio soon became embroiled in a drug deal gone wrong at the border with Texas and split his time between the hacienda and up north.

“You’re sure about this?” Lucero asked worriedly as she watched Noelle put on a pair of loose pants and a light shirt.

She tied her hair tightly at her nape before taking a small flashlight and checking if it worked.

“I’ve been thinking about this for months now. It’s the only way I can escape the curse of my position,” Noelle pursed her lips.

Though she hadn’t interacted much with Sergio, she’d had enough time to see just what the people at the hacienda thought of her.

Whenever she walked by the staff, they didn’t hide their disdain of her, cursing her in Spanish and sometimes even spitting on her.

At first, she’d thought that their behavior was due to the fact that she was a foreigner where all Sergio’s previous wives had been local women or from neighboring regions. Yet as the

situation escalated, Noelle had to ask herself if there wasn't something more. After all, why would they be so against a foreigner?

They could ignore her, and they could not like her, but it seemed that they *detested* her.

It was only a few months after the wedding that she realized what the issue was.

Though maybe a few had had issues with her being an outsider, their abhorrence of her had resulted from the fact that they believed her to be responsible for the drought that had taken over the region.

Noelle had been shocked when she'd heard the whispers. But slowly, she'd come to realize *why* they believed it to be so. Just like why they believed Sergio to be some god who came to save them from their human woes.

It was all embedded in the culture.

The god could bring about the rain, but an evil spirit could come and take it away.

And since Noelle was the only new visitor, who also happened to be an outsider, she automatically became the evil they used to explain their lack of irrigation.

Sergio, on his end, had been unable to do much due to his embroilment in the cartel business. But that hadn't stopped Noelle from figuring out *how* he did it in the first place.

Nuevo León had some very arid regions, and the area where the hacienda and its neighboring villages were located happened to be one of them. The locals lived off their fields, and as Lucero had recounted, since Sergio had taken over power, there had never been such a period of drought before.

Since nature wasn't forthcoming with rain, Noelle knew that Sergio must have been doing *something* to ensure the fields were always irrigated. And with that thought in mind, she'd begun her exploration.

Of course, due to the distance between the hacienda and the villages, she could only visit the nearest one without drawing attention—and only at night when the locals wouldn't curse her out for invading their space.

But what had arisen as a theory had soon been confirmed.

It wasn't Sergio's godly power that irrigated the fields. It was modern technology.

Small viaducts had been built under the land with the pretext of supplying the entire area with clean water. That much was true. But among the clean water ducts, there were also some special ones, situated at strategic points in the field, that would leak and hydrate the earth. This all happened at night, when no one was working in the fields.

That meant that even without rain, Sergio could keep the fields irrigated and his people happy.

Yet as much as that seemed to be a perfect solution to farming issues, it wasn't without its drawbacks.

Water. Sergio needed a *lot* of water for his magic to take place. And that wasn't without its costs.

Despite the hacienda seemingly being low-cost, it was actually the opposite. In a way, one could say that Sergio was *buying* his worship, since the investments needed to keep up the ruse far outweighed any practical advantages.

But Noelle supposed that for a narcissist such as he, there was no need for practicality.

Yet that confirmed to her why he was involved in all sorts of projects to generate revenue.

Like any narcissist, he wanted money and wealth. But in his case, he also *needed* it.

The drug factories. The forced labor. The slavery he dealt in. They were all avenues that brought him money. And Noelle was still not sure she'd found them all.

With the drug factories, it was quite easy to see their use, and why Sergio would need cartel ties to push forward his business—he might make the drugs, but he needed someone to sell it for him.

The forced labor and the slavery had been trickier to investigate.

At first sight, it seemed that the forced labor was used strictly for the construction of the temples—that it was all for the community. However, Noelle had recently found out that it wasn't necessarily the case, nor were they only imprisoned enemies who paid with their blood and sweat. No, some were kidnapped victims—important individuals for whom Sergio would demand a ransom—while others were trafficking victims. The latter had been a shock for Noelle, but it had soon become clear that Sergio's business was multifaceted, and the traffic in human flesh was one of the most economically successful avenues.

He sold and bought men, women, children—for all reasons human beings might get trafficked. Men were used for organ trafficking and illegal fights on the dark web, women for the sex trade and children... Children were used for all three and more.

Most of them were traded—bought and sold again—and Sergio had personal agents who worked on these transactions. But every now and then local people were trafficked, too—particularly young girls. It was all for the benefit of society, as Sergio always put it, and no one dared question his authority.

In the past, those girls would have been given directly to Sergio, as had been the case of Lucero. But since he'd had a bit of a mishap in that regard, he'd changed gears. He'd simply chosen some women for a regular harem and declared that they would all be his—another reason for people to hate Noelle, because it seemed as though she neglected her own husband. But the girls that were yearly offered as tribute to Sergio were no longer needed, they were given other purposes—they were sold.

Noelle had been absolutely shocked to find that—and she'd only managed to get some information by exploring Sergio's computers when he'd been away from the hacienda.

The more she learned about the hell she was in, the more she realized that anything could happen to her.

If Sergio woke up one morning and decided he didn't care what Cisco could do to him, or if he thought he could successfully fight against Noelle's family, he could easily sell her off—make her disappear, never to be found again.

It was something she didn't want to take any chances with, and that meant pushing on with her plans despite the anxiety that built within her with every passing day.

You can do this, she told herself as she stared at Lucero's disapproving face.

While her friend meant well, she was still half trapped within the constrictions of the hacienda and the only life she'd ever known.

Lucero had only rebelled twice in her life. Once when her own autonomy had been at stake, and the second time when the man she'd fallen for had been in danger. Both times, it had been out of necessity and life-threatening circumstances.

Yet she didn't understand that every second for Noelle was life-threatening. Just because Sergio left her alone for now, that wouldn't be forever.

“Don't look at me like that, Lulu,” Noelle called affectionately. “This is the best of a moment we're ever going to get since Sergio isn't coming back for a few more days. And then who knows when he'll leave again since the Spring Festival is approaching.”

“I know. I just don't like the risks involved,” Lucero sighed.

The Spring Festival was an occasion of celebration for the entire hacienda and a moment in which Sergio would show his godly powers in an annual ceremony.

Not only was this the perfect time to put her plan in motion, but Noelle needed everything to be done *by* the Spring Festival. Everything hinged on that event since everyone would be present—all the villagers under Sergio.

“We’ve talked about this. We go in and out. If you really don’t feel comfortable coming with me I won’t begrudge you if you stay outside.”

Lucero bit her lip in apprehension before shaking her head.

“You know I’m coming with you,” she added.

“Good,” Noelle nodded. “I promise you this will work. I know it in my gut.”

Lucero didn’t say anything, but she didn’t have to. Her doubts were written all over her face.

Even so, she dressed in the clothes Noelle had laid out for her and prepared to follow her.

“You’re a good friend, Lucero,” Noelle suddenly said, a moment before they were about to go. “You’ve risked more for me than anyone I’ve ever known. And I want you to know how much I appreciate that,” she gave her a smile, taking her hands in hers and squeezing lightly.

“I trust you,” Lucero said. “One way or another, we’ll make it out of here alive.”

With one last lingering gaze full of emotion, Noelle opened the door and they both went out into the night.

The factory was a good ten minute walk from the hacienda, and luckily for them, they didn’t encounter anyone on their way there.

It was when they arrived that they faced the most obstacles.

The factory building stuck out like a sore thumb among the temples and the local architecture. A metal building that looked like an alien technological center, it was also the most impenetrable place at the hacienda.

Where they had entered the temple easily enough due to Lucero's knowledge, the factory was foreign territory. The only thing Noelle had been able to gather about it was the shift of the guards. And that was supposed to take place in exactly...one minute.

A loud noise erupted in the air and they both fitted themselves flat against the building, watching the door open. A man exited, looking around with a sleepy expression on his face as the door closed behind him.

He frowned when he saw that no one was coming to replace him, but Noelle and Lucero had made sure that his replacement had fallen asleep after a hearty dose of valerian mixed with opium—something Lucero had managed to obtain from one of the healers at the hacienda.

The man's lips flattened together as he debated whether he should leave his station before his change of shift arrived, but after looking at his watch a few times, he sighed and left.

