



# BLAIRE

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*There's Something About Blaire*

BONUS SCENE

## ROMANTIC SUSPENSE

# **BLAIRE**

**BLAIRE'S SAGA: PART 1 & 2**  
*plus an exclusive bonus scene*

by

**A N I T A G R A Y**

*#1 International Amazon Bestselling Author*

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

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**Editor:**

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**TRIGGER WARNING:**

BLAIRE, PART 1 in BLAIRE'S SAGA, is not suitable for readers under 18.  
Contains psychological impairment, dubious permission, and violence.

**PLEASE NOTE:**

BLAIRE is written in American English with references to British English,  
Spanish, and Russian.

It is primarily set in Britain.

There is a language index at the back of the book for your reference.

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# 1

I walk through Maksim's strip club like a ghost, under streaming red lights that flash in tune with the pounding music. The air smells potent with sweaty bodies and cheap perfume, a mixture of men and women. Just how my master likes it.

Everything I see moves through my mind's eye in slow motion, my brain carefully and collectively scanning for danger. There isn't much out of the ordinary going on tonight. A few regulars line the stage in the center of the club, all unaware of my presence. I know why. They're too focused on the strippers, beautiful European girls leisurely peeling off their clothes. I'm wearing the usual: black sports trousers, trainers, and a thin black leather jacket over a long-sleeved sweater. Not exactly arousing attire but this is how I like it, being under the radar.

The strippers are the only people who do notice my presence. As I pass the stage, they each scowl at me with obvious loathing. I understand their loathing. I'm the only girl in Maksim's inner circle, and this lot—the strippers—hate it. They wonder why. They've always wondered why.

*No danger here.*

“Is Сэп Maksim back there?” I ask a member of security in Russian, gesturing at the door he's standing in front of like The Great Wall of Man.

“Yes,” he says in Russian, his pale eyes empty of emotion. “He's been waiting for you.”

I nod, knowing I'm an hour late. I'm never usually late because I know poor punctuality results in a good bloody hiding. But my phone was on silent by accident, so I didn't hear Maksim's text message.

The security guy pushes open the heavy door with one hand and stands aside. I saunter down the red hall, turn left, and knock on Maksim's office door three times. The knocks echo, carrying over the music booming through the walls.

“Come in, My Little Pet,” Maksim says through the intercom system in his thick Russian drawl.

I shiver as I normally do when I haven't spoken to him for a few days. His voice brings my entire body to attention.

Pushing with both palms, I force the door to creak open and go inside.

Maksim isn't alone.

I don't react—I never react to surprises. I briefly look to see who is accompanying my master, and though it's quite dark in here, I'm very aware of the powerful blue eyes watching me from the leather couch by the left wall, eyes that seem to be all over my body at once. Sharp little hairs race down my arms and legs. I haven't seen him before.

The notion that he's a stranger puts me on guard because Maksim rarely allows strange faces in his circle, let alone in his office.

I stop before Maksim's wide desk and fold my hands behind my back, feeling sheathed in darkness. He only has the desk lamp on and that isn't exactly bright. It just about illuminates his diamond-shaped, iron face.

“You are late, My. Little. Pet.” Maksim says each word with significant and singular meaning, speaking in Russian.

My blood runs cold when he's like this, mulling over something other than business. Today, it seems it's my timekeeping.

I keep focus, my gaze level and on him slouching back in his chair. He's a striking man with steady, expressionless golden eyes, and shoulder-length dark brown hair that smells like brut from the candles he burns. I remember the scent well. I remember the feeling of his hair on my face when he cuddles me after a beating.

“My phone was accidentally on silent,” I say, and my voice is low, as per usual. “I'm sorry, Сэр Maksim.” I offer him a little head-bow of respect.

Leaning forward and resting his elbows on the desk, he entwines his fingers together, holding my gaze with soul consuming eyes. “No more keeping your phone on silent, Blaire.”

I flinch subconsciously, stepping back. He only calls me by my given name when I've done something wrong, and that usually means trouble for me is brewing.

Maksim cocks a brow at me. “You got that?”

I nod, taking his warning seriously. I might be in his inner circle, but it takes just one bullet to remove me.

“What have you been doing for the past few days?” he asks in Russian, his tone husky and utterly terrifying.

“Nothing much,” I whisper in our language, squeezing my hands together

on the low of my back. “I’ve been training, of course, went to the salon yesterday, and I went out to a club last night.”

“Yes”—he tips his head—“my men saw you driving through the countryside. Did you have fun?”

I shake my head, being honest. “I was just getting out of the apartment, Сәп Maksim.”

“Of course, My Little Pet. Of course. Though, next time you want to visit a club, you come here.” He taps his desk with one finger. “You do not have to travel to strange places to have fun.”

“Okay.” I lift my lips in a forced, wary smile. “As you wish.”

I like visiting strange places when I’m alone. Everything in my life is a consistent bloodbath with the people and the work I execute. Sometimes, I just like a change of scenery.

I guess, at his command, I don't like visiting strange places anymore.

Maksim gestures to the right, to the man sitting on the couch, and I know the conversation about my last two days is over.

“My Little Pet,” he's speaking in English now, “meet my old friend, Mr. Decena.”

*Old friend?*

It takes a lot of effort not to frown. I've been with Maksim for ten years, and I've never seen or heard of a Mr. Decena.

I look at Maksim's friend, with my face blank of sentiment. Above him, a long tube light attached to the wall flickers on, buzzing with electricity, and illuminating a tall, muscular frame.

“No matter what happens here tonight,” Maksim says in sly Russian, “you are ordered not to challenge him.”

The back of my neck pricks. Maksim never orders me to stand down.

Though nervous, I obey without question, nodding to show I understand his command. I then study Mr. Decena, surprised by how relaxed he is in his pose, sitting there in the middle of the couch with one arm draped over the back, long legs stretched out in front of him.

This is bizarre. No one is ever that relaxed in Maksim's company.

I reckon Mr. Decena is in his late twenties. He looks young, wearing fitted jeans, tanned boots, and a black round-neck t-shirt that boasts solid muscles. He's nothing at all like my master who favors suits, but Maksim has a tall, athletic body for them. They are wearing similar watches on their left wrists with thick silver straps, but that's where their similarities end.

“Mr. Decena would like to ask you some questions,” Maksim says.

I nod in response, still studying the relaxed pawn. Unruly ink black hair curls around his neck and face, abating a strong, square, clean-shaven jawline, and a blade of a nose. His black eyebrows are thick and long, framing prevailing blue eyes that stand against his naturally tan skin. He's a good looking man, and judging by that lazy, narcissistic expression on his face, he's aware of it. He fancies himself.

He stares me up and down with slow meditation, taking in all my features from head to toe. I'm suddenly so uncomfortable that my stomach knots. I can't really explain why, but he makes me feel naked to the bone.

I shift on my feet, trying to iron out my anxiety. A smirk lifts the side of Mr. Decena's lips, a mischievous smirk that's full of promise.

“What do I call you, Señorita?” he asks, his voice deep yet calm. He's American but there's a sprinkle of Latin in his accent. “My Little Pet, or Blaire?”

Maksim nods to tell me I can answer.

“Blaire,” I say.

There's a split second of silence before Mr. Decena tells me, “All right, you can call me Charlie.”

Maksim's eyebrows shoot up, but he doesn't say anything.

I stand there like a statue, fighting not to react.

Another period of silence follows, then Charlie rasps out my name, drumming his fingers against the back of the couch. “Blaire, as in, field of battle?”

I scrunch up my face, unable to stop myself. *What's he talking about?*

Maksim chuckles under his breath like he's confirming something.

“You never mentioned how bonita she is,” Charlie says softly, causing me to straighten out my features. “Nor did you mention that lovely, whispery voice.”

“Ohhh, my friend”—Maksim smiles cunningly at me, his golden eyes crinkling in the corners—“don't take it personally. I do not boast of her to anyone.”

“Why not? She's a nice looking girl.” Charlie's voice lowers as he says in Spanish, “Siempre me he preguntado acerca de los pelirrojos.” *I've always wondered about redheads.*

I swallow, hoping I'm not visibly sweating under the pressure of these two.

“I wouldn't want you excited to see her,” Maksim says, “for she is mine

and mine alone.”

“Hmm.” Charlie hums, staring right at me with brazen audacity. I get the feeling he isn't a pawn in Maksim's game. He's too confident. “She sounds kinda Russian,” he says after a while, still tapping his fingers against the couch. “Where's she from?”

“She's not Russian,” Maksim says, and I see that he shakes his head at Charlie.

Charlie nods once, understanding that headshake. “How old are you, Blaire?”

I look at Maksim. He nods.

“Eighteen.”

Raising his eyebrows, Charlie seems stunned. I'm not sure why.

“What do you do, exactly?” he asks. “I've heard various stories.”

Maksim gives me the go ahead, so I say, “I deal in technology.”

“She's also on my security detail,” Maksim adds.

“This small girl is part of your security?” Charlie stops tapping the back of the couch, his eyes taut with confusion. A crease forms between his eyebrows. It makes him look evil.

“She is.” Maksim smiles up at me again, knowingly proud. “She is a beauty in battle. Trained to defend me on instinct unless I say otherwise.”

I am trained to defend him however I can. Though, I wouldn't just say I'm trained. I'd say I'm more conditioned. My brain works to please and protect my master without me actually having to think. I used to find it disturbing. Now, I'm used to it.

Charlie doesn't believe Maksim—it's written all over his face—but that's good. This is Maksim's trick with me. I have always been the element of surprise for his enemies.

“And your parents?” Charlie says, still frowning at me.

I don't show my confusion to that question. I just look at him.

“Erm, Charlie—”

“I'm not talking to you, am I?” Charlie cuts Maksim off dead.

My heart drops through me like a boulder.

“Don't you understand me, girl?” Charlie says with austerity. “Where are your parents? I won't repeat myself again.”

I have no idea why he's being like this. It's not like I've done anything wrong.

Thumping the desk with a fisted hand, Maksim says, “Answer him,



Blaire.”

I cringe as he uses my name. “I only have Cəp Maksim.”

Silence.

Charlie's glancing between us, an air of frustration on his face. “Where are her parents?” he demands to know, executing his attention on Maksim.

“Dead? Did they sell her to you? Where are they?”

My eyes flitter between them, and I'm so confused. I don't get why he's being so ascetic all of a sudden, or why he'd want to know if I have parents.

Maksim manages to give Charlie another curt head-shake, which Charlie also understands.

The next questions are sharp and snappy, like the tension that's now in the room. Charlie states my address in London, and asks, “Is that where you live?”

I nod.

“Alone?”

I nod again, keeping it brief.

“Is the apartment yours?” He raises his eyebrows at me, making his blue eyes seem wider.

I nod a third time.

“And you drove here tonight on your own?” he gestures at the office door with a large, steady hand. “You have your own car?”

What kind of a question is that? What's it to him if I live alone or if I own my own car?

“Yes, the car is hers,” Maksim answers for me, though he doesn't gain Charlie's attention. He is still looking at me.

“I have her on the payroll,” Maksim explains. “She's not a prisoner like the rest.”

“Is that right?” Charlie sounds like he's stuck in thought, while his eyes flicker all over my deadpan face. “So, you trust her completely?” he breaks eye contact with me to focus on Maksim. “Because if you have any doubts...I can't risk having sloppy workers on the job.”

Maksim doesn't hesitate. He says a powerful, “With my life,” then it's quiet again.

Why do I feel like I'm being interviewed for something?

“Okay,” says Charlie eventually, nodding to himself. He then summons my attention by rasping out my name. “Maksim tells me you can hack into any computer system, no hay problema.”

*Bingo.* He is interviewing me.

“You can answer him,” Maksim says. So I nod, my hands still firmly folded behind my back.

“How can you do that?” asks Charlie.

“My friend,” Maksim butts-in, clearing his throat, “the details are better left unsaid. Just know that My Little Pet is masterful at—”

“I’ll decide what details are better left unsaid,” Charlie says. Sitting forward, he puts his elbows on his knees and narrows his blue eyes at Maksim. “I’ll consider pardoning things that might make this girl feel uncomfortable, but you’ll tell me the finer details.” His square jaw ticks, though when he stares up at me, that anger in his face, it vanishes. “How can you do that, Blaire?”

“I spent three years in a room with books, codes, and computers,” I say without thinking, and bizarrely without Maksim’s permission. “I taught myself the things I know.”

Charlie gives Maksim a baffled look, wrinkling his nose. “She actually thinks she became a hacker in three years?”

No one answers him, and he runs a hand through his thick black hair, ruffling the strands at the back of his neck. “C’mon, don’t try to take the piss outa me.”

Maksim’s face tightens with what almost looks like...fear? No. Can’t be. He shakes his head at Charlie again.

“All right.” Charlie lifts a hand, understanding Maksim’s expression.

Is he hiding something from me? Why won’t he just tell Charlie that he bought me from a man in Russia, or insist it’s none of his business?

Digging into his jeans back pocket, Charlie pulls out a piece of paper and proffers it to me between scissored fingers.

I glance at Maksim. He signals for me to take the paper, so I reach for it. I briefly touch Charlie’s fingers in the process and a warm, tingly sensation spreads through my body, causing me to snatch back my hand—without the paper. Our eyes meet then in a moment of dead quietness. His are glowing like he knows what I just felt.

Everything around me becomes nonexistent. Even Maksim fades into the background. And I just look at this man who’s invading our personal space with pure bafflement. He doesn’t look away or blink. A pool of anxiety coils inside me, making my toes curl in my trainers.

I have a dark feeling he’s going to turn the world as I know it upside down.

“It's the latest in technology for a certain CCTV system,” he says softly, insisting I take the paper from him. “Here you go.”

To break whatever the fuck *this* is, I pinch the piece of paper out of his fingers and scan the notes written down, mentally willing my heart rate to calm.

It's the details for London's closed-circuit television system.

“Can you shut that down for fifteen minutes?” Charlie asks, his voice still unexplainably soft.

I've entered this system a few times before. Maksim likes to know that he can control a city if trouble breaks out.

“Can you shut it down, My Little Pet?” Maksim says.

“I can shut this down for four, maybe five minutes before I get locked out.” I lean over to give Charlie back the piece of paper, avoiding his touch—and his eyes. I have the contents of the note now stored in my memory.

Charlie shakes his head, screwing up the piece of paper in a large hand before tossing it across the office. “I need fifteen minutes.” He exercises his eyes on Maksim, who seems a little uncomfortable, pulling open the top buttons of his shirt. “You said the redhead could get me fifteen minutes. I. Need. My. Fifteen. Minutes.”

My protective instincts kick in, and I step closer to Maksim's desk. No one talks to my master like this with such contempt. No one.

I center my attention on Charlie. He's glaring at Maksim, his nostrils flaring.

I have to protect Maksim.

I have to ensure nothing happens to him.

Maksim is all that matters.

“Can you do it, My Little Pet?” Maksim says in a rush of words, visibly nervous. “Can you get the fifteen minutes?”

“I'll need a few weeks,” I whisper. I actually need more than a few weeks, but I'll tell Maksim that over the phone. At least this way, if he gets mad at me, I have time to mentally prepare. Mad Maksim doesn't bode well for my ass.

Charlie nods. Then Maksim tells me two weeks is fine, that there is no room for error. “Don't run over schedule, My Little Pet. You know what will happen if you do.”

“I won't,” I say. I do know what will happen, all too well.

Just as quickly as it bloomed, the tension in the room vanishes, though I

stay by Maksim's desk.

Charlie pulls another piece of paper from his jeans back pocket. "For Maksim. Please, give it to him."

Maksim gives me the okay, so I take it from Charlie and put it on the desk.

"That's a Dark Web link. Don't lose it." Charlie gestures at the piece of paper. "To contact me, the password is Guzmán Decena." He follows with saying out each letter of the password like we're fucking dyslexic or something. "Keep me updated regarding Blaire and the job, comprender? You can e-mail me any time, and I'll get back to you within the hour."

Regarding Blaire *and* the job? Why would he need to be updated about me?

"Of course, my friend." Maksim touches his chest in a deceptively composed approach. "Of course."

I feel Charlie is looking at me again, and my anxiety spikes when he asks, "Will Blaire be attending Rumo's poker game next weekend?"

I don't like how personally interested he is in me. It's odd.

A few seconds of silence pass through us, then Maksim says, "She will be." He smiles at me with an agenda, excitement gleaming in his eyes. "I might even put on a little show for you."

Charlie doesn't understand, so Maksim explains that he sometimes has me fight for entertainment. "Like I said a moment ago, she's a beauty in battle."

Chills run down my spine because I know what's going to happen. I know who he'll make me fight.

"You will come to the poker game, won't you, Charlie? You will come watch her fight?"

"Ohhh, I wouldn't miss it."

My stomach twists.

"Good. Very good, my friend."

While I stand here staring ahead impassively as not to draw attention to the fact that I'm sweating bullets, they chat about what's been going on in London over the past six years, which isn't much short of sex, crime, and murder. Charlie doesn't sound impressed as Maksim blathers on about his power in Western Europe. Seeming to have heard enough, he cuts Maksim off mid-sentence to say he needs to go. "Time's getting on."

That's when Maksim focuses on me. "Do you have any questions before you go, My Little Pet? Is there anything you need?"

"No," I whisper, devoid of emotion.

“I guess we're all done here then.” He reaches over to shake hands with Charlie, his chair creaking under his weight. “It's good to see you again, my friend.”

Nodding once, Charlie stands and fixes the hem of his t-shirt over his jeans. He's really tall. I'd say at least six foot two, and he's bigger than I thought with broad shoulders, a narrow waist, and hard muscles stretching under dark, olive skin. He looks like a Spanish soldier.

“If you're heading back to London, Blaire”—my name rolls off his tongue like satin—“I'll get a lift with you.”

*What?*

My heart does this weird doubling over thing. I whip my eyes from Charlie to Maksim, who strangely nods.

“You will have to forgive my little pet's attitude, as I am sure you will learn she has.” Maksim chuckles under his breath. “She's as arrogant as a redhead comes.”

Charlie laughs too, clearly amused. “I can handle one small girl, no matter how arrogant she might be. Don't worry about that.”

My stomach is sinking with anxiety. This is a test. It has to be. Maksim would never leave me alone with another man.

Maksim tells me that I must be polite to Charlie, that I'm not allowed to fight him. It isn't a request. It's an order. “You can speak to him, also, just not about me.”

“Of course,” I say, head-bowing to my master, hiding the fact that my anxiety is going through the roof.

## 2

After bidding Maksim goodnight, I lead the way out of the club. Charlie isn't far behind—I can feel his distance on my shadow—but he's far enough for me to have a sense of mental space.

The club is still booming with music and heaving in perverted old men tossing money about. They're chanting over the music, *Take it off! Take it off!* because the girls are still performing on the stage, naked breasts and asses jiggling all over the place. I'm surprised Charlie doesn't want to stay and have a nice European girl for himself. Any normal man would stay.

At the exit doors, I nod to bid the doorman goodbye and steal out into the cold night, beneath a cloaking black sky sparkling in stars. My silver Porsche is parked under a flickering streetlight at the end of the parking lot. I open it using the key in my pocket. It flashes three times with a low, deep beep.

“This is a nice car for such a young girl,” Charlie says, walking past me to open the driver's door. He rests his forearm on the top of the door and looks down on me, his head slightly cocked. “Did Maksim buy it for you or did you buy it for yourself?”

*Maksim?* That is so disrespectful. It's Maksim-Markov to those considered friends or work acquaintances.

“Do you want to drive or something?” I ask.

Charlie tips his head to the other side, with his eyes glancing back and forth between mine. “Why'd you ask that?”

I gesture at my car. “You're holding my door open.”

He laughs under his breath, flashing even, white teeth. “Tis' called manners, Señorita.”

My face twists with perplexity. Holding my door open is considered manners?

“In you get.” He nods at my car, amusement glittering in his eyes.

My neck arched back, I stare at him, baffled to say the least. He looks a bit different up close, more...I don't know. Beautiful? No. Handsome. He's too masculine to be beautiful. His lips are perfect, the lower fuller than the top,

his cheekbones are sharp and high, and his eyes are deep set, a lagoon blue in this light.

“Do you want me to drive?” He nods at my car again without breaking eye contact. “I can if you want. I know where you live.”

I scoff at the audacity of him, sink into the plush leather, and yank my door shut. He's laughing as he walks around to the passenger side. I don't get what he finds so funny.

Pressing the power button, I fire-up the purring engine, revving to warm it up. Charlie settles in the passenger seat, causing the leather to creak under his weight, and he adjusts the seat by sliding it back to give his long legs some room. He smells sweet and musky, a weird scent for a man but bizarrely appealing.

A quick glance, and he catches me staring. My heart almost jumps out of my chest, but I save face by telling him, “Put on your seatbelt and then we can go.”

He pulls it across his chest and plugs it in. I shift in gear to reverse out of the parking lot, and head down the bumpy country lane. He is blatantly watching me, though he doesn't speak for a while. I flick on the radio to drown out our silence, and check the rear-view mirror. I notice twin SUVs on our shadow with blinding headlights. They look suspicious with heavily tinted windows, both going at the same speed. I maintain my eyes on them, driving carefully as not to draw attention. But as I turn off to hit the clear motorway, they follow us.

Keeping one hand near my gun in my inside jacket pocket, my other hand on the wheel, I press down on the throttle to speed out of Dartford. The force presses me back into my seat.

“What's wrong, Blaire?”

“I think we're being followed,” I say, reaching one-hundred miles per hour, dodging what cars are on the road. “Have you got a gun?”

“Have I got a gun?” Charlie laughs at me again, and when I look at him, he smiles. It's an utterly seductive, sly smile that makes me feel warm all over. “Relajarse,” he says *relax*, “it's just my men. No need for guns.”

“What?” I drop a gear to slow the pace. “If you have men with cars, why did you ask me for a lift?”

He doesn't answer my question, which I don't like. He diverts with, “How long have you known Maksim?”

*Maksim-Markov to you!* It really bothers me that he addresses my master

like this.

“That's none of your business,” I say. My voice comes out surprisingly calm.

“Well, I'm making it my business. How long?”

I try not to react to his cool, dominant approach, though it's hard. I want to punch his lights out because he's so fucking conceited.

“I cannot comment without his permission,” I say in a flat tone.

He laughs at me again, though in a more mocking fashion. “You know, in all the years I've known your boss, you're the first of his girls I've seen off a leash.” Reaching over, he grabs my seat headrest, forcing intimacy.

I shift over in my seat, a little uncomfortable. I can feel the warmth of his large body at my side.

“Maksim must really trust you,” he whispers, checking me out with obvious lust.

I don't say anything in response. Of course Maksim trusts me. I'm his most trusted devotee.

In our silence, I glance at Charlie a few times because I sense he's still staring at me with stark concentration. He is. I wish he'd stop. I'm already on guard, and he's making the whole ordeal ten times worse with that penetrating gaze.

As a distraction, I turn up the radio.

“What are you allowed to say?” He breaks the silence, turning the radio down.

I shrug, steering off the motorway for London.

“Okay. How fast does your car go?”

Silence.

“You can answer me that, surely?” He sounds like he's being sarcastic. “Maksim said you can speak to me.”

“Naught to sixty in five and a half seconds,” I say, just to shut him up.

“And the color, did you pick it?”

I scowl to warn him off. Though his questions might seem ordinary, they're not. I know what he's doing. He's trying to get me talking by luring me into a false sense of security.

He isn't bothered by my scowl. He repeats his question.

“What is with you?” I snap my eyebrows together. “Why are you asking me these stupid, mundane questions?” My heart stutters with panic. Maksim said to be polite. “Sorry. I...I didn't mean to—”



“S'all right.” He shrugs with one shoulder, still holding my headrest. “You can ask me a question if you want.” He pauses, then leans a little closer and whispers down my spine, “I won't tell Maksim. Puede ser nuestro secreto.” *Can be our secret.*

I hold his stare for as long as I can, wondering why he's speaking to me in Spanish. But then I have to center my attention on the road, on the cars. “Why are you asking me these questions?” I repeat without wavering this time. My voice is soft but demanding. “What's with the whole Spanish Inquisition?”

“The Spanish Inquisition, huh?” A wide grin spreads across his face. “I'm curious about you, Blaire,” he says. “Even more so now.”

I glance at him, puzzled, and he elaborates, “You don't wear a leash. You live outside of Maksim's house. You can apparently put up a good fight. You're educated.” The list of compliments is endless.

I don't ask why he's curious. I don't want to give him the satisfaction of my own curiosity.

“It seems Maksim wasn't lying when he told me you've got a bad attitude,” Charlie says, chuckling to himself. His voice is so deep when he laughs like that. It's almost mesmerizing. Almost.

“I'm not gonna get anything outa you yet, am I?”

*Yet?* What makes him think he'll ever get anything out of me?

“No,” I say. “You're not.”

He doesn't say much more now. He just wants to know if I like living on my own, that kind of thing. I shake, nod, and shrug a few times, but I don't actually answer his questions.

“Where would you like me to drop you off?” I ask, driving past my apartment building, curbing crawling The River Thames.

“Here will do.” He unbuckles his seatbelt.

I pull over with a sharp stop, and we both jolt forward. I'm desperate to get him out of my car, but he doesn't seem to be in a rush to leave. He gives my body the once over, his eyes hooded and full of zest. “Maybe I'll stop by your apartment over the next two weeks to say hi.”

“I wouldn't bother.” I narrow my eyes at him, pushing my car in gear. “I won't answer the door to you.”

He flicks up his eyebrows. “Sure you won't.”

I snort with affront. Bar Maksim, I don't think I've ever met anyone so fucking smug.

He gets out of the car and leans down to look at me, causing that death black hair to fall around his handsome face, enhancing those diamond blue eyes. I feel trapped in a moment of visual connection with him, my chest constricting with unease.

Neither of us speak. I couldn't even if I wanted to. So I just hold his gaze.

I think he's contemplating something about me. I can't figure out why I come to that assumption. Perhaps it's that thoughtful expression on his face.

"I thought you said you had to leave? Time's getting on, isn't it?" I try to rush him along when I find my voice, using his own words against him.

"I've always got time for a pretty girl," he says, lowering his tone.

My stomach ties up in knots. I can't stand the way he talks to me, or the way he looks at me, as if he's mentally taking off my clothes. It's so personal.

"I'll see you very soon, Blaire," he says eventually, like it's a promise, breaking what can only be described as a spell.

In a fluster, I glance away, my chest so heavy that I can hardly breathe. He shuts the door and disappears into the city, one hand in his jeans pocket. I watch him in quiet muse. He walks with purpose, his tall body sauntering at a relaxed pace like he has all the time in the world to get to his destination.

As soon as he's out of sight, I sag in my seat, the tension draining out of my body.

And I thought Maksim was intense.

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When I can gather my wits after enduring Charlie Decena, I steer into the underground parking lot of my apartment building. My phone buzzes in my jacket pocket, so I pull it out and find James is calling.

He's a friend of mine. I've known him since before I can remember. He plays a role much like mine with Maksim—security and devotee—but he doesn't reap luxury like a personal car and an apartment. He drives a supplied security SUV, as all the other men do, and lives in Maksim's attic because Maksim doesn't trust him like he does me. That's never affected my opinion of James, though. He is one of the good guys. I've lost count of how many times he's taken a beating trying to protect me from our master. How many times he's let Maksim fuck him in an effort to ensure he doesn't fuck me.

"Have you spoken to Maksim?" I step out of my car and lock it with the key. It beeps and flashes, echoing through the eerie car park.

“He just rang me about some guy called Charlie,” James says, his Russian accent soft and husky. “He wants me to beef up security.”

“Beef up security?” My eyebrows snap together. “Did he say why?”

“No. It was a brief call, and I wasn’t about to start asking questions. Who is this Charlie?”

“I have no idea.” I lean back against my car, poking my chin with the key in a musing fashion. “Maksim is nervous around him though. I’ve never seen him so...I don’t know. Charlie kept cutting him off from talking, and Maksim just let him.”

“What?”

“Yeah, exactly. I was nervous, too. That man makes me feel...” I lose my voice. There are no words to describe how Charlie made me feel.

“You were nervous?” James’ voice goes up a notch. “But, you don’t get nervous about anything.”

“If you ever meet Charlie, you’ll understand. The way he looked at me in front of Maksim...the way he spoke to me...” I get chills just thinking about it. “He said, and I quote, ‘I’ve always wondered about redheads’, like he was fantasizing or something.”

“Seriously? And Maksim did nothing?”

“Yeah.” I go right into detail about how much authority Charlie had over our master. How he insisted I drop him off even while he had drivers at hand. “Before that though, he interviewed me for a job by asking the oddest questions.”

“What questions?”

“He wanted to know if I lived alone, and if I drove my own car. It was ages before he asked about my skills.”

“He’s up to no good, that’s why,” James says, with his feet thudding against the floorboards in the background. His attic living quarters is empty of things, other than his bed and a wardrobe. It heightens the slightest of sounds.

“I think so,” I say. “I get that impression.”

“Shit,” he curses. “Keep your wits about you, Blaire. If Maksim is getting involved with people he’s nervous about, it doesn’t bode well for us.”

“I know it doesn’t.” I nod at the empty parking lot. “I know.”

Whenever Maksim gets in trouble with his dodgy dealings, one of us—his arsenals—takes the fall. It’s always been this way.

“What job do they have you on exactly? Are you whacking someone?”

“No. Nothing like that.” I tell him about the job in great detail. Maksim lets us discuss things with each other. While James isn't much of a hacker, he's a good fighter. Almost as good as me. And I trust him implicitly.

“You could only get like, four or five minutes the last time, couldn't you?” he says, referring to my access to London's CCTV system.

“Ah-huh. But I wasn't about to tell Maksim that face to face.” I sound almost defeated, because I am. It's going to be mentally taxing trying to grasp more time.

“No, I understand.” James sighs in sympathy. “Just try and get his fifteen minutes. Try. If you can't, before you confess to Maksim that you've failed, call me and I'll come over to your place, okay? Don't tell him anything while you're on your own.”

My heart bleeds for this guy. There's nothing he wouldn't endure if it means he can spare me from pain.

“Thanks, James,” I say blank of emotion, but I'd never deliberately put him in the line of fire. “I have to go.” I shove my keys in my jacket pocket and head for the private elevator that leads up to my apartment. “I'll speak to you soon.”

# 3

For the next week, in my London apartment that overlooks a gray River Thames, I test myself to the limit.

I eat plain foods to prevent feeling lethargic, and scarcely sleep for five hours a night because my mind is on overdrive. I give up on the hypnopaedia—learning while asleep via a recorder—because I can't handle the overload of studying. In my personal gym upstairs, I execute my usual combat routine for four hours a day, which steals time away from work, but I must train physically. Maksim would kill me if I let myself slip. It could cost him his life.

I work on attaining the fifteen minutes in the dark computer room at the back of my apartment. It's hidden behind fake paneled walls, set up with ten computer screens hanging on the back wall in two rows. They offer the only source of light in here. They glow over my freckly face as I sit at the floating desk, where all my equipment is: keyboards, black boxes, and other useful gadgets that help me safely link to The Dark Web.

I work like a dog morning and night, occasionally nodding off in the wide office chair.

By day four, I manage to gain access to London's CCTV for a maximum of eleven minutes. I can control the traffic lights, certain security gates, and the city cameras. But, I cannot get a hold of more than eleven minutes. The system locks me out.

Sweaty, hungry for real food, and frazzled to the max, I rub my forehead. Then I bash at the keyboard keys to put glitches in London's CCTV system, working through another night.

Now, I have one week and one day left to train, and to add to my worry, work commitments over the weekend set me back. I don't have any other choice but to accept what is though, as I'm on Maksim's security detail and his life comes before mine.

Friday night, James and I watch his back while he parties ruthlessly at a mansion in Kensington Palace Gardens. The mansion belongs to some Asian

Prince who is largely in the public eye, but the public knows nothing of his taste for young girls and sex shows. They know only what the media allows them to know.

By ten o'clock, the party becomes hard to stomach—like most of the parties Maksim attends—because the Prince has a willing little Albanian brunette on all fours in the middle of his glorious ballroom. She's getting whipped, before being fucked by a man in a black leather mask. Their flesh slaps together so hard I can feel it. A collection of suits line the walls, waiting for their turn. Some of the onlookers masturbate, while the rest get their cocks sucked by their sex-slaves who are firmly on leashes, until it's their turn to fuck the Albanian girl.

James and I remain behind Maksim with our eyes ahead, clasping guns over our laps.

Maksim is in seventh heaven, especially when the Prince offers him a cock-sucker. The sound of the tiny blonde choking against his cock turns my stomach inside out, as he refuses to let her breathe by blocking her air passage. And to make matters worse, the godforsaken fuck show goes on until early hours of the morning, the ornate ballroom whispering with soft piano music. The music isn't loud enough to drown out her cries of pain though, nor the men's moans of satisfaction as they each have a go on her. Deep moans that remind me of Maksim when he makes me please him.

Internally, I'm beyond uncomfortable. On the outside, I must look as cold as ice.

The show gets even harder to stomach when Maksim takes over. He belts the Albanian girl to the point where her back splits and bleeds, before drilling her from behind. In a moment of raw intoxication, he presses her face into the floor and looks me right in the eyes. It's like everything and everyone in the room evaporates, the earth closing in on me. I go stiff, my chest so tight that I can just about breathe. I don't know whether to look away or not. He's never done this before.

He doesn't look away. He smiles at me with wickedness, and takes the girl slowly, holding her hips like he's caressing her. He hums with delight, his eyes hazy and full of lust.

I stare ahead, blinking above him, trying to avoid the devil's eye. Then, he fucks her with everything he has, making her squeal, skin smacking against skin.

I sense it when James glances down at me, then he steps a little closer and

puts us arm to arm. “Don't worry,” he whispers, “I won't let him do that to you.”

Though I appreciate his promise, it's empty. If Maksim wanted to do that to me, no one could stop him.

“Everyone, stay where you are!” an American-Latino guy shouts over the party, drawing my attention.

“If you move before we state otherwise, we'll shoot!” another Latino yells. “Girls, get your fucking clothes on.”

On alert, I glance about to assess the level of danger, as does James. A group of combat suited men are storming the ballroom with guns, and once they've got every man looking down their barrels, Charlie marches in.

“Stop!” he yells at Maksim, his blue eyes blazing with anger. He's holding a blanket in one hand, a large silver gun in his other.

My heart drops. I watch in dismay as the naked sex-slaves scatter like rats to get dressed, tripping over their dresses. One guy orders them to line up against the back wall, and starts handing out bottles of water from the duffle bag he's holding.

The men tuck themselves in, pulling up their pants and zipping up their trousers. Then they're lined up against the opposite wall from the girls, guns in their faces. Maksim staggers off the Albanian girl he's fucking, and fastens his trousers. His cheeks are tinted red with lust, golden eyes scorching in the same debauched emotion.

“What is going on?” the Asian Prince asks in terrible English, wandering around in a drug infused state of confusion.

My eyes flutter to Charlie, as he quietly consults with the combats. His large, muscular body is clad in jeans over black boots and a black long-sleeved sweater—rather casual attire considering his men look ready for war.

“That's Charlie Decena,” I whisper to James, and he loads his gun.

I pull back the hammer on my gun, too, and step forward for Maksim. James catches my elbow, making me stumble to a stop.

“What are you doing?” I hiss, tugging to get free. “Let me go.”

“Stay here. He's got over twenty men.”

I gawk up at James in panic, then at Maksim—who is now face to face with Charlie in the middle of the room—and then I gawk back up at James. “We can't just leave Maksim.”

“We don't want to start something if we can avoid it,” James says, his eyes trained on the situation. “I've heard a rumor Charlie Decena doesn't enjoy

things like this, so he's probably just putting a stop to the show.”

“How'd you know that?” I ask, drawing in my eyebrows.

“What's the problem though, my friend?” Maksim says, gaining my attention. “You've attended many parties like this before.”

There's a moment of dangerous silence, as Charlie towers over Maksim, tapering dominant blue eyes. “This, is *my* problem.” He drops the blanket he's holding over the girl Maksim just fucked.