Noelle and Lucero waited a few more minutes until he was out of sight before they went to the main door.

"The code," Lucero frowned. "We don't have the security code."

Noelle smiled furtively as she clicked on a succession of numbers on the security pad, a snapping sound indicating the door had opened.

"I told you I thought of everything."

"But how..." Lucero blinked in surprise.

"With how much Sergio loves himself, and has made sure that everyone else loves him too, it stands to reason that the codes would have some type of significance for him. I compiled a list of all the dates I could figure out, but to be honest, it was just luck that I got it from the first," Noelle chuckled

"So what was it?"

“The day of his *coronation*,” Noelle said, imbuing the last word with irony.

Both girls laughed as they made their way inside.

The first thing they saw was an empty desk for the main guard. Noelle hurried towards it, taking a seat on the chair and opening the computer.

“Do you see anything?”

Noelle pursed her lips as she went through all the documents. There were too many for her to sift through so expediently, but as she suddenly clicked on something, she jumped back images from the surveillance feed took over the entire screen.

“What...” Lucero frowned, but as she saw the screen, she barely held back a gasp.

“I thought this was only to produce the drugs,” Noelle muttered.

There were feeds from multiple rooms, all housing people behaving in what one could only call irrational ways.

“They’re trying them on people,” Lucero said, still unable to recover from the shock. “I thought the forced labor was awful but this... What is that person doing?” The last question was uttered in a low voice as they watched a man hit his head repeatedly against a wall.

“I don’t know what they’re doing, but we don’t have time for this,” Noelle suddenly said. Looking at the clock, she brought her teeth over her lower lip, nibbling at it as she did a quick calculation in her head. “They will soon find the sleeping guard and someone will come here. We need to grab what we came for and leave.”

“But...” Lucero was about to protest, and Noelle knew well enough what she was going to say. Her friend was too empathetic for her own good—sometimes painfully so. Noelle recognized it as a nice quality to have, but only when you lived in an ideal world where your safety was not so

precarious. Yet Lucero could not stop herself from wanting to help others.

“Not now,” she said dismissively as she turned her attention back to the files, scouring through them and scanning the list of drugs housed in the factory.

“Shit,” she cursed, her eyes widening. “They aren’t *just* making drugs, Lucero,” Noelle said as she scrolled through a document. “They are experimenting with *new* ones.”

“What?”

“Look,” Noelle pointed at a screen. Lucero blinked as she struggled to read the words. She wasn’t very proficient at reading since she’d never had enough practice growing up.

“I don’t understand.”

“These are all different trials. This one,” she pointed to a column, “has a different list of ingredients than the other one. They’re trying to create another drug by mixing a bunch of others.”

“Can you find what we’re looking for?”

“I’m trying,” Noelle pursed her lips, typing different names for the drug into the database.

She couldn’t claim to be any expert in the subject, but she’d watched a lot of shows and read plenty about mainstream drugs.

“I can’t find any LSD,” she ground her teeth in annoyance when her search came up empty. “Let me try something else,” she murmured as she typed in the name of another psychedelic.

“And bingo,” she breathed out in relief when she found something. “It says it’s stored in room twelve, whatever that may be.”

“I think I may help with that,” Lucero interjected.

Noelle’s eyebrows went up in question before she followed to where Lucero was pointing—a map of the building.

With a wide smile, Noelle jumped off the chair and laid a loud smooch on Lucero's cheek.

"I love you," she added effusively before turning to study the map.

It took her a moment to familiarize herself with the layout, but once she was confident she could do it, she asked Lucero to stand guard at the entrance and look out the window for anyone approaching the factory.

Noelle hurried down the corridor as she looked for the right room.

There were a multitude of doors on each side, and she assumed that was where the test subjects were housed. She was curious about that, but she had a goal and she couldn't let herself be distracted.

It took her a little longer than she would have wished to find room twelve. As it happened, the laboratories were underground, hidden from view. Yet as she found that piece of information, Noelle realized that all of the upper floors must be for experiments, which meant there must be even more rooms with test subjects.

Over the time she'd been at the hacienda, she'd had to accept that there were awful things happening around her that she had no control of. But somehow knowing those people were less than a few steps away from her made her falter—especially when she *shouldn't* falter.

Wasn't everyone on their own? She was fighting for her own survival, she couldn't afford to care for anyone else. She imagined Lucero would rather help them than help herself. But that wasn't Noelle. Not even when her heart ached at the images that replayed in her mind.

She had her purpose—one that was above herself, because though she fought for her survival, it was more than just a selfish purpose. It was more than the human drive for self-preservation.

No, Noelle was fighting for Blue. And the only way she could get to him—the only way she could find out what had happened to him—was if she had the resources to do so.

She needed to get to the top.

Though the journey might be fraught with unspeakable dangers and choices that would compromise her morality, she'd already decided that she would stop at nothing to get to him.

That was her life's mission.

Find her Blue and for one day, even one minute, nestle close in his arms and feel the true meaning of love.

Turning sharply, she shoved everything else out of her mind as she strode forward, reaching the designated room. As expected, it was locked. But if there was something Noelle had learned in her rather short time, it was how to bend the rules—and lock picking automatically fit in that category.

She removed a few pins she'd prepared in advance from her pocket and she got to work. Her movements were brisk and efficient. She knew time wasn't on her side and she needed to get this done before she was caught.

Sweat beaded on her forehead as she focused her efforts on the lock. In a few moments, though, she heard the tell-tale click and she grabbed the knob, testing the door.

A smile pulled at her lips as she successfully entered the room. Knowing time wasn't on her side she hurried to scan the various shelves, opening each to see which one housed the psychedelic mushrooms.

A few tries later and she managed to find tens of bags full of shrooms.

Noelle wasn't too sure how much she needed, so she took two bags, stuffing them in her pouch. With that done, she quickly went out, heading to where she'd left Lucero.

She was at the other end of the corridor when she heard a piercing scream. Her eyes widened and she dashed forward to

see Lucero struggling in the arms of one of the guards—the one who should have been asleep back at the hacienda.

“Andale, muñequita. Si haces lo que te digo no le voy a decir a nadie que estuviste aquí.”

“Sueltame!” Lucero cried out, trying to strike him as he tore at her shirt.

Noelle didn't think. She simply acted.

Rushing forward, she grabbed the first solid object she saw—a bottle of mezcal the previous guard had left on the table—and she hit the man over the head.

She took him by surprise, and with a cry of pain, he turned towards her, releasing Lucero. Unfortunately, her blow hadn't been strong enough to hurt him.

Before he could hit her, Noelle raised the bottle again, channeling all the strength she could muster as she brought it over his head.

This time, the blow was powerful enough that the bottle broke against his head, shards of glass flying everywhere. A bigger piece got embedded in the man's forehead, the cut deep and leaking blood.

“Que...” he muttered before his eyes rolled in the back of his head and he collapsed to the floor.

Lucero was shaking with fear, her eyes full of shock as she looked at Noelle before bringing her gaze lower to the man bleeding on the floor.

“Are you ok?” Noelle asked.

Lucero nodded.

Breathing out in relief, Noelle sank to her knees next to the man, bringing her hand to his neck and checking for his pulse.

“He's still alive,” she murmured, her heart beating loudly in her chest. “We need to dispose of him.”

“W-what?” Lucero stammered.

“We need to kill him and make it look like an accident. And we need to do it fast.”

“But why... We don't have to kill him...”

“He's going to tell them he saw us here, and if Sergio hears that...” Noelle trailed off, the implication clear.

“But we'd be killing him,” Lucero continued, still pale from the shock.

“If we don't, Sergio will kill *us*. Is that what you want?”

“It's murder, Noelle. How could we...”

“It's not murder,” she replied with a straight face. “It's self-defense. You know what he was about to do—what he wanted from you.”

“Yes but...”

“We need to act fast. We don't have time to argue the semantics of murder, Lulu. If we get discovered it will be worse. So much worse...”

The other girl was still reluctant, although she gave her a slow nod.

“You don't have to do anything, alright?” Noelle felt the need to clarify. “Just help me clean the scene.”

“But how are we going to dispose of him?” Lucero whispered. “Short of burying him outside I cannot imagine how we could make him disappear.”

Noelle shook her head.

“We can't do that,” she said pensively. “It's too risky to be out in the open digging a hole. It's even more risky if they find it later on. We need to do something that will ensure he won't *ever* resurface.”

“But what?” Lucero blinked.

Noelle's brows creased in concentration as she recalled passing by a stretcher on the way to the labs.

Without saying a word, Noelle got up and ran to where she'd seen the stretcher, grabbing it and leading it back to the body.

"Help me load him on the stretcher," she said, already pulling on the man's arms.

He let out a quiet moan as he shifted slightly.

"Lucero!" She called out when she saw the other girl hadn't moved an inch.

"Sorry. I'm a bit out of it."

"I know this is horrible, but we need to move fast."

Lucero nodded.

"But what are we going to do with it after?"

"We're going to burn it," Noelle added, suddenly remembering the floor plan. "There's a furnace room in the basement. Help me load him onto the stretcher and I'll do it. You just clean the blood off the floor."

Lucero blinked in surprise. For a moment she was quiet as she mulled over Noelle's words. Eventually, she agreed, though Noelle could see how uncomfortable she was with the entire situation.

Even with the two of them, it took them a few moments to be able to load the man fully onto the stretcher.

"Look for bleach in the janitor's closet and try to wipe it as best you can," Noelle instructed. "I'll deal with this."

"But... Are you sure you can handle it?" Lucero added, pink marring her cheeks as she couldn't even look at the dead body.

"I'm sure," Noelle nodded.

She wouldn't drag Lucero into her mess any more than she had to. She already knew that they were vastly different when it came to their outlooks on life. Lucero was kindness impersonate. Noelle... She wished she were like Lucero.

Unfortunately, whether by birth or by design, Noelle was wickedness incarnate.

Leaving Lucero behind to clean the mess on the floor, Noelle led the stretcher towards the elevator she'd spotted at the end of the corridor.

The man continued to moan softly, attempting to move but being unable to.

She squashed any pity she might have felt by telling herself that he'd been the first to attack Lucero. It wasn't as if he was innocent. Yet even if he had been innocent... Noelle couldn't say she wouldn't have acted the same.

"It's me or him," she whispered in an attempt to convince herself that she was doing the right thing.

Once in the elevator, she chose the basement key.

"God, I'm so happy I got a look at the floor plan before," she muttered to herself.

The furnace was likely where Sergio got rid of those he no longer had any use for.

Considering the entire factory was more like a testing facility, Noelle could very well imagine some test subject didn't make it out alive.

The elevator pinged when it reached the basement, the doors opening before her.

Gritting her teeth, she pushed the stretcher forward, looking right and left to identify where the furnace room was.

It took her a few minutes of pushing and pulling the body around before she finally found the room. It had an industrially sized furnace, and she noticed that all the smoke was being pushed through a huge vent that had been installed in the ground itself.

"Wow," she whispered as she looked around.

The facility was already huge, but she realized that the basement extended far further than just the foundation of the

building.

They had built it under the ground.

“Ah,” the low sound brought her back to the present and she shoved her misplaced admiration of the building out of her mind.

Looking at the man on the stretcher, Noelle realized she would have to actually kill him before pushing him into the furnace. She wasn't as heartless as to let him burn to death—that was one horrible way to die she wouldn't wish on her worst enemies.

Ok, maybe Sergio was the exception. He could burn in hell for all she cared.

Quickly swiping her gaze around the room, she noticed a knife on a table.

“I guess knife it is,” she muttered, her lips flattened into a thin line.

Despite having *aided* Ann Marie's demise, she hadn't actually killed anyone with her own bare hands. She might have injured the man just now, but was she capable of coldly dispatching him?

She pondered the matter for a moment—she couldn't spare more.

Yet no matter how much she thought about it, it always came down to the same conclusion. It was him, or her. It was his life, or hers.

And Noelle was nothing if not determined to survive.

Taking a deep breath, she took the ultimate decision.

With hesitant steps, she neared the stretcher. The knife felt heavy in her hand, the blade holding the weight of her soul and ultimate damnation. For despite knowing she *must* do this, she also knew this was the beginning of the end.

Maybe in the past it had been involuntary, but this, right now, was premeditated. She was about to commit murder,

despite arguing the semantics with Lucero. Deep down, she recognized it for what it truly was.

She let out a heavy breath as she tightened her hand on the hilt of the knife.

“It’s him or me,” she repeated, and squeezing her eyes shut, she aimed for his heart, burying the knife deep in his chest.

There were a couple more sounds that brushed against her ear. Still, she didn’t dare open her eyes again until only silence surrounded her.

Blinking her eyes open, she brought her other hand to his neck, feeling for his pulse.

He was...dead.

Noelle swallowed hard against the rush of guilt that assailed her. Yet despite the discomfort settling in her chest, she pushed forward, thinking only of the future. Because this was all for the future.

Noelle quickly opened the furnace door and set the temperature.

Before her conscience could make another appearance, she steeled herself as she grabbed the man’s shoulders and pushed with all her might. Once he was inside, she stripped the stained sheet off the stretcher, throwing it inside, too. She then closed the door and played with the settings until fire blazed from the other side of the furnace.

She took exactly three stabilizing breaths before she pushed her chin up high and strode out of the room.

Lucero was still scrubbing the floor, tears flowing down her cheeks as she stifled a hiccup.

“Lulu?” Noelle called softly.

She stifled as she raised her gaze, her eyes red.

“Let’s go. You cleaned everything.”

“Everything?” She whispered, looking back down. Her fingers were red from the combination of bleach

“Let’s get you out of here,” Noelle said, stooping low and helping Lucero to her feet.

The girl was still in shock, trembling from head to toe.

Ensuring everything was as they had found it and that she had the bags of shrooms they’d come for, Noelle led Lucero out of the facility.

As they got back to the hacienda, the girls went back to Noelle’s apartment, locking themselves inside.

Seeing that Lucero was still mostly out of it, Noelle took out a bottle of alcohol, filling two glasses and handing one to her friend.

“He was going to hurt you,” she pointed out in an attempt to make her feel better.

“I know,” she whispered. “It still doesn’t make it better. Or right.”

“Oh, it does make it right. I truly don’t know how you survived so far with that soft heart of yours, Lulu. Someone could literally stab you to death and you would still not wish to retaliate.”

“Well,” she took a sip of alcohol, licking her lips as she stared into the distance. “I would be dead. I wouldn’t be able to retaliate anyway.”

Noelle stared at her for a moment before bursting out in laughter.

“There’s still hope for you,” she chuckled.

“Is there?” Lucero asked after a moment.

“We survive, Lulu. That’s what we’re doing, and what we’ll continue to do,” Noelle sighed. “I know you’re not comfortable with some scenarios, so leave everything to me. My soul is already black. Yours can still be saved.”

“Can it? Because I doubt it.”

“I’ll never ask you to do something that goes against your beliefs again,” Noelle added.

“No.”

“What?”

“I can do it. I can...try. I can’t promise I’ll always be able to do it, but I’ll try. You’re right that we need to survive,” she took a deep breath. “For too long I thought I didn’t deserve better—that my fate was to suffer.”

“You can’t possibly believe that!” Noelle gasped.

“Not anymore,” she smiled. “I believe there is something out there—you called it karma. I think it exists, and what happened to El Señor is proof enough that there is justice in the world.”

“Why do you keep calling him El Señor when you know he’s nothing more than a charlatan?”

“Do I? I guess it’s been ingrained in my brain,” Lucero mused. “It feels odd to call him anything else.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t call him at all. Maybe we should just refer to him as *it*.”

“It?” Lucero’s eyes sparkled with amusement.

Noelle was happy to see that her friend was slowly recovering from her shock so she continued to joke around, finding different funny names to refer to Sergio—creating their very own secret language.

They drank and laughed, and for a moment, the world didn’t seem as bleak.

24. NOELLE

The celebrations for the Spring Festival started early. The entire hacienda was agog with excitement at seeing Sergio use his godly gifts and worship him even more than they did year round.

Noelle was alone watching from the sidelines since Lucero had been ordered to help set up the outer courtyard so it could accommodate all of the villagers that would be joining for the holiday.

With everyone so busy, it meant that Noelle's actions were not as scrutinized so she could accomplish the first part of her plan.