She's panting for dear life, understandably bested after being whipped and screwed by at least ten men, so of course I'm stunned when she says, “Why are you stopping the show?” She's gazing up at Charlie through scraps of chocolate brown hair. “Who are you?”

James and I look at each other, and then ahead at Charlie. He passes the gun he's holding to his right-hand man, and crouches to the girl, elbows on his knees. “You're Arjana, is that right?” he says, stroking her hair back out of her face.

She nods, an air of vulnerability coming over her. “How do you know my name?” she says, descending into her shoulders. She's veiled in sweat and looks weak with trembling limbs.

He whispers something to her, his face soft and welcoming, and then wraps up her tiny naked frame in the blanket.

*What the fuck is going on?*

“Blair,” James says quietly, “does he have dealings with the Albanians?”

“I-I don't know,” I stutter, trying to filter what's happening.

Charlie tucks one arm under the Albanian girl's knees, the other behind her shoulders, and lifts her into his strong arms. She huddles against him, seeming glad that he's here. “Any more of this bullshit,” he warns, and leisurely pivots around, using the girl as a demonstration, “and we're all gonna have a problem—especially you, falso Prince.” He continues to scrutinize everyone, then his attention lands on me. His pale eyes widen, and for the second time tonight, I don't know where to look.

“Charlie,” Maksim says, ruffling his damp hair, “the girl is old enough, and she's a willing participant. Tell him, Arjana.” He points out to her.

“Willing participant?” Charlie walks up to my master with the girl, hunched at the neck. “I just told you, she's stolen property. You of all people should know better than to fuck with the Albanians.”

“She is payment for a debt owed to me,” the Prince says, lifting his chin in an attempt to look proud.



“Debt or no debt”—Charlie stalks over to the Prince, who cowers in his kameez—“we can all find ways to please ourselves without beating and gangbangng an eighteen year old girl.” There's something eerie in the way Charlie is looking at the Prince. “Fuck her in a more private setting next time, or find an older participant—as you so nicely put it,” he says to Maksim, and he stalks back over to him while holding that girl like she barely outweighs a bag of sugar. “I mean, I'm all for a bit of sadism but this is bullshit.”

“It is just some fun,” the Prince says, lifting his shoulders in a shrug.

“Fun?” Charlie raises his eyebrows, and turns to his coward audience. “Maybe I should get all your wives here and have my men belt them and gangbang them for so long that their flesh shakes. How would you all like that?”

The ballroom is in quiet shock, and I'm just about to pass out with it when Charlie tells Maksim, “Send Blaire home, now. She doesn't need to see this.”

The Prince arches an eyebrow, flabbergasted by Charlie's audacity. Maksim is stunned and humiliated, stuttering to defend himself but nothing worthy comes out.

“You'll have her on all fours next”—Charlie continues belittling my master, shaking his head at me in disgust—“getting fucked by this brainless lot.”

I feel a surge of rage go through James, and he steps forward for Charlie. The five men who are Charlie's armor lift their guns in our direction, so I grab the back of James' sweater to stop him, my heart drumming in my ears.

Charlie isn't bothered by James' attempt, and why would he be? He's got an arsenal. He shakes his head at me again, pity burning in his eyes. “Since when did men start having young girls protect them, huh?” Before anyone can answer him, he turns away with the girl in his arms and leaves just as quickly as he came. His men follow out the double doors like a pack of wolves, and they shut us in.

No one is sure what to do—we're all just glancing at each other—but then Maksim rushes after Charlie, telling the Asian Prince, “I need to make sure there's no tension after this. That was Charlie Decena.”

The Prince's face turns white.

“What the hell was that all about?” James says under his breath, his eyes glued to the exit doors. “And why doesn't he address Maksim properly?”

“I have no idea,” I say, dismayed by Charlie's bizarre act of kindness to save that girl.

Voices break through the silence, discussing Charlie and what he's just done. Some know who he is. Others don't. I try to listen in—I want to know who he is—but Maksim returns. He marches up to me, his expression tight with nerves. “Go home now,” he orders in Russian. “I'll call you if I need you.”

*What?*

“Do not stop to talk to anyone,” he says in a charge of Russian words. He can't seem to relax, looking back and forth between the exit doors and me. “Just get in your car and leave.”

I'm paralyzed with confusion.

James nudges me onward.

Maksim grips my arm so tight I can feel his fingers digging into my flesh even through my combat sweater. “Get a move on.”

I don't question him, even while I know this is out of character—he's never ordered me to leave before. Putting my head down, I walk through the murmuring ballroom, sort of thankful that I no longer have to endure the party.

What Charlie saw is nothing. It'll get darker as the night goes on.

## 4

Saturday, and it's work as usual.

I pick up Maksim from his house and drive him to his friend Rumo's country manor. They play cards there once a month, but they always play on different days and times. Men like my master don't have routines. They say routines make them easy targets for their adversaries.

Maksim is on the phone throughout the drive, arranging a place for a few trafficked girls, so I don't have to endure a conversation with him. I'm glad. After coming eye to eye with him last night while he was fucking with that girl, I'll admit, I am a little nervous. There was something in the way he stared at me, in the way he touched that girl while staring at me.

Maksim hangs up the call as we pull up on Rumo's paved driveway. It's illuminated with floodlights. They're so bright that I have to squint. The redbrick house before us is a fortress with black iron bars covering the sash windows and a red laser security system surrounding the dwelling. Two SUVs pull up around us, the rest of Maksim's security detail. No one can get to him without a war.

In the cold, I help him out of my car by opening his door. I bow my head, clasping a heavy gun in one hand.

"You look lovely this evening, My Little Pet," he says in Russian, grinning at me with a cunning gleam in his eyes. "I haven't had a chance to tell you."

He looks good, too, in a sharp gray suit against a white shirt under a knee length black coat, his long brown hair curtaining his hard face. He smells nice, like something spicy. It makes my nose tickle as the night breezes against my face.

I don't thank him for his compliment, nor do I smile. I just bow a second time.

"Have you heard anything from Charlie Decena?" he asks, tipping his head. "After last night, I mean."

I nearly frown, peering up at him with innocent eyes. "No, Сэр Maksim."

He studies me for a moment, scanning my expression. “So, he hasn't been to your apartment?” His golden eyes widen for an answer. “I know he fancies you.”

“What? No, no! Of course he hasn't been to my apartment. I would have told you. You know I wouldn't—”

“Okay.” Lifting a hand, he cuts me off. “That is good, I guess.” He scratches his stubbly chin, and I cringe at the sound of his bristly beard grating against his nails. “But he's up to something. I just know it. I don't get why he's come to me for help on a job.” He goes on and on about his confusion over Charlie's agenda, saying what he did at the Prince's party wasn't him. “Decena wouldn't do something so thoughtful.”

It isn't just me who thinks *he's* up to no good. That makes me anxious, and the fact that Maksim is questioning me over my loyalty makes me even more anxious. He should know I'd never keep anything from him.

I'm sweating in my uniform.

“What did you talk about when you gave him a lift to London?” Maksim asks. “Did he want to know anything about me?”

No hesitation, I spill my guts about the useless questions Charlie directed at me. “He waffled on about my car and how fast it goes, the color.” I tell him everything, making sure I leave nothing to chance.

James appears from one of the SUVs, and I almost gasp out with relief. Maksim will focus on him for a moment.

“Ahhh,” Maksim breathes out with a broad smile, turning his attention to James. “He's here.”

Wearing a black combat outfit just like I am, James walks up to us with steady composure and bows, touching his chest.

“Hello, My Pet,” Maksim husks. He calls us both his pets. However, I'm his little pet.

“Evening, Cэp Maksim,” James says, his Russian spiced accent deep and level.

“How are you this evening?” says our master, his eyes flaring with something that a man shouldn't express to another man.

James answers as courteous as ever with, “I'm great, thank you.”

We never return Maksim's gestures. We're not allowed to. He doesn't like having to explain his moods—not that he needs to. I can sense his moods a mile away. Tonight, he's thriving.

“Good. Good!” Maksim claps, grinning from ear to ear. “Well, let us get

on with this evening. My best vodka is inside waiting for me.”

I internally shake my head. He drinks far too much.

Our master turns for the house, and James gently catches my hand. He gives me a squeeze, causing me to peer up at him. He flashes his most affectionate smile, mouthing, “Are you okay?”

Nodding, I smile back. Then we enter the house without an invitation. James walks on Maksim's left, while I walk on his right, both with a gun in hand. Maksim hides his away in his knee length coat. Though we're amongst friends, we're not at the same time. In this game, no one ever has a true friend.

The entrance hall boasts gleaming black and white marble floors, oak double doors on each wall, and a huge white piano tucked away under the arch of the staircase on the right.

“Maksim-Markov,” Rumo greets from the furthest doorway that leads into the snooker room. “You made it.”

Smiling like the devil himself, Maksim heads for Rumo while extending a hand. “I am much looking forward to this evening's events, my friend.”

“Ohhh, you should be. You should be!” Rumo clasps Maksim’s hand. “I bought a new poker table, as you requested. The chairs are a lot more comfortable and the table is softer.”

Maksim nods a few times, chanting that he's glad. “When we can afford luxury, why skimp on the finer details like a poker table?”

Entering the snooker room, they babble on about some Albanian business. James and I follow them in.

The brass lights hanging from the ceiling are dazzling, reflecting on the dark paneled walls in burnt orange tones. Behind the mammoth snooker table that commands the space, there is a poker table which can seat six. They always play poker in this room. I've never seen any other part of the house.

Carl and Umberto await patiently, already sitting at the soft green table. Umberto greets Maksim from a distance with cool esteem. Carl simply nods.

Mucky cigar smoke clouds the air in streams of grays and browns. It stinks. I hate the smell of cigars. I don't get the fascination with smoking.

James and I stay within touching distance of Maksim when he sits at the head of the poker table, draping his coat over the back of his chair.

“I hear you have Charlie on side, Maksim-Markov?” Carl says in awful Spanish tinted English, flicking the head of his cigar in a crystal ashtray.

“That's right, my friend.”

“Even after what happened?” Umberto asks.

Maksim nods, scissoring a Cuban cigar between his fingers. “Yes. He forgives me.”

*Forgives him? For what?*

James and I glance at each other.

“Just. Like. That?” Umberto pulls his thin gray eyebrows together. “You don't think that's odd?”

Maksim laughs under his breath, biting off the end of his cigar. “Charlie isn't the kind of man to beat around the bush, is he, Carl?”

Carl doesn't respond to that sarcastic directed question. He doesn't even address Maksim.

“Besides,” Maksim continues, “it is always good to have such a powerful man as a friend. Wouldn't you all agree?”

They go into a full blown tête-à-tête over Charlie and what he's about, loyalty mostly. I come to understand that nothing else really matters to him. I also come to understand that Maksim double crossed him on some job a few years back.

I gulp at this point.

Rumo leans forward, staring at my master. “Just don't cross him again, Maksim-Markov. You know what he is capable of. You know he gears himself up with at least twenty armed men wherever he goes. And I can't get involved. I don't want to die.”

“I know, my friend.” Maksim squeezes Rumo's shoulder. “I understand.” He then grabs his crotch under the table. “Anyhow, why would I double-cross him again? I like my balls attached to my body.”

They all laugh out loud—well, everyone but Carl laughs. This is strange. I've noticed before that Carl isn't Maksim's biggest fan, as has James, but his dislike for Maksim is coming off him in waves tonight.

A tiny blonde girl wearing a red underwear set and shiny red stockings enters the room. She fills the men's glasses on the table. Umberto says he will fuck her after the game, emphasizing that he's going to whip her. She flinches when he smacks her ass with an open palm, and I drop my eyes to the floor. I will admit, I do feel a pang of pity for her. But, it's not my job to save girls like her, as much as I wish I could. As much as I know I could. I'd slaughter this lot in minutes with my own two hands if I was allowed.

James gently touches my hand and I straighten, coming across deadpan.

“Five card draw?” Rumo says after the girl leaves, and everyone agrees.

So, they play cards, chatting lightly about girls they've abused and the wives they wish they could abuse. James and I keep quiet for the next two hours, antipathy radiating through us. We don't agree with what they do to girls. We have sneakily spoken about what we've seen and heard, but neither of us really knows what to make of it. We don't share their fancy for abuse, but we know nothing else, since we were so young when we came to Maksim. Once, James actually asked if he was wired wrong because he cannot bear to see girls getting mistreated, even if they do consent at times. He doesn't understand why Maksim enjoys being brutal. I couldn't give James an even answer. I don't know if he's wired right or wrong. I know what I feel. In my opinion, what they do is immoral. But this sentiment only came over me when Maksim granted me freedom. Since then, I've lived in the world amongst the normal and with television and books. James has only ever lived under our master. He's never tasted what normal might be, or felt the satisfaction of freedom that comes with living alone.

“Charlie spoiled our fun,” Maksim says, and the mere mention of that man’s name pulls me from my thoughts. “And he was mad as hell. I swear, if anyone questioned his actions, he would have shot us all.”

He must be talking about the Prince's party last night.

“I heard about what happened.” Umberto lifts a glass to have a sip of vodka. “The gossip has spread like wildfire. Glad I wasn't there. I know how excited Decena can get when angry.”

Carl comes to life, telling stories about Charlie in his younger years. “If anyone so much as attempted to pull a gun on him, they'd be dead. He doesn't fuck about.”

I grip my gun a little tighter, anxious because Charlie said he was coming to this poker game. Hopefully, he's changed his mind.

“Do not worry, my friends.” Maksim lifts a hand, grinning from ear to ear. “I straightened things out. He wanted me to send Blaire home last night, so I did.”

My stomach rolls with shock. James gawps down at me.

“And luckily,” Maksim adds, “that girl we were fucking was old enough and willing to let us abuse her.”

“Yeah, luckily,” Charlie says from the open doorway, gaining everyone's attention.

My eyes flicker to him, and an overwhelming tightness forms in my chest. He's leaning against the doorframe on one shoulder, arms crossed over a

strapping chest. He looks cool in his pose, wearing a black shirt tucked into dark blue jeans, the collar unbuttoned to show a hard, dusty chest. The sleeves are rolled up to his elbows, revealing tan muscular forearms covered in black hair and thick veins. He's got that silver watch on his left wrist, a minute statement of money.

Our eyes align for a split second, as he flashes me a cunning smile, showing even white teeth. I'm the one to look away, unable to endure his presence.

"Hola, Charlie." Carl pivots to him from the table. "Where have you been? We expected you hours ago."

Uncrossing his arms, Charlie saunters in and around the snooker table, his motions oddly graceful. As he passes James and I from behind, I hold my breath, and my toes curl in my trainers. I'm expecting him to do something like touch me in secrecy.

He doesn't, but the fact remains. He puts me on edge. Even more so knowing Maksim has betrayed him somehow.

"Tis' good to see you, Carl." Charlie smiles coolly at Carl and only Carl. "Work kept me late. I'm sure I've not missed much."

I check him out from the corner of my eye. His hair is tied back, enhancing his gorgeousness—if that's even possible. It's so black and shiny, and looks finger touching soft. I've never thought about touching a man before. Maybe I haven't because all the men I've been around are either on Maksim's payroll or at the end of my barrel.

Charlie shows no interest in anyone but Carl, though the other men fuss over him like he's some kind of god, offering up their chairs and their drinks.

"The end chairs are the most comfortable," Rumo says, giving Maksim a funny look, curtly nodding to the right, as if to say, *get up and move*.

Charlie doesn't react to them with smugness. He doesn't really indulge their fussing at all. He simply shakes everyone's hand while asking Carl, "How's the wife?"

I'm itching to know who the fuck he is, especially after he saved that girl last night. He's like the light and the dark, the good and the bad. It's so confusing because no one in this game is both.

"She's doing great," Carl says, cradling his whisky glass on the table. "We're on our third child. Her name is Gabrielle." He kisses his own fingers with passion, emphasizing his daughter. "She's the most *lindo* little thing."

"I'm sure she is perfect. Your wife is bonita," Charlie says, though not in a



smutty manner. He sounds like he genuinely thinks highly of Carl and his wife. “Tell her I said congratulations,” he adds, then takes Maksim's seat by grabbing the back with authority, forcing Maksim to move over one. James and I follow him to the right, staying behind him.

“A drink?” Rumo says to Charlie, appearing a little nervous, tugging open his silver tie.

Charlie nods, slowly taking to his chair. Then, his eyes flitter between James and me, causing my stomach to roll with anxiety. I don't meet his gaze. I stare past him, endeavoring to come across collected in my pose.

“Someone's got a thing for redheads,” he teases, referring to James and I, flicking up his eyebrows at Maksim. “They've gotta be related.” Turning his head, he says to James, “What's your name, boy?”

Maksim waves out a hand, and James states his name. His voice comes out cold and detached.

“You're obviously part of Maksim's security alongside Blaire?”

James nods. “Yes, sir.”

“Sir?” Charlie looks amused and pleased with James' word choice. “Well, it's been a while since I was called sir. You should have seen this boy last night”—he winks at Carl from across the table in a sly manner—“actually tried to stand up to me and all my men.”

My heart sinks with unease, but James looks confident in his domain.

“Though I can't blame him,” Charlie says. “He clearly thought I was mocking this one.” He gestures at me and smiles. It makes him look so handsome and young, which is odd given how sovereign he is.

“Yes,” Maksim drawls. “I used to have a hard time training Blaire because he didn't like my process. He is too fond of her.”

“Aren't we all?” Charlie eyes Carl in an artful fashion, who seems entertained with his daring.

Maksim doesn't respond to that. He ushers me forward by clicking his fingers, telling me to get Charlie a drink. “You still like brandy, don't you, my friend?”

“Yeah,” Charlie says, and I hate that I can feel his steady blue eyes on me. “Especially if she's making it.”

On autopilot, I walk over to the bar in the corner of the room, put down my gun, and fix him a drink.

“Have you opened your new club, yet?” Charlie asks. I assume he's addressing Rumo, given his club opened last week.

“Of course,” Rumo says, and he blathers on about his new adventure—the whores, as he calls them. “They're filthy as fuck, and for you all, my close friends, they're free.”

*Men...* I roll my eyes. They're so easily distracted with tits and ass.

“I think I'll pass,” Charlie says. “Don't like whores. I prefer my women clean and exclusive with a bad attitude.”

Carl chuckles.

I grab the brandy from the side and take it to Charlie. He's surveying me as I walk to him. My stomach won't stop rolling with anxiety, but I try to save face by being as impassive as I can.

“Hello, Señorita Blaire,” he says when I stop in front of him. His Latin infused voice makes every hair on my body prick. “It's nice to see you again. Did you enjoy an early night last night?” He smiles at me with bold seduction, his blue eyes glancing back and forth between mine.

He's so fucking handsome it makes me sick.

I nod at him by a way of forced respect.

“I've gotta say, you're even prettier in the light. Isn't she pretty, Carl?”

Carl agrees, sparking a lighter for his cigar. “Even when she was younger, she was a bonita girl.”

Charlie smirks at Maksim with mocking enthusiasm, then he smirks at me. “You really have to fix the lighting in your office. What's the point of owning something so lovely when you can't fully appreciate it?”

I gesture impatiently with the glass, urging Charlie to take it. He does, and he runs his thumb over mine, causing me to jerk away from him as that familiar tingly feeling spreads through my body. A black switch goes off in my head—the switch that says, *KILL!* The switch that flickers on when someone touches me.

I don't attack him. I don't know why.

I manage to keep my cool, and step back behind Maksim, training my eyes on the wall behind Charlie.

James gives me a weird side-glance, which I see from the corner of my eye.

“How's work coming along?” Charlie asks me. Pressing his feet into the ground, he slides his chair around to face me.

A few uncomfortable looks are thrown around, but Charlie doesn't care. He simply sits back and drapes his hands over the arms of the chair, holding the glass in one hand.

“You can answer our friend, My Little Pet,” Maksim says, centered on the cards in his hand.

“Things are coming along fine,” I say, squeezing the gun over my lap in both hands, fighting for composure.

“Just fine?” he asks.

I step around so I can see Maksim's face, and also to get out of Charlie's line of vision.

Maksim nods at me.

“Things are running like clockwork,” I lie. Now is not the time to confess that I'm not only failing to attain fifteen minutes, but behind schedule.

“Good.” A devious grin reaches Charlie's eyes. He looks me up and down, leisurely and with intent. “Hmm, I like what you're wearing.”

Oh, of course he does. My combat outfit is tight and black, covering every inch of my small frame but my face.

I think my cheeks heat up, but I don't show any other reaction—well, not deliberately.

James is wearing the same, but I doubt Charlie will compliment him.

“Can you breathe in those trousers?” he teases.

I shoot him a wolfish glare, and he winks at me. I press my teeth together. Why does this bastard have to provoke me?

Rumo and Umberto lewdly compliment my clothes too, saying what dirty things they'd like to do to me, if they were allowed.

“That was a private joke,” Charlie says, and the room submerges in silence.

I peer over at James. He's staring at me, baffled beyond belief.

“So, Maksim...” Charlie says after having a sip of his brandy, “about your offer to see Blaire in action.”

James and I look at each other—this is about the only communication we achieve in Maksim's company.

“In action?” Umberto's eyes light up. “Are we to enjoy a...fuck, show?” He hesitates to say the words, I assume because he's remembering what happened last night.

“No.” Maksim says in a deep note, lifting a hand. “No one is fucking my little pet.”

“No, they're not,” Charlie says.

Maksim blinks at him. James and I blink at each other. Charlie's presence is so intense, like walking on fire.

“So, what show?” Umberto asks, seemingly at a loss with a stupid expression on his wrinkly face.

“Maksim was telling me Blaire is a good fighter,” Charlie elaborates, speaking with his hands. “He offered to show me just how skilled a fighter she is.”

I detest how he addresses my master as just, Maksim, rather than Maksim-Markov, especially in front of his friends.

“Ohhh, I see.” Umberto emphasizes that he's never seen a girl battle with such raw fighting skills. “She's like a fucking cheetah because she's so quick. You never said she was fighting tonight, Maksim-Markov?”

“I was waiting on Charlie,” he says. “It is a surprise.”

My heart drums in my ears. I'm not often nervous, but I don't often have time to get my head around having a fight. I usually do, rather than think.

“Why don't we retire to the ballroom?” Rumo says, rubbing his hands together. “There is plenty of space for her to fight. We should bet?” Everyone concurs, then Rumo adds, “I've never seen Blaire fight before, but Carl has told me she's good.”

“That's because she is,” Carl says, though he doesn't sound as animated as the others.

Nonetheless, Rumo grins. “Well then, let us get a move on.”

# 5

Chairs scrape against the wooden floors as everyone stands up from the table, including Charlie.

He's getting on my last nerve with all this curiosity bullshit. I'm desperate to ask Maksim if I can fight him, just so I can kick his ass.

James and I follow Maksim and the rest of the men through the entrance hall, down a wide lobby, and into a huge open ballroom. All these rich motherfuckers have them. The room oozes luxury with ivory paneled walls, a large sparkly chandelier hanging overhead, and decadent, highly buffed wooden floors. Their oxford shoes echo through the space as we go forth, stopping by the French doors that lead out onto the back garden.

"My Little Pet—" Maksim calls in Russian for me to stand in front of him, waving me forward. He takes my gun and tells James to put his down on the window ledge. "You and James will battle until one is unconscious, is that clear?"

Charlie steps in front of us and crosses his arms. "Unconscious?"

My face drops. *He can speak Russian?*

Maksim nods. "It will be a good fight, my friend. You'll see."

"No way. I'm not up for seeing this little girl unconscious." Charlie points at me, then tucks his hand back into his crossed arms. "I just want to see what she's made of."

I almost huff. I'm insulted, truly, but quite eager to see the shock in this bastard's eyes when I knock James out cold.

*Shit, no.* What am I thinking? I don't want to do that to James. I don't want to hurt him.

"Charlie, relax, my friend." Maksim pulls me under his arm. I lean into him, into his warmth like a cat getting petted. He always pets me before a fight. "James will not beat Blaire. She's too good."

"She is," Carl concurs.

Charlie frowns down at me. "Is that right?"

Tipping my head back, I peek up at Maksim, almost purring. Since before

I can remember, I've been robbed of affection, so when Maksim is like this, I bask in his touch. I bask in the way he holds me. I guess everyone needs affection at some point in their lives, even me.

“Don't look at him!” Charlie snaps, making me flinch.

Everyone is instantly on guard, glancing at each other.

“Look at me and answer me, Blaire.”

Maksim squeezes my arm to give me the go ahead.

“Yes, that's right,” I whisper.

I can feel James' anxiety behind us coming off him in waves. It would usually make my stomach turn over with guilt. Now, however, I'm too preoccupied with Maksim. He's so warm, and he smells like freshly burnt brut. At times like this, I can almost imagine myself as a different person. Someone who can and will thrive in another's tenderness. No more brutality. Just, *this*.

“Okay, Charlie?” Maksim says, holding me tighter under his arm. He knows I enjoy his touch. I've told him many of times when he's asked.

Charlie grinds his square jaw. “Yeah, but if I call it to a stop, they must stop. I don't want to see her half dead.”

Somehow, he's snapped me out of this needy trance. I'm not sure if I'm angry, affronted, or flattered by his demand.

I frown.

No one has ever broken me out of a trance when Maksim holds me.

“Blaire, you understand?” Maksim looks down at me. “If Charlie says stop, you will both stop.”

I nod, innocently blinking up at him.

“You too, James,” Maksim says, glancing back.

“Yes, Cəp Maksim.”

“Good.” My master gives me another squeeze before saying in Russian, “Now, the both of you go on and take your positions in the middle of the room.”

When I glance up at Charlie, he nods at me. I'm not sure why.

Turning out of Maksim's embrace, I come face to face with James. He appears very deadpan, but I know he's nervous. I can sense it on another level. I don't enjoy fighting my friend like this either, so I guess I am a little nervous too, but I have no other choice. Maksim will beat the shit out of me if I refuse, and like always, I'll do nothing to stop him.

While the men light up cigars and place bets, James and I walk into the

middle of the room and stand opposite each other. His face is pale against short red hair, and his eyes a dark shade of blue under this light. My hair is tied back in a bun but that won't stop James from trying to get a good hold on me.

I won't let that happen.

“Form positions!” Maksim calls out in Russian, modestly annoyed because we haven't done so already.

Raising our fists to protect our faces, and opening our legs to create balance through our bodies, James and I nod at each other.

“Just go down,” I whisper, holding his uneasy gaze.

“He won't like that,” James mouths back. “He wants to show you off.”

My heart sinks because he's right. Maksim won't like that. He's boasting.

“I'm sorry,” I say truthfully. At least I tried to spare him, for this moment.

“Fight!” says Maksim in Russian.

---

James and I smile pitifully at each other to apologize for what is about to happen. Then, he goes in for the kill.

He swings for my face with a few steady punches. I evade his onslaught with effortless grace. I duck and weave to the left and the right, my muscles easing into my motions.

He always serves the first hit, I've noticed over the years. It gives me an advantage because one is off balance while trying to strike. I've never told him of his bad-habit, since we often have to fight each other to train or entertain, and it gives me a chance to put him down before things get bloody.

I dodge another punch. Then James pounces at me. I catch his wrist and fling him across the room with all the strength I have, letting out a harsh breath. I then run at him and dish out meditated jabs, landing a few to his hard stomach when I can get through his fist attack. He gasps, twisting his face in pain, but manages to keep focus.

I don't stop there.

I dance him around in circles, lashing out athletic kicks to bat away his punches until I'm behind him.

I'm trained with Wing Chun, a Chinese Martial Arts way of fighting. Since I was...well, I don't really know how old I was when I first started fighting, but I was young, I've always fought this way.

My muscles now warm and loose, I beat James' kidneys with perfect clenched fists, exhaling for each strike. My assault puts him on his knees, groaning in agony. Clutching the scruff of his neck, I ceaselessly beat him into a bloody haze. My knuckles are cracking and throbbing with pain. His eyes swell, red and bruised and puffy. He will look like hell tomorrow.

I boot him in the chest, knocking him over with brutal force. He doesn't get up, just lies there half curled up in a ball. So I wait, trying to filter the rush of adrenaline. I don't want to get lost in myself while fighting my friend.

The seconds tick by at a snail's pace. I can hear the men over there by the doors muttering amongst themselves, though I can't make out what they're saying.

James is still crippled on the floor. I steal over to assess him, to make sure he's okay. He jumps to his feet and clouts me in the face, whipping my head back. My bottom lip splits. I spit out a pool of metallic flavored blood, and meet his blows with rapid movements, punch for punch. "Aargh!" I scream through clenched teeth with every strike, my knuckles smashing against his.

He's battling in his stride, and because I know I can't get through his ambush, I lash out a high axe kick, knocking his head back.

Dizzy again, he stumbles about.

My chest is on fire as I pant through my nose, watching him strive to gather himself.

"She's fucking unbelievable!" someone yells, keyed up. I think it's Rumo.

When James is back on par, he darts at me, growling, "Gragh!" He kicks my feet and jabs through the air like he's going for gold, forcing me around the room.

With my forearms, I block his storm, left then right, amid punting away his lazy kicks. He's trying to knock me over by kicking my feet, but he's not doing a good job of it. I'm a little angry with him. He knows I'm good with my feet.

I side-kick behind his knee to put him off balance, then I spin around and flip him over, scissoring him between my legs. I land on my palms as we hit the floor with a heavy thud, my hands throbbing with pain. I unfold my legs from around his body, kick him away, then leap to my feet and stretch out my thigh muscles.

The adrenaline rushing through me is intoxicating, tingly sensations swimming in my bloodstream, and my heart is pounding.

I'm slowly losing focus.



James struggles to get up, and when he does, he staggers back, I assume to put some distance between us for a breathing moment.

“What...what are you-you waiting for?” he pants every word, squeezing his eyes shut a few times.

Fast and smooth, I sprint at him. I land a nice clean blow to the center of his face, causing his nose to explode. My knuckles pulsate but the pain goes away after a few seconds of flexing my hand.

“That’s it, My Little Pet!” Maksim chants in Russian. “Kill him!”

“Kill him?” I stop then to look at Maksim and James thumps me square in the face, knocking me clean into the air.

I’m in a haze for a moment, plummeting backward, wondering if Maksim actually wants me to kill James.

My back cracks when it hits the hard floor. I wince, arching over on my side.

Maksim's control over my mind doesn't always serve me well. One word—one click of his fingers—and I lose focus.

I don't want to kill my friend. I have to clarify this before I do.

Booting me in the stomach, James winds me. I cough up thick, warm blood, struggling to breathe for a second. I manage to wrap my arms around his ankles, ensuring he cannot kick me again.

“Not literally, Blaire!” Maksim shouts in Russian. “Fucking get up!”

James grabs a fist-full of my hair and pounds me in the face, sending shooting pains right through my skull. My head lashes back and forth, but I'm still here. I'm not out cold yet.

“Stop the fight!” someone yells. “Now, Maksim!”

“Just wait,” Maksim says. “Blaire, Podgotovsja! Konchaj yego!”

My senses come to attention.

Bent over me, James is weak in his stance. I dig my nails into the backs of his knees and yank him forward with a loud groan, dropping him on his ass. His grip still in my hair, he drags me forward with him, making my scalp tear.

He's trying to get up now, at the same time shoving me into the floor.

I fight to my feet, spin out of his grasp on my hair, and boot him where it hurts.

“Oh, fuck!” Cupping his crotch, he goes down like a sack of shit, all the color draining from his face.

I step back, panting like a wild cat, wiping damp strands of hair back out

of my face.

“Finish him!” Maksim yells.

James wobbles to his feet, and I know this is my moment—any longer, and it'll be a bloodbath. I jump up into the air with facility, wrap my legs around his neck, and flip over to put him down completely. I land on the floor with open palms, and James' neck between my thighs. I use all my lower body weight to keep him facedown, tensing and gritting my teeth, pressing my hands into the cold wooden floors. The veins in my eyes feel like they might pop but I don't stop. I squeeze and squeeze and squeeze.

“Jesucristo!” someone shouts out. “I thought he had her!”

Gasping and wriggling, James tries to pry my legs open, digging his fingers into my flesh. It doesn't work. I might be small but I'm strong.

“Davaj, devochka!” Maksim yells. “That's it girl. Put him to sleep!”

I do, my heart twisting with remorse. This doesn't happen often, me feeling a sense of guilt, but it's happening now.

*I'm sorry.*

After a few minutes, James falls limp in my thigh tight grasp.

## 6

Gasping, I loosen my grip on James and roll onto my back, relieved the fight is over.

A round of applause breaks out, echoing through the large room. I don't soak up the ovation. Lost somewhere in my mind, I turn over onto my knees and push to my feet, lengths of hair sticking to my sweaty, bloody face. Standing there, I look down at James. He's battered, bruised, and bested. My chest aches at the sight of him.

I hate that Maksim makes us do this to each other. Training together in my apartment is fine because we stop when one calls for a ceasefire, but in moments like this, we have to fight until one is cataleptic, or worse. I've had to kill others to entertain many times before.

Charlie saunters toward me with a white towel in hand. He's undone his ponytail, so his ink black hair curls around his neck and face. "Wipe yourself off," he says softly to me, and shakes out the towel, I assume because I don't take it. I'm just glaring at him, a storm brewing inside me.

"What's with the silence? Hmm?" His blue eyes glow with uncertainty as they search mine. "Maksim said you can speak to me."

I huff under my breath, amazed by his impudence. He goads Maksim into making me beat my friend half to death and wonders why I don't want to chat?

"I don't need that," I refuse the towel. Crouching down, I pick up my friend from the floor, hooking my arms under his so I can drag him out to the car.

"Leave him," Maksim says.

I glance up, my muscles straining under James' weight.

"Go on. Leave him where he is." Maksim smiles at me with zealous wickedness, standing amid the other men who are patting him on the back.

"Okay," I say softly and without thinking. "Sure." I carefully put James back down on the ground and fold his hands across his chest.

"Don't worry," Charlie whispers, draping the towel over his shoulder. "I'll

put your friend in his car.”

“Don't you dare touch him,” I warn under my breath and stand up to him in defiance, barely coming up to his chest. I have no idea why I feel I can talk to him like this, but I do. “You asked for this.”

He hunches down so we're almost at eye level. “I just wanted to see what you're made of.”

“Well, now you've seen.” I'm trying to be sarcastic but I can't keep the misery out of my voice. “Happy?”

A lick of blood slithers down the side of my face, over my cheekbone. I catch it with a single finger and wipe it off on my trousers.

“You in a lot of pain?” Charlie lifts a hand to touch me, ignoring my question. “I can get you some painkillers if you need them?”

I bat away his hand with such force it makes a slapping sound. “I'm not allowed painkillers.”

His eyes widen. “Like hell you're not.”

I ball my trembling hands, the storm inside me whirling like a hurricane getting ready to explode. “Who are you to tell me what I can or cannot have?” I'm just about to tell Charlie to piss off and leave me alone, then—

“What are you two talking about?” Maksim asks, reminding me that Charlie and I are not alone, and James is still lying there at my feet.

On instinct, so I don't get in trouble, I say, “Charlie was just praising me, Cəp Maksim.” I give Charlie a desperate, knowing look.

“Sí, I was,” he concurs loud enough for all to hear, and then whispers, “For that, I want to talk to you before the night is over.”

I frown at him, maintaining eye contact. What could he possibly want to talk to me about?

There's a faint vibrating sound coming from his pocket. I realize it's his phone when he pulls it out.

“What?” he snaps to answer, without checking the screen to see who it is—and without looking away from me.

I'm the one to break eye contact. I blink about in a fluster, and he disappears through a doorway off the ballroom.

This is so weird. I've never lied to Maksim before, and I'd never be so blatant as to hold someone's gaze in front of my master.

“Come over here and have a drink, My Little Pet,” Maksim says. I'm assured by his relaxed tone of voice that he hasn't clocked onto anything.

I walk stolid across the room with a slight twinge in my back, smoothing

scraps of hair back out of my face.

“Here you go.” He gives me his glass and smiles with obvious elation. “Drink up. It will make you feel better.”