She'd grinded the shrooms she'd stolen to a fine powder, and the next step was to dump it into the stew that would be served to all the guests. She was still a little wary of the dosages, but from what she'd been able to research, if she gave them slightly too much, they would just hallucinate for longer.

She didn't necessarily care how much they hallucinated as long as they did.

The opportunity arose the night before the celebration when the kitchen was left unattended.

Given the quantity of stew the cooks had had to prepare, they'd cooked everything the day before and had left the pots in the main kitchen. It was infinitely easy for Noelle to sneak inside and heat them up while stirring the ground shrooms inside until the contents became homogeneous.

With that part out of the way, she needed to prepare for her following step.

For months, she'd practiced the words in the ancient language with Lucero's help and she was sure she would succeed. But while she'd thought of all the details, there was still the element of surprise.

She would be putting on the performance of her lifetime, and she would be doing it in front of Sergio and his faithful villagers, which made it the ultimate risk. If it didn't work according to plan... She was going to die.

She knew that. Lucero knew that.

She either succeeded in her ruse, or she would die for it—there was no in-between.

Yet her life was at risk for every moment she breathed in his foreign land. Whether she died by her own folly or because Sergio caught her unawares, she knew the end would still be death.

Now, if she succeeded... That was another story altogether.

If she managed to pull off her plan, she would not only get away with her life intact, but she was sure that everyone would give her the same reverence they gave Sergio, if not more.

She would finally have...power.

Was it for power that she was doing all this, or was it merely for survival? Noelle had asked herself that question numerous times as she prepared for the Spring Festival.

Deep down, she knew she could have found other ways—would have likely been able to contact her family if she tried enough. But a part of her didn't want to.

She wanted to succeed on her own. She wanted to achieve power *on her own*. Because at the end of the day what was it to her if she returned to her family? She would still be just as powerless, her life not her own, her choices nonexistent.

At least this way, whether she lived or died would have been her own choice.

She would have had the power to decide—something she hadn't had the luxury of many times in her life.

And if it worked... She was certain she would be one step closer to finding her Blue.

The months might have passed. The seasons might have changed. But her heart remained the same.

Still hurting. Still yearning. Still...loving.

Blue never strayed far from her thoughts for she always imagined what he would say or do in a certain situation. He was in her dreams, both at night and during the day.

He simply...was one with her.

On the one hand, it gave her the necessary strength to plan and plot, to wait and bide her time. But it also made the chasm inside her heart deepen every time she realized she still did not know how he was—if he was still alive.

Despite that, Noelle lied to herself.

She convinced herself he was still alive, thinking of her just as she thought of him. She convinced herself that one way or another, she would find him and he would fall for her as he'd been meant to from the beginning.

It didn't matter if it was delusional—if even Lucero thought her mad for entertaining such thoughts about someone she'd never once talked to in real life.

Maybe she was mad. Maybe she didn't want to be anything other than mad.

Because at least she still had him.

The more she found herself in conflict with her daily life, the more she relied on her dreams—that land she could only visit at night but which she could tailor perfectly to her liking. And there, her Blue—Rafaelo as she'd call him affectionately if they were face to face—was hers and hers alone.

How many times had she dreamed about him holding her, kissing her, making love to her? How many times she'd snuggled into her pillow, inhaling deeply as if she could recreate his scent?

She wasn't ashamed to admit she spent her days half a ghost because her nights were consumed by thoughts of him. If she wasn't plotting her next move, she was imagining how her future would look like with him.

Lucero had been very frank with her.

"I don't know how you could trust another man after El Señor."

"Blue isn't just any other man," she'd replied, almost offended. "He's...the kindest, most thoughtful person. Not all men are like this, Lucero," she'd told her friend, knowing her own experiences had soured her completely towards the opposite sex.

"But...wouldn't you be scared that he..."

"He would never raise a hand against me."

Lucero had refrained from questioning her assurance considering she didn't know the real him. Instead, she'd confessed that she didn't believe there were good men. All her life she'd never met one who didn't want to either rape her or abuse her.

Noelle could certainly understand her point of view.

But Blue was Blue. And she was absolutely certain that he would never do anything against her wishes.

That had been their last conversation on the topic since Lucero had seen that Noelle was unyielding when it came to her Blue. Instead, she'd quietly supported her.

But that was Lucero. She was quite possibly the purest person Noelle had ever met. And despite her naiveté that was so contrary to their battle for survival, Noelle didn't want to see her lose the core of who she was. For that reason alone, she'd promised herself that she would never force Lucero out

of her comfort zone, preferring to keep quiet about the more morally questionable matters. After all, if she found out, Lucero would involve herself simply to help Noelle—even if it went against everything she believed in.

Noelle didn't want that. She was already gone, so she wasn't worried about herself. But Lucero could still hold onto her humanity for longer.

"The ceremony will start in an hour," Lucero's voice made Noelle turn her head towards the door of her room.

"I'm ready," she nodded, tying the traditional belt around her waist.

She did her best to conceal the small bags she'd attached to the body underneath the clothes, for that was to be the main attraction of the show.

"It has to work," Lucero said as she neared her side to help her put on the headdress.

Noelle noted the difference in her wording. Usually, she would ask her if it would work, not that it *had* to work.

"It will," she assured her. "I have this. By the end of the day, Sergio will kneel to *me*," she said, determination dripping from every syllable.

Looking at her reflection in the mirror, Noelle saw the same conviction shine bright in her eyes, just as she noted her different appearance. It had nothing to do with the traditional clothing she was wearing. Rather, it had everything to do with who she'd become—the person she'd transformed to be able to come to this point.

It hadn't been easy.

She would be lying if she said she hadn't thought about what she was about to do countless times, knowing she was either going towards her salvation, or her death. Such thoughts tended to change a person, whether they wanted to or not.

But that was another lesson she had to learn.

With the power to choose also came the responsibility for one's choice.

"Let's do this," she nodded.

Lucero lent Noelle her arm as they slowly made their way to the courtyard. She had to be careful to not disturb her outfit and make sure she didn't burst any of the bags underneath before the time was right.

Music blasted through the air, together with the sound of people talking loudly and singing along.

Together, all the villages were composed of some hundreds of people—all present today to see Sergio do his yearly sacrifice.

Yet by this point, they must have already been served the stew, the psychedelic slowly seeping into their systems and getting them ready for what Noelle had in mind.

"Sergio won't even know what hit him," she joked as they hid in a corner, waiting for Sergio to make his debut onto the makeshift stage that had been built in the middle of the courtyard.

"I can't wait to see his face when he realizes what's happening," Lucero chuckled.

"Is everything else ready, too?"

Lucero nodded.

"I released all the horses from the stables. When they hear the sound, they will panic and run around."

"Good. What about the other thing I asked you?"

"It wasn't easy," Lucero pursed her lips. "But I managed to attach it to his belt. Luckily he'd had two bowls of stew so his aim wasn't very good."

"Tell me he didn't grope you."

"He wanted to. Didn't succeed."

"Good."

“You still haven’t told me what you mean to do with that,” Lucero frowned.

“It’s better you don’t know until the moment is right,” Noelle smiled, though it didn’t quite reach her eyes.

Lucero pursed her lips but she didn’t say anything more. Instead, she just handed Noelle the basket with the goods.

“They aren’t poisonous, so don’t worry too much.”

“They can still strangle me to death,” Noelle joked.

“I don’t think it’s the time to think of such scenarios.”

“You’re right,” Noelle sighed. “Just look at him,” she nodded towards the stage.

There were two bands playing. One on the right side of the stage and the other on the left side.

Sergio was garbed in a colorful tunic held together by a gold band. He had an ostentatious headdress on—a symbol of his status. And as he walked among the villagers, they all knelt before him, blessing him and thanking him for all he’d done for the region.

Some women wept. Others fainted from being so close to the *god*. The men, too, sported a perpetual expression of awe as their knees trembled.

Noelle’s lips curled in disdain as she watched the way Sergio preened at the adoration coming his way. And that’s how she knew that it wasn’t all about the money, or the authority to conduct his business as he pleased. No, it all came down to his ego being constantly fed with this obscene veneration.

“It’s starting,” Lucero whispered as the music suddenly changed to a quieter melody.

“Bienvenido a todos,” Sergio’s voice boomed as he spoke into the microphone.

“I’m surprised he didn’t require you on the stage, too,” her friend commented.

“I’m not. He knows how much the people dislike me and he wants to keep it this way. If he had invited me there, it would have meant he was acknowledging me publicly, and that’s the last thing he wanted.”

“You know,” Lucero licked her lips, her head tilted to the side. “There’s something that I just don’t understand.”

“What is it?” Noelle turned towards her.

“If you ignore what you did to him on the wedding night, why was he so adamant to marry you—an outsider? He would have known the people wouldn’t take well to you, as they are doing right now.”

“I’m not sure. From what I heard, Sergio insisted on the wedding. Although...” she paused, her brows knit together as a scene from months ago came to mind.

She’d laid on the floor, bleeding, while Sergio had paced around the room in a fit of anger. He’d muttered something about his plans going to shit because of her—that he’d promised something that he couldn’t deliver.

It had been only later that she’d found out Sergio, embodying his full godly persona years back, had made a prediction about his future wife—an outsider who would bring forth change.

“I think he wanted to use me,” Noelle said pensively.

“Use you?”

Noelle briefly recounted what she’d heard.

“I think he planned to change things around but he didn’t know how to legitimize his ideas.”

“So he pretended it was a divine prophecy?” Lucero snorted.

“It might be why everyone hates me so much. What if he didn’t specify *what* change, and now the people think I’ve come to destroy everything?”

Lucero pursed her lips, mulling over the information for a moment.

“It could be. El Señor could tell them anything and they would believe it. He could even...”

They both turned towards each other at the same time, their eyes widening in stark realization.

Sergio didn't need to do anything to Noelle—not with his own hands. He only needed to insinuate that she was a pest, and the villagers would take care of her.

Wouldn't that be perfect for him? If a mob suddenly trampled over Noelle and killed her *accidentally*?

Right at that moment, Sergio's voice boomed in the air, his words echoing her thoughts.

“Creo que han visto que nuestra tierra ha sido invadida. Que tenemos a nuestros lados la personificación del diablo. Y hoy, estoy aquí para mostrárselo que los voy a proteger como lo he hecho durante decadas. Hoy, nos enfrentaremos juntos a esta plaga y vamos a enterar este desgraciado capítulo de nuestras vidas. Ahora...”

“The motherfucker...” Noelle muttered. “I need to act. Fast.”

“But Noelle... They just ate. Don't they need more time for the drug to act?”

“I can't let him make me public enemy number one,” she said determinately. “Be ready to sound the alarm on my command.”

Before Lucero could say anything else, Noelle took over the lid off the basket, reaching inside and wrapping her hands around the serpent's body as she carefully draped it around her shoulders. And taking a step forward, she pushed her chin up in defiance as she prepared for the craziest moment in her life.

Let the show begin.

Noelle slowly made her way through the crowd, and upon seeing her, people stepped out of her way, a clear path appearing between her and the stage.

Everyone was talking in hushed tones, but among their chatter, Noelle recognized the signs of the drug taking effect.

Some thought she was a stranger. Others believed her to be an apparition. Some even claimed she was a goddess as they saw the snake slithering on her shoulders.

She straightened her back as she brought her hands to the buttons of her tunic, slowly unbuttoning them and letting the material fall to the ground. In the process, the bags she'd sown on the inside of the cloth burst, red liquid dripping down her naked body.

Her clothes slowly pooled at her feet, her only cover the animal blood that draped her from head to toe.

Gasps erupted in the crowd, people's eyes bulging in their heads as they stared at her.

She walked sensuously towards the stage, the white snake hissing and baring its fangs to the people on the side.

Suddenly, some dropped to their knees, a prayer on their lips. Others, swooned and crossed themselves—perchance hoping that christianity would give them an answer.

Noelle smiled furtively as she realized they were seeing her as she had wished.

Through the lens of the psychedelic, they didn't see a small woman covered in blood. They saw a graceful creature being *born* from blood, walking proudly towards the stage with her faithful reptilian companion.

The music stopped.

Sergio stared at her unblinkingly. He couldn't even mask his shock as he took her in.

“What is the meaning of this?” He gritted out at her, noticing from the corner of his eyes how people were reacting

to Noelle.

“¿Cómo me hablas así, hijo?” She asked in a clear tone, her accent flawless.

Sergio’s mouth dropped open, as did everyone else’s.

“Hijo?” He repeated.

“No me digas que no me reconoces en este cuerpo.”

Whispers floated in the air. Though the drug distorted people’s perceptions of what they were seeing, it didn’t fully inhibit their understanding.

Everyone heard what she’d said.

Son.

She’d called Sergio son.

But how could she do that, unless...

“Tōnacācihuātl! Someone suddenly yelled.

The name echoed through the crowd, everyone joining in a choir.

“Tōnacācihuātl?” Sergio sneered.

“Asi me tratas?” She tilted her head, keeping her composure as she looked him dead in the eye.

Screams. Prayers. Chants.

The entire yard was agog with reactions, some stronger and more vocal than others. Yet at first sight, Noelle could see that the combination of her appearance and the drug they’d imbibed had the intended effect.

They no longer saw her as Noelle—the abandoned wife, the outsider.

Now she was just a vassal for Tōnacācihuātl.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing, Noelle?” Sergio snapped as he climbed down the stage, striding towards her, murderous rage oozing from him.

Fernando was following closely behind, his expression closed off as he awaited Sergio's orders.

Noelle's gaze dipped to his belt, an insidious smile pulling at her lips.

As Sergio stopped in front of her, she realized she didn't even mind her lack of clothing anymore, the blood giving her a power unlike any other. Like a drape over her body, it hugged her skin, providing an immortal armor between her and the world. And in the eyes of the world, she was just that—timeless, immortal.

Unnatural.

“What do you think I'm doing?” She murmured softly, the words only for his ears.

Looking right and left, she raised her arms in the air, more drops of blood falling to the ground.

At the same time, one by one, more people knelt down in front of her.

“What the fuck,” Sergio burst out, grabbing her hand in a bruising hold.

Noelle bit down against the pain, her body recognizing danger as it had become too inured to Sergio's revenge sessions. It took everything within her not to give in—roll to the ground into a fetus position to avoid being hit.

She raised her gaze, brazenly looking at him.

He can't hurt me, she told herself. Now, more than ever, he couldn't hurt her in front of everyone.

“I'm here for one reason and one reason only,” she smiled smugly. “Payback,” she whispered.

Right at that moment, she squeezed her fist, clicking the small transmitter she'd hidden.

The countdown began.

“Tu,” she said as she wrenched her arm from Sergio, taking a step back as she pointed towards Fernando.

Counting the seconds, she backed further and further away until the time was almost upon her.

“La muerte vino por ti,” her voice thundered ominously.

Fernando’s eyes narrowed in question while Sergio’s widened in alarm.

He barely managed to take a step away from Fernando when his body exploded from the waist up. Pieces of bone and flesh flew through the air, blood splattering among the crowd and spilling onto the ground.

Noelle’s gaze went to the house and she gave a harsh nod—her signal to Lucero.

In no time, animals started running around the hacienda, the thumping of the horses blasting through the air. They were all running amok, surrounding the crowd of people, with some cutting through it. Yet through all of this, no one moved. They might have been alarmed, but their faith kept them rooted to the spot.

Despite the mass hysteria the animals should have caused, the people were still on their knees, watching Noelle with awe in their eyes, her goddess name on their lips as they intoned that she’d come to save them.

Too bad, though, that she’d only come to damn them.

And Sergio was the first one on Noelle’s list.

25. NOELLE

SIX MONTHS LATER

“**Y**our order, as requested,” Alonso gave her a dazzling smile as he laid out the variety of knives and weapons Noelle had commissioned.

“Thank you, Alonso. You’re always coming through for me,” Noelle batted her lashes as a slow smile spread across her lips.

“I told you *querida*, just say the word and I’ll take you from that husband of yours.”

“Oh, come on, Alonso. You know Sergio. He would never allow it,” she murmured absentmindedly, her attention solely on the weapons.

“Unfortunately,” he grimaced, releasing a weary sigh.

Noelle picked up the heels he’d made specifically for her—fashionable but deadly as the heel had been replaced with a knife.