I nod with a forced smile, taking the glass. It's cold against my palm and quite heavy. I scoop out a cube of ice and press it to my broken lip, blinking droplets of sweat over my lashes. Not just sweat. Blood. It makes my left eye sting.

“Told you she was good,” Umberto says, his chin doubled because he's staring down at me from at least six foot.

“Yes.” Rumo's eyes thin as he looks at me. “You should put her in the monthly fights at my farm, Maksim-Markov. We could make some serious money off of her.”

“No! No!” Maksim laughs, tipping up the glass to motion I have a sip. “It would be unfair to her opponents.”

The vodka burns my throat and makes me gasp a little.

“You can say that again,” Umberto says between chuckles. “Imagine, we would be accused of fixing the fights.”

Everyone but Carl laughs at his silly joke, and then Rumo says they should get back to playing poker. “Umberto now has an extra fifty thousand to burn as he bet on Blaire winning.”

Of course he did. I'm not sure he's ever missed one of my fights.

“Go put James in the car, My Little Pet.” Maksim leans in to kiss the wound on my eyebrow, causing me to wince internally. He then puts warm lips on my ear and whispers, “When you are done attending to James, meet me in the snooker room where we will be playing poker. Be cautious of Charlie if you run into him.”

Nodding, I pass him back the glass and walk over to James, a morsel of pain still in my back like needles in my spine. Must be due to landing on this hard floor.

James remains out cold. His hands are still folded over his chest. He's not moved an inch.

*Poor guy.*

I block out the sentiment of guilt. It's the last thing I need to be feeling right now. As I'm the only person inside Rumo's house who can guard Maksim, I must keep my wits about me.

With both hands, I grab under James' arms. He's heavy like deadweight, so I use my lower body strength to move him.

Charlie appears in front of me, takes James' forearms, and attempts to throw him over his shoulder.

“What are you doing?” I snap, standing up straight. “Will you go away?” My eyes dart over to the doors. Fortunately, Maksim and his friends are out of sight.

“Dios mío, will you calm down?” Charlie glares at me, putting James back down on the floor. “I'm just helping you.”

“Helping me?” I squeak in shock, my hands trembling to hit him. “If you didn't provoke Maksim, James wouldn't be lying here unconscious.” I'm struggling to keep my voice down, but he really gets under my skin. “Why don't you go play a hand of poker? Leave the hard work to those of us who have no other choice but to do the heavy lifting.”

“Why do you stay with Maksim?” he asks completely off topic, cocking his head.

I scoff. *Another stupid question.* He seems to be full of them.

“I know your friend here is fitted with a tracking device,” he says, waving a hand at James, “yet, you're not, and you stick around. Why is that?”

My jaw drops. He's been asking around about us? Not well enough though, it seems. I'm not fitted with a tracking device because I have my master's absolute trust. James is fitted with one because Maksim isn't a silly man. He knows that if James had half the chance, he'd try to run. It would be a foolish mistake, though. Maksim has the British government in his pocket because he brings millions to the economy with his trafficked girls. So if James ever did run, he'd be picked up by the police within the day.

“Why do you address Maksim with such insolence?” I say, putting Charlie under the spotlight. “Don't you think you ought to learn some respect?”

He snorts with affront. “Why would I speak up to someone with respect who is beneath me, hmm?”

I shake my head in obvious loathing, refusing to argue cat and dog style. “I don't know who you think you are...”

I grip my friend's ankles and haul him across the floor, toward the doors. Charlie takes James' wrists and lifts him off the ground, his arm muscles bulging with tension.

“Charlie,” I growl his name, curling my lips against my teeth.

“Look,” he says, releasing James again, “you can drag your friend out like a dead body, or you can let me help you.” Though he's giving me an option, his tone doesn't really leave any room for argument. “The choice is yours.”

He snatches the towel off his shoulder and flings it at me. “Wipe your face. You're bleeding.”

Dropping James' legs, I catch the towel with both hands, wondering why he's doing this. Why is he provoking me? And why is he trying to help me?

Charlie nods at the towel and I don't know why, but I wipe my sweaty forehead before cleaning up my bloody mouth, wincing when I press it to my busted lip. I'm bleeding more than I thought. The white towel soaks through with claret.

Charlie walks up to me, his stride confident and unhesitant. Reaching out, he lifts my chin with a single finger, forcing us to look at each other. A rush of heat sweeps through me, making my skin flush, and then my stomach tingles with...I don't know.

I do nothing. I just stand there like a brainless statue. I manage to swallow past the restriction in my throat, but that's it.

“Your eye is bleeding quite a lot,” he says softly, glancing between my eyes and my mouth. With his other hand, he covers mine where I'm holding the towel to my lip and forces me to press it to my eye, dabbing there.

It stings, but that isn't what's bothering me.

I back up out of his grip to put some well needed distance between us, unable to think or speak. I just look at him, unnerved.

He observes me from a few feet away, running his tongue across the sharp of his upper teeth. I'm sure he knows how he makes me feel when he touches me. I can see it in his eyes.

He nods a few times, as if confirming something to himself.

“What?” I say, but he doesn't answer me.

Breaking eye contact, he crouches, grips James around the waist, and tosses him over his shoulder. Straightening, he heads for the exit with steady grace, as if carrying a shopping bag rather than a fully grown man.

For a time, I'm frozen in the middle of the ballroom, watching him leave. What is it with the way he touches me? Why does he make me feel weird?

Tossing the towel on the floor, I jog through the house after him. Outside, the floodlights are beaming in full force. I squint, catching up with Charlie.

He seems to know exactly where he's going because he's heading straight for the SUV James arrived in.

“Open the back door,” he says, nodding at the car, so I do. He bends at the knees to put James across the back seats and tells the other two in the car to just let him rest. “If you give him water when he wakes up, make sure he

takes it in small sips.”

“Eh, okay,” they say in unison, glancing at each other, then back at Charlie.

Now that James is safely in his car, I relax somewhat. I turn for the house, heading back to Maksim.

“Are you gonna answer my question?” Charlie says, walking up beside me. “I just had your back in there, so the least you could do is—”

“What question, Charlie?”

“Why'd you stay with Maksim? Why doesn't he insist you wear a tracking device?”

I roll my eyes, refusing to go there.

We jog up the porch steps together.

“Blaire?” He gently touches my arm.

“Are you stupid or just deaf?” I face him, then I step back because we're too close for comfort. “I'm not allowed to talk about Maksim. Do you want to get me the fucking whip?”

“He whips you?” Charlie says this like he's surprised, raising his eyebrows. “We'll have to remedy your situation then, won't we?”

“Fuck you.” I step for him, craning my head back so I can defiantly meet his wicked gaze. “Fuck you and whatever you're up to.”

He looks down on me like I'm small and harmless. “I'm not up to anything.”

I laugh under my breath, jabbing a finger at my temple. “You must think me a fool, Charlie.”

“Not at all. Far from it, actually.”

“Yes,” I huff at him, looking between his eyes as he looks between mine. “I've seen men like you my whole life. I know when one is up to no good.”

“I'm not up to anything. I'm just curious as to why a pretty girl like you who has immense discipline and fighting skills, bows to a motherfucker like Maksim.” His eyes pour over my body, and the lust that burns in his expression is back in full force. “It's crazy. I mean, look at you. How strong you are.” He gestures at me with a sturdy hand. “You could choose your own path, Blaire, and you damn well know it.”

I point at the ground between us. “This, is all I know. It's all I've ever known.”

Leaning down, putting us eye to eye, he whispers, “You can learn something new.”



“Oh?” I cross my arms, stepping away from him. “Because it's that easy, is it?”

“If you had me on your side, it'd be easy.”

I don't for a second entertain what he's offering. I'll never be ready to abandon Maksim.

“I'm going nowhere. I'm going nowhere until Maksim orders me away. Have you got that?” The veins in my neck tick. “Now, just leave me alone.”

He sidesteps me when I try to rush past him.

“Agh, why are you doing this to me?” I ask in frustration, uncrossing my arms to tense my fists at my sides. “Last night, you had Maksim send me home. Tonight, you're provoking him into making me fight, and then you almost call it off because you didn't want to see me half dead.” I air quote 'half dead'. I know it was him who shouted for Maksim to stop the fight. He's the only person I've ever heard address Maksim by only his first name. “And now, you're trying to influence me into turning my back on Maksim?”

“I'm not doing that.” The tranquil expression on his face makes my blood boil.

“Then what are you doing, Charlie Decena?” I have to squeeze out every word through clenched teeth. “Because I can't work you out.”

“Maybe I just think you are a waste as 'his little pet'.” He also uses air quotations, to mock me, I think.

“That's not an explanation for all your actions,” I say with anger. “Why won't you leave me alone?”

“Okay.” Shrugging and nodding at once, he gives in to me. “I don't think I need to explain why I made him send you home last night—no young girl wants to watch that perverted shit—and as for the fight tonight, I wouldn't have let it go too far. If I thought you was in trouble, I would've stopped it myself.” He sounds genuine, and given his actions, I think I believe him. But, I'm not sure.

Maybe I'm just too proud to admit to myself that I believe him.

“I can't be doing this.” I push him out of the way, using both hands to move his large body. “Maksim is waiting for me.” As I walk past him, he grabs my wrist, forcing me to gasp in anger.

“Don't do that, Charlie,” I warn, looking down at his hand wrapped around my wrist. “I don't want to hurt you.”

He yanks me into him with powerful force, causing my head to snap back. “I'm not afraid of you, Blaire,” he whispers in my face, his brandy seasoned

breath warm on my cheeks.

I glance between his blue eyes, fear and fury surging through me. “You should be.”

We're like this for a moment, staring at each other in a power standoff—before I realize all of Maksim's men are surrounding us in the SUVs. They can see what's going on.

I'm going to get in trouble if Charlie doesn't back off.

“Blair, listen to me—”

“Let me go,” I say to cut him off. “Please, Charlie. All of Maksim's men are here, and they're probably watching. Just let me go.”

He frees me then, without hesitation. I stumble back a step and hug my middle, letting out the breath I've been holding.

“You don't have to go back in there,” he says, shoving his hands in his jeans pockets. “My car's over there. You can come and work for me if you want. You can utilize yourself in a better way, Blair. You don't have to live like an emotionless robot.”

There it is. The way the world sees me.

“You know nothing about me,” I say, boldly meeting his gaze. “You know nothing about what I've been through or what I feel.” There's so much more that I want to say to him, but I won't. I won't let him break me down because Maksim will only have to put me back together again. “Leave me alone, Charlie.”

My eyes on the ground, I walk past him, through the welcome hall and into the snooker room where I take my position next to Maksim.

My hands are shaking like crazy. I hide them behind my back, gathering my composure.

“Do you think Charlie will attend?” Umberto says, blathering on about some party Maksim is holding next week. I don't pay attention to the rest of their conversation. It dawns on me that I didn't once attack Charlie for touching me. No one but Maksim has ever laid a finger on me without reaping my wrath.

My head is a vapor of confusion. I don't get this.

Maybe I didn't attack because Maksim said in his office that I'm not allowed to fight Charlie. I put it down to that. It's the only thing that makes sense.

“My Little Pet,” Maksim says, and when I look up, I see he's proffering my gun.

Taking it, I nod by way of respect.

Charlie returns around ten minutes later, his ink black hair a little ruffled, as if he's been running his fingers through the glossy strands.

“Where were you?” Carl asks, examining Charlie as he takes to his seat. “We've been waiting.”

“I was helping Señorita Blaire with James.” He scoops up his cards from the table, focusing his attention. “We can get on with the game now.”

“You helped My Little Pet with James?” Maksim raises his eyebrows at Charlie, then he peers back at me with the same shocked expression on his iron face. “Ohhh, isn't that nice, Blaire?”

I flinch, and my bones chill from the tone of his voice. He isn't happy.

---

The rest of the night goes by smoothly, thankfully, and Charlie doesn't say another word to me.

The men talk business and ask Charlie to attend the next poker game. He says he will if he's in town, which pleases Carl. “I can't guarantee anything. I've got a lot of work that needs my focus.”

I'm glad to hear that he might be leaving. He's causing too much bother around me. He's fucking with my chi.

By the time the clock strikes four A.M., I'm relieved the game is over. We're all leaving to go home.

At the front doors, while Rumo is bidding us all goodbye, Charlie gives me this weird look, blatantly staring at me in front of everyone.

“We still on for tomorrow then, Charlie?” Carl repeats his question because Charlie isn't paying attention. He's just...well, he's looking at me with his hands shoved in his jeans pockets.

I disregard his scrutiny and link arms with Maksim because he's out of his mind drunk. I help him stagger across the driveway and into my car. When he's slumped in the passenger seat, I slip into the driver's seat, fire up the engine, and reverse out of the driveway.

“Here you go.” He passes me a bundle of cash for fighting. He always pays me for what I do, which is sort of odd, given he doesn't pay James.

“Thank you, Cəp Maksim.” Leaning over him, I click open the glove compartment and shove the bundle inside. Then I steer out of the suburban street with the security detail on our trail.

“My friend Charlie has taken a liking to you,” Maksim says. I can feel his golden eyes on my face, scanning my reaction.

“I wouldn't know,” I lie for the second time tonight, my expression impassive. I'm not sure Charlie's reasons are genuine, but he's definitely pursuing me. I'm not an idiot.

“You would tell me if he tried anything with you, wouldn't you, My Little Pet?”

My stomach twists with disloyalty. It's almost crushing. I should tell Maksim about the things Charlie said to me. That he's curious and that I can choose my own path if I really wanted to. That he'd be on my side. But I just...I just can't. I've never kept anything from Maksim before, but this, what Charlie and I spoke about, it feels weirdly private. And, I don't want to go over it at all, if I'm truly honest. I don't want to analyze. I just want to forget. I want Charlie to piss off back to wherever he came from so my life can go back to normal.

“After I've broken his nose for touching me,” I say in response to Maksim's question, blank of emotion, “of course.”

That makes him laugh, though in a lazy manner since he's tired.

“You are a good, loyal, little pet.” He snuggles down in his coat and rests his eyes. I cannot help thinking over what he just said. *Charlie has taken a liking to you.*

The man is out to cause trouble. I know it. I wish I knew why.

“Do you have anything you want to ask?” Maksim says in a sleepy voice.

There's a million things I want to ask, but only one question makes sense. I brace myself for a blow as I say, “Who is Charlie exactly?”

The blow doesn't come. Maksim doesn't move in his seat.

He's quiet for a while. I train my attention on the road, so I don't look too interested.

“Remember last month?” he says in time. “Tatiana and I had you study Mexico and the Los Zetas?”

Tatiana is his boss—and more, the Russian Mafia leader. She never makes an appearance unless it's absolutely necessary, and that's only ever when she needs to cause bloody murder.

I nod when Maksim looks at me, then I turn right onto the motorway.

“Charlie Decena is the son of the man who first deserted his army rank and created the Los Zetas.” Maksim doesn't sound too comfortable speaking about this. He pauses every so often. “They are considered the most

dangerous criminal organization in the world. It is famous for their torture techniques and power throughout Southern America.”

That explains the American accent with a touch of Latin.

“Charlie in particular is known famously for his wicked torture techniques,” Maksim continues. “He likes to break women down with pleasure and pain, always ensuring their humanity remains intact—you know, sort of like how I taught you to murder women while they stare at photos of their children?” Maksim laughs like he's proud of this, his voice a bit croaky. “Women are nothing if not weak when it comes to humanity.”

I cannot relate to this, so I don't ponder over it too much.

“And the men?” I ask, swerving into the fast lane. “How does he torture men?”

Maksim stares at me with grave, golden eyes. “He will chop off their cocks inch by inch, and so slowly that time feels like it no longer exists.”

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# 7

After a long, emotionally grueling weekend of watching Maksim's back, I return home and try for the fifteen minutes Charlie wants to shut down London.

James texts to say he's okay, informing me that he has a few broken ribs, bruised kidneys, and a bloody, messed up face. He'll be right as rain in a few weeks.

You know I'm sorry, don't you?

Though I never usually would, I text him back. I just feel so guilty about what I did. It's fucking weird. I never feel guilt for anything. I don't know what's sparking my emotions.

I know you're sorry. Don't worry about me. I'm fine. And I hope that you are too. Text or call if you need me.

That makes me smile, a little. Hopefully by the time I see him again, he'll look as good as new and this frustrating guilty feeling will leave me the hell alone.

Putting everything and everyone out of my mind, I focus on the job at hand, working my butt off in my office.

I'm exhausted by day three.

The swelling on my left eye and lip has gone down a bit, so I'm almost back to normal. Well, physically I am. Mentally, I'm fucked.

Regardless, I continue punching in codes and filling London's CCTV system with glitches so I can take over it, but by the end of the week, it's confirmed that it is impossible to grasp fifteen minutes. When the system locks me out, that's it, and it's always at eleven minutes.

I can do no more, and my time to try is up.

Two hours it takes me to work up the courage to call Maksim, two bloody

hours, because I know he's going to punish me for failing.

And I'm not wrong.

He isn't happy when I lie and say that I need another week, that I only have eleven minutes—I'm just trying to spare my ass some time. He curses through the phone in Russian, telling me, “Charlie will lose it if we don't give him what he needs, Blaire. Do you understand that? Do you fucking understand what he'll do to me? To us? Pizdets!” He screams with fury. “This is the fucking end!”

I'm quiet throughout the whole ordeal, shitting bricks. Once he's finished yell-rambling, he hangs up on me. He shows up at my apartment half an hour later, as I knew he would. Punishing me in my own home is his way of letting me know that while I don't live with him, I can't escape him.

Three loud knocks echo through my personal space. My heart is racing. My palms are sweating, and my mouth is so dry.

With a trembling hand, I open the front door to him and stand there with as much innocence as I can conjure up, sinking into my shoulders and my waist length hair.

He looks the part in a sharp gray suit paired with a crisp white shirt, but that's where his customary, docile facade ends. His eyes flair with disappointment as he looks down at me, shaking his head.

This isn't good.

Though Maksim sometimes beats me to teach me a lesson, he never looks disappointed with me.

He must really be scared of Charlie.

“You don't often let me down, My Little Pet.” His lips curl against natural white teeth. “I'm very, very unhappy with you.”

I drop my eyes to the floor so my hair curtains my face, mentally blocking out what's to come. He's an unpredictable sadist. One minute he'll whip me, and the next he'll drown me—or worse, he'll burn me.

I hope he'll just whip me today.

Reaching out, he grabs my wrist and drags me through the living area, into my bedroom. I stumble to keep up with him, my naked feet slapping against the marble floors.

By the floor to ceiling windows opposite my bed, he twirls me around to face him, knocking me off balance.

“You know what happens next,” he warns, then he orders in Russian, “On all fours with your trousers and panties down!”

When he lets go of my wrist, my thoughts go white. I scramble to obey, dropping to my hands and knees. Without shame—Maksim has seen my unclothed body more times than I care to remember—my sports trousers come down, then my underwear. I must leave them around my knees, I've always thought because the elastic in my trousers ties my knees together.

Cool air breezes through my thighs, blowing over my naked sex. A hand lifts up my t-shirt and bunches it around my waist, then a single finger runs over the scars on my back. I shiver quietly, holding myself up on all fours.

“Podgotovsja!” Maksim yells from behind for me to prepare, his voice resonating through the double height room.

I do. I try to relax as best as I can but it's so difficult.

The seconds tick by. I'm counting in my head. *One. Two. Three. Four.* I imagine he's standing there looking at my scars and at my naked ass like a hungry man starved of rage. There's nothing more in this world Maksim enjoys over inflicting pain.

He fumbles with his belt, and I can tell he's using both hands. I've seen and listened to him do this for ten years.

Though I'm relieved that he's only going to belt me, the sound of metal clanging against metal makes me cringe, sending me into some dark place in my mind.

*White thoughts. Focus on your white thoughts.* It's so hard. If there's ever a sound I'd love never to hear again, it's *that*.

He pulls his belt free with a loud, **woosh**. I cower to brace myself, letting my hair curtain my face, the ends dripping over the floor.

The first whip whistles through the air, then a powerful **SMACK** rings right through me. I jump subconsciously, a desperate scream stuck in my throat preventing my ability to breathe for a moment.

My head rushes with the lack of oxygen. He gives me a moment, and I somehow manage to suck in a lung full of air.

“Podgotovsja!” he yells again for me to prepare.

I squeeze my eyes and my teeth shut, fisting my fingers and my toes.

**Wa-tch!**

I jolt in my own skin.

“Podgotovsja!”

**Wa-tch!**

“Podgotovsja!”

**Wa-tch!**



My ass and the backs of my thighs are on fire, each welt throbbing. But I don't move, nor do I cry out, even while tears swim in my eyes. I just take the beating, going into a numb zone.

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Eleven strikes in succession, Maksim groaning after each one, and then it's over.

I almost pass out with relief that it's over. My head swims with endorphins. I take deep, steady breaths now that I can, blinking away the black spots in my vision.

The belting wasn't that bad. I've suffered much, much worse. If anything, I think Maksim has been too soft on me.

“One more week, Blaire,” he says, leaning over me from behind. The buttons on his suit are cold against my naked, wounded flesh. “If you do not successfully attain fifteen minutes, this”—he rubs my ass with a rough, open palm, starting with my left cheek, and then my right, making me wince—“will be child's play compared to how I will punish you.”

The next breath I take in swells in my throat. He's been soft with me so the next hiding takes full effect. Now it makes sense.

“I want to see you at my house on Saturday at nine P.M.,” he whispers, a Russian gargle in each of his words. “My driver will collect you from here.”

Saturday is exactly one week from today. I'm petrified. I'll never have his fifteen minutes, and I know that what he says is the truth. This was child's play compared to what he's going to do to me.

“You understand, Blaire?”

“Ye-yes, Сәр Maksim.”

“Good. You can pull up your clothes, My Little Pet.”

Under his tall frame because he's still towering over me, I pull down my t-shirt, then pull up my underwear and trousers.

Maksim stands back when I'm fully clothed, ordering, “Get up.”

Pushing to my feet, I grimace, grinding my teeth because my clothes chafe against my red and sore behind. Yeah, it wasn't that harsh of a beating but it still stings.

“Here, My Little Pet.” Maksim passes me a bottle of cream from his suit jacket pocket. Hunching down, he kisses my face, pressing his lips to the sharp of my cheekbone. “So you can focus on the job and not your pain. You

know the drill. Apply three times a day.”

His arms wrap around me, burying my face in his warm chest, sheathing me in the smell of burnt brut. I remain as still as a rock, empty of emotion, my hands hanging by my sides. I'm used to this for this is how Maksim comes. A beating follows disobedience and tenderness follows brutality. It's always been this way.

“You know,” he husks out, brushing down the back of my hair over the curves of my spine, “if you want to make me happy again, why don't you get on your knees, My Little Pet?”

My heart leaps into my throat, but I obey. Shutting my eyes, I slide through his embrace, down to my knees, and reach for the zipper of his trousers with one hand, squeezing the bottle of cream in my other. I will myself not to think about *it* while he strokes the top of my head. If I hurry, it'll be over.

“Cəp Maksim,” I hear from behind, and my heart sinks.

“Ahhh, My Pet,” Maksim purrs. “What a surprise.”

I glance over to see James standing in the doorway, dressed in his black combat gear. In a panic, I try to check out his face to see if he's okay but I'm too guilty-nervous. I know what happens next.

“I'm sorry,” he says, lifting a defensive hand. “I didn't know you were here. I just wanted to check in on Blaire because I haven't heard from her in a while.”

“Ohhh, of course you did, My Pet.” Maksim chuckles with dark desire, and I feel him stare down at me as he whispers, “Always just in time, isn't he, Blaire?”

I flinch against my given name. He shoves my head back, forcing me to fall on my sore ass. The bottle drops out of my hand with a light thud and rolls away under my bed. I consider crawling after it, but end up cuddling myself, gazing straight-faced at the floor. I'm pushing filthy images of him fucking James from my mind. He often makes me watch, but James says it's okay because at least I'm safe from Maksim's sexual attention.

It's quiet for a moment, bar the blood roaring in my ears. I expect they're exchanging knowing looks.

“Why don't you have Blaire make you some lunch, Cəp Maksim?” James comes up to us with artificial confidence. “I'll see to you.”

**A week later**

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## 8

My eyes are heavy, and my body is lethargic. I've not slept properly in two days. I've been studying to the ends of the earth on The Dark Web for a way to gain complete control of London's CCTV system because my hacking skills have proved useless. As I feared, there's no way, so I'm here at Maksim's house in his office to collect my punishment. Hopefully, if it's brutal, he'll knock me out cold and I won't feel anything

Hopefully.

"I can do only eleven minutes, Cэp Maksim," I confess, standing with my head down. "I'm sorry."

"Only eleven minutes?"

"Yes," I whisper, glancing up at him from beneath my lashes.

He's slouched back in his chair, behind his desk, hands clasped together in his lap.

"I'm really sorry, Cэp Maksim."

"Oh, I'm sure you are, My Little Pet."

Dropping my gaze, because I can't stand that half amused, half thwarted expression on his face, I kneel before his desk so he can hit me. I squeeze my eyes shut to brace myself. He warned me last week that this punishment would be brutal. I'm horrified to think about what he's going to do. The worse thing he's ever done was brand my skin. I passed out on the dining room table, only to be woken up in a bathtub full of freezing cold water.

The cold water hurt more than when he burned me, bizarrely so.

I can't go through that again. It was torture. I can't even explain what the recovery was like. My skin felt hot, irritated, and stretched out every time I moved my back.

"Stand up," Maksim says.

With my eyes still on the floor, I do, but I almost lose my balance because I'm shaking like a leaf.

"You know, My Little Pet"—his husky voice makes me shiver—"as a child, when I failed to do what was asked of me, my parents would brutally

rape me to teach me a lesson.”

Is that what he's going to do, rape me?

I remember the way he looked at me when he was fucking that Albanian girl at the Asian Prince's party the other week. This has to be his next move. Nothing else makes sense.

I'm not scared if it is time for him to have me. I've always known this day would come.

“But I wouldn't do that to you,” he tells me. “Not brutally, anyway. You mean more to me than I meant to my parents.”

I pull my eyebrows together, wondering where he's going with this.

“There are other ways to teach you a lesson,” he says, and then he's quiet. The creaking sound of a chair makes me flinch, then a heavy hand lands on my shoulder. “Charlie Decena will have to make the most of eleven minutes. Look at me, My Little Pet.”

I lift my lashes to find his golden gaze.

“Is there anything you need?” he asks, a peculiar, evil expression on his face. “Or any questions you wish to ask?”

“Um...I might need a few extra computers, just if I get locked out of the CCTV system when I perform the job.”

“Of course.” He leans down and says in my ear, “I'll have them set up in your apartment for when you execute the job.” He kisses the side of my face with hard lips. “Now, you should go tell Charlie of your equal success and failure. He is out back.”

*Great.*

Coming down from the rush of fear that he was going to hit me, I nod, turn on my heel, and get the hell out of his office before he changes his mind and gives me a good bloody hiding. I follow the pounding music down the hallway to the kitchen. It's packed with half naked girls dancing all over the place in a drunken state, and an assortment of men whose eyes are glazed over. They're drugged up off powdery cocaine, mountains of it scattered across the white worktops and the dining table by the back doors.

I continue through the kitchen in search of Charlie. One guy, I can never remember his fucking name, smirks at me as I pass him. “When is Maksim-Markov going to give it up already?” he says, watching me with glossy eyes as he leans over the kitchen worktop on his elbows.

I don't even look at him. I round the dining table, shoulder barging the girls who smell sweet with perfume, and steal through the French doors.

Outside, my breath mists the cold night. A few more of Maksim's friends surround the illuminated swimming pool in the heart of the patio area. I also note James, who nods at me from the other side of the pool. He's dressed in his combat uniform, standing about with his work partners, Oliver and Shane. I lift my hand in a small wave. A gentle smile reaches his candid, affectionate eyes. *Fuck*. His eyes are a little black and blue. He's still bruised from our fight, dark green-gray patches marring his cheeks and his nose.

I remember what he did for me last week as if it happened just moments ago. He let Maksim fuck him in an attempt to spare me of sexual attention.

Overwhelmed with guilt, I have to shut off my thoughts and emotions. I can't think about how bad I feel for him. I have to endure Charlie Decena soon.

To the left of the pool, Maksim's dogs—his girls—stand on all fours with leashes around their necks. They're all naked. Some of them are absolutely petrified, crying and cringing from Maksim's friends who are copping a feel. The other girls aren't bothered. They seem used to what's happening to them, staring ahead blankly.

As usual, I fight to ignore my instincts telling me to teach these perverted bastards a lesson. I'd tear them all apart single-fucking-handed.

I go over to James so I can quickly say hello, and nod with respect to Oliver and Shane. They return my gesture before walking off, I assume to give James and me a moment.

“Hey.” James smiles down at me, and also offers up his beer. “It's still cold.”

“No. You keep it,” I say softly. I can't seem to return his affectionate smile. He looks a mess. His left eye is bloodshot from the impact of my punches.

My eyes crinkle with guilt.

“Don't worry”—reaching out, he gives my hand a squeeze—“it's all superficial. Are you okay?”

“Yes,” I lie, noticing he's got red strangle marks around his neck. “I'm fine.” I look down at my feet, then back up at him. “I can't stop. I have to...” I gesture out, “you know? I just wanted to make sure.”

“I know.” There's that sincere smile again. I wish he wouldn't do that. It makes me feel like crap.

Leaving James, I go off and find Charlie at the other side of the pool. He's wearing jeans over white trainers and a black round-neck t-shirt that hugs his

masculine body. His hair is tied back. The silvery-blue water reflects on his handsome face, lighting up his olive skin, shimmering against that perfect black hair. He's got his arm around a blonde who is wearing a white bikini. She has to be cold. It's freezing out here. I know she is because her nipples are like bullets and goose pimples are racing down her arms.

Charlie is whispering something in her ear, making her giggle like a frivolous teenager. Even the other girls standing about him are giggling, indulging him.

“Iisos Khristos,” I scoff to myself in Russian, continuing for him.

To think that most women are like this, giddy to the sweet nothings, makes me want to vomit. A man would have to work a lot harder than *that* to make me laugh. Mind you, no man has ever made me laugh before.

When I reach him, I ask, “Can I speak to you for a moment, Charlie?” We meet each other's gaze, and I add, “In private?”

I'm surprised that I'm not anxious to see him. If anything, I'm grateful that I have to endure his disappointment as oppose to Maksim's.

The girls surrounding Charlie raise their eyebrows at me, affronted that I would even attempt to approach him. I'm fully clothed in black sports trousers, trainers, and my leather jacket, hardly dressed for the occasion.

I don't bother returning their gestures of abhorrence. Enough blood will be spilt tonight. My blood, probably.

One of the girls seems to know exactly who I am, because she tells the others to look away. “Say nothing,” she urges.

“Hello, Señorita Blaire.” Charlie's Latin seasoned voice is soft and inviting. It reminds me of Hannibal Lector.

He scans my appearance, just like he always does, a dirty grin twitching at the corner of his mouth.

The blonde under his arm doesn't know whether to glare at me or him, her eyes flickering between us.

I don't react to his intense, penetrating gaze. Or I try not to. I cannot control my cheeks. I strive to appear impassive, with my hands in my leather jacket pockets.

“Sure you can speak to me,” he rasps out eventually, taking his arm from around the blonde. With his hair tied back, his features are sharper and harder. He's so handsome, and for some bizarre reason, I can't help imagining he's tan all over.

*Stop imagining*, I admonish myself internally.

“Hey,” the blonde grips his arm, rubbing her hip against his cock, “you're coming back, right?”

Charlie gives her a deadly stare and snatches her hand off his arm, before he pushes her back a step. She stumbles to find her balance, so stunned by his dominant-aggressive behavior that she just gawks at him. I'm not stunned. Men like him are often assholes.

I lead the way into the house with cool composure, through the luminous white kitchen.

“Look at that tight little ass,” that fucking guy is still going on. “Maksim-Markov really does have to give it up.”

“What'd you just say?” Charlie asks, and the kitchen pauses in silence.

I peer back on instinct. Charlie is glaring at that guy with evil authority. His eyebrows are so furrowed that he looks wickedly dark.

“I-I wasn't talking to you, man.” That guy shakes his head, lifting self-protective hands. “S-sorry.”

“Keep your fucking mouth shut.” Charlie stalks up to him and points a steady finger in his face. “You understand that, boy?”

Rolling my eyes, I carry on through the kitchen and into the living room so we can be alone and undisturbed. Charlie's heavy footsteps follow me in.

“What'd you want to speak about in private, Blaire?”

“I can do no more than eleven minutes,” I say while facing him. I just want to get this over with so I can go home. “I'm sorry, Charlie, as is Maksim.”

Charlie stops right in front of me, literally. We're toe to toe. My eyes are level with his chest. He doesn't say anything for a moment, and my anxiety peaks because I can sense he's staring down at me. I fight for my composure, thinking about being at home reading or something. It's easier to control my mental state if I'm not spiritually near him.

Lifting a hand, he runs a thumb over my jaw line, using the sharp of his nail when he reaches my chin. I'm mentally back in the room now. His touch seems to ignite my body. Hairs raise and my blood pumps a little faster.

I don't understand this, the sensation of when he touches me. No one but Maksim has ever touched me like this before. No one but Maksim is allowed to touch me.

In the moment of thinking about my master, I aim to slap Charlie's hand away, that black switch going off in my head, but it's Charlie's voice that stops me in my tracks. “Maksim told you, Blaire, fifteen minutes,” he



whispers, his voice deeper than usual. It somehow carries above the music coming from the kitchen.

Lifting my shoulders, I repeat, "I'm sorry, Charlie." I don't sound like myself. I sound a little breathless, and anxious. "I can't give you what I don't have."

"Is that right?" Stepping forward, he practically puts us flush against each other.

I scowl up at him, defiantly meeting those powerful blue eyes. Why does he do this, ensure close proximity?

I step back, but he steps forward, smirking. Another step, and another, until I'm pressed against the wall. Charlie cages me in from the front, and his legs are slightly open as if he's readying himself for a fight. I can feel the warmth from his large body, and smell the clean muskiness of his skin. It's all so bizarrely inviting.

"No one is allowed to touch me," I counsel him with all the will I have, lifting my chin so I can hold his consuming gaze. He towers over me by at least eight, maybe ten inches, but I'm not afraid of him. He knows I'm not. He smiles down at me, and I'm not sure, but I think he looks excited.

"Maksim will let me touch you," he says, matter of fact.

My heart stutters. I know where he's going with this. I can see desire burning in his eyes.

To steer clear of a conflict, I try to walk past him, but he grabs my wrist in a solid grip. A black switch goes off in my mind and all I can hear are Maksim's words echoing. *No one is allowed to touch you, ever. No one but me, My Little Pet.* He's told me this for years. He used to play a recorder on repeat while I slept until his words sunk into my subconscious. That's why I live to serve him.

I smirk back at Charlie. "You shouldn't have done that."

He flicks up his eyebrows to challenge me.

I twist out of his grasp so fast that I land on my knees and elbow him in the nuts. He gasps out, doubling over, and lands on his hands. "Fuck!"

I sprint forward and stand, turning around to face him. He lunges at me before I can register he is on his feet. He grabs my throat, runs back with me while groaning in anger, and slams me against the wall.

"Ah!" I gasp on impact, closing and opening my eyes, gripping his wrist with both hands.

He laughs in my face. "I'm not your little friend, James."

I choke in his grasp, my head getting dizzy, then I whack the inside of his elbow to buckle his arm.

“Neither am I.” I draw back and punch him in the face, causing his nose to burst open.

He isn't bothered. He tries to grab me again but I fight him off, cross-whacking his hands away, but he keeps coming at me. I've nowhere to go, so I boot him in the stomach with lower body force. He bends over, winded, and I try to dash out of the living room but he fists the back of my hair.

“Aargh!” I spin around and pound at his chest, forcing him to free me. I can't go too crazy. Maksim is going to kill me for this as it is.

When Charlie is a few feet away, forced back by my attack, I jump up on one foot to kick him in the face with my other. He catches my ankle and yanks me forward.