After her demonstration in front of the crowd, everything had changed.

She might have risked death, on the off chance it wouldn’t work, but it seemed her luck hadn’t run out. Despite the drugs—and *because* of them—everyone at the hacienda had come to believe she was the incarnation of Tōnacācihuātl, and as such, she was higher on the godly hierarchy than Sergio.

Tōnacācihuātl was the mother of Tezcatlipoca, and that meant her power was absolute. With everything so public, Sergio had had no other recourse than to properly recognize her and treat her respectfully—though Noelle had no doubt he wished to strangle her on the spot.

She might have thought the entire ruse silly, but for the people in the region everything was real. The gods were real, as were their powers. Fernando’s demise had been proof

enough that she was capable of great destruction despite being touted as a goddess of fertility. And because of that, people not only treated her with reverence, but also with fear.

They were convinced that if they crossed her, they would end up the same as Fernando, if not worse.

Not one to waste the opportunity that had arisen, Noelle had quickly made use of her newly elevated status and insinuated herself as a leading figure at the hacienda, requesting access to every aspect of its leadership.

It hadn't been easy to get through Sergio, who still abhorred the very sight of her. But seeing that anything he might do to her would incur the wrath of his people, Sergio had decided on a more *peaceful* approach. He'd proposed an alliance through which both would mind their own business while working for the good of the community—or, in simpler terms, *Sergio's* good. Noelle didn't fool herself for one moment that everything he did was for his own benefit, including accepting her new position. But she'd accepted, for she had her own ulterior purpose in doing so.

Yet that had been merely the beginning for Noelle.

As Tōnacācihuātl, she'd escaped certain death and had gained access to a metaphorical power. But she needed more—much, much more. Her initial goal might have been to ensure her survival, but her subsequent one was to find her Blue. And for *that*, she needed more than just the perceived adoration or terror of the people.

She needed *tangible* power.

And so the negotiations had started.

Since she had the upper hand, she'd managed to persuade Sergio to let her manage the drug testing facility. Her reasoning had been simple. By gaining access to the workings of the drug facilities, she would get control of the product while also infiltrating Sergio's extensive international network.

From the beginning, she'd taken her role seriously as she'd changed the protocols involved so that less people died

because of the testing. At the same time, she brought new ideas to the table as she suggested new combinations of drugs that could potentially make Sergio a lot of money.

When the new batch of experimental drugs had become a success, she'd officially proven herself in order to go to the next step.

Connections.

She needed to find the right people that could help her track Rafaelo, and she knew that only by becoming a respectable figure in the underground world could she achieve such a thing. And she had.

For a couple of weeks now she'd started attending auctions looking for the perfect test subjects, and in the process she'd made new acquaintances.

One of them was Alonso Vasquez—a weapon dealer that specialized in custom artillery.

“I'll see you next month?” Alonso asked, his tone hopeful.

“I think this is plenty for now. I'll reach out when I need more,” Noelle shut him down gently.

Signaling to one of her men to carry out the items, she turned to Alonso and gave him her thanks before heading out.

“I'll be waiting, querida,” he winked at her.

Noelle kept a pleasant smile on until she left the building. But as soon as she got in the car, her disgust showed on her face.

“That bad?” Lucero asked with a raised brow.

“As usual,” Noelle sighed. “Why is it that every man I interact with can't take a hint? They all want only one thing. Just because I'm female doesn't mean I'm open for business,” she groaned.

“At least they're not trying to force themselves on you.”

“Oh, trust me, Alonso would have long done it if he wasn’t afraid of Sergio. You remember how he behaved last time.”

“That’s why he’s waiting for you to give him the green light. If you’re a willing participant then Sergio won’t have to know,” Lucero pointed out.

“Men,” Noelle rolled her eyes. “I’ve made it clear it’s never going to happen but he’s still trying his luck.”

“I think the more unavailable you are, the more he wants you. Remember what happened last week at the auction.”

Lucero always accompanied Noelle at auctions to pick the new test subjects. Though at first she’d objected because she didn’t morally agree with the concept, she’d put her own beliefs aside to be by Noelle’s side.

Every time they traveled outside of the hacienda, Noelle received all sorts of propositions from the men present—most not used to being rejected by a woman. And a few times, Noelle had been forced to *make* them understand, even if that meant taking a rather drastic approach—namely, killing them.

But what was a girl to do when someone invaded her personal space and decided it was his God given right to touch her? Of course she ought to defend herself.

With her rise in power, Noelle’s body count had also risen.

If in the beginning she’d only done it when necessary, her temper had gotten worse and worse as she’d realized just how misogynistic the world was and how she had to fight for every little opportunity. Whereas her male counterparts were congratulated for every silly thing, she had to prove herself ten times over in order to get the barest acknowledgment. There was also the matter that men did not believe a woman should have such a high position in the crime world—after all, they could only ever be victims, never more. As such, her capacity to withstand bullshit had reached an all time low, and if the person in question was inconsequential, she didn’t shy away from doling out a punishment that equaled the crime. And in

her eyes, there was no worse crime than laying a hand on a woman.

Lucero, too, had gotten her fair share of harassment, which Noelle was always quick to rectify, even if her friend thought her measures too drastic.

Even if she was now a woman in a position of power, men still seemed to think her a simpleton—someone whose only real attribute was to look good. So what if she looked good? What if she liked dressing nicely and wearing heels?

Though in the past she would have never gotten caught wearing feminine clothes, now she seemed to revel in it. Maybe to some degree she enjoyed seeing men unable to help themselves and thus inviting themselves at the end of her gun. Maybe it was all a test to see who passed and who failed—and she *knew* they would all fail.

Since Sergio, Noelle simply found that she *hated* that type of overbearing machismo that relegated women to only one position—whores.

“I always hope they learn their lessons, but then it happens again.”

“As women, I don’t think we’re ever going to see the end of it. I can say for sure I’ve never met a man who hasn’t leered at me.”

“Except your Romeo,” Noelle wiggled her eyebrows suggestively.

Lucero blushed, averting her gaze.

“He was...different. But I was also too young for him to think of me as anything but a friend. He couldn’t have seen me as a woman.”

“Sixteen is not that young,” Noelle said pensively, thinking of her own situation. She’d fallen for Blue around that age, too, and though in the beginning it had been an idealized version of love, soon the sexual thoughts had followed—and

they'd never left her mind since. "You never told me how old he was."

"He was twenty," Lucero whispered, almost as if ashamed.

"Twenty? And you think that's too old?" Noelle blinked. "You were offered to Sergio, who is a grandpa compared to that," she felt compelled to add.

Her own Blue was slightly older than that and she'd never thought of their age difference as an impediment except in his eyes—since she knew he would never cavort with an underage girl.

"It wasn't just his age. He was so smart and knowledgeable about everything that I felt even younger when I was talking to him," Lucero shrugged dejectedly.

Noelle nodded thoughtfully. She could understand why Lucero would have thought him to be so much older considering Lucero was painfully naive at twenty. She probably would have been much more innocent at sixteen than Noelle had been at the same age.

"You said he'd been kidnapped by Sergio?"

Lucero nodded.

"Yes, El Señor was holding him for ransom. At least that's what he told me; that his family was very rich and it wasn't the first time it had happened to him. But El Señor asked for an outrageous amount of money and his family didn't seem willing to pay the price," Lucero swallowed hard.

Noelle nodded sympathetically.

"Tell me more," she said as she scooted closer to Lucero. "You never talk about him. What did he look like? What did he do for a living?"

"He..." she trailed off, her brows pinched in a frown. "He had dark hair."

"And?"

"Dark eyes."

“That’s it?” Noelle blinked.

“It’s been years,” Lucero admitted, ashamed. “Although I try to hang on to the image of him, I find that it slips a little one day at a time.”

“I’m sorry,” Noelle put her arm across Lucero’s shoulders.

She was in a similar situation as she found that the more time passed, the more Blue’s face blurred in her mind. And she was terrified of it. No matter how much she tried to hold onto his face as she’d last seen him, sometimes she wondered if she remembered him right—if her memory wasn’t fading with each passing day until at one point she wouldn’t recognize him even if he stood in front of her.

No!

That would never happen!

Noelle refused to believe that she could ever *not* recognize him. Even if her sight faded. Even if she lost all her senses, she knew she would be able to tell him apart from a crowd.

“He must have a family by now,” Lucero continued. “I know there’s no point in hanging onto the idea of him, but...”

“It’s your escape,” Noelle added.

Lucero gave her a sad smile as she nodded.

“We could look for him. There’s little I can’t do now,” she said, trying to liven up the conversation.

“No,” Lucero shook her head vehemently. “I told you. To him, I was just a companion when he needed one.”

“You’re selling yourself short,” Noelle tsked. “You’re a beautiful woman, Lulu. You could have anyone you wanted. Especially now that there’s nothing holding you back.”

“Everything is holding me back,” Lucero choked on the words. “Romance isn’t in the cards for me. Now, or ever,” she said vehemently.

“Because of your scars? Because of what Sergio did to you? Come on, Lulu. There will be someone who won’t care about that.”

“Even if there were, and I doubt it,” she snorted, “I don’t know if I could ever trust someone so much to share my vulnerabilities with them.”

Noelle didn’t say anything more, just hugging her as she silently sobbed.

She brushed her lips across Lucero’s forehead, holding her close.

She knew exactly what her friend was going through. To a lesser extent, Noelle had experienced the same type of disappointment, not only in men, but in humanity as a whole. After her family had traded her so easily, and after the beatings she’d taken at Sergio’s hands, she’d realized that she could only count on herself—for everything. Blue was her only exception, but that was only because in her mind, he was separated from the rest. He belonged in a category wholly to himself.

To cheer Lucero up, Noelle decided they would stop in Ciudad de Mexico before heading back to the hacienda.

They had an entire entourage with them, Noelle’s bodyguards fading in the background as the two women went shopping.

Noelle bought some clothes for herself, but it was mostly for Lucero’s benefit. She wanted her friend to feel beautiful—just as Noelle saw her.

“You need to get this,” Noelle pointed to a pretty white dress. “And this,” she said as she picked up a pair of sandals. “And this...”

She went on and on, grabbing everything that caught her eye, despite Lucero’s ongoing protests.

“Why would I wear pretty clothes if I’m not dressing up for anyone?” Lucero asked as she gazed at the items Noelle

paid for.

“Because you don’t need anyone to dress up for. You can do it for yourself. So that *you* feel good,” she winked playfully.

Lucero blushed, but eventually nodded.

Noelle could tell she liked the clothes but was just unused to owning such items. In a way, she reminded her a lot of her old self and how curious she’d been when Yuyu had taken her shopping.

Her smile wavered as she thought of Yuyu, but she pushed against the discomfort in her chest. For all the resentment she’d built around her family, there was no denying that a small part of her remembered the past fondly—and she hated that. If she could, she would erase all the good memories so she could successfully foster her hate—so she could finally break free of the chains that still held her back.

“I think I saw an ice cream shop around the corner,” Noelle took Lucero’s hand and led her out of the store, leaving the bags of clothes with her bodyguards.

“Espera, señora,” one of them called out as Noelle and Lucero dashed across the street.

Noelle only had time to turn around when a car suddenly came speeding down the street, the windows going down as four guns were pointed at them.

Her eyes widened in alarm, and in no time, she pushed Lucero to the ground. Her elbow caught on the pavement, pain shooting up her arm.

She gritted her teeth as she quickly pulled her own gun.

“Stay down,” she barked the order to Lucero, who was watching her with wild, terrified eyes.

Noelle’s bodyguards were already exchanging fire with the assailants, but two of them had already been shot down.

She grimaced at the sight of the men bleeding out on the pavement, but she focused on the situation at hand. They were clearly after *her* for some reason. So she would give them what they wanted.

Moving behind a truck, she found a good angle and aimed her gun, blowing through one of the windows of the assailants' car. A loud cry told her she'd managed to hit someone. Taking advantage of the mayhem, she rolled on the ground, quickly moving behind another car as she opened fire again.

She moved as fast as she could so they wouldn't anticipate her position as she continued to fire.

With shots coming from her direction and that of her bodyguards, the car in question was simply trapped.

It was only when one of her men called out that it was safe to come out did Noelle finally breathe out in relief. She went to Lucero's side, helping her to her feet. The poor girl was trembling from head to toe as she looked at the carnage around.

"How can you get used to this?" She asked in a timorous voice.

"Necessity," Noelle answered absentmindedly, her eyes on the men who'd come gunning for her. "Go to the car and wait there, I'll be with you shortly," she instructed Lucero. She didn't wait to hear her reply as she went directly to the car that housed the now dead bodies.

"Recognize anyone?" She asked Marco, one of her bodyguards.

He shook his head.

"No, but I'll try to find out their identities," he said as he removed his phone, snapping photos of their faces—or what was left of them.

Noelle pursed her lips in frustration. She didn't like having an unknown enemy—not like this.

Pulling the front door open, she told her men to stand-by as she searched their pockets for any ID.

“There’s nothing on them,” she noted after she’d gone through everyone. “What do you think? Mercenaries?”

“I’d guess so,” Marco remarked.

With a heavy sigh, Noelle finally told them to regroup in the car.

“The police should be here soon. Can you get someone to wipe the cameras around?”

“On it, señora.”

With that out of the way, Noelle joined Lucero again.

“At least the clothes didn’t get bloody,” she joked as she looked at her own outfit. She’d thoroughly stained her clothes when she’d searched the dead men. She could tell she looked quite a fright by the look of pure horror on Lucero’s face.

“It’s fine,” she tried to laugh it off as she smoothed her blouse.

The car started and they were headed towards the hacienda.

All the while, though, Lucero couldn’t help but look back and forth at Noelle, unable to believe she was the same girl whose wounds she’d helped tend not even a year ago. She looked and looked at Noelle, with her blatant disregard for human life and the carelessness she displayed in the face of murder and she wondered if she ever knew her.

“Don’t you think that this is getting a little out of hand?” She finally voiced her concern out loud.

“What do you mean?” Noelle frowned.

“The killing. The violence. Everything that you’re doing. Surely there must be another way....”

“There isn’t,” Noelle answered curtly. “Don’t worry about me, Lulu. I’m fine. I know you’re not cut out for this, but I

am.”

“Are you?” Lucero blurted out.

Noelle was silent for a moment, her gaze out the window as she watched the beautiful countryside scenery.

“I do what I must.”

It wasn't a proper answer. But Noelle herself didn't know how to explain it to Lucero who seemed to shy away from everything violent. She didn't know how to tell her that it was in her blood. That for someone who'd always wanted power, to have the authority over life and death was the ultimate goal.

Maybe she was turning into Sergio, she admitted to herself grimly. But if it was the only way she could survive, why should she feel bad about it?

She already knew the rumors going around—that she was a blood-thirsty bitch. She knew that even her newly acquired godly status hadn't saved her from that. Slowly, people weren't as in awe of her as they were terrified.

And she...reveled in it.

Was it bad for her to feel like that? Maybe. But Noelle had long thrown away that part of her morality concerned with good or bad. In its place, she'd decided to focus only on what was *advantageous* for her, and then achieve that by whatever means possible.

Yes, she was a blood-thirsty bitch, and she would continue to be one. It was the only way she could be in control. And if there was one thing Noelle never wanted to experience again, it was to be a victim.

She'd promised herself that on the day Camilla had hung up on her and she'd stood up to Sergio for the first time.

She would *never* depend on anyone else.

So what if she had a fearsome reputation? She would make sure to continue to cultivate it until no one dared to go against her anymore.

It took them hours to get to the hacienda. At the end of the journey, both were tired and ready to go to bed.

Lucero was the first one to go to the room to wash up and get ready for bed while Noelle still had a few phone calls to make.

As she entered the main living area, the servants scurried out of her way when they saw her stained with blood from head to toe.

Noelle didn't mind it much as she took a seat on the sofa, dialing up one of her contacts while she requested someone from the kitchen to bring her a snack. As she spoke on the phone, she played around with her gun, swirling it around her finger absentmindedly.

It was just as she completed her first phone call that Sergio happened to walk into the living room.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?”

Noelle raised a brow as she turned her gaze to him

“You wanted their love but all you have is their fear. They *hate* you. Everyone hates you, Noelle. They are afraid to meet your eyes when you cross their paths because you might suddenly kill them. What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“So? Better be feared than loved,” she shrugged.