“Awh!” I grimace as my back slams against the hard marble floor.

I don't let my pain take over my process. I bolt upright and snatch for his hand on my ankle but right now, he's quicker than I am. I'm not on par tonight. He catches my wrist, still gripping my ankle in his other hand, and manages to flip me over so my face is sliding against the cold floor.

“That's more like it,” he says in my ear with humor. He battles to get both my arms behind my back and holds them there in one of his hands. He then grabs a fist-full of my hair, hauls me to my feet like this, and turns me around so I'm facing him. I hiss against the discomfort, struggling to free at least one of my hands from his but my efforts are useless.

He bends at the knees, nearly putting us eye to eye. I have no choice but to stand here against him. If I fight while in this position and he pushes my arms up my back, they'll snap.

“You're fast.” He tugs on my hair to make me look at him, bending my neck back. His chest is hard against my breasts, crushing me to him.

I pant angrily, a little out of sorts. If only I had grabbed my gun and shot this bastard.

Through heavy eyes, he glances between my eyes and my mouth. Then smirks like he's won. “Tell me, Señorita Blaire, why shouldn't I have done that?” He's enjoying this. I just now realize.

Is this what he wanted? To fight me?

I glare at him with wrath, at the stark perfection of his face. He's so fucking handsome it's stupid, even with his nose running red, smothering his top lip. His eyes are the most perfect shade of blue, darker under this light.

His olive skin is flawless, begging to be marked.

“You really are a bonita little thing,” he whispers, his expression softening as he tips his head.

*Are we thinking the same thing, of each other's beauty?*

“I've never seen a girl so pale with a million freckles who is so wildly pretty.” He leans down, putting us nose to nose.

“You need to let me go,” I say in a panic, trying to shove away from him because he's going to try and kiss me.

He pushes my arms further up my back. I wince, squeezing my face in agony. My arms feel like they're going to pop out of their sockets.

“Stop fighting,” he says, then his lips seal over mine, catching my pleading, *no!*

Everything goes blank. I can't see a thing, nor can I breathe. The air is caught in my throat.

Charlie is surprisingly gentle in taking my mouth, humming with pleasure, his lips soft and full. I think about biting his tongue as it probes tenderly at my mouth, but I don't. I just keep my lips together, basking in the sensations of his smooth face on mine, his tongue doing this mind-blowing, slow licking thing across my upper lip.

My veins buzz with unfamiliar sensations, every inch of my body inundated with...I don't fucking know. I'm so—

In my entire life of battle and blood, I've never, ever, felt anything like this before.

“C'mon, Blaire,” he rasps. His breath smells like brandy, spicy and hot. “Let that wrought iron guard down.”

I shake my head, trying to keep my lips shut but it's so hard. My body wants this—everything that can be puckered, is—while my mind is screaming for me to shut down and attack.

“You'll let me kiss you.” His smooth face rubs across mine as he puts his mouth to my ear, breathing heavily, making me quiver from head to toe. “If you don't, I'll bend you over that sofa and fuck you right in the ass.”

Fear belts through me, and my eyes fly open. We look at each other for a split second, like there's nothing else in the world but us. His face is dark with lust. His eyes almost look black because his pupils are dilated.

A luring smile spreads across his face, drawing me into the darkness that is him. I gasp, horrified this is happening. I cannot help my panic. Maksim has never prepared me for anything like this.

Charlie takes the opportunity to invade me as I gasp. Tipping his head to the side, he dips his tongue in my mouth, moaning with satisfaction. He tastes me in endless, leisurely licks, causing something hot and heavy to gather between my legs.

My toes curl in my trainers while my stomach is flipping.

His blood tastes metallic. His lips are softer than I ever could have imagined, but demanding, making mine swell.

“You're sweet,” he says in my mouth, massaging his tongue over mine. “Eso es bueno. So, fucking, sweet.”

“Charlie,” I squeeze out his name, but before I can say anything more, he closes his mouth completely over mine, making us airtight. He groans with such passion. The sound vibrates through his chest and mine.

Now, I'm throbbing between my legs—it's the most confusing feeling—and there's warm liquid in my underwear. I've definitely not felt this before. Yes, Maksim has made me please him. He's made me suck his cock or milk him while he kisses me. And yes, I felt a little warm at times. But this is on another level.

Divorcing everything I know, I find myself melting in Charlie's arms, almost buckling at the knees. I even think I moan. I hate that, but I can't help it.

“That's it,” he rasps out. Letting go of my arms, he holds me around the waist in one arm and yanks me up so my feet aren't touching the floor, making me squeal in shock. He puts us chest to chest. His is pure, solid muscle and his heart is pounding.

So, it's not just me.

He keeps his other hand in my hair at the back of my head, holding us mouth to mouth, but right now, I don't mind. The pinching in my scalp is the only thing telling me that this is real.

I put my tiny hands on his shoulders and kiss him back, just how he's kissing me, carefully and avidly. Our lips mold as one. Our tongues dance over each other's in a twisted game of seduction.

I could happily get lost in him.

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Someone whistles from behind us, startling me.

“She's off limits, my friend.”

It's Maksim.

My heart explodes in my chest.

Yanking up my knee, I try to hit Charlie in the kahunas but he anticipates my move, blocking my attack with his leg. He laughs in my mouth, pressing one last peck to me, smothering me in his blood. "I like you," he says quietly, so quiet in fact that Maksim cannot hear him.

Slowly and warily, he puts me down on wobbly legs and steps back, holding out his hands as if I might attack him again. I'm not going to. I couldn't even if Maksim ordered me to. I'm in an odd state. My body is aching for Charlie's warmth and his scent, and most of all, his touch.

*What the fuck is this?*

I'm confused with what he makes me feel. I know I have to obey Maksim and all his requests. I know to risk my life for Maksim. I'm wired to attack anyone who touches me, anyone but Maksim, but I didn't fight Charlie when he kissed me. I guess I let him.

My thoughts are driving me nuts. I know nothing of this...this...I don't even know what the fuck this is!

"She got you good." Maksim laughs with blatant amusement. "Don't take it personally, my friend. My little pet is trained to takedown anyone who touches her without my permission."

"Why is she off limits?" Charlie prowls over to Maksim, who is standing in the doorway looking at me. I cannot see that he's looking at me. I just know.

I wipe my lips with a single finger, relishing in the sight of Charlie's blood coating my pale skin. I can still taste him.

That kiss was nice.

I blink up at Charlie and Maksim, my head still in a desire fueled fog. They're watching each other like dangerous predators.

"Maksim," Charlie snaps. "Why. Is. She. Off. Limits?"

Maksim slants his head to me, his eyes thinning. "She's innocent, and I'd like for her to stay that way."

Charlie's eyes zoom in on me and the look on his face...he wasn't expecting Maksim to say that.

"Like hell is she innocent." Charlie points a leveled finger at me. "Why would you have a bonita girl like that and not have her?"

Silence dominates us, though I can almost hear Charlie's thoughts running through his mind.

“I have my reasons. Why don't you go and get yourself a proper drink, My Little Pet?” Maksim ushers me to leave. He half smiles too, as if pleased with me. “Charlie and I have some business to discuss.”

“Yeah, you bet we do.”

On autopilot, feeling a little more like myself with Maksim's order filtering through my system, I nod and walk past them, eyes down, heading for the kitchen. I could do with a cold, stiff drink. It's been a crazy day.

The hallway is aglow with soft blue lights shining up the white walls. Walls that boast pictures of every boxer to have ever won a world title.

Charlie is a seriously good fighter. I wonder who taught him.

I need to find out exactly who he is. Knowing he's a syndicate leader isn't enough. I don't trust him or his intensions—nor his effort to bend me to his will with that damn kiss for that matter.

Though, it was a nice kiss.

I'll not tell Maksim that. Charlie's bloody nose tells him all he needs to know, that I fought. I fought against him for touching me.

Perhaps that's why he was so relaxed about catching Charlie and I in a compromising position. He thinks I resisted.

In the kitchen, where it is still heaving in naked women, that guy says nothing to me. He moves out of the way and lets me walk through the cooking space.

I pull out my hair tie and my long, fuzzy mane falls down my back. Then I grab a beer out of the fridge, crack open the lid, and guzzle down a healthy mouthful, ignoring the music and the people around me. The bitter liquid is refreshing. I sigh, resting back against the counter top. The bottle is so cold that droplets of water gather under my palm. I press the bottle to my cheek, feeling hot.

I still cannot believe Charlie just kissed me. No one has ever kissed me like that before. Maksim is cruel when romantic—if I can call what he does to me romantic—but it's all I know. Though now, I have this. Whatever *this* is.

Over an hour passes before Maksim and Charlie enter the kitchen. I'm still standing by the fridge, looking as though barely a minute has passed.

“I guess I will see you in a week or so, Charlie,” Maksim says with obvious irritation, making his way outside without looking at me.

I frown. Why isn't he coming to speak to me? He usually says goodnight at least.

“Out!” Charlie barks with a thumb, and everyone, I mean everyone, leaves through the back doors.

I aim to leave too, but Charlie stops in front of me and says, “Not you, Señorita.”

I rest back against the countertop in resistance.

“The eleven minutes will work.” He takes the beer out of my hand and pours the rest down his throat. “You all right, Blaire?”

Arching my neck back, I scowl at him, noticing he's cleaned up his face of blood. “Of course I'm all right. What's Maksim doing?” I grab the edges of the kitchen countertop because Charlie virtually puts himself between my legs. “What are *you* doing?”

With the back of his finger, he wipes my upper lip and shows me his blood is still on my mouth. Again, much to my frustration, I don't even think about hitting him for touching me. I simply get rid of the blood on my mouth by using the cold, leather sleeve of my jacket.

“Maksim's joining the party,” Charlie says softly, his blue eyes glued to my face. “We've come to a deal.”

“A deal?” I whisper in mystification. Maksim hasn't told me of any deal. He usually tells me everything. “A deal about what?”

Charlie smiles lazily at me. I glower with confusion. His mood is different than before when we were in the living room. He seems very...I can't be sure. Satisfied, maybe?

“Your hair's longer than I thought it was.” His eyes glance over my appearance. He reaches out for a strand of my hair and runs his fingers down it, making my scalp tickle. “It looks nice down.”

Ignoring his inane compliment and these weird vibes he's got going on, I ask, “What deal have you come to, Charlie?”

Still fondling with my hair, he stares at my mouth in total silence. My heart is suddenly pounding. I don't like that look on his face, that dark, *I won*, look.

“Maksim's got a hefty debt with me. He's been trying to pay it back but I don't want money. I've got enough of that.”

“Oh'kay.” I blink at him a few times. “Well, what do you want then?”

Charlie stares up at my eyes now, gazing with wicked intent, while curling that lock of hair around his finger. “You.”

I go cold on the spot.

“And as he knows better than to refuse me, you're now mine for three

months—or until I get bored.” He’s still speaking, still playing with my hair, but I’m not really listening.

I’m not sure how long I stand there gawping at him, until I yell, “What?!” I shove Charlie’s chest, hard enough to knock him back a step and let go of my hair. “I’m not going anywhere with you. What fucking debt are you talking about?”

I know Maksim can probably hear me shouting but right now, I don’t care. “Charlie, what debt?!”

Putting the beer bottle on the side, he leans back against the fridge and crosses his arms. “We did a job together a few years back and unforeseen circumstances meant I wasn’t able to collect. While I was away, Maksim spent the money without my permission, so now, I’m collecting.”

Steam blows out of my ears.

“Not through me you’re not,” I hiss, my face tense with anger. “I’m going to speak with Maksim. He wouldn’t barter me to pay off some debt.”

“You’re not allowed to speak to him,” Charlie says in a chilled, unfazed manner. “That is part of our deal.”

“Huh?” My face scrunches up. “You can’t decide that.”

Throwing his head back, he bursts out laughing.

My eyes widen with insult. “What the hell are you laughing at?”

“Do you know how confusing you are?” he asks once he’s done laughing, wiping his watery eyes with one hand. “One minute I think you’re so deeply conditioned to Maksim that there’s no getting through to you. Then you’re rebellious with your cocky attitude. But then you’re thawing in my arms as I kiss you.”

A hot flush comes over me at the memory.

“Now, you have a chance to come with me and get away from this life for a while—if you can call this a life,” he casts a hand around the place, “but you don’t want to leave?”

I don’t know what to say right now, so I just look at him.

“What ties you to Maksim?” His thinning eyes search my face, glittering in curiosity. “Tell me, I’m dying to know. I’m almost sure it’s not just fear.” He sounds like he’s taunting me, goading me into losing my cool, and I am. My blood is boiling.

“You can shout your reasons at me if you want, Blaire.” His eyebrows flick up with daring. “No one will stop you.”

“If my reasons for staying with Maksim need explaining, you’re denser



than I thought.” I twist my lips, struggling to contain the bubbling explosion going off inside me. Why would I want to leave Maksim when he's all I know? Why's that so hard to understand?

“As for *this* life,” I say, pointing at the floor between us, “it's mine, and I like it just the way it is.” I head for the back doors with my hands fisted at my sides, certain he's talking bullshit. Maksim wouldn't barter me. He wouldn't.

“Not so fast.” Charlie's large hand wraps around my upper arm and forces me to an abrupt stop.

“I'm not fucking doing this with you again!” I yank back and forth. “Let me—aargh!” Something sharp stabs me in the side of my shoulder and a cold, dopey feeling rushes through my veins.

Within seconds, my brain goes fuzzy and I fall back in Charlie's arms, my legs buckling under me.

“Wha...what have you done to me?” I say breathlessly, trying to grab my shoulder but my hands are all floppy.

“Shhh. S'all right, Blaire,” he whispers in my ear from behind, stroking my hair back out of my face. “You're gonna be all right.”

The world as I know it goes dark.

## 9

“Take off your clothes, Blaire, or I will,” Charlie says in a deceptively soft voice.

He's staring at me from across the shadowy bedroom, around fifteen feet away. It's almost too dark to see him, but I can. His tall, powerfully broad frame is blocking my way to the door. He's standing there prepared for combat, with his legs slightly spread open. He thinks I'll try to fight him, and he's right to assume that because I will. He just reiterated the ‘deal’ he made with my master, how I’m supposedly his for three months or until he gets bored. I don’t know if I believe him. He said that after he stabbed me with a needle, knocking me out, Maksim apparently had one of his men bring me here—wherever here is—so he knows where I am. He refused Charlie’s request to bring me himself. That’s my silver lining. It tells me my master still cares, or that this could possibly be a lie.

I hope it’s a lie.

“Go on,” Charlie says, and comes toward me, his heavy feet thudding against the wooden floors.

Swaying on my feet, I clutch the bedpost with one hand. I try to gain focus so I can battle, but I'm still groggy from whatever he gave me.

When he reaches me, he tries to get me out of my leather jacket by pushing his fingers in the shoulders. I weakly grab his wrists, but he twists out of my grasp and pins my hands at my sides, making me groan in a mixture of fear, anger, and self-pity.

“Just relax,” he says, his breath warming my face, and I can feel his silky hair tickling my cheek where he’s let out his ponytail. “You must feel light headed.”

Resisting the urge to scream at him, I let my head roll to the side so I can hide in my hair. “What did you give me?” I ask, staring into the darkness.

“Just a little something to put you down so you couldn't resist,” he whispers. “But don’t worry, it'll wear off.”

When his hands over mine loosen, I slip out of his grasp and slam my fists

into his chest, knocking him back a few steps. I breathlessly bump into the bedpost on my shoulder. I'm not at full strength, and my head is so cloudy that I can't think straight. The last twenty-four hours are like looking into a black hole.

I strive to focus my mind, desperate to figure out what's really happening, and what is the truth.

I remember telling Maksim that I cannot get his fifteen minutes. I remember Charlie kissing me. I remember talking to Charlie in the kitchen and briefly waking up in the back of Maksim's SUV—I know it was Maksim's SUV because I could smell his brut scent. It was dark, and the road we were driving along was bumpy. I could still taste Charlie's blood in my mouth from when he kissed me.

My eyes widen at the realization. He is telling the truth.

“No,” I breathe out, a lump forming in my throat.

“Blaire?” Charlie hunches down to look at my face hidden behind my hair. “What's wrong? Do you feel ill?”

In a moment of madness, to save my ass from whatever he has planned, I reach for my gun in my inside jacket pocket. I fumble to grip the cold, metal handle, and pull it out. Though it's heavy, I'm sure not to drop it, holding it with both hands. I lift it high enough to aim at Charlie's head, as he stands upright with mute shock.

“Where the fuck are we?” I say, clicking back the hammer while blinking rapidly to clear the fog.

He points a long finger at me, warning, “Put that down.”

“You didn't anticipate I'd have this, did you?” My voice is the wrong side of confident, but I'm not confident. “Didn't you think to pat me down?”

His nostrils flare in the shadows.

“Where the fuck are we?!” I scream, tearing my throat to shreds.

He doesn't say anything, so we watch each other for a moment, the atmosphere thick with tension. I'm not sure who is the prey. Inside, I feel it's me. I'm shitting myself.

Charlie walks into the barrel of my gun, hunches down, and presses it to his forehead. “Do it,” he hisses through clenched teeth. “Or give me the gun, Blaire.”

My face crumples with defeat and anxiety. I cannot actually shoot him. I'm just trying to scare him. I don't really know who he is yet, or how important he is to others. I cannot be sure people won't come looking for him if he goes

missing, and I cannot risk the blame landing on Maksim, even if he has betrayed me.

I hold Charlie's unnatural blue gaze. He's not at all afraid. I am, because I'm certain he's going to abuse me for the next few months. Maksim clearly cannot stop him. He took me from my master's house and doesn't seem to have a scratch on him.

"Go on, Señorita," he says more gently this time. "Shoot me."

"If I don't, you're going to do terrible things to me."

He nods, making the gun move in my grasp. "You're right. I am." There's something icy in his voice, like vengeance. He wraps his long fingers around the gun to hold it in place on his head. "Do it!" he yells, making me squeak and jump in my skin. "Fucking do it if you want to do it!"

Exhaling shakily, I let go of the gun. He throws it over by the door. It lands with a heavy bump that makes me flinch. He then grabs me around my arms, imprisoning me with all his strength. I stiffen in his hold, panting heavily, trying to gather my wits.

He doesn't do anything right away. He's just holding me in place, looking down at me.

"I need to speak to Maksim," I say, lifting my eyes to his.

Charlie quietly scans my face, his expression unreadable. Or to me his expression is unreadable. I'm so dizzy.

"I need to ask him something. I-I need to speak to him!" I yell in Charlie's face. It makes me dizzy.

"What for?" he says. "Permission?"

I nod in a floppy state. He's right. I do need permission. I can't do this—whatever *this* is—without Maksim's full permission.

"Are you gonna let me take off your jacket?"

Give and take, is that what this is all about?

I can let him take off my jacket if it means I can talk to Maksim. I need to talk to Maksim!

I nod again in a weak manner, as his hands draw down my arms, and he pulls off my jacket. Leaning past me, he lays it over the foot of the bed, then steps back.

He's quiet again. I can't fucking stand it. His silence seems to magnify his presence.

"Can I speak to Maksim?" I say, wavering under that powerful stare of his. "Please, Charlie?"

More silence.

I try to convince myself that I can see pity in Charlie's eyes as he studies me, but it's a lie my mind has conjured up. This man doesn't pity me at all.

“Charlie?” I snap, balling my hands.

He pulls a phone out of his jeans back pocket, dials someone, and passes it to me. With a rickety hand, I take it and put it to my ear.

“What's the problem, my friend?” Maksim's husky Russian voice almost breaks me. “Having trouble taming—”

“Сәп Maksim,” I whisper, cutting him off, squeezing the phone in my grasp.

“My Little Pet, are you okay?” He sounds worried. “What's happened? Please do not tell me you have done something to Charlie Decena?”

“No. He...he's here.” I glance up at Charlie, who is watching me intently, then I turn my back on him, holding the bedpost with one hand so I don't topple over. “Сәп Maksim, what...what am I doing here with Charlie?”

“Did he not tell you?”

“Yes,” I say with hesitation. “He...he says—”

“You are to fulfill Charlie's needs without ruining your virtue, complete the job when he needs you to shut down London's CCTV system—and only that job—and return home to me alive and well in no more than three months' time.” Every word he says is like punching me in the chest. “Is that clear?”

“You want me to...” I blink into oblivion, swallowing past the lump in my throat. “He's allowed to touch me?”

“Yes, My Little Pet.” There's a long pause, before he elaborates, “He can do whatever he likes to you as long as he doesn't take your virginity or kill you. Also, he doesn't want you to respect him as you do me. He wants you to decide for yourself, for whatever good it will do.”

I cup my face in one hand. My head is hurting. “I'm so confused.”

“Don't be confused, My Little Pet. Do not fight him. Just do your job and come home to me.”

His words echo while my world narrows. *He can do whatever he likes to you as long as he doesn't take your virginity or kill you.*

Charlie was telling the truth. Maksim has bartered me!

“No. No—please, I'm sorry,” I squeeze out every word, gripping the phone so tight my fingers ache. “I'm sorry if I've been bad the past few years. I'm sorry for...maybe if I come back and live with you at the house, it will

help? I'll be good. I swear!"

There's nothing but silence.

"Сәп Maksim? Сәп Maksim, are you there?"

I check the screen, trembling so hard I almost drop the phone. It's dark. He's hung up the call.

"No..." The ability to breathe abandons me. I try to call him back, to beg for my life, but Charlie takes the phone from me. "No!" I scream, attempting to snatch it out of his grasp but he pins me to the bedpost with one arm over my chest. "Let me go!" I grip his wrist with both hands, trying to pry him off but his body is too powerful. "I'm not finished talking to him!"

"You are." He shoves his phone in his jeans back pocket. "He just told you what you have to do."

"No. He-he didn't clarify." I'm shaking out of control now, and Charlie is so close that I can smell the clean, sweet-musky scent of his skin. I wish he'd back the fuck up so I can think.

"Why didn't he tell me this in person at his house? Why did you have to drug me? I-I would have come willingly if Maksim told me to. I would have."

"I don't want you having anything to do with him until I'm done with you. That's why he didn't tell you himself."

"But, that doesn't make any sense." I shake my head to get rid of this vertigo. "You just let me talk to him, and if...if you let him give me my orders, you wouldn't have had to drug me."

"I'm not gonna keep going over this, Blaire," his voice deepens with authority as he says that, determined to get off the subject. "When I decided I wanted you, I told him then and there to stay away until your time with me is up. He knows better than to go against my word. He warned me you would resist, so I drugged you, and now you're here with me for three months." He shrugs. "Get used to it."

That's hard to digest. I can't imagine not speaking to my master for three months.

"What do you..." I start to say. "What-what can I do..." My mind is too chaotic. I don't even know what question to ask. Why did he just let me speak to Maksim if he doesn't want us to have any contact?

"Don't be frightened," Charlie whispers, cupping my face with his free hand. "I'm not gonna hurt you."

"Liar," I snap like a child, and he stands back, releasing me from the rule

of his body. “You just admitted that you're going to do terrible things to me.”

*I'm all for a bit of sadism.* I can't stop myself from thinking about when Charlie said that at the Prince's party.

Bending at the knees, he puts us at eye level. “If you misbehave, then yes I will hurt you.”

I sink into my shoulders, shooting him a daggering glare. “What have I ever done to make you want to hurt me? What have I ever done to make you want to do this to me?”

There's a moment of visual power exchange. I don't think he likes that I just asked him that. He sighs, blinking at me, his temple ticking. It's there again, that facade of pity. I wish it was real so I could use it to my advantage.

“Look,” he says softly, glancing between my eyes, “I won't hurt you beyond what you can handle, you have my word on that. If you want me to stop at any point, all you have to do is say, stop. Okay?”

*Stop? Is he fucking kidding me?*

“You know I can't tell you to stop,” I hiss in his face. “I'm not allowed to.”

“Here”—he points at the ground between us—“with me, you can do whatever you like. All you have to do is open your mind.”

With one push, he knocks me back onto the bed and I fall with a bounce.

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Charlie grabs the hem of my t-shirt and tugs it up over my head, leaving me in my black sports bra and sports trousers.

I do nothing. I just sit there huddled in my dark red hair as it pours around my body. I look at the floor, obeying Maksim, thought after thought romping through my mind. Charlie can't actually have sex with me, but that just makes the whole thought process worse because I have no idea how he's planning on getting his kicks.

I imagine a beating is on the cards tonight. Men like Charlie enjoy doing that.

When he backs up a few feet, I can't help peering up at him. He smiles down on me, tossing my shirt to the side.

“What is it?” he whispers, as I stare at him.

“Maksim told me to fulfill your needs,” I say, striving to gather my courage, “wha...what do you want?”

In silence, he gazes at me like he wants to devour my soul, diminishing my courage. I crawl back across the bed on my elbows to put some more space between us, my heart roaring in my ears.

“Well,” Charlie says finally, tilting his head, “I want to fuck you *como loco*—I thought that was obvious.”

My entire body sinks with anxiety.

When my naked back touches the cold wooden headboard, I shut my eyes and hug my middle, complying with Maksim's command not to fight. What's the fucking point? Either Maksim or Charlie is going to abuse me. I might as well accept the latter.

“You're like a beautiful, wild little wolf,” he rasps in the darkness.

I don't utter a word to that, and it's silent again. I can hear Charlie's heavy breathing over the blood roaring in my ears, but nothing else. The house feels so quiet.

The minutes creep by and nothing happens. Eventually, I have to open my eyes to look at him standing there at the foot of the bed, mentally beckoning him to get a fucking move on.

“What are you thinking?” he says, his eyes tapering with wonder.

Is that why he's taking so long? He wants to get in my mind?

“You're not allowed to take my virginity,” I warn, and I'm stunned by how even my voice comes out.

“So I'm told.” His blue eyes check me out from head to toe, and he's smiling to himself. It's like he's mentally taking off the rest of my clothes.

I hate that. It's so personal. I wish he'd just get *it* over and done with rather than longing it out and making me more uneasy than I already am.

As I blink away from Charlie, trying to center my thoughts on anything else but this, he rounds the bed. His eyes are on me the entire time. I hide in my hair curtaining my small frame, hugging my middle to the point where I almost can't breathe.

He's beside me now, but he doesn't touch me yet. A flicking sound like a lighter going off draws my attention. The room glows with a dancing orange flame. He's lighting a candle.

“Wha-what's that for?” I ask, swallowing after. “You-you're not going to burn me, are you?”

“What?” he says, sounding shocked. “Course I'm not gonna burn you.” He wants to know why I said that, I can sense it, but he doesn't question me.

On the bedside cabinet next to me, there's a candle burner. The rim is



filled with liquid. I can't see what color. Charlie puts the candle inside the burner, under the liquid, and a strong scent fills the room. It's potent. It makes my head rush a little faster.

“What is that for?”

“These oils will help you relax,” Charlie says. Leaning over me, he hooks his fingers into the waist of my trousers. My stomach tightens from the skin to skin contact. I instinctively go for his wrists to stop him from touching me. He pauses, and I retreat with Maksim's order swimming in my mind.

“Are you gonna fight me?” he asks. He's so close that I can feel his warm breath on my forehead.

I don't look at him. I just shake my head.

“Es una pena.” *It is a pity.* Charlie tugs my trousers down my legs, yanking off my trainers one by one on his way to undressing me.

I sit bare in my bra and underwear now, my anxiety reaching its summit. The only time I was ever this apprehensive was when Maksim first belted me. The first time I told him no to sucking his cock.

What I wouldn't give to go back to him right now. I miss what I know.

Huge hands close around my ankles and my toes curl. Charlie pulls me down so I'm lying on my back. My hair puddles around my face. I squeeze my thighs together and close my eyes. The blackness makes this seem almost like a bad dream.

Soft strands of hair tickle up my stomach, followed by a wet trail and the bed dipping around me. Charlie is licking his way up my body, over my navel, through my chest, and to my throat. Tension gathers low in my stomach, and my insides tingle.

His tongue on my body feels so good. I can't deny it.

The saliva trail turns from warm to cold within seconds, and I shiver.

“You liked it when I kissed you, didn't you?” he says. It doesn't sound like he's asking. It sounds like he's telling me what I already know.

I don't bother trying to rebuff him. He knows I liked it. I hardly fought him off.

To avoid kissing him again—this is my power over him—I turn my head to the side but it only gives him the access he wants. He presses kisses up the side of my neck, inhaling on his way, his smooth face gliding across my skin like satin. He sucks on my earlobe and nips with his teeth, sending some strange vibes through my body. I'm ashamed to admit I nearly moan.

“You smell creamy,” he says with puffs of breath in my ear, “hmm, like

cocoa butter.”

Knees try to probe my legs open, but I squeeze my thighs together, hugging my breasts.

“Blaire,” he warns, his voice deepening, “if you're gonna fight, do it with some dignity.”

My blood simmers, but I reluctantly relax because I know he wants me to fight. I remember how much pleasure he took in our first battle—the first time he won at kissing me. I won't let him have the pleasure of fighting me again.

A rough skinned hand forces me open, and his heavy weight settles between my thighs. His jeans chafe my sensitive skin. I'm glad he's fully clothed. I don't think I could handle him being naked at the moment.

Fingers touch my face, my jaw, and then my cheek. He kisses me there with gentle lips, adding a little pressure in places.

*Fuck*, I can smell him, the clean, soapy-musky fragrance of his skin, and he's so warm it almost feels like a hot summer's day in here. It's all so intense, and confusing—a horrifying mixture of things. I enjoyed the way he kissed me before and the way he just sucked my ear, but I am horrified.

I don't want this.

I want to go home.

“I'm glad to learn it's true what they say about redheads. They're fiery.” Charlie kisses down my neck and across my collarbones, his lips tender and nearly inviting. It has to be those oils he's burning, screwing with my head. “But you're not fiery anymore, are you? Not with your orders firmly dished out.” He sucks the pulsing vein in my neck with his lips and something surges through me. I jerk under him, unable to stop.

“What I'd give to have Maksim's control over you.”

“You're fucked up, you know that?” I spit at him, my cool slipping away. I wish he'd stop fucking talking.

I boldly meet his gaze. We're nose to nose.

“We're all a little fucked up,” he says in my face, his blue eyes glowing with zeal. “It's just, some of us aren't scared to admit it.”

“I don't mean like that,” I say through gritted teeth. “Look at you, Charlie, how handsome you are.” Putting my hands on his large shoulders to keep him an inch away, I soak up his handsomeness, the stark silver blueness in his eyes—I don't think I've ever seen eyes so untamed and beautiful. I glance down to look at the perfection of his lips, the sharpness of his features. “You

don't need to do this.” I try to push him back another inch, but he isn't budging. His hard body just makes me feel weaker and more helpless. “Tell me why you're doing this to me.”

He tips his head to the side, lifts a hand, and strokes down my face. “Why should I tell you?”

I've got a million thoughts running through my mind. Is it just that he wants to fuck me? Or is he getting his revenge on Maksim through me?

I cannot ask that. I'm afraid he'll say yes.

“Since I saw you walk into Maksim's office, dripping in wild beauty,” he starts talking before I even answer him, “and ever since you defiantly mouthed me back at Rumo's place, I've wanted you.” Running his thumb and finger down my jaw line, he pinches my chin. “And I always get what I want, Blaire. One way or the other.” He isn't joking. I can see it in his eyes.

So, because I have a backbone and I'll tell him exactly what I think without fear, he wants me? What a twisted motherfucker.

Hot lips travel back down my body, down my neck, and to the arc of my breasts, making me quiver. He sucks over the curve of my left breast, sucking my flesh into his mouth, and I don't know what happens inside me. I'm throbbing all over with heat, somewhat aroused but still anxious about what he's doing. I'm fighting not to arch into him, using my grip on his shoulders to keep flat against the bed.

He senses how he's making me feel inside, it seems, because his teeth close around my pebbled nipple over the thin cotton material of my bra. He gently kneads it, rolling his jaw from left to right, rolling my nipple in his teeth. The pain is strangely perverse and arousing. It hurts at times but I like it.

I arch into him now. I can't stop myself. I'm losing my fucking mind!

“That's it, bonita Blaire.” His tongue swirls around my nipple, soaking through the material, making my insides roll with sensations. He goes further down my body, leaving a path of fire in his wake. He kisses and caresses me at once, kneading my body with large hands. My breasts first, tweaking my nipples with his fingers until they're standing on end. Then he massages my sides and my hips, having me squirm against the sureness of his hands.

My chest is on fire. It's taking every ounce of my spirit not to groan out, not to express how good that feels.

He's kissing just above my underwear line now, from left to right, over each of my sharp hipbones. My stomach quivers, and again when his hands

follow his kisses down my thighs.

Letting go of his shoulders, I claw at the sheets on either side of my waist, thawing under him. I know exactly where he's going. Maksim has told me that men like doing this to women. They like making women come apart using only their mouth. It's a game of power.

When Charlie is crouched between my legs, he spreads me wide open, gripping the insides of my thighs. He leans down and licks over my black cotton underwear, briefly touching my throbbing clit. I writhe against the warmth of his tongue, tightening my ass, trying to cope with the sensations. He then blows on me down there, turning everything cold, and a surge of pleasure zaps through me. I jump in my skin, letting out a small girlish moan, my senses flooding with endorphins.

"I like it when you moan like that," Charlie rasps out. "It'll forever remind me of when I first kissed you."

He does it all over again, licks and blows against my underwear, teasing me with pleasure.

I slam my teeth together. My head is getting faint all over again as I struggle with the bitter sweet, agonizing pleasure.

I sense he's looking up at me from down there, and it's making the whole ordeal that much more intense. I have no privacy right now.

He hooks a finger into the side of my underwear, and the pressure in the low of my body expands. He strokes an invisible boundary of mine, up and then back down, just touching my sex.

"You've gotta be kidding me," he says angrily, and I wonder what the hell he's talking about. "Dios mío, you're waxed?"

The back of his dusty hand tickles my thigh as he strokes up and down my groin some more, savoring the moment. I wriggle about, but I can't escape what he's making me feel.

He peels my underwear to the side, then silky warmth presses to the most private part of me, my blood swollen bud, and my world blows up. I cannot hold back moaning this time, nor can I stop my toes from curling.

"Smooth, soft, and untouched." He blows on my flesh, sending tendrils of rapture through me. Then he rips off my underwear with a loud elastic snap, causing the cotton material to burn against my hips.

Nothing is said, and he buries his face between my legs.

"Ohhh!" I squeal, twisting and turning to escape. His mouth is warm and wet and soft. "Oh, God!"

He laughs out puffs of breath, grabbing my hips and pinning me to the bed, his hair brushing my inner thighs. He sucks my folds with his lips, gently and slowly drinking me in. Then kisses me like he did my mouth, full on, lips completely sealed over my sex.

When he's massaging my clit with his tongue, coaxing something dark within me, I buck forward more than once. I'm almost out of breath. I'm almost out of my mind with sensations.

It goes on and on. Charlie breaking me down. Kissing me, sucking me, and moaning like he's enjoying this more than I am. I'm tensing so hard that I start to shake.

This is too much. All over I am hot and cold at once, my skin swamped with sweat.

"You're pretty down here, too," he says in a muffled voice, pressing a kiss to my inflamed bud.

My thoughts scatter, drifting away like balls of white light. In the back of my mind there's Maksim, and what he's letting happen to me. The evilness in which he can clear a debt. Then there's this, the epitome of what I now think is pleasure, mindless pleasure that makes everything else in the world seem like a nightmare.

In all my life, I've never felt such provoking sensations.

Another kiss is pressed to my sex, making me quiver, and I don't know why, but I reach out to Charlie. I just can't deal with this. He takes my hand in one of his and holds it against my hip.

"Charlie," I groan, trying to stop my hips from moving. I'm grinding against his tongue as it swirls around my clit, infusing the delight. His face is soaked in my arousal, smooth and wet and adding to everything I'm enduring.

"I know, baby," he whispers, pecking my bud again. "Do you want me to stop?"

"No," I sob in a state of desire. I want this. It's like the first kiss all over again but on another level.