“You...” he clenched his fists in frustration. No doubt, his first instinct was to strike her, but he knew he could not.

“I'll remind you that your days of messing with me are over, Sergio. Over.”

“You're cursed,” he spit at her. “Maldita perra.”

“Not more than you,” Noelle simply raised a brow. “And I think you got the wrong person. It's not *me* who kills the staff.”

He sneered at her before he pivoted, leaving the room.

Noelle didn't even mind him. She'd gotten used to his outbursts—all borne out of his helplessness and the fact that he still carried her a grudge he could not act on. In a way, she pitied him. She'd outsmarted him in such a way that he could not do anything to her without severe repercussions from his own community.

It didn't matter that the people feared her. It was *because* they feared her that they now respected her.

Noelle finished her snack before going to her room to take a shower. Yet she barely managed to remove her clothes when her phone rang again.

“Yes?”

“Someone matching the description you provided will be put on auction tomorrow,” her contact said, going straight to the point.

Noelle froze.

“Are you sure?” She asked slowly, her heart hammering in her chest.

“Positive. I've asked for a detailed background, but the seller refused to give one. It's my understanding that he's been trying to sell him for a while with no success.”

Noelle swallowed hard against the wave of nausea that threatened to overtake her.

“Text me the details. I'll be there tomorrow,” she said before hanging up.

Though she couldn't wait to find out if this was truly her blue, she also couldn't help but hope it wouldn't be. Because if he'd been sold... If he'd been sold numerous times before... She didn't want to imagine what might have happened to him—did not want to entertain the thought that anything at all could have happened to him.

Blue, my Blue...

26. NOELLE

Noelle strained a smile as her heels clicked on the ground. She did her best to maintain her facade without showing the turmoil inside her heart.

She was alone at this auction after Lucero had pled a headache, but she didn't let that affect her confidence. She was there for one purpose and one purpose only.

Blue.

She needed to see if the man she'd been told about was indeed her Blue.

Drinks were being served as people socialized before the auction was set to begin, and Noelle did her best to mingle around, spotting a few acquaintances and in the process making new ones.

She put on her haughty persona—the one that had inspired such fear into the people of the hacienda—and though the appreciative glances didn't fail to come her way, no one crossed the line.

Noelle was happy that she didn't have to fight off any advances, for her mind was not in the game. If anything, the strain of the wait was weighing heavily on her.

She nursed a glass of wine for the entire event, her eyes always on her watch.

When someone finally declared that the auction would start, her pulse suddenly sped up.

She pushed against her body's response to fear as she straightened her spine and followed the host towards the room in which the bidding would take place.

During the networking event, lists had been handed out with the night's offering, and she'd noticed most of the other people on auction were women. Only a few men were available, and one of them matched her Blue in age and description. Now she only needed to see if it was him or not.

Stepping inside the bidding room, Noelle took a seat as she waited for everyone to do the same.

It was some ten minutes later that the announcer went up onto the stage, starting with the introductions and a brief summary of what to expect, as well as starting prices and conditions of purchase.

Noelle didn't really pay any mind to that. She had plenty of money at her disposal, and she was ready to use it all up in order to get her Blue—if it was indeed him.

When the auction finally started, the women were first. Most of them looked barely eighteen, some seemingly fresh and unspoiled while others already battered and abused.

Though she'd tried to kill her empathy long ago, Noelle couldn't help but feel a twinge of pity for those girls, especially as she saw their buyers. She had no doubt that if things hadn't gone according to her plan, that it could have been her on the stage.

She tapped her foot restlessly against the floor as she tried to calm her frayed nerves. Yet it was to no avail as when the announcement for a male in his twenties came, her heart dropped to the floor.

Her lips parted in shock as she saw one of the attendants push forward a barely coherent man whose limbs had been secured with heavy chains.

His gold locks spilled onto his forehead, wet and sticking to his skin. His body was black and blue, the signs of abuse unmistakable.

She barely stopped herself from getting up and yelling at them to leave him alone—to get their hands off him. She barely stopped herself from fainting on the spot at recognizing him.

It was him.

Her Blue.

Rafaelo.

And he looked so pitiful her heart broke in her chest, shattering in a million pieces never to be recovered.

He was clearly drugged out of his mind, moving sluggishly as he was pushed onto his knees in the middle of the stage.

His eyes, though, were the most concerning.

They were blank. So blank, he looked as if he'd retreated to a deep corner of his mind—the only place he could find safety from the horrors of the world.

How did this happen? How the hell had he gotten here?

Though she'd put an alert for his description, she'd still hoped that there could be another explanation to his disappearance.

At least he's not dead.

No, he wasn't dead. But by the looks of him, he wasn't far from the grave.

“This one starts at ten thousand,” the announcer stated, and Noelle quickly raised her bidding sign.

There was another person who bid with her, so she hurried to raise her bid, again and again.

“One hundred going once. Twice. Sold.”

It was only at that moment that she released a relieved breath.

She'd done it. She'd bought him.

But now what could she do with him?

“What do you mean you’re not letting him come with me?” Noelle asked after the auction had concluded.

She’d already planned for him to be freed and taken back to his family, and a car was waiting for him to be taken across the border back into the States.

“Your husband called. He instructed us to send him to his home or he wouldn’t release the funds.”

“What?” Noelle’s eyes flashed.

“You should talk with your husband, ma’am,” the man nodded at her before excusing himself to talk to someone else.

Noelle was incredulous. Sergio had never done something of the sort before. What could have gotten into him?

Taking out her phone, she dialed him up immediately.

“What’s the meaning of this?” She gritted her teeth as she asked.

“A hundred grand for a slave, Noelle?” His tongue clicked as he drawled the words, and Noelle could imagine him sporting a smirk on his godforsaken face.

“Well, it’s my job to acquire them. We’ve settled that before,” she answered, doing her best to keep her tone even and not betray her mounting anxiety.

“We might have. *Before* you decided to spend a hundred grand on one person. What’s so special about him, I wonder?”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Nothing,” he answered in an innocent tone—too innocent.

Damn it, was he onto her? Was he suspecting something?

“I’ve heard you’ve been looking for a certain blonde slave. Why is that, I wonder?”

Noelle wanted to yell at him and remind him of his part of the bargain, but seeing that he was already suspicious of Blue, she couldn’t afford to do anything that might reveal her attachment to him.

“Maybe I’m into blondes,” she said carelessly. “You can have your harem and I can’t?”

“So you bought him to fuck him?”

“What’s it to you, Sergio?” She rolled her eyes.

“He’s not much to look at. I had no idea you were into the pathetic scrawny type,” he chuckled.

Fuck. He knew what Blue looked like. How long had he known she’d been looking for him?

She started panicking at the prospect of Sergio finding out just who Blue was to her. If he did...then he’d have plenty of material for blackmail. He was her one weakness, and she had no doubt Sergio would exploit it to the fullest.

God, but the thought of her Blue being hurt because of her made her dizzy with fear.

“Jealous much, Sergio? He might be scrawny but at least his anatomy works,” she countered.

“You bitch,” he spat out.

“You can have him if you want. You should have said so from the beginning. I’m not so bad that I can’t share,” she continued, knowing this was the best way to rile him up and make him lose sight of what was important. “You might be missing your dick but I assume your ass is intact?” She added sweetly.

“One day,” he gritted out. “One day I’ll fucking kill you, Noelle.”

Too bad his threats did nothing to her when she knew he couldn’t carry them out.

“Why, when I’m so generous? I’m even offering to share him and you threaten to kill me. Not very nice of you, Sergio,” Noelle said, the lie burning on her tongue.

She would *never* share her Blue. She’d rather kill Sergio and face the wrath of his people than have anyone lay even one finger on him.

A string of muffled curses and she knew she had him where she wanted.

“You can fuck him all you want, but he’s going to earn his keep at the temple,” Sergio said before he hung up—no doubt needing some time to soothe his battered ego.

Noelle took a deep breath. That had been a close call. She needed to be careful with how she interacted with Blue until she managed to find a way to free him.

Her small fists clenched by her side as her lips flattened into a thin line.

Damn you, Sergio! Damn you for everything!

TO BE CONTINUED IN THE MORAL DILEMMA

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