I feel him smile against my sex, then he does something that turns me inside out. He closes his lips over my clit and sucks, hard, in time with flicking his tongue against it with endless endeavor.

"Ohhh fucking, God!" I scream out, as my left leg starts trembling, as something in me rushes with heat. I grip his hand with my nails, sure I'm drawing blood. He doesn't care. He strokes my knuckles with his thumb, as if to comfort me.

My veins vibrate with tension, and between my legs, I'm pulsing so hard that I'm sure Charlie can feel it against his tongue.

The ecstasy is never ending, and I cannot move to deal—he won't let me. I squeeze his head between my legs—it's all I can do to not pass out from spiraling—but he doesn't want me to do that. Letting go of my hand, he wraps his arms around and over my hips to grip my inner thighs, and lifts my ass off the bed, practically folding me in half.

“I'm not done with you yet,” he says, gazing down on me through heavy, blazing eyes. “Not by a long shot.” His tongue parts my nether folds as he finds my clit. He makes my body blow a fuse again, manipulating me and kissing me—or, maybe the rush never stopped. I think he's drawing it out somehow, making it go on, and on, and on.

I can't take anymore. Grabbing my face in both hands, my sensory system goes into a state of epidemic as a stronger force hits me, and I scream.

# 10

As Charlie said, he's not done with me. Not by a long shot.

He carefully puts me back down on the bed and whispers from somewhere above, "You all right, Blaire?"

I'm floating in a cradle of ecstasy, my chest heavy with pants, and a weird buzzing feeling is radiating all over my skin.

A hand touches my face then strokes under my eye. "Blaire? You with me?"

I think I nod. I'm not sure. I'm too mindless to concentrate right now.

That was extraordinary. I never knew such sensations existed. All I've ever felt is the lick of a belt, heat of a branding iron, or a blow from Maksim's fist. I wasn't aware there was more.

Sitting back on his knees, Charlie pulls off his t-shirt, revealing a hard, chiseled stomach and broad shoulders, his chest sprinkled in rough, dark hair. The candle glowing on the bedside cabinet next to us gives an orange shine to his tan skin.

Like that, he's more savagely handsome than ever before.

Why is he so good looking? It would be so much easier for me to resist the desire if he was ugly.

Panting still, I lie there gazing up at him, sheathed in diamonds of sweat. I cannot even hug myself because my muscles are like jelly, and I do want to hug myself.

The sound of a zipper comes down, slow and raw, and heavy movement on the bed. Then, Charlie is hovering over me, pressing into the mattress on all fours. I can feel something warm and hard just touching my pulsing sex, but I don't really register what it is. I'm so hazy. I cannot even really make out his face. I've got stars in my eyes.

With a single hand, Charlie picks damp lengths of hair out of my face. "So fucking pretty," he whispers, and I can feel his eyes boring into mine.

After a while, my serious pants die down, and the barrier that is my dizziness fades away. Charlie smiles when I really look at him, his unruly

black hair dripping around his neck and face. His lips are wet from my arousal, glossy against the orange candle light. My cheeks flush red. I try to cup my face, desperate to hide from him, but he takes my wrists and pins them to the mattress on either side of my head, supporting himself on his knees between my legs.

“Don't be embarrassed,” he says huskily, reading my mind. “You're perfect.” He licks his glistening lips and closes down on me, kissing my mouth. He tastes salty and smells a little musky. A feminine musky scent with a hint of his own.

I turn my face to the side. Not because I don't want to kiss him. I just need a moment to recover. But he doesn't seem to like that. Freeing one of my hands, he grapples my jaw and puts us nose to nose, his fingers digging into my skin.

“Don't look away from me,” he says, and physically orders me to kiss him.

I do, even when he lets go of my face to hold my neck. Losing my mind all over again, I bask in that kiss, in how slow his tongue caresses mine and how softly alluring his lips are. I even wrap my free arm around his neck to keep him close, savoring the feeling of his smooth, shaven face on mine, his heart pounding against my chest.

Looks like we're both running on adrenaline.

My lips swell under the pressure of his, but I can't seem to stop having a taste of him. I kiss him with all I have, sucking his tongue and gasping with anxiety every time he attempts to pull away from me.

“Why are you pulling away?” I say through clatters of breath, blinking up at him. “You wanted this.”

“Ohhh, I still want this, Señorita.” Releasing my neck from his hold, he braces his body up on one elbow beside my face and stares into my eyes. “I just need to loosen you up first.”

My heart jumps into my throat. I know what he's going to do.

“Is it going to hurt?” My voice comes out so pathetic that I want to punch myself in the face.

He silently watches me for a second, his dazzling blue eyes flickering back and forth between mine. The orange glow of the candle makes him look so gorgeous that my heart goes a little faster.

“Might a bit at first,” he tells me honestly, “but I'll go slow, and I won't go all the way in if it's too much.”

*Won't go all the way in?!*



I think he knows I'm anxious because he focuses on kissing my mouth for a while, a gentle pursuit, his hand stroking the side of my face. I'm practically purring under his touch and his kiss, rushing with heat. I shut my eyes so I can anchor my thoughts on four senses instead of five. Looking at him is too overwhelming right now.

His back muscles feel extraordinary under my arm enveloped around his neck, flexing and contracting as he moves, and the weight of his body holding me down isn't so frustrating anymore. I sort of like the feeling of being beneath a powerful man. For the first time in my life, I feel like a girl lusted after, rather than a pet ordered to please.

I'm not sure how much time passes before Charlie lets go of my other wrist. Now I'm swathed around him with both arms, putting us chest to chest, crushing my breasts between us.

I think those oils have fucked with my arousal or something because I've never felt this ravenous for anything in my entire life.

A hand slides between our bodies and finds its way to my forbidden entrance. Charlie rubs me there, making me squirm, making my core buzz with hunger. I'm so wet and juicy it's ridiculous, inundating his fingers.

"Hmm, virgin cum," he says in my mouth, his voice full of darkness. "You taste fucking sweet, you know that?"

Pushing his fingers up through my soft, slick folds, he centers his attention on my clit again, teasing my inflamed bud. I cry out. I unhook my arms from around his neck and grab his arm. I'm too tender. It's too much.

"You want me to stop?" he asks, glancing heavily between my eyes.

"No! I just..." I blink in the sight of his flush face, not quite feeling like myself. "Please, Charlie, I just...just give me a second."

Smiling with pure wickedness, he deepens our kiss with a moan and works his tongue across mine, turning me inside out. He doesn't close his fiery blue eyes. He locks us in a period of visual bonding, possessing my fucking soul. I've never felt so vulnerable in all my life.

I begin to relax beneath him, letting go of his arm. He adds pressure to my clit then, making me whimper out loud. I claw the sheets on either side of my waist, curling my hips, wondering if this could get any more intense.

"You ready now?" he says on my mouth.

I nod a couple of times, looking desperately at him.

"Good." He pecks my mouth, then licks over my upper lip before sucking me there. "Now, put your feet flat on the bed so your knees are bent."

Obedying, I spread my legs and press my feet flat on the mattress, giving him more room between my thighs. Dripping wet fingers slide down my sex, gathering more liquid, then over my virgin entrance and to my decadent entrance. He circles me there with a single finger, softening the flesh, slowly kneading the tip in.

“Why Maksim hasn't fucked you, I'll never know.” He swallows my anxious gasp as he pushes into me. “I wouldn't be able to keep my hands off you if I had you at my beck and call.”

My toes bunching in the sheets, I throw my head back in the pillows, breaking away from his lips. He's halfway in, opening me up, and while it sort of stings, it's—

I don't even get a chance to figure out how it is because he pulls out, causing a tight friction to burn my insides.

“You all right?” Charlie kisses the apple of my throat.

“I...I think so.” I let out the breath I've been holding, blinking up at the dark ceiling.

“Just relax,” he says, like it's that easy.

The pressure is there at my anus again and he slips inside me, loosening me up by gently twisting his hand. He doesn't stop halfway this time. He goes all the way in until I can feel his knuckles against my butt cheeks, his finger lodged so deep inside me that I feel full to the brim.

I moan through closed teeth, and I'm trying not to tense up but it is hard. It's the most particular sensation having him in there. The burning, and it's just weird.

“Breathe, Blaire,” he reminds me. “Don't think too much. I'm not in a rush. We'll go slowly.”

“I'm just a bit anxious,” I confess, getting more and more pathetic by the minute. “I've never done anything like this before.”

“Don't be anxious,” he says softly. “I'm not gonna hurt you. Those oils burning help your muscles relax, and I won't do anything you can't handle, all right?”

I shakily nod, telling myself that I'll just follow his guidance. He hasn't hurt me yet, not really, and for some strange reason, I don't think he is going to. Not that it really matters. He can't hurt me anymore than Maksim has.

Charlie doesn't move inside me for a while, just kisses my throat and across my collar bones, training my attention on his bizarre affections. This man just an hour ago admitted he's going to do terrible things to me, yet he's

kissing me like he's in love with me or something.

I wish he'd be one or the other, either good or bad. A mixture of both is too bewildering.

He's kissing over the curve of my breasts now, moaning in the deep of his throat, his hair tickling my chest. With his teeth, he kneads my nipples over the material of my bra again, left, and then right.

"Ohhh, that's good," I say before I realize. The burning and stinging in my ass eases somewhat. I relax on the bed, stretching my toes because I've got cramp. He gently pulls out of my ass then and gathers some more moisture from my sex. My entire body tingles because it thinks he's going to play with my clit again, but then I feel something bigger stretching me out.

Two fingers.

I hiss through gritted teeth, squeezing my eyes shut. My muscles feel like they're being forced to work the wrong way, sharp pains shooting up my spine.

"Relax, baby," Charlie whispers, pulls out to soak his fingers in my cum, and then he's gently taking my ass again.

He finds a leisured rhythm that soon becomes quite satisfying, and I wonder, *is this what it feels like to have proper sex?* If it is, I've been missing out.

I don't know why I just thought that. I want him to get rid of those oils, so I can test a theory and see if they're messing with my body.

After collecting some more lubrication, three fingers press past my sphincter and it feels like he's tearing me open. His lips are on mine before I can utter a word, his tongue swirling, taking my mind to another place.

"I want you," he says harshly, lost somewhere in his mind. "I want to fuck you." He isn't lying, but I'm convinced he won't. I can feel how much control he's exercising over himself.

Curling his fingers against a spot deep inside, he makes my core pulse. I tense my ass, clamping down on his fingers, rhapsody sizzling in my veins.

"Ah!" My eyes fly open as he pulls me up off the bed, holding me around the waist in one arm tangled in my hair. The other is hooked under my ass where his fingers are still wedged inside me.

"What are you..." I don't finish my question. Skin against skin, I can feel his stiff, warm cock touching my sex, every bulging vein.

I gulp.

Looking at me with his head slightly tilted, Charlie shifts me up his dusty

legs so I'm sitting right on his lap, causing his cock to stimulate my clit with the movement. I squeeze out a moan, gazing at him in desperation, at his flush face and his blazing blue eyes. If there's ever been a look of desire, that has to be it.

“Put your feet on the bed just like I told you before,” he rasps out, and I do, gaining balance with my legs open on either side of his waist.

There's a peculiar smell in the air that I'm finding hot is sweat, my arousal, and Charlie's natural musky fragrance. Why do I find his body odor so appealing?

“You know, if you want me to fuck you properly,” he says, making my heart pound with fear, “I will. No one orders me about. And I promise I'll be gentle.”

“No,” I shake out the word, shuddering. “Don't do that, Charlie. I can't do that.”

Unable to bear the expression of desire on his face any longer, and because I'm so out of my depth, I bury my face in his dusty chest.

“No. Look at me.” Grabbing a handful of my hair at my back, he tugs, forcing me to arch and meet his glowing eyes.

“That's better.” His voice is softer now. He leans down to kiss my lips, warm puffs of breath coming from his nose.

I kiss him back, indulging myself, mirroring his salacious tongue actions.

His fingers begin to move in and out of my anus, slow at first but then faster and faster. It creates a wet suction sound that makes me cringe, until he grinds his hips, massaging a spot on my sex with his shaft, and I no longer care about anything else.

I swear, everything in me is boiling on the verge of erupting.

Back and forth with steady, skilled motions, he rubs his cock on my sex, rubs my swollen clit. My focus narrows. I copy his motions, curling my own hips to meet his grinding. It's so good—so hot. Driving me nuts!

“Please,” I beg in a state of aroused weakness, my voice choked with my neck trussed back.

“What do you want, baby?” he asks against my mouth, looking at me through hooded eyes.

That's a fucking good question.

“I don't know.”

“More?”

I open to speak but nothing comes out.

He must think I mean to say yes because it isn't long before he stops finger fucking me. His hand curves under my ass, he lifts me up, and then I feel something much bigger being pushed in me, something warm and slightly wet.

My toes curl, and my finger nails dig into his hairy chest. The head of his cock is large and warm, forcing me open bit by bit.

“Relax,” he whispers, gently pumping his hips to thrust past my sphincter.

“Aw!” I scream through closed teeth as my insides roll with pain.

“Fuck, you're tight.” Charlie sounds tense, like he's on the verge of erupting himself, and his expression is so powerful.

He stops when he's an inch inside, and I exhale, trying to sink into him for comfort but he won't let go of my hair. He's forcing me to look up at him, keeping my body arched.

Cupping his cock against my ass with an open palm, I assume so it doesn't come out, he says, “Now, we can go at your pace. If it's too much, just stop moving.”

“What? No!” I blink rapidly at him, my eyes flickering all over his face with panic. “I-I don't know what I'm doing, Charlie. Please don't make me do it.”

There's a moment where we gaze at each other. I know I look oddly vulnerable, but I feel like that. Charlie seems cool in his domain, like he's done this a thousand times before.

“All right.” He binds both arms around me, squeezing me to him. I want this, his comfort. I need it. I turn my head to the side and rest my face against his damp, hairy torso, feeling oddly safe in his embrace.

“You'll tell me to stop if it hurts too much, won't you, Blaire? I don't want to hurt you.”

I nod, and then his hips rock back and forth, urging him in some more. It burns so bad and my muscles are aching—or stinging. I can't tell the difference right now. I feel so full that I'm not sure how he's got any more room to move.

But he does.

Another inch, and it's too much. My insides whirl in agony.

“No more,” I say in a pitiable state, and I think I'm trembling.

“Shhh,” he hushes me, stroking up and down my back over my hair. “I won't go any deeper. Not unless you want it.”

He stills for a while, soothing me with his touch as he continues stroking

up and down my back over my hair. It's like he's massaging me.

When I'm looser and calmer, he ripples his hips, just a few inches of his cock sliding in and out of me with ease now that I'm stretched open. There's a spot he hits every so often that makes me squeal in pleasure and agony. It's a gripping contrast of sensations. I want more now. I can't think of anything else anymore.

Pulling on my hair, Charlie seems to want my mouth again, so I give it to him, gladly soaking up his kisses. They're tender and lovely.

I stare at him in paralyzed musing, seeing again how much he's controlling himself. His temple is throbbing like he wants to go crazy with me, and his eyes are scorching with something dangerous. He's moaning in the back of his throat. It's so hot! It turns me on even more.

The harder we kiss, wrapped in lust and debauchery, the deeper he goes. I want more of his cock. I ask for more, as fucked up as I am, and he gives it to me, until he's sheathed in my flesh, my clit rubbing against his hairy pubic bone.

He curses in Spanish, his fingers boring into my back.

Pressing my feet into the bed, I rendezvous with his thrusts by swaying my hips, sweat trickling down my spine. Faster and faster, my heart racing out of my chest. He's really fucking me, his thighs slapping against my ass globes, body to body, only sweat between us. He hits that spot every time now, causing ecstasy to gather at my core until it scatters.

“Aargh!” My arms fly up to hold him around the neck, clutching to him like my life depends on it. I don't know what the hell is happening to me. This is different than before, more powerful. I'm full to bursting, yet liberated.

I faintly hear deep moans mixed with screaming—Charlie and myself—and then he comes to an abrupt stop, crushing me in his arms as he curses to the high heavens. Buried deep in my decadency, he curls his hips around, massaging my clit with his pubic bone. It's so intense that I buck away in a tremor of spasms. My sex pulses while my spine is tingling. Large hands clamp down on my hips, shoving his cock right inside me again, drawing out the pleasure—it's radiating supernova.

I hide my face in the crook of his sweaty neck, scream and cry, barely handling what's happening to me.

“It's never been this agradable,” Charlie hisses *it's never been so good*, tensing from head to toe. I can feel the tension in his body, in his hard

muscles.

When it's over, when he lets go of my hips, I slump on him gasping so hard that my throat is on fire, trying to come down from whatever that was.

My ass is stinging, and I can feel warm liquid dripping out of me.

A hand caresses my back over my hair, while another is holding me to Charlie because I'm sliding down his damp body. He's panting with great effort, his heart drumming in my ear.

He says something to me, but I'm not listening. I'm coming down from the orgasmic rush and it's scarily sobering.

What the fuck have I just indulged in?

I feel sick.

"You all right?" Charlie says in puffs of breath, kissing the side of my damp face.

I don't say anything. I can't. I feel strange in my own skin.

Pressing into his chest with both hands, in time with shakily standing, I force him out of me.

"Hey"—Charlie tries to stop me—"hey, careful."

"Awh!" I wince, slapping his hands away. It fucking hurts, my muscles resisting the corrupt withdrawal. I drop back onto the bed with a loud huff of relief, roll over, and curl into a small ball.

No. I don't feel sick. I am sick. One sick motherfucker for enjoying that.

A hand touches my hip. "Blaire?"

"Please go away," I say, staring into nothingness. "You got what you wanted."

Anything good I felt is gone now, and anything I could feel, I'm blocking it.

Charlie exhales a sharp breath and the room goes dark. There's a burning wax scent in the air now.

"Señorita, I'm leaving," he says, and I feel the weight of a blanket covering my body, up to my chin. "Do you want anything before I go, like a glass of water?"

*Don't think. Don't think. Don't think.*

Refusing to answer him, I shut my eyes, desperate for the night to take me.

# 11

When I wake up the next morning, everything is fresh in my mind, and I'm fuming.

I untangle myself from the blanket and roll onto my back, arching with a breathless moan. My ass is a little sore, and my hips feel like they've been banged so hard they ache. There are finger print bruises on my back where my ribs are, and parts of my neck feel like a vacuum had its way with me—Charlie's mouth. That sexually warped bastard.

Trying not to tense up with anger, I take deep, balanced breaths, but with every inhale I can smell cleaning polish. It's orange and citrusy. It reminds me of when my car has been cleaned.

My car.

Home.

Maksim.

James.

Just thinking about it all makes me so...I have no words.

I cannot believe Maksim gave Charlie permission to do *that* to me. I cannot believe he let that motherfucker drug me when all he had to do was tell me my orders, and I would have followed suit. How could he barter me in this sexually violating way? How could he do this to me? His most trusted devotee?

Seething, and on the verge of pitiful tears, I stuff the blanket in my mouth and scream so hard that I can feel my throat being ripped to shreds.

I'm shaking, too.

I could kill someone.

I'm so glad Charlie isn't here right now. I might do something I'd live to regret, especially when I think back on last night about what he did to me. The things he made me feel.

Not only am I fuming, but I'm so embarrassed it's beyond belief. Charlie practically had me begging for him. He even held my hand when I reached out to him and comforted me through my first orgasm.



That's humiliating.

I'm trained to kill, trained to punish and protect, and I wanted Charlie to hold my fucking hand?

Maybe it wasn't me. I try to convince myself for whatever good it'll do. I'm not weak. I'm tough. Charlie drugged me, and he had those oils burning, which he said would help me relax.

Yes, he forced my state of needy weakness.

The memory of him grabbing my hips and shoving his cock back in my ass to draw out my orgasm makes my insides tingle, and then I feel a warm gush of liquid between my legs. *Fuck*. I don't even know why I'm thinking about that but it seems to be turning me on.

I beg myself to put it out of my mind. It's too mentally consuming, and confusing, and as I've no idea when Charlie is going to show up today, I need to get my shit together.

I cuddle the blanket to my chest, stunned I'm still wearing my bra. I sit up in bed, squinting through the sun flooding the room. It's so bright that my head pounds for a moment, but when my eyes adjust, I'm stone cold sober.

The room is big and airy with high ceilings and dark paneled walls, a huge brass chandelier hanging over head. The parquet floors are highly buffed but old and worn. In the left corner of the room, opposite from where I'm sitting on the bed, there's a small square table housing a chessboard and a throne like chair made from redwood. An antique armoire stands next to the chair, made from the same redwood.

It's as if I've gone back in time, and I'm in some medieval showdown.

I never expected Charlie to live in a place like this. It's just not him.

Through the tall sash window on the left wall that boasts no curtains, I see the sun burning low in the sky. It has to be morning. The sun isn't past noon yet.

The air breezing in is refreshing, cooling my warm skin. He must have opened the window for me. How fucking nice.

"Mudak," I hiss to myself, twisting my lips in anger.

I want to go outside and take in the morning's freshness. I want to feel free for a moment. I don't want to be here. I miss home so much, my apartment, Maksim and James, and it's only been one night. How does Maksim expect me to do this for three whole months?

If James was here, I'm not sure this would be happening. I know he'd be fighting to do whatever he could to spare me. He always does.

“No,” I whisper, my voice choked up. The guilt I feel for even considering letting him take my place is horrible. Dealing with Maksim is one thing, but Charlie is another. None of us really know him and up until now, he's not actually hurt me. I can't be sure he wouldn't hurt James.

I hope James is okay with Maksim.

“Don't think about it,” I say, speaking to the empty room. I put last night and James in a little black box in the back of my mind and hope the thoughts will stay there.

Hooking my feet over the side of the bed, I get up on shaky legs, my muscles aching from head to toe. Something crispy and sticky draws my attention to the flesh between my thighs.

Charlie's cum, and my morning's arousal.

I recoil, trying desperately not to think about it. I focus on the clothes at the foot of the bed: a pair of skinny fitting jeans, a black long-sleeved sweater, and a pair of knee high flat heeled boots.

These aren't mine. Where are my clothes and trainers?

The clothes are all right, I guess, but the underwear isn't exactly what I'd call underwear. The bra is black lace and the matching panties are just a scrap of material. I pick up the thong with my finger and thumb.

I'm not wearing this crap.

I toss the underwear back on the bed and find my way into an en-suite bathroom that leads off the bedroom. I head straight for the triple width shower. I need to get clean. I feel so dirty.

Flicking on the faucet, I snap off my bra and step under the flow to shower in ice cold water, shivering as it sprays over my face and my body. I wash with a bar of lime colored soap that smells strong of mint, using my hands and fingernails. My ass stings against the soap, but the cold water is numbing. The soap dries out my hair as I lather, making the strands feel a little wiry, but there's no shampoo or conditioner in here.

I briefly wonder if Charlie pre-planned bartering me. He doesn't seem prepared. Or, maybe he is. Maybe he just won't offer me luxuries like Maksim does.

That wouldn't surprise me.

When I'm done, I can only find a small hand towel in the bathroom. *Definitely unprepared.* I dry myself as best as I can, patting my hair. There's a toothbrush and some toothpaste on the vanity sink under a long mirror, so I brush my teeth, and then I go back into the bedroom to dress.

I'm grateful for the clothes, given it's a little chilly in this big room. I don't put on the bra or the thong. They're so trashy. They're not me. I wear sports bras and comfortable underwear, not this shit. My breasts aren't that big anyhow, so going braless won't matter.

The sweater is made from cashmere. It's so soft. I hug my middle, missing home a little more. Now, if I was there, I'd be making myself a coffee, casting my eyes out over London until Maksim calls for me or texts to say I can have the day to myself. Here, I don't know what the day has in store for me. More sexual infringement? A beating? That is what men like *him* enjoy, as far as I know.

I'll take a beating any day of the week. At least I know how to feel about that. I'm in emotional limbo when it comes to what happened last night.

My usually sleek red hair is damp and heavy around my shoulders and my waist. I notice it's frizzy, too, seeing my pale, freckly reflection in the bedroom window. I don't even recall walking over here. I'm in such a weird place mentally.

I comb out the damp kinks in my mane with my fingers, wondering where is my hair tie. I glance over the messy bed behind me, but I remember that I let my hair down last night at Maksim's house.

I go cold on the spot as the main door clicks open and closed, and dominating presence fills the room.

# 12

Turning my head, I look at Charlie by the door. It's suddenly like there's no air in the room.

He's wearing dark blue jeans over black boots and a black long-sleeved sweater, his muscles clearly defined under the soft material. I remember the weight of his hard body on mine. The musky scent of his skin, and the way he kissed me.

My lungs are so tight.

His eyes are striking blue against the sunshine, against his tan skin, though they're black in the corners, I assume from taking a punch from me.

“Morning, Señorita.” A sly grin tugs at the corner of his lips.

His ink black hair is a little chaotic, curling around his neck and face, but annoyingly sexy. I'd love to rip his hair out. I'd love to rip out my own hair for responding to him this way, feeling flustered at the sight of him.

I don't say anything. I'm just looking at him, trying not to think of last night. If I do, I'm not sure what I'll do. I don't trust myself right now. I don't trust that I won't hit him, or worse, kiss him.

I can't stomach this. I've never not trusted myself.

Charlie proffers a steaming cup, his eyes trained on mine. “I'm told you like coffee in the morning.”

I wonder again, just for a split second, if he is using me to get back at Maksim. One day, I'll ask him, when the time is right and I'm not terrified that he might say yes.

“I'm not really interested in coffee, Charlie.”

“No?” He smiles at me, mischief flashing in his eyes. “What are you interested in then?”

I arch a brow at him, suddenly so angry I could murder him. “Are you going to do that to me every night for three fucking months?”

“Do you want me to?” He's deadly serious and a little amused.

“Eh, no, I don't want you to.” My expression is hard like stone.

He sighs and brings me the coffee. I flinch when he takes one of my

wrists.

“I'm also told you like eggs for breakfast.” He carefully puts the hot cup in my hand and lets me go, stepping back.

“I'm not hungry,” I say, my voice weaker than I was trying for.

Coffee topples over the cup, scalding my wrist. My hand is shaking. I hate this. I never shake. Not under anyone but Maksim.

Charlie doesn't say anything for a moment. He's just staring at me with a look of wonder gleaming in his eyes. The silence is unbearable, louder than any scream or cry I've ever heard. I can't stand it.

I need to get out of here.

Dropping my gaze to the floor, I start for the door to put some distance between us, but a hand closes around my forearm.

“Where do you think you're going?” Charlie turns me to face him.

Baffled, I search his eyes. “Outside.”

“I don't think so.”

“What?” My eyes widen. “You expect me to stay in this room for three whole months?”

He shrugs, like that's exactly what he expected.

“You're insane if you think I'll stay cooped up in here.” I squeeze the cup in my hand, restraining myself from throwing it at him. “I need to train, Charlie. I need my own personal space.”

He's quiet again, as though he's contemplating something. It feels like hours before he says, “If I let you out, you're not gonna run screaming for the hills, are you?” He flicks up his eyebrows. “Theoretically, I mean.”

I scoff at him with a smirk, on the verge of laughing my head off.

“What's so funny?” He doesn't look confused by my laughter, his expression even and focused, but he sounds a bit confused.

“You flatter yourself.”

“Oh yeah?” He's back to smirking.

“Yes,” I huff. “Trust me, you're not worth screaming for.”

For a second, just a split second, I think he looks insulted. But then he grins, hunches down and puts us nose to nose, making me sink into my shoulders. “You screamed pretty well last night.”

My cheeks burn. I'm more embarrassed now than I was when I woke up.

I don't know where it comes from, but I snatch out of his grasp and slap him across the face, **wallop!** hard enough to make his head whip back.

He slams me against the wall with his forearm over my chest.

“Ah!” I pant out on impact, dropping the coffee cup. It smashes at my feet and scatters across the floor.

“You know,” Charlie says in my face, his expression taut with darkness, “you're the only girl I won't hit, but don't think you have the advantage because there are other ways I can punish you.”

I gulp, pressing my hands back against the wall.

“I'd rather you hit me,” I say, my voice small.

His gaze burns into mine. My breathing accelerates. I don't know what to do. Should I fight him off?

*Maksim said not to fight him.*

*Maksim said to indulge him.*

*Maksim said to please him.*

“Believe me, you wouldn't want me hitting you.” With his free hand, he cups my sex over the jeans.

I cower and turn my face to the side so I can hide in my long hair, my core tightening. I remember the orgasms last night, all too well, and I can't tolerate that I liked them.

He rubs me there with the tips of his fingers. Even with the jeans between us, it feels good. I pulse for attention, the crotch of my jeans dampening with arousal. It makes my toes curl.

Why does my body react against my will?

“You like that, don't you?” he whispers, softly kissing the side of my face. “And you hate that you like it.”

Can he read my fucking mind?

Looking back at him, touching his nose with mine, I make damn sure I don't break our gaze this time, even while I feel like I'm drowning. He has to know I'm strong willed if nothing else.

“Are you sore?” he asks. I'm not sure if he's mocking me or genuinely concerned.

Raising his eyebrows, he beckons me for an answer.

I nod minutely.

“I thought you might be,” he whispers. Grabbing my hips in both hands, he yanks me up off the ground, making me yelp in shock. “Don't be frightened. I'm not gonna hurt you.” He presses one knee against the wall between my thighs and sits me there, so my legs dangle freely on either side of his.

My ass feels bony against his masculine leg and a little sore with the

pressure of sitting down.

I instinctively reach out for balance, and he grabs my hands. He runs his fingers through mine. I lose my breath at the warm contact, trembling, desperately looking up at him.

What is he doing?

To answer my question, he puts my palms on his smooth face and makes me hold him, controlling my balance like this. His hands completely cover mine.

I can't breathe again.

Not once does he blink while staring right through my soul, his blue eyes full of desire. I feel so weak and small, at his mercy, and I know I look scared out of my mind.

I can't stand this!

“No one has ever been gentle with you before, have they?” Bowing his head, Charlie kisses my lips, and fire races through my veins. “Have they?” he repeats because I don't answer him, speaking against my mouth.

I turn my face so I don't have to kiss him, but he *tut, tut, tuts* at me. My entire body trembles. I don't want him sodomizing me again—it gives him too much power over me—so I face him. He pecks my lips, chipping away at my will, making me want him in this fucked up endeavor of allure.

I detest that I want him. It's crazy. I should hate him—and I do hate him—but right now the desire is stronger than the hate. I can feel it in my body.

I start to say something, anything to stop this, and he takes full advantage, just like he did before. Delicately touching my tongue with his, he has me moaning and melting again, gripping his jaw in a desperate attempt to make love to his mouth.

All my anger and hate vanishes.

It seems I lose focus when he does things like this to me. I'm not myself.

He hums deeply, then forces his sodden tongue right into my mouth and massages unholy across mine. I can taste real, bitter coffee on his tongue and Charlie's natural flavor. It's such a sexy contrast of flavors.

When he sucks the tip of my tongue, I moan again. It's so hot that I forget who I am for a second. My head is buzzing with lust.

He likes that I moan. He smiles.

“Tell me the truth, Blaire, or I'll keep you in this room all day long.”

“The truth about what?” I ask, blinking rapidly at him, my head swimming.

Letting go of my hands on his face, he runs his fingers into my hair and seizes my head, holding us mouth to mouth. I don't let go of his face. If anything, I squeeze him tighter, finding the whole ordeal of us staring at each other while kissing too intimate.

“Has anyone ever been gentle with you?” he says, and then he's kissing me as though he really means it. His wet licks are unhurried, and his lips are gentle, shaping around mine, making my mouth water.

In a haze, I shake my head.

“No,” he whispers in my mouth, blinking then. “I didn't think so.” Wrapping his huge arms around my entire body, he forces me up his leg so we are chest to chest, crushing me to him.

Now, it feels like he's all over me, all over my mouth, all over my body, and I'm not sure I don't like it. He smells so good, like he's just had a shower.

My heart is hammering, trying to jump out of my ribcage, and I'm so damp between my legs that I feel clammy and hot.

“Did I hurt you last night?”

I think I whimper in his mouth, anxious, struck by his question. I can't live like this for three months, wondering, drowning in anxiety, and unwillingly wanting. I need to know what the days have in store for me. I need to know how bad it's going to get.

“Don't be frightened,” Charlie whispers again. He grips the back of my neck with one hand and holds me there, his other arm still wrapped around my back.

“Charlie,” I tremble out his name, visibly anxious, “what are you going to do to me now?”

He glances between my eyes, his alight with ardor. “Nothing. I just want to kiss you.”

I'm so relieved that I know he can feel my body going slack with relief.

“Did I hurt you?” he asks once more, taking my mouth in another deep kiss.

I want to tell him it was agony because that is after all what men like, isn't it? To inflict pain on girls? I don't tell him that though. I shake my head, being honest. It wasn't that bad. I've suffered far, far worse.

“Good,” he says softly, pecking the edge of my mouth. “I didn't want to hurt you.”

I frown at him, and he pecks my mouth again. He said he was going to do terrible things to me, didn't he?



“What did you mean when you said that I might be the only girl you won't hit?” My courage to ask that comes from nowhere.

The way he smiles at me causes my stomach to flip.

“I like you,” he says sincerely. “A lot more than I thought I would.”

Something vibrates in his jeans pocket against my thigh. Without breaking away from me, he shifts to hold me in one arm, squashing my breasts to his hard chest. He reaches into his jeans pocket and pulls out his phone. Then answers it against my mouth while still kissing me. “What?”

Now, it feels really intimate with him being on the phone, unable to stop having his fill of me.

Charlie utters a few words amid pecking me, while I'm cupping his face in both my hands, kissing him back. Then I hear someone say something about arranging a meeting on Maksim's behalf.

My heart drops into my stomach.

Why would he be arranging a meeting on Maksim's behalf?

Charlie presses another kiss to my lips, then he says, “Two o'clock is fine.” And he hangs up, shoving his phone away.

“Why are you talking about Maksim?” I pull away from him, but I don't get far because his arm is still around my waist.

I grip his shoulders, wishing he'd put me down.

“I'm paying the Albanians a visit.” He doesn't teeter about telling me, which surprises me.

“The Albanians?”

That girl who got fucked at the Prince's party springs to mind.

“Yeah,” Charlie says. Using his free hand, he tucks my hair back over my shoulder, really looking at me through heavy blue eyes. “Maksim is having a few issues with them, so I agreed to sort it.”

“Maksim is having problems, and he went to you instead of me?!” I'm affronted. I cannot believe this.

I push against Charlie's chest, forcing him to drop me on my feet, and crane my neck all the way back to look up at him. “Why has he come to you and not me?”

“They're a little outa your league, Señorita.” Pressing one hand against the wall beside my face, he cages me in, towering over me.

“Out of my league?” I ask, glowering, my body getting hot because he's doing this weird primal proximity thing. “What does that mean?”

Glancing between my eyes, he smiles at me. It's such a gorgeous smile

that I can't stop my heart from beating a little faster.

“They're quite dangerous.” He wipes across my upper lip with his thumb, as if he doesn't give a shit about what we're talking about. Then he kisses me once more. He seems solely focused on me. “Too dangerous for one small girl.”

I laugh sarcastically, folding my arms over my chest. “You actually believe that you bested me with ease, don't you, Charlie?”

He doesn't answer me, but he thinks just that. It's in his meditated stare and his cunning, lax smile.

“Well, understand this, I put up a little bit of a fight in moments because my heart is in war with my head”—I put a finger to my temple—“not because I'm weaker than you. So when you have your way with me, know it's because I let you under Maksim's wishes. Nothing more.”

“Is that right?”

“You bet it is,” I speak through clenched teeth. “I do whatever Maksim says. I'm only here because he wants me to be here.”

Charlie hunches down, putting us face to face. “And if Maksim told you to come home right now?”

I point at the space between us, feeling like myself again. “I'd kick your ass if you didn't let me go, then I'd leave.”

“You really do think you could beat me in a fight, don't you?”

“Oh, I don't think. I know.”

“Silly chica.” He chuckles, standing back and crossing his arms. “Maybe one day”—he cocks his head—“we'll get in the ring and battle it out.”

“Name the time and the place.” I'm so sure I'll beat him that I want him to say, *right here, right now*. He doesn't, of course. He's just looking at me like he's gently taking off my clothes. My cheeks get hot, so I stare down at the floor. “I'll come with you to meet with the Albanians, if you don't mind. You might find me useful.”

He scoffs, insulted. “Maksim might have no shame in having a tiny girl on his security detail, but I do.”

“Shame?” Glaring up at him, I cross my arms again, mimicking his pose. “I took you on, and almost vanquished you, might I add.”

He flashes the filthiest smirk, reaches out, and gently pinches my chin. “Almost.”

I pull my chin out of his grasp. He starts chuckling again. His cheekbones are clearly defined with that large smile.

“I'm not surprised Maksim sees you as his trophy. That lucky motherfucker has had you for far too long.”

“Charlie,” I say softly, thinking about my master, “I want to avoid any intimate conversations with you, if you don't mind.”

“I do mind, actually,” he says, his voice taking a dark edge. “Over the next three months, I plan on knowing you inside out.”

My chest tightens because I have a horrible feeling he isn't going to tire of me.

He exhales, like he's sighing. “If you have some breakfast, you can come with me.”

“What?” I'm so astonished he just gave in like that, I gawp at him.

He nods. “On one condition.”

“What condition?”

“You have to stay behind me if any trouble breaks out.”

I scowl at him, confused.

“I don't want you getting hurt on my watch, Señorita.” He's mocking me. He lowers his tone when he says, Señorita.

I snort at him. “Maybe I'll kick the Albanians' asses before kicking yours. That ought to shut you up.”

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Before we leave for the Albanians, Charlie brings me a plate of warm scrambled eggs, toast, and a glass of orange juice on a silver tray.

I'm so pissed off by how easily he makes me enjoy what he does to me that I hesitate to take it from him. He raises his eyebrows, but I continue looking at him in wrath, wanting to punch him again. Maybe if I fuck up his face, I won't find him so attractive—because that must be the reason why I respond to him so easily, right? It's physical?

“You can always stay here,” he says, reminding me of his ultimatum to eat, or stay here. “It's no bother to me either way.”

Simmering inside, I snatch the tray from him. The orange juice almost spills over but he's quick to grab the glass, steadying it on the tray. He tells me to take it easy, but I'm not really listening to him. Glancing over the tray, I wonder how he knows I like eggs for breakfast—and scrambled eggs for that matter. Did Maksim tell him?

“What's wrong?” he asks.

I don't like to assume they've spoken about me, that's what's wrong. It's too weird, given what Charlie wants me for.

Holding the tray in both hands, I push past him. He sighs but I don't let it affect me. Hopefully, if I keep on like this and refuse to indulge him, he'll tire of me. I can't live like this for three months. He's going to ruin me. How Maksim thinks I'll come back intact, I don't know.

Sitting on the foot of the bed, I shift to get comfortable in these jeans while Charlie gets all domesticated and cleans up the broken coffee cup, using a dustpan and brush to sweep up the splinters. Now I wish I threw it across the room to really put him to work.

I'm laughing before I can stop myself. Charlie glances up at me, pulling his thick eyebrows together. Avoiding his stare and trying to stop laughing, I grab the glass of orange juice. It's sweet and refreshing, cool as it pours down my throat. I then dig into my breakfast. The eggs are nice, fluffy and seasoned right.

Did he cook this?

That makes me feel a bit weird. I can't recall a time when anyone ever made me food. Maksim used to feed me bread and water when he was conditioning me as a kid, but I wouldn't exactly call that making food.

Charlie mops up the spilled coffee and disappears with the bucket for about five minutes, then he returns and sits beside me, making the bed dip. I'm so aware of his closeness that my skin prickles, and my nipples are like fucking bullets. I'm not sure that I don't like being so close to him. How bizarre is that?

I try to focus on eating, but I can't shift this personal feeling of him watching me. It's so strong.

I peek up at him, a question in my eyes.

He's glancing between all my features. It's quite flattering the way he looks at me, as if he sees only me. "What is it?" he says softly.

"Where are my clothes and trainers, Charlie?" I put down the fork and pinch the jeans I'm wearing. "I don't like wearing jeans."

He half smiles, gently pushing my hair back over my shoulder with one hand. "I'll get your things if you want them."

I look down at the food on my lap and pick at the toast with my fingers. He's got those weird dark vibes going on. I've noticed how his aura changes when he wants to kiss me, or worse.

"What else do you like other than eggs, Blaire?"

I lift my shoulders. “I’m not fussy. I’ll eat anything.”

“I didn’t ask if you’re fussy. I said what do you like other than eggs. What would you usually eat at home?”

I definitely want to punch him, especially when he speaks to me like this. I’m not a fucking child.

I don’t find his gaze again. I eat the rest of my eggs, keeping my eyes down. “I don’t know, chicken, vegetables, potatoes.”

Nothing more is said about what food I like. Charlie sits with me until I finish off my breakfast. Then he stands and takes the tray from my lap. I look up at him, and of course he’s staring at me. He’s always staring at me, intrigued or something.

“Meet me downstairs in ten minutes”—he gestures with the tray—“I’ll clean this up and then we’ll head off.”

I nod, glad that he’s taking me with him. Someone has to look out for Maksim because I doubt Charlie is. He has other intentions. I know it.

# 13

Charlie and I shrug into our jackets by the double front doors. He's wearing a brown leather jacket, and I have to admit, he looks good in it, especially with his black hair curling around his features. He looks dangerous and rugged.

"Here, let me get that." He helps me into my jacket, slipping it up my arms.

I want to stop him but why bother? Unless I want him making my life hell for the next three months, I need to find some common ground with him.

He pulls out my hair and drapes it down my back.

"I want my gun before we leave," I say, zipping up my jacket and facing him.

"Yeah, all right." He chuckles, grabbing a set of car keys from a cupboard on the wall by the doors.

"I'm serious." I stare at him without blinking. "I want my gun."

He's quietly looking at me, his eyes flittering between mine, then he snaps, "You're mad if you actually believe I'll let you around me with a pistol."

It seems he wants to control everything about me, even my safety.

"Charlie," I sigh out his name, running my fingers through my hair. "I can't live like this for three months. You're too intense."

His eyebrows shoot up.

"There has to be some kind of mutual respect between us, otherwise, I'd rather you and Maksim fall out, and I go back to my old life." I shrug. "It's your choice."

"You can't decide that."

Slowly and softly, I say, "I can. I'll just pay for it."

He grinds his jaw, and now he's glaring at me. "You'll put a bullet in my head while I sleep if I give you back your gun. Why do you think I took it from you in the first place, hmm? I don't trust you."

Like I give a shit if he trusts me or not.

"I don't need you to be asleep to shoot you." I reach past him and tug open

one of the front doors, allowing in a rush of cold air. "I'll be waiting outside. Bring my gun. I don't feel safe without it."

When I walk past him, I shove him with my shoulder. He huffs, as if he wants to say something, but he doesn't.

Exiting the house, I jog down the porch steps, immediately noticing Charlie has a fetish—for cars I mean. There's a black Mercedes, a red Ferrari, two Range Rovers—one in black and the other in white—and an old red sports car. They're all parked on the right side of the stony driveway, under a wall of climbing white flowers.

Who needs this many cars?

"I must be crazy giving this back to you," Charlie says from behind.

Pivoting, I take my gun from him. It's cold and heavy. It's my safety blanket.

"Blaire," he says my name gravely, giving me his hardest stare, "I'm only gonna warn you once. If you ever pull that gun on me again"—he points a finger in my face—"I'll put you down. Is that clear?"

I nod, unbothered. I don't plan on using my gun on him. I only used the fantasy of it last night to scare him, which failed immensely.

Closing his eyes, he lets out a deep breath. He's uneasy about me having a weapon. *Good.*

"Let's go," he says. "We have to be in West Sussex by two."

The black Range Rover flashes to signal it's open, so I head for it, my feet crunching against the driveway.

"Do you want me to drive?" I tuck my gun away in my inside jacket pocket and zip myself up again.

Charlie throws the keys without question, and I catch them in steady hands.

"I suppose this mutual respect has to start somewhere." He winks at me—actually winks at me. It makes my cheeks warm up.

What is it with him and that dark alluring thing he's got going on? Even Maksim doesn't affect me on this level.

I jump into the driver's seat and press the button to fire up the vibrating engine. For a moment, just a quick moment, I wonder if Charlie has spoken to Maksim. If he's told him that I pulled a gun on him.

I'm petrified that he has. Maksim will beat me half to death for provoking Charlie, the man he clearly fears.

"Blaire?" Charlie says from beside me. I hadn't even noticed him getting

into the car. “What's wrong?”

I realize I'm frozen, squeezing the wheel of the car so hard that my knuckles are white.

“Have you spoken to Maksim today?”

He shakes his head, pulling on his seatbelt. “I'll be seeing him next weekend. And don't worry, Señorita, I won't tell him you tried to shoot me.”

The relief of hearing him say that is comforting. I sag in my seat, letting out a breath.

“Is that what you're worried about?” he asks, touching my arm to gain my attention.

I shrug. It's obvious I was worried.

“Blaire, listen”—he gives my arm a gentle squeeze—“I know this isn't exactly conventional, the way I've taken you from Maksim. I know you're having a hard time. But soon you'll see that you can trust me. Whatever happens between us is our business. Not Maksim's.”

“I'll have to tell him when I see him, you know?” I twist at the waist to face Charlie, holding the steering wheel with one hand. “He'll ask what we've been up to.”

“That's on you.” Turning up his lips, he shrugs. “As far as I'm concerned, this is our private business.”

“It's not that private when Maksim gave you permission to drug and abuse me.” I sound bitter, but I am. He's twisting my mind, making me take pleasure in things I shouldn't, kissing me like he's in love with me or whatever.

I don't even know why I'm talking to him like this, as if I know him on a personal level. It pisses me off royally.

“Blaire, ohhh, Blaire.” Reaching over, Charlie grabs the back of my seat, giving me his full attention, “Whether Maksim gave me permission to take you or not, I'd have taken you because I wanted you.”

I frown at him, fighting not to react to that consuming look in his eyes.

“He isn't the boss of me, as I'm sure you've noticed.”

I huff, glancing away.

“Anyhow,” he says, lightly tugging on a strand of my hair, making me look back at him, “regardless of all that, as far as my intimacy with you goes, it's our business.”

I don't reply to that.

In silence, we gaze at each other, Charlie's blue eyes pacing back and



forth between mine. I don't know what happens, but I feel a sense of privacy between us. I actually believe he won't tell anyone about what he's doing to me. It isn't like Maksim can force information out of him. It's Charlie who has all the power.

“All right?” He raises his eyebrows at me.

After a while of thinking, and holding back a million questions, I nod, trusting him like the fucking idiot I am. It's not even forced trust, I just do.

“Can I ask you one more thing, Charlie?”

He tips his head, seeming a little surprised. “Sure you can.”

“Why did you let me talk to *him*, on the phone last night?” I have to know this at least. “You said you didn't want us having any contact until you're done with me, so why?”

“You looked too nervous for my liking—more nervous than I anticipated you'd be—and I knew that if you spoke to him, you'd be okay.” He gestures out the window screen like he's averting from my question. “C'mon, Señorita. We need to get a move on.”

I want to tell him that I was nervous, that he didn't need to drug me because if Maksim said so, I would have come with him, but I won't get any more out of him. So I put the car in gear and pull out of the wide driveway, between tall electric gates that open on command.

I fleetingly wonder if he is using me to get back at Maksim. It doesn't feel like he is. The way he looks at me and kisses me...I feel like he genuinely likes me. But perhaps I'm just green to men of his standards.

I don't know.

He really confuses me.

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We don't talk much on the drive to West Sussex, other than Charlie telling me, “Take a left, get off on that motorway, turn right.” We just watch the city landscape change to farming fields and acres of flourishing green land packed with sheep. I suppose there isn't much to say, really. He got what he wanted last night, and I'm safe from his sexual desires for a while.

It takes about two hours for us to arrive at our destination, but we arrive when the Albanians expect us at two o'clock on the dot.

“Let me do all the talking,” Charlie says, tucking a gun into the back of his jeans.

“Do you think I'm stupid?” He should know by now that I don't usually speak unless spoken to. I only talk back to him. I just now ponder over why I have the guts to do that.

“What is it?” he asks.

“Nothing.” I shake it off.

“Blaire...” he elongates my name. “If I ask you a question, I expect you to answer me.”

I sigh, blinking down, then back up at him. “I'm just wondering why I talk back to you when I wouldn't dream of doing it to anyone else.”

Sitting back, he grips the handbrake, and watches me in quiet muse.

“Maybe because I don't order your silence. Maybe you feel comfortable around me.”

I laugh mordantly. “Comfortable? Really?”

“Well, as you said”—he shrugs with one shoulder—“apart from me, you wouldn't dream of speaking before being spoken to, yet, you've never questioned yourself with me.”

The idea isn't lost on me. Staring at him staring at me, I mull it over, annoyed that he might be right. Even at Rumo's poker game, I indulged Charlie. I spoke to him, and I lied to Maksim when he asked what Charlie and I had talked about after I bested James. I've never lied to Maksim before. I've never spoken to anyone like I do Charlie, and I don't even know him.

“Don't think about it too much.” Charlie's raspy voice breaks through the silence. “I like that you prefer this rather than the obedient dog Maksim has trained you to be.”

“How do you know I prefer this?”

“Don't you?” He raises his eyebrows, locking us in a moment.

I can't tell if he's manipulating me or not. I just can't read Charlie.

“You're trying to get in my head,” I say through gritted teeth.

“No, Señorita,” he says softly, looking between my eyes. “I just want to know you, that's all.”

“Why though?” I ask with clear frustration. “Why do you even want me? You could have any woman you want. A woman who doesn't resist you,” I add with sarcasm.

“You'll soon give into wanting me too. It's the law of attraction.”

It's like he just slapped me across the face. I will admit that I do fancy him. I just hate how he makes me feel.

“That doesn't explain why you're doing this to me.” I peer down at myself,

mystified, then back up at him. “I'm not your type. Not like those girls at Maksim's party. I'm not what you want, not really.” I go on and on. Don't ask where my audacity has come from, but I just can't seem to stop the verbal diarrhea. I need to know why.

Reaching over, Charlie flicks down the sun visor and opens the mirror. I scowl between him and my haunting reflection.

“What?” I say, still scowling.

He looks at me in mocking fondness, as if he knows I don't get his point, then climbs out of the car before I have a chance to ask anything more.

“Charlie, Iisos Khristos.” I huff out, tensing my fists.

He rounds the car and opens my door for me, just as he did the first night I met him. I don't think about the gesture. I slide out of the car, wishing he'd give me a straight fucking answer.

He won't though, of course. Charlie is nothing if not calculating. I feel he wants me to work out everything on my own.

Seven black SUVs with heavily tinted windows pull up around us. I grab Charlie's arm to keep him near and reach for my gun, thinking this is a setup.

“Relax. They're my men.” Charlie closes his hand over mine, and strokes over my knuckles with his thumb, warming me from the outside in. “I don't go anywhere without backup.”

I snatch my hand back, trying to evade the way he makes me feel.

“C'mon,” he says, nodding at the mansion before us. It's all smooth white walls and tall sash windows.

I walk with Charlie toward the house, peering up at him from the side. He carries himself with pure confidence, strolling onward like he owns the world and everything in it, his handsome face as impassive as ever.

We reach the bottom of the porch, and he catches me staring. A huge smile spreads across his face.

“Ready?” he says.

In a bit of a fluster at being caught ogling, I blink away and focus on the stone steps in front of us. “Yeah, I'm ready.”

Charlie's hand hovers on the low of my back as we pace up the porch steps together.

“If anything goes down,” he says, something untrusting flashing through his eyes, “make sure you don't fucking shoot me.”

“I know how to use a gun, Charlie.” I sound offended because I am. He gives me no credit for my skills. “Believe me, I've never shot anyone I didn't

mean to.”

“Just make sure.” He knocks on the door, and an unfamiliar face greets us.

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# 14

Charlie shakes hands with a guy he addresses as Robert. He's as tall as he is wide, standing there in the doorway draped in a long black coat.

Remaining in the background, I observe the situation, listening to every word they exchange with extra awareness. I need to know why the Albanians have a beef with Maksim, and then I can find a clean solution to how we can avoid a war.

Tatiana doesn't like unnecessary conflicts.

"I appreciate you agreeing to see me," Charlie says, withdrawing his hand. "I understand the situation is tense."

"No. Thank you for coming on Maksim's behalf." Robert's accent is thick and cold, like his eerie brown eyes. "I'm not sure we would have been able to resist killing him otherwise."

My defensive instincts buzz in my veins. No one is killing Maksim on my watch.

I glance between Charlie and Robert with careful scrutiny, while my hand twitches for my gun.

"Do you have a picture of her?" Charlie says, and I frown, trying to read between the lines. "I see no point in pissing around."

I rake through my mind for who this *her* could be. The only conclusion I come to is she must be the Albanian girl Maksim and his friends fucked at the Prince's party. It's too much of a coincidence.

"No. I agree," Robert says. Peeling open his coat, he pulls out a tiny photo and passes it to Charlie. "She was very beautiful. As you can imagine, my anger is quite justified."

Charlie doesn't bother studying the photo. He proffers it to me, of all people. I don't take it. I don't even look at it. I scowl up at Charlie, wondering why he's trying to show it to me.

"Do you recognize her?" He raises his eyebrows at me, gesturing with the photo. "The girl in the picture."

"Why are you showing that to me?" I ask softly, beyond confused. If it is

the girl I'm thinking of, then he knows what she looks like.

“Just answer the question, Blaire,” he whispers, though I can feel the urgency under his voice.

He pushes my hair back over my shoulder, trying to create intimacy between us. My eyes flicker to Robert, then back to Charlie, who is watching me like a hawk.

“So, you're Blaire?” Robert interrupts us, gaining Charlie's attention. “She's the fighter, is that right?”

Charlie faces Robert and tells him that I am, shoving one hand in his jeans pocket. “And she's good. I've seen her in action.”

“Oh, I don't doubt that,” Robert drawls, his cold gaze journeying up and down my small frame. “I've heard great things about you, girl.”

I analyze him as he analyzes me. He's got blood on his hands. I can tell from his icy, gangster-like exterior, puffed out chest, and hard-life wearing expression on his face.

He doesn't scare me. I've ended men greater and more dangerous than him.

“I've also heard of your silence.” He laughs, giving Charlie this sultry look, flashing coffee stained teeth. “Is she on offer in exchange for the girl who was taken from me? Because I'd be more than happy to forget about all the bad blood for her.” Smiling down at me, he adds, “She's pretty.”

I don't react to his smuttiness. I remain as impassive as ever.

“Blaire isn't on offer.” Charlie's tone leaves no room for negotiations, nor does his body language as he steps in front of me. “As we agreed, if Blaire confirms that this is the girl Maksim and his friends fucked-up, you'll tell me how much she was worth and I'll ensure she's paid for in full.”

“What?!” I shout without thinking. This can't be right. I had to bargain with Charlie so he'd let me come to this meeting, and now I'm to identify someone? And, he fucking knows what that girl looks like, so why does he need me to identify her?

Charlie glances over his shoulder at me. It takes every ounce of will I have not to attack him. How dare he try to turn me against my master like this.

“Her name is Arjana.” Robert confirms that it is the girl from the party. “She is worth half a million euros to me, for she *was* a virgin with Palestinian blood.”

“That's fair enough,” Charlie says, nodding a few times. He then pivots to me, holding up the photo again. “Do you recognize her?”

I don't look at the photo. I give him this wolfish glare, on the verge of ripping his head off.

“Blaire?” he says my name gravely, walking into me, lifting the photo so I can't avoid seeing it. “Do. You. Recognize. Her?”

My jaw ticks, as I glance at her. Arjana is wearing a green Oxford college uniform, her dark hair pinned back. She looks very content in this image, hugging what looks like a bunch of school folders. Her big brown eyes are innocent, and her smile is wide, pretty, and carefree.

My throat is so tight that I can barely breathe.

“If you don't answer me,” Charlie says under his breath, his eyes flittering between mine, “I can't sort this out.”

I swallow, standing my ground of silence. I won't do this to Maksim. I won't betray him.

Briefly shutting his eyes, Charlie sighs, then he turns to Robert. “She won't answer. Trust me on that.”

“Thing is”—Robert shrugs—“we can't take Blaire's silence as a yes or a no. Everyone is aware of her loyalty to Maksim. Everyone is aware that she won't talk without his permission. And I need to know who took Arjana from me. I need to know who has her, so I can get her back.”

So, Robert doesn't know Charlie took her.

I don't know what to do. In any normal situation, I'd end Robert and be done with the bother, but I'm not sure Maksim wants that to happen.

Charlie pulls out his phone and tells me to call Maksim, to ask for permission to speak to Robert. “Make it concise,” he says.

I refrain from taking the phone, clenching my fists. I can't speak to Maksim in front of these two. They could overhear.

“I'll pay you the half a million,” I blurt out to Robert. “I'm not saying I know that girl or that I don't. I'm just agreeing to pay the debt.”

Silence.

Robert is surveying me with curious eyes. I can feel them on my face.

“Why would you pay a debt that doesn't belong to you, girl?” Robert comes out of the house and prowls toward me.

“I won't have this looming over Maksim,” I say, wary that he's still coming at me.

One more step...if he takes one more step, I'll tear him to pieces. Then Charlie for lying his way out of knowing Arjana.

Before I can say or do anything, Charlie meets Robert chest to chest,

acting as a barrier between us both. “Not another step.”

Smelling war in the air, I pull out my gun and hold it beside my leg. I glance around the front garden, rapidly tucking my hair behind my ears so I can scan our situation. Charlie's flock of men are standing outside their cars. They're dressed in black combat outfits, hands clasping machine guns over their laps. Their attention is focused on us by the front doors, emotionless eyes studying the state of affairs.

It makes me feel a little better to know that we have backup if we need it. I focus back on Charlie and Robert.

“I need to speak to Blaire,” Robert says eventually, his eyes narrowed in on Charlie. “I need to look into her eyes and find the truth.”

“She won't say anything more than offering to pay the debt.”

Robert tries to walk up to me but Charlie sidesteps him, and then again.

“Leave her alone or we're gonna have a problem,” Charlie says. “That's not a warning.”

“I can't leave this alone.” Robert presses his hands together, like he's praying or something, “I want to see the girl's eyes when I ask if she knows Arjana.”

Charlie grabs his gun from the back of his jeans and slips back the top hammer. Robert reaches in his coat.

“I wouldn't,” Charlie says, gesturing out, “there are over thirty of my men and one of you.”

“That's because you warned me there would be consequences if I had my security detail!” Robert is red with fury, snapping, “I only came alone because I know you are a man of your word. You said there would be no trouble!”

My heart is in my throat. I'm not scared, just nervous. I don't know what to do. Yeah, I'm not Charlie's greatest fan, but I won't stand back and watch him get shot, not after he's clearly watching out for me.

Robert is visibly conflicted, a thoughtful expression on his face as he stares at Charlie. He's not sure whether to press Charlie or not. In all honesty, I'm not sure if I ever should, either. There's something formidable about him.

“You need to stop this,” Charlie says coolly. “Don't start something I'll have to finish. Just take the money and let this be over with.”

“I need to know who has Arjana,” Robert snaps, the veins in his neck contracting. “I can't just let this go. I had her for barely two hours before someone came into my house and stole her. Someone invaded my personal



space! I can't just let that go, Charlie."

"That's irrelevant to me," Charlie says, and he warns, "If you start a conflict with Maksim, I'll be on his side."

"What?!" Robert's face lights up with shock. "Why would you side with that scumbag? He's the reason you did a stretch in a Russian jail!"

My mouth drops open. Charlie went to jail because of Maksim? *What the fuck? Why?*

Charlie cocks his head. "Let's just say, I've got other interests when it comes to Maksim now."

Robert pulls his eyebrows together and looks down at me, then back at Charlie.

Charlie nods, and I sense he's grinning.

It all ends pretty quickly from there, which baffles me completely. Charlie says that Maksim will pay within the month. "Any longer, and I'll call you."

Robert lets out a steely breath, obviously pissed off with the outcome. "Looks like I have no other choice but to accept that offer then, do I?"

I hide my gun away before anyone sees it, wondering how the hell I'm going to tell Maksim about what's happened here today. He needs to know.

"Trust that I'll find out what happened to your girl," Charlie says, shoving his gun in the back of his jeans before fixing his t-shirt to cover it. "Anyone who was involved will suffer my wrath, as a favor to you for trusting I'll deal with the situation." Reaching back, he grabs one of my hands and entwines our fingers together. My stomach flips, mostly with anxiety from touching him, but also with a dollop of embarrassment that he's holding my hand in front of Robert. His grip is firm yet gentle, his hand completely covering mine.

"We'll be off now, Robert. Take care, and I'll speak to you very soon." Forcing me down the porch steps, Charlie leads me back to his car.

Robert says a curt goodbye from a distance, and then I hear the front doors close with a loud *crash*.

I cannot believe how easily people back down from Charlie. I don't know why. He isn't any different from all the other underworld elites. Or is he? Maybe Maksim didn't tell me the full story about him. Charlie does refuse to address Maksim in the proper manner and gets no reprove from anyone.

Charlie puts his lips on my ear, and whispers, "You did well, Blaire."

"Huh?" I say, screwing up my face.

Opening the car door for me, he puts me in the passenger seat and plugs in

my seatbelt. I briefly wonder why he isn't letting me drive us back to his house, but I don't really care.

“What do you mean, ‘I did well’?”

He smiles sneakily at me, and my eyes enlarge. Did he just use my loyalty to Maksim to his advantage?

He clicks my door shut, jogs around the car, and jumps into the driver's seat, firing up the engine. I vaguely see all his men piling into their cars, but I'm not really paying attention.

I turn to face Charlie, gripping the edge of my chair. “Did you just use me?”

“Not exactly,” Charlie says, a stupid, naive expression on his face. “I knew you wouldn't say anything about Maksim without his consent. Actually, I was banking on it.”

I'm stunned, and I know I look it. Yes, I'm glad he's taken care of Maksim's problem with the Albanians, but I can't say I'm happy about the way he used me. He could have told me what the plan was. I'm not an idiot. I would have followed suit.

Putting the car in gear, Charlie pulls down the driveway, between the arsenal of SUVs that follow us out.

“Why did you just pretend you've never seen that girl, Arjana, before?” I ask, striving to keep my cool so I can get the answers I need.

“Because I've got her”—he steers down a country lane—“and I won't be able to keep her if Robert knows that now, will I?”

“What the...You can't be...Are you kidding me?!” I yell, feeling sick. “Who the fuck are you, a kleptomaniac of females?”

He bursts out laughing. “I can't believe you know what that means.”

“This isn't funny, Charlie! Why the hell do you have her?” My eyes are blazing, and my gut is turning over with guilt because I can't help thinking he's mistreating her, too. “You're abusing her, aren't you?” I have to ask, then I add in anger, “You're all the fucking same!”

“Dios mío, calm down, Blaire.” He lifts a wary, defensive hand. “I'm not abusing her.”

“Then why do you have her?” I speak through clenched teeth.

“I sent her to Mexico because she said she didn't want to stay in Europe.” He shrugs with one shoulder, withdrawing his hand. “I've sorted her out with a place to live and enough money to keep her comfortable until she can work.”

I'm gawping, absolutely baffled. "But...why? Why would you do that?"  
He looks at me from the corner of his eye. "Because I can."

What a smug motherfucker. Yeah he's done a good deed but why does he have to season it in arrogance?

"Aren't you worried Robert will discover it was you who took her?" I question. "He only has to ask around, you know, anyone who is anyone was at that party."

Charlie laughs with mockery. "Everyone who was there that night has been briefed and know that if they say anything about my presence, they'll not only have the Albanians on their asses, but me."

I don't know what to say anymore, so I sit back in confliction.

"You all right?" He side-glances me.

I refuse to look at him, holding my tongue. He's the most confusing man I've ever met.

He steers onto the motorway where it's bumper to bumper traffic.

"Are you ignoring me?" He reaches over and cups my hand, giving me a squeeze.

I snatch away from him, staring out of the side window.

"Ohhh, don't sulk, Señorita." He gently pushes my hair back over my shoulder. "I know I used you, but it worked in our favor. And as for the girl, I've no desire for her. I just wanted to help her."

I don't utter a word. In silence, I fester in my own thoughts.

"Okay then," he says softly, flicking on the radio. "Silence it is."

I'm quiet throughout the entire journey back to his house, which is three fucking hours long given the traffic.

Lately, it feels like someone *up there* really hates me.

# 15

We pull up on Charlie's driveway at just shy of six in the evening. I'm thirsty, and hungry as I haven't eaten for over six hours. I'm still simmering over the fact that Charlie used me to his advantage, too. But, most of all, I want to get the fuck away from him for a while before I explode. I can't take how many different personalities he has.

I step out of the car, slam my door shut with noticeable anger, and head straight for the house.

“Blaire!” Charlie calls out, sighing. “C'mon, Dios mío, you can't really be that mad at me?” He jogs up beside me and stops in front of me, so I can't go inside the house without forcefully moving him. “If Robert found out Maksim definitely had a hand in fucking that girl, I cannot say what might've happened. It's better this way.”

I cross my arms, looking at his chest, my aggravation like a living thing in the air between us.

“I have to say, I never imagined you'd sulk.” Charlie hooks a finger under my chin, forcing our eyes to line up. His are glowing with fond amusement, I guess because he feels like he's breaking me down and revealing my layers.

“S'all right, though.” He smirks at me. “I think it's kinda cute.”

*CUTE!*

“I need a car,” I say in a blank manner, “and a phone so I can call Maksim to arrange a plane.”

Dropping his hand to his side, he glowers at me. I knew that would get him.

“Why?” he asks.

I tell him that I need to go to the Cayman Islands. “As soon as possible.”

“Huh?” He runs a hand through his black hair, frowning. “Why?”

“All my money is in an offshore account there”—I tighten my arms over my chest—“and the only way to access it is to take it out in person.”

He still looks confused, though he's trying to save face, giving me this awkward smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes. “You don't need any money.”

Maksim can sort his debt.”

I shake my head. “He’ll have to go to his boss for that much money, who will want to know what’s going on.”

A pulse near Charlie’s temple starts throbbing. “Then he’ll have to explain.”

“Maksim won’t do that.” My voice comes out deceptively smooth. “His boss will be fuming that he almost started a war with the Albanians over a girl. He won’t risk that.” Though I have more to say, I stop talking, watching Charlie’s cool facade slowly dissolve.

“Then I guess he’ll have to reap Tatiana’s wrath.”

He knows Tatiana?

I shake my head once. “I won’t let Maksim suffer her wrath.”

“Why not?” He sounds like he’s gradually losing it, his eyes a little wider. “It’s not your job to protect him from his hobby of raping girls. Maybe he deserves a comeuppance.”

I cock my head. “It is my job to protect him, actually.”

Charlie minces his teeth together. “How do you have that much money? And how the fuck do you have access to more money than Maksim does?”

“That’s none of your business.”

As if I’d tell him Tatiana restricted Maksim’s finances for five years due to his overspending? Any money that goes through him goes straight to her.

Charlie raises his eyebrows like he usually does to summon an answer, but I say nothing. I don’t have to give him the ins and outs of my life. The deal he made with Maksim was for my body, nothing else.

“Why do you bow to Maksim when you’ve got money, physical, intellectual skills, and beauty? Shouldn’t it be the other way around?”

“I don’t expect you or anyone else to understand me, Charlie,” I say. “Are you going to lend me your car or what? I need to go as soon as possible, as I just said.”

“You”—he points at my feet, his eyes flashing with clear loss of control—“are to be here with me for three months. I shouldn’t even be letting you come on jobs with me, let alone fly to another fucking country!”

“Oh, don’t even go there,” I say with bold conceit. “We both know you tricked me into believing you were doing me a favor by letting me come today, so you can stop taking the moral high ground.”

“Moral high…” he starts to say, but doesn’t finish. He just glares at me, his nostrils flaring.

“Calm down, Charlie Decena, before you have a stroke.” I smirk at him. It's quite entertaining seeing him on the verge of boiling over for once. “Don't worry, while I'm gone you won't be alone. I'll get you a nice girl to keep you company for a few days. A nice Russian girl who won't mind being sodomized.” I sound bitter as I say that, but I am.

It seems I've hit a nerve because Charlie shuts his mouth, the muscles under his jaw contracting.

We're quiet for a few seconds, staring at each other, the atmosphere thick with tension. I'm not going to break the silence. He can. It's his fault.

“I'm not doing this with you, Blaire.” His tone comes out ice cold. “If it's an apology you want for last night, then fine. I'm sorry. If I hurt you, I never meant to. I told you this morning that I didn't want to hurt you.”

“You could've fooled me with your pathetic attempt at scaring me.”

He scowls at me. “Attempt at scaring you?”

“Yeah”—I step up to him—“you know, when you agreed that you were going to do terrible things to me.” I've no idea where my daring attitude has come from, but I'm not backing down.

“I said that to put you in your place.”

“And drugging me? Was that okay 'because you could'?” I mockingly repeat what he said about his reasons for saving Arjana.

“No, of course it wasn't,” he says through clenched teeth. It's like he's sucking on a lemon. Men like him don't apologize, but I will admit it's good to hear.

“I realize now I went too far with you, all right?” He lifts both his hands in a shrug. “What else can I say, hmm? You tell me and I'll say it.”

“There's nothing for you to say.” My voice comes out in a whisper, as I stare down at the ground.

“Well,” he whispers back at me, dropping his hands to his sides, and I peer up at him, “if it's any consolation, I'm not normally so soft with girls.” He looks very honest saying this, like it matters. “You pulled a gun on me, and I let you get away with it. Believe me, Señorita, I've killed others for less.”

I scoff. Is that his silver lining?

“As for The Cayman Islands,” he narrows a firm finger at me, “you can forget that. I'll lend you the money so you can pay Robert. I'll pay him within the month. You can give it back to me when your time here is up.”

“You're just going to lend me half a million pounds?” I say with a gawp, my voice higher than it's ever been. “Just like that?”

“Yeah.” He nods, his eyes glittering with some strange emotion. “I want us to get along. I don't want you loathing me for three months.”

I twist up my face. “Why do you care if I like you or not?”

He shrugs. “I dunno. I just do.”

The reality of the situation really starts to sink in. “You're not going to tire of me, are you?”

He doesn't answer me right away, just looks at me with...I don't know. I've never seen that expression on his face.

“Probably not, no,” he says eventually, his tone softer now. “How could I?”

This is just fucking great. I want to scream.

“In spite of how you feel about me right now,” he says, “you're better off with me than with Maksim. I wouldn't dare let you take a bullet for me.”

“That's good then, because I wouldn't.”

He rolls his eyes. “I'm not gonna keep arguing with you, Blaire. So why don't you lose that stinking, redhead attitude for one damn night, and let's go have something to eat and drink. We can overlook all this bullshit.”

I give him my hardest stare yet, knowing my eyes are balls of blue fire. As if I'm just going to forget about all of what's happened since he bought me from Maksim?

“Will you give me a break?” He waves out a hand in frustration. “I'm trying to level with you here.”

I don't believe him. He's playing me. I know it. He has to be. He's being nice to get me on his side. It's classic emotional bonding. Maksim used it on me—I know because I've researched it.

Charlie sighs, then steps up to me. I instinctively step back, holding out my hands to defend myself. I can't tell what he's thinking. He doesn't have that dark alluring thing going on, but I just can't tell what he's thinking.

“I'm not gonna hurt you.” Taking one of my hands in his, he strokes over my knuckles with his thumb, turning my bones to jelly. “Just kiss you.”

Heat spreads across my cheeks. I look down and pull my hand free, holding it to my chest.

“Blaire—”

“We should go have that dinner you're so hungry for,” I say, and I don't hang around for his kiss. I walk past him, half expecting him to stop me and force his tongue down my throat.

He doesn't. He lets me leave.

He is seriously doing my head in. One minute he's arrogant and dominating, then twisted and sexually infringing, and then he's like this.

I'm still not sure of his agenda with me. I've never met a man like him before. I can't figure him out. I'm not even sure if I hate him or if I'm taking a liking to him. I fancy him for sure, but I just don't know.

I don't know anything anymore.

---

In the entrance hall of Charlie's big house, I try two sets of doors before I find the kitchen, which is all rough sandstone floors and high ceilings with crisscrossing dark wooden beams. The walls are an uneven pallid yellow.

Hiding my hands in the sleeves of my jacket, I wander in. It smells like lemon zest. When I find two readymade chicken salads in the American style fridge, I notice why. Grabbing one out, I pick at the leaves with my fingers. It's seasoned in lemon juice. On the side there's a bowl of grated lemon zest.

I think Charlie has a thing for cooking. I haven't seen a housekeeper or a cook here, so I'm assuming he made this.

I pull open a few drawers in the alcove cooking area, searching for some cutlery, then I take my salad over to the dining table. It seats ten, resting in front of French style doors that are set between a collection of windows on either side. The garden is enormous with perfectly cut grass that seems to go on for miles. I hover above my chair to peer out the windows. A patio area with a bistro set, then a large swimming pool that's sparkling under the evening's sun. I can see myself training out there in the garden. It's big enough to get lost in.

Surrounding the garden, far in the horizon, tall, thick trees hide the house, the majority of them blooming in white flowers.

I'm an outdoorsy person, so I'm glad Charlie has ample space.

Lowering onto my chair, I fork the salad. It's fresh, crunchy and sour with that lemon juice. It's not an overpowering flavor. It works well with the oily, grated garlic.

A faint clanging noise makes me jump. I glance about on alert, hoping Charlie doesn't join me for dinner. I'm not sure I'll be able to stomach the food with him watching me. It's been such an intense day already.

There's no one in here but me, I see, scanning every corner.

I'm too anxious to sit back and enjoy how yummy the salad is, so it doesn't



take me long to polish it off.

I wash up my bowl and cutlery in the sink before drying them, leaving the kitchen as I found it. Then I sneak upstairs to my room, kicking off my boots on the way in, and shut the door.

I'm almost sure Charlie is going to come and take me again, so I crawl into bed fully clothed, leaving the lights on for when it gets dark. I'm not scared—or I don't think I'm scared—just a little anxious. I don't understand how he makes me feel.

I force myself not to think about any of that. I don't want to think about being intimate with Charlie, and I don't want to think about today. I just want to switch off.

After a while of peace and quiet, listening to the birds chirping outside the window, I start to relax, counting the rose moldings on the ceiling so I can put myself to sleep. I'd usually wear headphones so I can learn in my sleep, the voice of a stranger teaching my subconscious, but I don't have any headphones here. I quickly find out it's hard to nod-off without them.

Rolling onto my side, I give in and reflect on today, and only today, hoping the fact that it's over can put me out of my misery. It's been okay, really, which surprises me given how our time together began yesterday. I think I might be all right here for three months, if Charlie really is sorry, and we stick to business as usual.

Somehow, I don't think that's going to happen. Charlie might have been kind enough to offer me an apology but he's still a man. A powerful, needy man. I'm still here for a reason.

“Two months, three weeks, and six days,” I tell myself, closing my eyes.

# 16

The next day welcomes rain.

I'm snug in bed, warm and sleepy, staring out the window for over an hour before I strip out of my clothes to take a shower. I'm surprised to find there's a white body towel hanging on the heating rack by the frosted window, and things other than soap. My bra is gone from the floor, too. Charlie must have stocked the bathroom while I slept. I'm not sure how I feel about that. How long was he in here? And how the hell didn't I hear him? I'm trained to be aware of my surroundings, even in an unconscious state of sleep.

I shower under warm water this time, washing with some kind of soft body cream rather than soap, though I don't wash my hair. I curl it around my fist and knot it up without a hair-tie.

I feel a bit better today. I'm not as anxious. I slept well and woke peacefully, just like I usually do at home.

In the towel, dripping in water, I brush my teeth and wander into the bedroom, noticing for the first time a stack of books under the window. The titles range from Shakespeare's collection to Oscar Wild's "The Picture of Dorian Gray", amongst other reads. I've got these books at home.

That's odd.

Charlie hasn't left out any clean clothes like he did yesterday, so I pull open the armoire doors. My clothes are here. My sports trousers and sweaters hanging up, a few pairs of my trainers lined up on the bottom shelf. Even my combat outfit is here.

Is this why he didn't join me for dinner last night? Did he leave to go get my things?

My underwear isn't here, I see, rustling through the drawers with one hand, holding the towel to my body with my other. There's a collection of lace bras, thongs, and some other risqué garments that I've seen women wear before. Risqué garments that I'll not be wearing, that's for sure.

I smile to myself nonetheless of the underwear. Charlie said he'd get my things for me and he has. I'm assuming those books are mine. I still can't

stomach the fact that I didn't hear him enter my room last night. However, I am grateful to have some of my things.

Ignoring the chosen underwear, I dress in my combat gear and trainers, feeling like myself again. I find jeans so uncomfortable. I can't fight properly in them. They restrict my movements. Yes, my sports trousers are tight too, but they're made of stretchy material.

Exiting the bedroom, I wander down the landing, the sweeping staircase, and into the kitchen. Charlie isn't here. It's so quiet, except for the rain spitting wildly against the windows.

I wonder where he is.

Pulling open the back doors, I go outside in the rain, shivering as it spits across my face.

The sky is a fortress of angry gray, breaking with heavy black clouds. The back garden is just as breathtaking as I remember, flourishing in lush green grass. I jog down the patio steps, around the titanic swimming pool, and to the end of the garden until I'm under the trees. The cold air chills my lungs, and my now damp clothes cling to my skin, but there is nothing like testing yourself in bad temperatures.

When my muscles feel loose and relaxed, I stop by a flowering rosebush. The petals are so red, like blood, each one more perfect than the next, sheathed in thorns.

I step out of my trainers, wiggling my toes in the soggy grass, and then I train with meditating Tai Chi, punching and kicking in slow motion, soaking up the way the earth feels right now. My feet become sodden and muddy but I don't mind. I love this feeling of being free.

The memory of Charlie taking me flows in and out of my thoughts, as does his apology and the way my body desires him when he touches and kisses me. It's like my subconscious is sorting the conflict for me, rather than me having to sit down and seriously mull over how he makes me feel.

This is why I delight in meditating. It's so peaceful.

With my hair tied back in a slack bun, the rain falls freely over my pale, freckly face, drenching through my clothes. It's refreshing.

I can sense eyes watching me from the house. I suspect it's Charlie. I don't stop my meditation. I go at it for two hours, lashing out lengthy, focused kicks and breathing steadily but softly.

When the rain dies down, I pick up my trainers and jog back across the garden, and inside the house. I'm dripping water everywhere but the kitchen

has stone flooring, so I don't worry too much.

Dropping my trainers by the dining table, I go into the kitchen area. The coffee machine is steaming. I pour myself a cup, lift it to my nose, and breathe in with contentment. The smell of coffee in the morning is like home to me, the bitterness of real Columbian beans.

Roaming back across the kitchen, I stand by the back doors and hold the cup to my chest, taking in the last of the gray morning.

“Morning, Señorita.”

I flinch at the sound of Charlie's raspy voice. My stomach whirls with anxiety. It's a new kind of anxiety now. Worry yes, but also because I know I fancy him. It's so strange but I can feel it in the way my body responds to his presence. Since he turned me on, I seem to notice everything he makes me feel with extra effect.

He wanders over and stops behind me, his large body warming my back. He smells like he's fresh out of the shower, a mixture of male musk and clean body wash. My eyes flicker up his reflection in the French doors. He's wearing jeans and a gray round-neck t-shirt with his hair pulled back.

“Do you do that every day?” he asks softly, as we make eye contact.

So, he was watching me, probably like he is now, staring over my head at my reflection like he's hypnotized on something, and he's smiling at me. It's his unholy, alluring smile.

Wordless, I nod to answer his question and take a sip of my coffee, breaking eye contact. My heart is going crazy. Every time I see him it's like the first.

“You look beautiful when training.” He leans closer and whispers in my ear, “So focused.”

Little hairs on the back of my neck prick. There's something in his voice. Something fervent.

Reaching around my waist from behind, he presses a large hand onto my stomach and forces me back against his front, forcing me to emit a rough breath. He's hard in his jeans, pushing into my spine.

My toes curl against the cold stone floors.

“Are you going to fuck me in the ass again, Charlie?” I ask blankly, peering up at his reflection. I have to ask. I need to know so I can mentally prepare to lose my mind.

He stiffens behind me, with his hand like a rock on my stomach. He's not breathing, either.

Somehow, I've gotten to him. He's not the type of man to stop in his pursuits, but he has today.

*How have I gotten to him?*

I wish I knew so I could use it to my advantage.

Charlie takes my coffee cup and puts it down on a nearby side table. Then he grips my hips and makes me turn into him, my eyes level with his chest. I don't know what to say or do, so I just stare at his chest, filtering these vibes coming off him in electric waves.

Lifting my chin with a single finger, he orders me to look up at him, then he grips my hip again. "I want you," he says sensitively, glancing all over my features, promise and restraint in his expression. "You know I do."

I drop my eyes to the floor between us, everything in my body tightening with anxiety. I reluctantly want him too when he's touching me. It's so fucked up, and it makes me sick. I should hate him. Just because he's handsome it doesn't make what he's doing to me okay.

We're silent for a while. He's watching me. I can feel it. I can feel every-fucking-thing now.

"Stop making me feel guilty, Blaire," he says, his voice now void of emotion. "You're my plaything, nothing more."

"I'm not making you feel—"

A hand fists the back of my hair, causing me to yelp, and Charlie pushes me down to my knees. "Suck my cock, and I won't fuck you."

My heart leaps into my throat.

It's an ultimatum, and one that I'm going to take if it prevents him from having my ass. But I can't admit I'm happy. He started to show kindness yesterday. We found our mutual ground. He apologized.

Maybe he's regretting his apology.

I don't know why, but that hurts, and I feel like such a fool for trying to make myself believe him.

Shutting off, I don't even think. I let my thoughts escape me.

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I fumble to unzip Charlie's jeans, careful not to make a sound when opening his belt. The sound of a belt reminds me of Maksim, and I can't think of him right now.

I pull down his black boxer briefs in time with lifting up his shirt. His

length juts free, long, thick, and hard, swollen with veins. A mixture of sensations trickle through me. He's so robust and hairy all over. His pubic hair meets with a thin line of black dusty hair below his navel. His stomach is a work of art, not like those athletic men who have ironing board stomachs. Charlie is buff, made of raw chiseled abs.

Something in me clenches and warm liquid surges through me, gathering between my legs. I recognize it as arousal now, but I don't know what the fuck it's all about. He isn't even teasing me down there.

I glance up at him, at the taut look of desire on his face. He's waiting.

Not using my hands—my master taught me to suck his cock with no hands—I shut my eyes and run my tongue down the length of Charlie's shaft, swallowing a few inches of him in my mouth. He tastes like body wash, but he smells all manly and musky, his skin soft yet broad with solid veins. I find it all so bizarrely appealing that my sex throbs, making me conscious of how tight my trousers are.

I try to ignore the desire thriving inside me, focusing on satisfying Charlie, but it's so hard. I've never felt this power of desire for a man before.

I pull back, then I take another few inches of Charlie, wrapping my lips completely around him, causing my cheeks to ache because he's so thick. He moans with zeal, his grip in my hair tightening. It makes my scalp tear, though I try not to tense up too much so I don't end up biting him or something. I draw back once more, and then I gulp him right down this time, his crown hitting the back of my throat.

“Fuck,” he emits a curse, gasping out, and the sensations in me are no longer trickling. They're erupting, burning all over my body. I'm not completely sure, but I think I like this, having Charlie under my spell for once.

I fold my hands behind my back, curl my lips against my teeth, and suck back and forth, settling in to a leveled, satisfying rhythm, his cock smoothly gliding against my lips because it's inundated in my saliva.

Charlie mutters another violent curse under his breath. I can't resist peering up at him. Our eyes meet. His are heavy, a dark shade of blue because his pupils are expanding. He's so fucking gorgeous when intoxicated, lips slightly parted to accommodate faster breaths.

He cups my cheek with his free hand and strokes under my eye, his other hand still in my hair. He's back to being soft with me. I bask in his tenderness, sighing as I mouth-fuck him.

Another deep suck, then his cock throbs and pre-cum melts in my mouth. He's salty, on the verge of reaching his summit. I swallow before pushing him to the apex of my throat, blocking my air passage, but then he slips down my throat opening, causing me to gag. My lips now against his pubic hair, Charlie's entire body trembles with lust fueled anger and want. I choke with watery eyes and pull back, saliva coating my chin, but he doesn't seem to like that. Holding my cheek in one hand and my hair in his other, he starts fucking my throat, rippling his hips back and forth, making me retch over and over. He's losing control. I can feel it in him.

Using my hands, I press against his hips because I cannot breathe. I gasp for air in a dizzy state, then he's right inside my throat again, swelling in my air passage.

“You're so...” he groans with his face tight, teeth clenched. “I'm not sure I'll ever be able to give you back to—Fuck!” He spasms, his cock pulsing warm, thick liquid down my throat.

My eyes are watering like crazy, tears streaming down my face. My throat is on fire, but I swallow every inch of his orgasm, heaving at times. He's overflowing.

When he's done, panting through his nose, I fall back on my ass and try to catch a breath but he doesn't give me a chance to sort myself out. Making me yelp again, he yanks me up by my arms and pushes me down on the dining table, face up. I grab onto the edges, looking up at him, anxious.

I don't know where he is in his mind, but he looks like he's losing it.

He hooks his fingers into the waist of my trousers and pulls them down my legs, tugging in places because they're damp and sticking to my skin. I'm not wearing any underwear. I feel exposed in the daylight.

“Charlie”—I lick my lips, squeezing my legs together—“what-what are you doing?”

“I'm gonna make you cum so fucking hard. That's what I'm doing.” He tugs off my trousers, then runs his large, rough hands up my legs, up the insides of my thighs to wrench me open.

I quiver under him, a sharp pain shooting through my thighs because I'm open so wide.

“Don't worry. I'm not gonna fuck you, and I'm not gonna hurt you.” Now, he sounds like he's here, but I'm still panicking, digging my nails into the table, unsure of what to do.

He presses delicate yet hungry kisses up the insides of my legs after his

hands. I moan against each peck, my body on fire, and my head is flooding with this overwhelming dizzy feeling.

I know he's going to kiss me down there again, and I'm not sure I want to stop him.

I let my head drop back on the table and grab my face.

He nibbles up each side of my groin with his teeth, and I writhe, squirming, unable to deal.

I can't do this. I'm too anxious.

“Charlie, please, don't do this to me,” I beg him. For the first time, I actually ask him to stop. I can't help it. I'm not sure I like feeling at his mercy.

He freezes, a bit out of breath.

“You want me to stop?” he rasps out.

This is so embarrassing. Of course I don't want him to stop. I want him to make me feel good again, but I don't at the same time.

I cover my eyes with one arm and nod. This is my control. Since his apology, he seems to be giving me a semblance of control. Or, I thought he was before he made me suck his cock and gave a warning for making him feel guilty.

Oh, I don't fucking know. I'm so confused.

“Blair, look at me,” he demands, though his voice is soft. Long fingers close around my wrist, and Charlie gently moves my arm off of my face.

I peer down at him, finding his blue eyes are dilated. He looks so hot. Why can't I just let go and be with him like this? Why can't I shut off mentally?

“Do you want me to stop?” He raises his eyebrows at me, stroking the inside of my wrist with his thumb.

I nod again, trying to close my legs but I can't because he's between them.

Our gaze united, he's not sure what to do. I imagine his instincts are telling him to just do whatever the fuck he likes, but I think he's working on this whole mutual respect thing. He did tell me that if I want him to stop, all I should do is say so.

This is his chance to prove I can trust him.

I hope he doesn't fail.

When he steps back, scoops my trousers up from the floor and puts my feet into the legs, I am a little gutted. I like the way he turns me on and makes me cum, but at the same time, I just don't want him doing that to me again. I'm the architect of my own confusion, I know, but I'm not sure what *this* is between us.



I pull up my trousers and stand on jelly-like legs, drawing into my shoulders. My hair is a static mess, flowing around my shoulders and waist. Must be an endorphin reaction.

Charlie is frowning down at me. He doesn't know what to make of this either.

“Do you have a gym where I can work out?” I ask, hugging myself.

His frown deepens. “You want to work out again?”

I nod. I feel so vulnerable knowing I just sucked his cock, and he's just seen me splayed out in front of him here on the dining table. He said I was pretty down there. That makes me blush, and I never blush.

“Are you all right?” he whispers.

I nod again, though I'm not all right. He's fucking with my head.

After a while of staring me down, Charlie nods left and heads out of the kitchen, his masculine back flexing under his t-shirt.

Though my feet are dirty, I slip into my trainers and go after him.

In silence, we walk down a long hallway just off the entrance hall. At the end, there is a set of steel double doors. Charlie pushes them open and pale blue, double height walls fill my gaze. It's not just a gym. It's a sports arena fully loaded with a boxing ring in the center, surrounded by blue exercise mats. A collection of treadmills and other exercise equipment stretch across the left wall, with chin up bars and boxing bags. The right wall boasts rock climbing.

“Wow,” I whisper under my breath, in my element.

“Wait here,” Charlie says, pointing down. “I'll be five minutes.” He exits the way we came, so I do as I'm told.

Still hugging myself, I glance up at the ceiling. Monkey climbing bars. How the hell can anyone get up there? I scan the space and find in each corner of the gym there are ladders.

No wonder Charlie is so fit.

“Here,” he says softly from behind.

Turning around, I find he's passing me a bottle of water. He's changed out of his jeans into gray joggers and trainers.

I take the bottle of water from him, twist off the cap, and drink a mouthful. It's so cold that my brain aches for a moment.

“I'll make you a deal,” Charlie says, nodding like it's already set in stone. “You and me”—he gestures between us with a large, steady hand—“we'll have a friendly fight, and if you can put me on my ass in less than fifteen

minutes, I won't touch you ever again. Not unless you ask me to, or want me to.”

I stare vacantly at him. That's why he's changed.

“But, if I win,” he continues, his voice full of promise, “you'll let me make you cum right here and whenever I want to, and you'll enjoy it.”

Oh, I fucking like this.

Putting the cap back on the bottle, I shrug and nod at once. This could be fun. I've wanted to kick his ass for weeks now.

“You promise not to touch me ever again once I put you on your ass?” I raise my eyebrows. “You swear?” I don't know why I'm trusting his word but something inside me is convinced Charlie wouldn't make a misleading deal. He's too cool for that.

Charlie leans down and presses his lips to mine like it's the last time. I lose my breath, my blood warming with fire.

“If...” he elongates, whispering against my mouth, “if you put me on my ass.”

I have no idea what comes over me but I arch into Charlie and kiss him back. I grip his t-shirt with my nails and let out a girlish, moany sigh, thrilling in this humid rush of sensations that always come over me when we kiss.

“Don't do that,” he warns, his tone taking a dark edge.

I step back, breaking away from the kiss, my head a little faint. “Do what?”

“Kiss me like that and whine as if you're enjoying it when we have this deal on the table.”

Crossing my arms, I flick up my eyebrows. “You're worried I'm going to win?”

He takes in a long, steely breath, his blue gaze flickering all over my face. “A little, but this is why I like you.” He steps closer to me and I step back, again and again. “You're different from any girl I've met before. Stronger, smarter, ominously alluring, and I like your nasty attitude.” Raising a hand, he strokes down a length of my dark red hair. “Girls like you don't come around often.” He keeps playing with my hair as if fixated, still walking into me. “I have to admit, I'm having a hard time even thinking about giving you back to Maksim.”

My brain switches from hot and lusty to robotic, and my expression goes flat.

“I don't want to talk about Maksim.” I blink down, searching for the

words, then back up at Charlie. “I know you said you plan on knowing me inside out, but talking about Maksim, it bothers me.”

“All right,” he says much to my utter surprise, lifting his hands in defense. “No hay problema.” *No problem.*

He's doing it. He's working on our mutual respect. Why is that making me like him a little more?

He tugs out his hair tie and combs his hair back with one hand, the strands sleek and shiny under the down-lighters. “Here,” he says, “tie your hair back.”

Putting down the bottle of water, I take the tie from him gratefully. I've needed a hair tie all morning.

I walk past him, putting up my hair in a bun, then I slip under the ropes and into the ring. This is going to be epic. I'll put him on his ass in five minutes, let alone fifteen, and it's that much sweeter knowing I'm going to win the rights to my body.

“What are the rules?” I say softly.

In one swift motion, he grabs the back of his t-shirt and whips it off, dropping it to the floor. My eyes are having a hard time adjusting because I just don't know which part of his body I should focus on. He's so fit it's actually stupid.

“I won't punch you,” he says. He bows under the ropes and steps into the ring, every muscle in his body contracting. “Anything else, I can't be held responsible for.” He winks at me.

I feel my cheeks warm up, and I hope to god he doesn't notice.

“Okay.” I step back, rolling my shoulders. “Let's do this.”

“Fifteen minutes,” he warns, pointing at me. “After that, I'll have you cumming in my mouth.”

Charlie tries to slap my face, but I catch his wrist and boot him in the stomach with a loud, “*Aargh!*” making him groan.

“Jesucristo!” He folds over, winded.

I don't even think about my next move. I grab behind his left knee and Karate chop him in the throat with my other hand, slamming him back on his ass. He's so heavy that it takes all my lower body strength to put him down, but I do. He lands with a profound thud. I bolt forward to escape him, kneading out my hand because it hurts. It's like he's made from bricks rather than muscle.

Safely in the corner of the ring, I face him, my chest heavy with

adrenaline. He's lying on his back with his knees pulled up, and he looks a little stunned, blinking up at the ceiling.

Well that's a sight for sore eyes, Charlie bested.

"I reckon that's thirty seconds," I say, the smuggest smirk plastered across my face.

He chuckles under his breath, shaking his head. "You're fucking quick."

I wander across the ring and crouch down to him, leaning on my knees with my elbows. He lets his head roll to the side, catching us in a moment. Our eyes flicker between each other's, and I'm surprised to find he doesn't look bested anymore. He looks glad as he smiles at me.

"I hope your ego isn't too bruised," I say, my goal being to rile him because I want to go again, though longer this time if he can handle it. "I hear it hurts getting beaten by a girl."

He isn't bothered by my arrogance. He asks in a low, raspy voice, "Didn't you want to stretch that out to show me how good you are?"

"You already know how good I am." I don't look away from him as I say that. "My objective in a fight is to win, not to pussy foot around."

He hums in agreement, glancing down at my mouth, then back up at my eyes. "Where'd you learn to fight?"

"Somewhere you didn't." I stare down the length of his tall, muscular frame, at the defined muscles in his stomach. "Do you want to go again? Whoa!" I squeal as Charlie grabs my legs and yanks them out from under me, dropping me to the bouncy surface. He's on top of me, seizing my wild, combatant hands in both of his.

"You're like a feral little cat," he says while laughing, struggling to get me under control.

Growling and straining, I kick the ring surface, giving myself the strength I need to turn us over. He's under me now, so I jump to my feet, my thigh muscles burning from the abrupt movement.

Charlie catches me. I didn't even notice him getting up. He wraps his big arms around me from behind, squeezing me against his powerful chest.

I tighten my fists, readying to elbow back, but he whispers in my ear, "You win. Stop. You win."

I swallow down a mouthful of air. His cock is hard in his joggers, pressing into my back. My stomach rolls with liquid desire, the memory of having him in my mouth taking over all thoughts. Why do I find it so hot when he dominates me?

“And...and you won't...” I start to say, but I can't concentrate on my vocabulary. I wish he didn't affect me on this level.

“And I won't, what?” he says softly.

“You won't”—I swallow a second time, gripping his hand over my chest —“touch me like that anymore?”

He doesn't say or do anything for a moment, just holds me, closing his fingers over my grip on his hand. I relax against his body, his touch melting my will.

“Not if you don't want me to,” he says on my neck, his hot lips making me squirm in his grasp.

“No,” I say, though I hardly sound convincing. My voice comes out too girlish and husky. “I-I don't want you to.”

Silence. It's not awkward silence. It's...I don't know. I'm not sure if it's the adrenaline or desire running through my veins, but I have a sudden urge to kiss him. How fucked up is that?

“You gave me your word,” I say, peering up at him from over my shoulder, finding his expression is tight with control. His lips aren't far away. I stare at his mouth.

“Yeah, I did.” Charlie lets me go then, and jumps out of the boxing ring. His motions are fluent and gracefully masculine. He pivots to me, his black hair dripping around his handsome face, framing those stark blue eyes. “You can trust that I'll keep it,” he says, and while I'm weak in my pose, we look at each other.

The silence becomes a living thing with unspoken words and tension—*you can trust me on that*.

I feel a little lightheaded, falling under his spell, unable to look away from him. He's the one to break the moment. Reaching down, he scoops up his t-shirt from the floor and flings it over his shoulder, nodding at me. Then he turns and exits the gym.

I lean back against the ropes, trying to gather my wits, my chest rising and falling with heaviness.

I'm not too sure how I feel right now. That fight just changed the dynamics of our situation.

# 17

Night falls while I'm meditating outside in the cold, the dark sky glowing silver with a full moon.

I've been meditating since besting Charlie earlier today because my thoughts have been whirling over what the next few months are going to be like. Now I know, or assume, he won't touch me in a sexual manner, I can't help but wonder.

Will he start beating me now? Is that how he plans on getting his kicks? Because I can't imagine he'd make a deal like this without a backup plan to ensure his appetite is satisfied. I'm not sure, so I let the energy that is my thoughts course in and out of me with each breath I inhale and exhale, and every slow movement I execute. I go at it for hours, until my stomach howls for food. I haven't eaten all day. I didn't even have breakfast, which isn't like me. Breakfast is the most important meal to me. To anyone, really.

Gathering my trainers in my arms, I patter barefoot up to my room where I take a quick shower, washing away the saltiness on my skin. I dress in my usual black sports trousers and a black long-sleeved sweater, still appreciative that Charlie went and got my clothes for me. They make me feel like me and not some cheap whore he bartered.

Tying my damp hair back with the tie Charlie gave me, I head downstairs to the kitchen.

"Evening, Blaire," he says from the cooking space, wearing only a pair of gray joggers, his ink black hair curling loosely around that gorgeous face.

I stop on the threshold, startled that he's here. Then I carry on toward the table, ignoring my intentions for the fridge. I'll fix myself something to eat when he's gone.

"Hi, Charlie," I say. My voice comes out softer than I was trying for. It's because I'm looking at him from the corner of my eye, at his tan, powerful body, sprinkles of black hair across his chest and under his navel. He's one of the most exquisite men I've ever seen. I can't deny it.

"You must be starving," he says, and grabbing a plate out of the oven with

a kitchen towel, he proffers it to me.

He's cooked dinner?

I nod and shrug at once, slipping behind the dining table, my cheeks a little hot. There's a jug of water in the middle of the table and two glasses. I fill a glass, glad the water is at room temperature. It's easy to guzzle down and quench my thirst.

"You all right?" Charlie says. He rounds the kitchen and puts a plate down of chicken, potatoes, and green vegetables in front of me. Exactly what I said I eat at home. "You look a little flushed."

"I've just had a shower," I say softly, putting down the glass of water.

"Hmm," he hums, his eyes following my tongue as I lick my lips dry. "Do you mind if I eat with you?"

I raise my eyebrows, and it seems to pull his attention from my lips to my eyes.

"Or do you want to eat alone?"

Extending a hand, I urge him to sit across from me. I don't mind having dinner with him, I suppose. There isn't anyone else to talk to. At home if I got lonely, I'd give James a call. Here, there's only Charlie to speak to because I don't have my phone.

He smiles down at me before sauntering back across the kitchen. I feel warmed from that smile. He grabs another plate from the oven and comes back to the table. He's not wearing any shoes, and I can't help noticing that even his feet are masculine.

"Do you realize you've been meditating all day?" he says, passing me some cutlery over the table.

"How do you know that?"

"I was watching you." He gestures with the cutlery.

I take the knife and fork from him in a state of dismay, barely registering the way he runs his thumb over my fingers. Is he constantly watching me?

"You need to be careful you don't burn yourself out." He sits opposite, in my line of vision. "Especially if you don't eat properly."

"There's nothing else to do here but train."

Resting his elbows on the table, he cups his square chin. "Well, what would you normally do to fill your days? Bar serving Maksim," he adds with bitterness.

My stomach is in knots. It's the way he's looking at me, utterly focused on my face, curiosity and ardor glittering in his eyes.

“I guess I'd train in my gym at home.” I cut off a piece of chicken. It's tender and juicy. I think he's cooked it in some kind of butter.

“Yeah, I saw that you've got a gym in your apartment. You train with Wing Chun, don't you?”

“You've been in my apartment?” I almost spit out my food, so I cover my mouth with an open palm. That's a personal thing for him to do, snoop through my home.

“Yeah,” he says candidly. “I got your things for you, remember? I brought some of your books too, so you could read when in your room here.”

“Oh.” I blink at him, that feeling of appreciation all too real. He didn't have to fetch my things. “How do you know what style of fighting I do?”

“You've got wooden dummies, balancing tackle...” A long list of my gym equipment rolls off his tongue in that Latin accent. “You're a bonita controlled fighter.” He shrugs. “Call it a hunch.”

I realize I've just been staring at him, at his lush mouth, listening to him waffle on about my equipment, so I drop my gaze to focus on my food.

What made him go upstairs in my apartment? It's an open balcony top and anyone at the front door can see that it's a gym up there. Also, I'm sure I left my bedroom doors open the last time I was home, so he would have noticed my room as soon as he walked through the front door. He's not stupid. He knows my clothes would be in my bedroom.

“Your place is incredibly clinical,” he says.

“I bought it like that.” I reach for my glass and have another mouthful of water.

“So, you bought it?” he asks, cocking his head.

I swallow down the water before saying, “Well, yes.”

He nods, like he's confirming something to himself. “How long have you lived there?”

“Two years.”

I don't think Maksim will mind me saying that. It's hardly a secret. Two years ago, he told me that if I wanted to, I could have my own place. As anyone could imagine, I jumped at the opportunity. Not because I didn't want to be around Maksim. I just wanted my own mental space. I've always suspected his boss Tatiana had something to do with the decision, but I never asked.

“Wow, that young?” Charlie glances away from me, his jaw ticking, and when he looks back at me, his expression goes flat. “What else do you do,



Señorita, other than train physically?”

“I study a lot,” I whisper.

“What do you study?”

I lift my shoulders, trying to avoid the blueness in his eyes. “Whatever Maksim wants me to study, really.” A light goes off in my head. “My last project was Mexico.”

“Mexico, huh?”

I nod, forking some vegetables.

“What about Mexico?”

“The culture and the geography. I came across a newspaper article about the economy and decided to study the country,” I flat out lie.

“So, you studied it of your own accord?”

I nod. I shouldn't say what I'm about to but I want to see Charlie's reaction. “I've learnt a lot about the Los Zetas, amongst other things.”

He sits back, keeping his hands on the table. “Is that right?”

I nod.

He watches me for a moment in total silence.

“What did you learn about the Los Zetas, hmm?”

“Nothing special, really. They're a criminal syndicate much like any other.” I'm trying to mock his organization, to rile him into saying something. Sure I know he's the leader, but I want more intelligence on him.

“What else does Maksim have you study?” he says, unbothered by my mockery. Picking up his cutlery, he cuts into his food.

“This and that.” I slice into the fluffy potatoes. “I tend to focus on technology.”

Charlie turns up his lips and shrugs in agreement. “Makes sense, given your talent.”

I smile with arrogance. *Yeah, I'm not just a fuck toy.*

“You know,” he says, “you were recommended to me by three different leaders to execute the job.”

I frown at him.

“To shut down London,” he adds.

I don't react to that. I know I'm good at what I do, as do a lot of others. I could spend years without so much as touching a computer and still do what is asked of me. Studying and hacking are my forte, even before my fighting skills.

“What's happening with the job?” I ask between bites. “I assumed that by

rushing me to attain your fifteen minutes, you needed it done as soon as possible.”

“It’ll happen when it happens,” he says. “I just needed you to be ready.” He doesn’t give me any more than that. He begins telling me about himself, that he doesn’t usually spend a lot of time in England. “I’m almost always in Mexico—my home country.” He talks about this for quite a while amid eating his dinner, saying he doesn’t typically deal with Westerners because they’re chauvinistic pigs.

*What does he think he is then?*

“But sometimes,” he says, “it’s inevitable.”

I think I know where he’s going with this. He wants me to verbally connect the dots between him, Mexico, and the Los Zetas—who are based in Mexico—but he’s doing it in a coy manner.

“Why are you here now then?” I ask, pushing against my plate. I cannot eat anymore.

Smirking, Charlie flicks up his eyebrows. *Me*. He’s here because of me.

“Don’t let me get in the way of you going home to work.”

He tips his head, chewing on a piece of chicken. “I never said I work in Mexico.”

“I just assumed.” I straighten up in my seat. “You just told me that you’re almost always in Mexico, that you don’t usually deal with Westerners.”

He hums in concurrence, also pushing against his plate. He hasn’t had any trouble with his dinner. He’s polished off everything with gusto.

“Do you know how Maksim and I met?” he asks, sparking my interest.

I shake my head minutely.

“Well, Blaire”—he puts his elbows on the table and winds his fingers together—“when I chopped off my father’s dick for trafficking little girls and watched him slowly bleed to death, I obtained a list of his associates.”

My stomach bottoms out of me.

“Maksim was on the top of that list.”

Silence. We’re just looking at each other.

“And yet, you-you let Maksim live?” I ask bravely, immediately wishing I didn’t. I don’t want to piss him off, not now that I know he cut off his own father’s cock.

He nods, resting his chin on his hands. “I had details to a job in Russia, and given Maksim’s influence over there with Tatiana, I thought I could use him.”

I can feel my cheeks turning white.

“I pardoned Maksim for his word that he'll stay away from children, and brought him in on the job.” Charlie goes quiet, and his eyes seem closer than they really are.

“Why...” I start to say, but I just can't find the courage to finish.

“What?”

“Nothing,” I say.

“Blaire...” His voice deepens as he says my name in a summoning manner.

“I just”—I gulp, and he sees, his eyes dropping to my throat—“why did you kill your father?”

It's a while before he answers me. He's assessing the situation, as I would, wondering if telling me is of any benefit to him.

“I had a sister once,” his voice is soft as he says this, grief flashing through his blue eyes. “And now I don't.”

“Oh.” There is a semblance of emotion in my voice, which is strange, given I don't give a shit about Charlie or his sister. “What happened to her?”

“Can't you guess?” he says, giving me his hardest stare.

I look away from him, a niggling feeling telling me that Maksim might have had something to do with Charlie's sister not being around anymore. Maybe that's Charlie's real agenda with me. Maybe *this* isn't about Maksim double crossing him after all. Maybe his agenda is about getting some justified payback for his sister.

“Tell me, Blaire, you've known Maksim since you were, what, seven or eight years old?”

“Why would you think that?” I screw up my features. “I never told you how long I've known him.”

“I've asked around about you, and one person told me that he stole you ten years ago.”

*Stole me?* That's news to me. Maksim said I was sold to him.

Another long pause. The silence between us is stifling, and my thoughts are rambling.

“Why would you ask around about me?” I say eventually.

A smile plays on Charlie's lips. “Curiosity. What else?”

I scoff again, though in irritation. I don't like his prying.

“Is it true?” he says, looking between my eyes. “Have you known him since you were that young?”

“I think so,” I whisper, swallowing and nodding in union. I don't want to

talk about this. I want to know why he thinks Maksim stole me.

“You *think* you were that young?” Charlie says, putting his hands back on the table, looking solemn in his pose. “What does that mean?”

“I don't remember much of being young,” I tell him honestly. “I don't even remember meeting Maksim.” I shouldn't be indulging him but I'm hoping that if I let him in on a little of my past, he'll tell me more about Maksim apparently stealing me.

Why would Maksim tell me he bought me when he stole me? It doesn't make sense. If he stole me, he should have just told me. It wouldn't change things either way.

Charlie doesn't elaborate on what he knows. It seems he's got other things on his mind, like, “Did he sexually abuse you when you were younger?”

On autopilot, I jump to my feet. “Why would you think that?”

With a sardonic expression on his face, he arches a brow at me.

“Don't you look at me like that. You know I'm a...” *Fuck*, I can't even bring myself to say that innocent word. “You know I've not had sex before.”

He looks me up and down in irony. “There are other ways to toy with girls, as I'm sure you know, *Señorita*.”

A cold drop of sweat slides down the side of my face.

“I can't be speaking about this. I can't be speaking about Maksim to you.” Yes, I want to know what happened to me, but not that much.

I fiddle to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. I never get visibly anxious when it comes to a confrontation, but after that revelation about his father, he makes me anxious.

“It's getting late,” I say, wiping my face with the back of my hand. “I should probably—”

“Sit back down, Blaire. That's not a request.” He extends a steady hand, motioning for me to take to my seat. “I was just asking. I'm concerned, is all.”

*Concerned?* Yeah, right.

I need to watch what I say around him. He's charming, and it's easy to get lost in conversation with him.

“Blaire—” he nods at my chair and I sit on command, fisting my hands in my lap. “Forget about all the heavy stuff.”

That's fucking easy for him to say. I'm sweating in my seat.

“Do you want to train daily with me?”

“Huh?”

“In the gym,” he elaborates. “Do you want to train daily? I find you quite

challenging, and I don't find anyone challenging, usually.” He smirks, his sly amusement back in full force.

“If you think you can keep up with the pace, then sure.” I shrug. “Why not?”

“Okay then,” he says, wiping his lips with a napkin before tossing it on the table. “I'll see you in the gym bright and early.”

“Any time specifically?” I watch him gather the dishes on the table.

“Six thirty, if you can manage that.” He stands, and my eyes zero in on his body. “I have to train early because I make a lot of business calls during the day.”

“I can work around your schedule.” I force myself to look up at his face, and my next line comes out thick with sarcasm as I say, “It's what I'm here for, isn't it?”

He chuckles, glancing between my eyes and mouth, then he takes the dishes to the sink. “Do you want anything else to eat? Like desert?”

“No.”

With raised eyebrows, he looks back at me. “No, thank you.”

I snort. I barely say please and thank you to my master, so as if I'd be courteous to *him*.

“Can I go now?” I say. “Or do you want to grill me some more?”

Shaking his head, he pulls open the fridge for a bottle of beer. “You can go if you want to go.”

I'm out of my seat before he finishes speaking, and the sarcastic me says, “Thank you.”

# 18

The next morning, I eat a scrambled egg breakfast courtesy of Charlie, wash up at the sink, then I wander into the gym. I've got this weird sensation in my tummy, like flutters. It makes me really nervous.

Charlie is on the treadmill already, a little sweaty but lean and running like an athlete. He's wearing a pair of gray sports shorts, his muscular legs peppered in dark hair.

Trying to ignore how gorgeous he is, because his broad upper body is lacking clothes, I keep my eyes ahead and pursue for the boxing ring.

"Morning, Señorita," he pants out, and I look at him. His lips are curved in a sinfully alluring smile, as he wipes his face with a towel.

I wish he wouldn't smile at me like that. It makes me feel all funny inside.

I force a smile back at him, folding the sleeves of my sweater up my arms.

"You ready for a friendly fight, huh?" He pushes a button and rolls back off the treadmill, drops the towel, and ties up his hair.

"Sure," I say. Pulling the ropes apart, I climb into the boxing ring and hold them open for him, leaning away as he straightens in front of me.

"I'm glad you're ready. I want to teach you something," he says, and steps into me, making me step back.

"What?" I ask, still walking backward. "You're not going to start questioning me over Maksim again, are you?" The thought just popped into my head. After that intense conversation with him over dinner yesterday, I want to avoid the topic of Maksim like the plague.

"No, I'm not gonna question you about him," Charlie says, circling me now. He's hunched at the neck, prowling like a wild animal.

I pivot to his stride, my eyes trained on his. "Okay. So, what do you want to teach me then?"

"Mental control." He attacks me without warning, but I block his punch with my forearm.

"Khristos, Charlie! Give me a chance to prepare." I step back, blinking at him with my heart rate soaring. "Why do you want to teach me mental

control?”

“Because,” he says, his gaze dark and focused, “I don't want you listening to anyone else around you when you're fighting.”

He snatches for my throat but I whack his hand away, keeping my legs slightly open for balance. I need my wits about me today, clearly.

“You don't want me listening to anyone?” I say, baffled.

“No, I don't. I noticed how quickly you stopped fighting when Maksim told you to kill James.” Charlie follows me around the ring, trying to dominate me with his presence. “If James was out for blood that day, you'd be dead.”

Is he kidding me? James would've needed more than that stupid moment of distraction to end me.

I'm insulted.

Charlie swings for me with a straight front-jab. I catch his punch in one hand and clout him in the face with my other.

“That was vicious.” He laughs, wiping a drizzle of blood from his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Vicious?!” I squeal, shaking out my hand, pain simmering in my bones. “You're trying to punch me! You said you wouldn't—” He ambushes me then, grabs the back of my neck with both hands, and forces me to bend over. He tries to knee me in the face, letting out a deep groan with each assail. Growling in anger, I beat away his attacks with the heels of my palms, heating up all over with adrenaline. Then I tackle him with my shoulder, dropping him on his ass. He's so fucking heavy to move it's physically taxing.

Dashing to my feet, I jump about and roll my shoulders, trying to warm up my muscles. I should have stretched out before fighting him today, but I didn't anticipate this.

Charlie gets up and runs at me like a bull in a china shop. On instinct, I bob and weave, using up all the boxing ring space, escaping his strikes and booting away his kicks.

“What are you doing?” I yell because he won't stop coming at me, and I slap his face. His head whips to the left, but he laughs. He manages to catch my next slap and bends my arm back. “Ouch!” I sidekick behind his knee, knocking him over. I fall flat on my face with him, bouncing against the surface.

Gasping with adrenaline, I bolt to my feet. Charlie merely takes his time with getting up, still chuckling.

“What the hell are you laughing at?”

He gestures up and down my body with a steady hand, the smuggest grin on his face.

“I don't need any training from you, Charlie Decena.” I point at him in anger. “I can keep up with you in my sleep.”

“Yeah, maybe you're right, but you're not focused when it comes to Maksim.”

“If Maksim says something—aargh!” I smack away his next punch. “I stop on instinct!” I don't mean to yell this so passionately, but I do.

We go back and forth like this for ages, Charlie really trying to put me down as he chases me around the ring.

I've had enough when he swipes for my face with such force I feel a breeze against his action. So I seize his arm, yank him forward, and shove his face into the boxing ring with my knee between his shoulder blades. “I thought you said you wouldn't punch me?” I hiss in his ear, as his fingers clasp around my wrist. “Are you trying to make me really hurt you? Whoa!” He flips over and manages to pin me under him, putting us face to face.

“I assumed you'd want me to keep up with the pace, Señorita?”

My heart picks up a beat, because I can smell the sweaty, soapy fragrance of his skin—and the way he's looking at me...it's raw.

“Yeah, I do want you to keep up with the pace.” I knee him where it hurts because I need to put some space between us.

“Awh, Dios!” He doubles over with his expression twisted, cupping his crotch with both hands, and presses his face into the floor. “Fuck, Blaire!”

I roll away from him and stand, panting so hard that my chest is on fire. His ripped back is glistening in sweat, his muscles bunching as he tenses in agony. I lick my lips, imagining what his skin tastes like, feeling that heavy desire form in the pit of my core.

“You can't just do that in a friendly fight,” he groans.

Putting my hands on my hips, I say between pants, “Stop trying to talk me under your influence then.”

I know what he's doing. He's trying to mentally bond us. I'm not stupid.

He shakes his head, taking in easy, controlled breaths. I actually start to feel a little guilty. Did I go too far with hitting him in the balls?

“Are you all right?” I kneel beside him and softly touch his side.

“Charlie?”

Making me squeak, he grabs my arm and yanks me under him again. He



nudges my knees apart with his and settles between my legs. I cannot stop myself from gasping out. He's only wearing sports shorts and the thin material doesn't exactly hide how big he is.

“Charlie—” I husk out his name, gripping his solid forearms.

“Now, how would you escape me, hmm?” he asks. His eyes are level with mine, dark blue because his pupils are large. “You can't kick me in the nuts this time.”

I dig my nails into the insides of his elbows. He twists out of my catty grasp, grabs my wrists, and heaves them up above my head to stretch me out.

“And now?” he says in my face, flicking up his eyebrows.

We're nose to nose, watching each other. He's smirking, his eyes glittering like blue crystals.

“I'd head-butt you,” I whisper, slowly blinking at him.

He presses his damp forehead on mine. “And now?”

*Oh, shit.*

I tense my stomach, trying to manage this rage inside me. I'm not sure if it's anger or desire or both. They seem to be blurring into one.

“What would you do now, Blaire, hmm?”

Out of the blue—and I'm sure I've lost my damn mind—I push my chin forward and I kiss his soft lips.

With a deep moan, Charlie thaws against me, closing his eyes. His grip on my wrists loosens, so I use the heel of my left foot to turn us over and put him under me. I grunt as he resists. But I manage to get on top and straddle him with my thighs. “That's what I'd do.” I smirk down on him and gently slap his face, feeling uncharacteristically playful. “I think I win this round, too.”

He sits up and slams his lips to mine. I squeal, trying to push him away with my hands on his damp, hairy chest. I only wanted to distract him so I could prevail, I think.

He catches my hands and bends them behind my back, making me whimper in pain.

“Ouch!” I scrunch up my face. “My arms!”

He doesn't care. Moaning, he licks across my tongue, massaging mine with slow seduction, crushing my breasts to his chest. I groan, unwillingly sinking into him, losing all focus. I think I even close my eyes.

We're not supposed to be doing this!

“You're a little fucking tease,” he says harshly.

“And you're a cheat,” I say too softly, making him laugh.

Tilting his head and curving his lips around mine, he takes me in an extremely passionate kiss. Our mouths shape as one, inundated with saliva and sweat and the metallic flavor of his blood. I know I should keep fighting him off, but I don't. I can't. The kiss is satisfying. A little spot in my sex pulses, and I think I like it.

He kneads the insides of my wrists with his thumbs and an odd sense of relief washes over me, like he's tapping into my pressure points or something. I sob in his mouth with fervor, thinking about the way I'm sitting on his lap. It's provoking. His thick cock is just touching my throbbing clit, only scraps of material between us. I cannot move out of the way he's holding me, yet I can move my hips. If I shift forward just an inch, I'll be sitting in the hot zone.

I fight not to fulfill my desire to rub against him. I fight with all the will that I have left, which isn't much—Charlie is slowly but surely making sure of that. He's making me spiral out of control.

A phone starts ringing from across the gym, causing me to jump in my skin. My eyes flutter open. I try to yank back from Charlie but his grip on my arms at my back tightens, and he snaps, “Ignore it!”

“I need to go have a shower,” I say over our kiss, going all funny inside when he pushes his tongue in my mouth again.

“Ignore it,” he whispers after he's done licking me, his voice softer now. Then he pecks a kiss to my lips before consuming me again.

I whine out loud, my will now evaporated. I indulge him for one more kiss—it's not like I can stop this, is it?

Charlie lets go of my arms, I assume because he can sense that I'm into this. Before he can do anything, I'm swathed around his neck, trapped in an erratic, lusty haze. I've no idea what the fuck I'm doing. I'm just doing it. His lips become more urgent and aggressive, making mine swell. He cradles the back of my head in one hand and the curve of my ass in his other, shifting me up his lap so we're flush against each other, sitting me right on top of his erection. It's all heady, the flavor of his blood and his sweaty fragrance. His sweat seems to have magnified his scent. It's all I can think about. Until he moves under me. He rolls his hips, rubbing his bulging cock against my sex. My veins charge with fire and I cling to him desperately, raking my nails down his back, moaning like I'm in pain or something.

The phone is ceaseless, ringing over and over again, all but shattering the

moment. Charlie curses in Spanish. I can feel his anger on the surface of his skin.

“Go...go answer it,” I say in bated breaths, panting in his mouth.

He's not sure for a moment. His face is taut with deliberation. Then he bites out, “Dios Mío!”

Gripping my hips in large hands, he stands with effortless strength and puts me on shaky legs. I'm dizzy and flushed, blinking through my haze. When I tilt my head back, I see Charlie's cheeks are flushed too, his eyes glowing with arousal.

“You all right?” He scans my face, his eyes dancing between my eyes and my swollen mouth.

A little embarrassed, I nod, dropping my gaze to the floor between us.

“Good.” He shocks me with another gentle kiss, leaning down and pecking my lips. “Wait here.”

I nod again, but when he turns his back on me, it breaks the spell. My lungs fill with hot air, and I realize what I've just done. After I fought to have the power over my body, I just kissed him?

*Fuck.*

This is so fucked up. He stole me away from my life—from Maksim. He used me to satisfy his own perverse needs without any regard for what I wanted. He's evil.

Holding my face in both hands, I duck out of the boxing ring and sprint across the gym for the exit doors. One second I can hear Charlie yelling, “Who the fuck helped her leave The Site?” And the next, he's calling my name, telling me to wait.

I ignore him with all the will I have and rush upstairs to my room, baffled with myself.

Why did I do that?

I pace my bedroom, stewing over what the hell has come over me.

Three days I've been here with Charlie. Just three fucking days, and I've gone from being a strong, mentally disciplined combatant, to a whore? The only person I should ever want like this is Maksim, but I don't. It makes me sick. I don't get it. I just don't understand how this can happen, and so quickly.

I once read somewhere, “the only way to get rid of temptation is to yield to it. I can resist everything but temptation”. Is that true? Is that what I need to do? If I give in to wanting Charlie, will it fix me? I'm not sure. I know

nothing of what's happening here.

I wish Maksim had prepared me for things like this. If he had, I wouldn't be so mystified.

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I bury myself in a book to take my mind off things, though when it's midafternoon, the sun hovering between high and low in the sky, I have to go downstairs because I'm hungry.

I'm hoping to avoid Charlie, but that's never going to happen. He's in the kitchen, on the phone by the back doors, wearing jeans and a black round neck t-shirt, his hair tied back. He's almost as tall as the back doors, his shoulders broad and his waist narrow, blocking the view over the garden.

"So, she's in Europe then?" he asks in Spanish, and I stand there on the threshold with a familiar tightness in the low of my stomach.

I shake my head, frustrated with myself, and wander into the cooking space. His presence alone fucks with my chi and he hasn't even looked at me yet. I open the fridge and find there are pork medallions and fresh chilled asparagus, and on the kitchen countertop there's a bowl of potatoes. Busying myself, I rummage through the cupboards to gather the utensils I need. I peel and cut up the potatoes so I can boil them for mash. Then I fill a stainless steel saucepan with water and set the stove ring on medium, gently dropping in the potatoes.

"Why did you rush off this morning, huh?" Charlie says from beside me, glancing over everything.

My chest constricts.

"I called for you to wait," he adds.

Swallowing down my anxiety, I keep my eyes trained on the task at hand. "I had to have a shower."

"You smelled all right to me." He pinches a stick of asparagus from the side, nips off the end, and says between bites, "You're cooking."

"Yeah." I rinse off my hands. "Are you hungry? I can make some for you, too?" The least I can offer is to cook for him. It is after all his house and his ingredients, and he could just as easily not feed me properly.

He leans back against the kitchen units. "*This*, is something I never expected to see."

"What?" I dry my hands and hang the towel back over the sink.

“You, cooking.” Charlie smirks at me, mischief glittering in his eyes.

“I’m not an idiot. Of course I can cook.”

“I never said you were an idiot,” he says, popping the rest of the asparagus into his mouth. He then says something about me being into sports, and I don’t know what else. I’m not paying attention. I’m watching him eat, my eyes focused on his mouth as he chews that piece of asparagus. He’s so mesmerizing.

The longer I look at his mouth, the quicker my thoughts divert. I remember our kiss this morning all too vividly. The way he groaned in my mouth. The way he crushed me against his hard body as though he couldn’t get me close enough.

Charlie raises his eyebrows at me, and I blink away in a fluster. Why the fuck do I fancy him so much? Is this normal?

Using a colander, and trying to ignore Charlie standing there, I set the asparagus to boil, then I oil a frying pan for the medallions.

“Here, I’ll do that.” He takes the frying pan handle, grabbing it over my hand.

I snatch away from him, determined not to go there again. He smiles coolly at me before seasoning the pork with salt and pepper and some herbs, his motions smooth and confident.

“I don’t mind cooking if you’re busy, Charlie.”

“No. You’re my guest,” he says. “I don’t want you cooking.”

*Guest?* Resisting the urge to point out that I’m not a guest, more of a prisoner—now, a half willing prisoner who might want him—I try to walk past him so I can get out of his ozone.

“Not so fast.” He catches my wrist and urges me back a step, then nods at the fridge. “Get two beers out.”

Tugging out of his grasp, I grab one bottle of beer out of the fridge, twist off the cap, and put it on the side by him.

“You’re not having a drink, huh?”

I shake my head, stepping away to put some distance between us. I don’t need anything impairing my mind right now. Charlie does that alone.

“Ohhh, go on, *Señorita*.” He gestures at the fridge, his blue eyes shining with amusement. “Live a little. It might help you relax.”

“I don’t need a beer to relax.” Crossing my arms, I rest against the sink in resistance.

“You sure?”

“Absolutely.”

He chuckles, his cheekbones sharp with that large smile. He then peppers me in questions, first asking if I learned anything from our sparring session this morning.

“Nope,” I lie. I learned that, if one is going to kiss another as a distraction, do it quickly and without adding desire to the mix.

I won't tell him that.

More questions. He's still intrigued by my fighting skills. “Are you gonna tell me who taught you yet?”

“Nope,” I say again, my expression flat of emotion. It's better this way. If I can steer clear of that lusty zone he puts me in, I can maintain control over us. I won't end up kissing him again.

Charlie smirks at me. “Okay then, chica, if curt is how you want to play it.” He turns down the heat to put the potatoes on simmer, then he steps in front of me, mimicking my pose by crossing his arms. “If you don't want me to touch you, why did you kiss me earlier?”

My stomach rolls with embarrassment. I don't for a single moment want to talk about *that*, but I won't keep letting him chip away at me. He has to know that I'm strong minded and more perceptive than he gives me credit for.

“I took advantage of you.”

He flicks up his eyebrows. “Smart girl.”

I huff. That has to be the most modest compliment he's ever given me.

“You know, Blaire, I think you like it when I kiss you.” He stares down the span of my body, then back up. “You just won't admit it because what I make you feel confuses you.”

Could he be any more arrogant—or right?

“I think it's the other way around, Charlie.” I'm being brave, trying to take him down a peg, but on the inside I'm so embarrassed it's stupid. My stomach is in knots. “I think it's you who likes kissing me.”

“Sure I do.” He glances between my eyes. “You're a nice looking girl. I wouldn't kick you outa bed for love nor money.”

I look away from him, my cheeks burning. How can he say things like that to a girl with such cool composure? I'd never have the guts to tell him how I feel.

“I give you one week before you're revoking our little deal,” he says softly, with a hint of sarcasm.

I swallow, keeping my eyes down. “I think you'll be sourly surprised when

I don't.”

“You're right,” he whispers, leaning into me. “I will be.”

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# 19

The next week passes slowly.

Charlie wakes me up the morning after pledging I'll revoke our little deal with a cup of coffee, softly calling my name from the open doorway. I'm so startled to see him in my room before the sun has even risen that I just lie here leaning up on one elbow, staring at him standing there on the threshold. He saunters over to put the coffee down on the bedside cabinet, and as soon as he looks down at me with a deep frown, my stomach twists with knots. There's a familiar heaviness in the pit of my core, sexual anxiety. I think he's come to do something to me. To satisfy his appetite, or mine.

"Wha-what are you doing in here, Charlie?"

"Don't look so nervous," he whispers in the shadows. "I'm just bringing you a coffee. You all right?" He sounds concerned, and though it's quite dark in here with only a glimmer of dawn peeking in through the window, I can see he's still frowning.

"Yeah." I croak out because my throat is a bit sore. "Why wouldn't I be?"

Hovering there at my bedside, he watches me for a moment in total silence. I don't know where to look—I feel as if I'm naked and on trial when he looks at me like this—so I sit up against the headboard and reach for the steaming cup of coffee. It's half empty, and it's too sweet for my liking. I wonder how he knows what I enjoy for breakfast, yet he doesn't know how I take my coffee.

"Be ready in half an hour for the gym," he says eventually in a low, soft voice. "I'll make you some breakfast. It'll be in the oven."

"Um...okay."

"If you ever want to eat breakfast with me, let me know and I'll wake you up earlier."

Eat breakfast with him? Why would I want to eat breakfast with him? I barely make it through dinner mentally unscathed.

Hugging the blanket to my chest, I nod and shrug to answer him, and then he leaves.



That was really weird, but it doesn't end up being so. This becomes a pattern, and I'm less and less nervous by the day. Charlie wakes me up at Six A.M. with a coffee, asking if I'm all right like something is terribly wrong. Then I eat breakfast alone in the kitchen. We fight in the gym after, our sweaty bodies often rolling around the boxing ring in a battle of power. I spend the dull parts of the days reading in my room. We have dinner together every evening where he teases me about apparently fancying him, and he wants to know why I don't come down for lunch during the day. He hasn't clocked on to the fact that I need that time alone to mentally come down from whatever he makes me feel. Conversation starts to flow more freely, and I gradually ease into spending time with him. I even look forward to spending time with him.

Though he was sold on the idea that I would revoke our deal, I don't. As much as I want to because our sparring sessions are almost unbearable with sexual tension that's now constantly between us, and at dinner he talks me under a charm that I start to enjoy, I don't revoke. Not that it really matters though, because with every day between us, the old me is drifting further and further away like a soul being swept by the wind. I find myself getting weak to Charlie's charming seduction, holding conversations with him rather than letting him take the lead. I'm awake before he even comes into my room in the mornings now. I'm desiring him more and more...sneakily looking at him...enjoying the way his body flexes when he moves about...basking in his attention when he talks to me...hell, I'm even dreaming about him in the most risqué manner—that's what wakes me up before sunrise—and I never usually remember my dreams.

Everything in my mind is narrowed in on him now. I don't know how this happened. I should fucking hate him—he stole me away from everything I know—but I don't.

The line has gone blurry.

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“It seems I'm gonna have to work a little harder,” Charlie says, wrapping up my knuckles with stretchy medical bandages. I've been going at it with the punching bag this morning, trying to relieve some of this sexual tension that's in me, and my knuckles are bloody. He took one look at me and said I'm not to fight with naked hands anymore—not while I'm living here with him. I

tried to resist letting him touch me but my resistance was fruitless. By the time his fingers were on mine, I folded.

I cock a brow at him, assuming what he's talking about. The deal. It's the only thing on his mind lately, other than teasing me. He's always teasing me about something, usually that he knows I fancy him—or, he assumes. I haven't told him the truth.

“I'm sure you will,” I say.

Chuckling to himself, he works on my left hand. I watch him with careful meditation, nodding and shaking when he asks if the bandages are too tight or too loose. He's got his hair tied back today and while this is my favorite look on him, all I can think about doing is yanking out his ponytail and raking my fingers through the strands, steering him to my satisfaction. I want to touch him. I want to run my hands over every bulging muscle under the t-shirt he's wearing, to feel the power in his body. I dreamt about touching him last night, felt the callousness of his body hair under my palms—maybe that's why my mind is twisted this morning?

Charlie glances up from my hands and holds my burning hot gaze for a few seconds. “You shouldn't stare at people like that, Blaire.”

I give him a funny look, drawing in my eyebrows. Does he know I'm thinking about him being naked?

“Your eyes are haunting,” he says softly, his blue stare flickering all over my features, “possessing.”

I glance away from him then. When he says things like that, it's as if he's an incubus talking to my unconscious soul.

“You don't even realize what you're doing, do you?” he whispers, pinching my chin between a finger and a thumb, forcing our gazes to align once more.

“I don't even know what you're talking about.” I tug out of his grasp to break the spell.

“No,” he says under his breath. “I know you don't.” He finishes bandaging me up, then he gives my hand a squeeze, nearly making me moan. “Before we spar, I want to do something with you.”

I back up, my stomach contracting with frustrating wishful anxiety.

“Nothing like that.” He laughs, a wide smile dominating his face. “I want to see how high you can kick.”

“Oh.” I blink at him, coming down from that nervous rush. I've come to like that rush. I like everything about the way he makes me feel now. “Okay,” I say. “Sure.”

He nods left, so I follow him across the gym, fisting and unfisting my hands to loosen up the bandages. Charlie rustles through the cupboards on the back wall for something, saying that once he's satisfied with seeing how high I can kick, I can show him a few tricks.

“Tricks?” I ask in a distracted fashion because he has a Wing Chun ring on one of the shelves in the cupboard.

“Yeah”—he sounds like he's trying not to laugh—“I'm sure you have many.”

“Why do you have that?” I ask. Picking up the Wing Chun ring, I run my fingers over the smooth bamboo outlay.

He smiles at me. It's his deathly handsome smile that makes me feel all warm and tingly. “I got you some Wing Chun equipment so you can train. Don't want you getting bored now, do we?”

“I was going to say...” I glance up at him, putting the ring back in the cupboard. “You're into boxing, right?”

He nods, smirking at me like he's got a hidden secret.

“You know, you're going to have to learn a different style of fighting if you want to beat me.”

He doesn't look offended by my arrogance. If anything, he looks amused. “Yeah, I'm well aware.” Grabbing a remote control out of the cupboard, he uses it to move a punch bag up the wall. The bracket hums with electricity as it ascends, until Charlie clicks the stop button, leaving the bag hanging just above my head.

“Is that too high?” he asks, ushering me back across the gym with his hand on the low of my back.

I shake my head, walking with him, training my attention on the bag. I can high-kick around eight feet in the air if I run up to a target.

“All right then,” he says. “But if you want it lowered, just tell me.” Wandering past me, he checks the bag over, grabbing it with both hands and shaking it so vigorously that the wall shudders. I assume he's making sure it's safe to use. He then crosses his arms and moves back to give me the space I need, telling me, “Go on then, Señorita.”

He's curious to see me do this. I can tell by that fire in his eyes.

I bend over to stretch out, ensuring I have no knots in my muscles. There's nothing worse than getting a cramp mid-fight. Charlie is watching me—I can feel his eyes on my ass, but I knew they would be. In fact, I'm taking great pleasure in winding him up, especially when he clears his throat.

My muscles now loose, I jog back for some distance, getting in position by slightly bending my knees. Then, to gain the strength and speed I need, I run up to the punch bag, my muscles easing into my motions. Two feet away, I leap into the air and kick the bottom of the bag. A warm surge of adrenaline shoots through me as I softly land on my feet, my interest centering on my training. I've missed this, the relaxed routine of training in this manner. It reminds me of home.

"Yeah, you're quick," Charlie says, seeming to be confirming his own thoughts.

I glance at him, smirking with conceit.

"Go again," he says, gesturing for the bag, his arms still folded over his chest.

Backing up, I pull in a large breath and run up to the punch bag, jumping into the air with an athletic kick when I'm within range. Again and again I attack, each kick executed more brilliantly than the last. I spend the next forty minutes doing this, flashing Charlie the odd smile as he tells me that he could watch me do this all day. "I don't think I've seen a girl so disciplined."

I know there's an ulterior meaning to what he's just said, but I'm having such a good time that I don't want to spoil it by being snarky.

I keep going at the bag, and when I'm a little puffed out, sweat dripping down my back, I have a go at teaching Charlie. I don't know why. I just fancy it.

"Everyone can learn, but you should lower the bag a bit," I say, estimating that it's got to be six feet in the air. "That's quite a fall if you miss and drop on your ass."

He arches a brow at me. "Are you sure you don't want me to make it higher then?"

Pursing my lips, I hum in a musing fashion. "Second thought, you should make it higher."

He playfully pinches my side, making me squirm. "I knew you'd say that."

I kick his feet out from under him, and he drops with a heavy thud. I burst out laughing, grabbing my stomach because it aches, hardly containing myself. This is the oddest thing. I've never laughed like this in my life.

Charlie shakes his head at me, and I think he's trying not to laugh, too.

"Go on," I say amid laughing, gesturing out. "Form position. You can't kick the punch bag from down there."

Grinning, he gets up from the floor and stands before the punch bag,

rolling back his shoulders. I love watching him do that. Every muscle in his back waves and flexes beneath his t-shirt.

I tell him to warm up with a few axe kicks, that he doesn't need to jump up and kick the bag until he's ready, but he's terrible at taking advice.

“Do as you please then.” I shrug, walking back and forth with crossed arms, observing him.

My face drops when he strikes the bag with a high-air-kick, landing perfectly on his feet. Another kick, and another, every one achieved with focus and refinement.

My mouth hanging open, I glance between him and the punch bag.

“Didn't expect that, did you, Señorita?” he says, triumph plastered across his face. He walks into me, playfully slapping my face.

I flick away his hand but he catches my wrist. We start fighting then, and we're not even in the ring. We are all legs, trying to knock each other over, I guess because we've been practicing our kicks. I put Charlie down more times than he does me but I have to admit, I underestimated him a little. He's not as good as me, though he's not as bad as I thought either, and he's definitely into more than boxing.

Charlie starts sweating up, so he yanks off his t-shirt and flings it at me. The overwhelming smell of his clean, sweaty, musky scent hits me in the face.

*Khristos.*

Before I can toss his t-shirt aside, he runs at me and hooks one arm between my legs, gripping my ass.

“Charlie!” I squeal, grabbing his shoulders, the feeling of him between my legs all too familiar.

He fists the back of my hair with his other hand, yanks me up off the ground, and slams me down on a training mat.

“Aargh!” I groan out, arching.

“Shit!” He crouches over me on all fours, his knees pressing into the mat on either side of my body. “Are you all right?”

“The mats aren't that soft, you know?” I roll onto my side, my face taut with pain.

“Ohhh, Blaire, los siento, baby,” he says he's sorry in Spanish. He runs a large hand down my spine, over every curve, kneading out the pain. “I didn't mean to hurt you. The mats are supposed to be quite thick.”

I start to say, “*Well they're not,*” but then I find myself leaning into his

touch like a dog being petted, my stomach coiling with sinister desire. Why the fuck is this happening to me? Why can't I go one day without desiring him?

While I'm bathing in his touch, practically humming in delight, he whispers in my ear, "Are you gonna kiss me again so you can beat me, hmm? Because I really don't mind."

I smirk up at him from the side, and I can't help thinking, does he want me as much as I want him? I sense that he does, but I can't be one-hundred percent sure that this isn't his agenda—to have me utterly under his spell.

Charlie looks like he's going to kiss me. His face is dripping in want as he comes closer to me, his eyes flickering between mine. I playfully tell him to piss off, pushing his mouth to the side. One more kiss and I'm not sure I'll be able to stop.

Taking my hands, he helps me to my feet. "You all right?" he asks with genuine concern, giving me the once over, his eyes sweeping up and down my body. "Does your back still hurt?"

"No." I roll my shoulders, trying to iron out the tension. "I'm fine."

"Here," he says, circling with a single finger. "Turn around."

"Why?" I can feel my heart hammering in my chest. "What are you going to do?"

The way he smiles at me, it makes my heart race.

"Turn around," he says, still circling his finger as he flicks up his eyebrows. "C'mon, chica. You'll be glad you did."

A bit wary, I do, and to really fuck with me, he puts his large hands on my shoulders. He massages me there with sure, gentle fingers, getting into knots and kinks that I didn't even know existed. It feels so good that I sigh and let my head fall back. I can't resist closing my eyes for a moment either, imagining that he's doing this to me while I'm naked and withered after an orgasm.

"Feels good," Charlie whispers in my ear from over my shoulder, "doesn't it?"

*Ugh.* I groan internally. I'm living in my own sexually repressed hell, and it feels like things are just getting started.

## 20

Over the coming weeks, I adjust to living with Charlie.

After the way he dropped me in the gym the other day, he's a little delicate with me when we spar now, but it's all right. I don't want to get too physical with him anyway. I'm trying to control my hormones, so his guilt for hurting me has worked in my favor.

I also don't hide away in my room during the day anymore, reading the books he brought me. I come down for lunch as well as breakfast and dinner. Though, we never eat breakfast or lunch together. I always get up too late to share breakfast with him, and he's always working at lunchtime.

Today however, he isn't working, so I'm indulging myself in his company, making us both a sandwich before he disappears again. We eat standing in the kitchen, Charlie leaning against the countertop next to me, topless. I'm not sure if he owns a bloody shirt anymore.

"You know you've been down for lunch every day this week?" he says, flicking crumbs off his chest.

"Yeah, so?" I have a sip of orange juice but it barely quenches my thirst. "Is that all right?"

"Course it is," he says softly. "You can do whatever you want here, Blaire." He reaches for my glass so I give it to him, and he finishes off every last drop of orange juice. I watch the Adams apple in his throat bob up and down, captivated. Everything he does captivates me.

"Why have you only just started coming down during the daytime, hmm?" he says, leaning past me to put the empty glass in the sink. "You've been here for over a month now."

"Maybe because I didn't like you before." The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them. "Not that...you know...I don't mean..." I blink at him, internally cringing.

Why did I just say that?

"So," he says amused, licking his lips, "you like me now, huh?"

I exhale under my breath. He isn't offended.

“Hmm?” he hums, flicking up his eyebrows for an answer. “Yes? No? Maybe?” His eyes thin. “Maybe a little?”

“You're all right, I suppose.” I shrug, and try not to laugh at him. I bite a chunk out of my sandwich. He is all right. Nothing like I thought he'd be.

He laughs at me, his eyes glittering, trapping me in his spell. I could stare at his wicked blue eyes all day long.

“Well, that's better than you hating me, I guess,” he says, having another deep bite of his sandwich.

“Why don't you have a girlfriend?” I blurt out. I'm not ashamed to ask. I've been wondering for weeks now, wondering that if he does have a girlfriend, who she might be or what she looks like.

He coughs and punches his chest, almost spitting out his sandwich.

“I mean, you probably have a girlfriend. I just assumed.” I put down the last of my sandwich and hide my hands in the sleeves of my sweater, looking up at him innocently. “Sorry. I'm not prying. I just wondered, is all.”

“No.” He laughs, wiping his lips with his fingers, smirking down at me. “You don't have to be sorry.” He's still laughing, trying to swallow down his sandwich. “I've had plenty of women,” he explains, but says he couldn't be bothered to make the effort with them. “I work all the time, so I don't have time to fuck about with *mujer*.” *Women*.

I incline a brow at him.

“Except for you, but you're different.” He winks at me, polishing off the rest of his sandwich by popping it in his mouth.

I look away from him, my cheeks warming up. Gathering the dirty dishes, I drop them into the sink, then I wipe down the sides.

His words are like a mantra in my head. *I don't have time to fuck about with women. Except for you.* Why am I so flattered by that?

“Blaire,” he says my name after a while of silence. When I peer up at him, I find he's giving me an unusually cautious stare.

“What?” I shove the butter and the salad away in the fridge.

“I want to ask you something,” he says, then he pauses for a moment, chewing the inside of his mouth. “But if you don't want to talk about it, then that's okay. Just say so.”

Crossing my arms, I rest back against the kitchen counter.

He crosses his arms too. “You said you don't remember meeting Maksim, right? Nor do you have any memories of being young.”

My eyebrows draw together.



“What's your earliest memory?”

My frown intensifies. “That's a bit random, Charlie.”

For the past few weeks, he hasn't so much as mentioned my past, and now he wants to know what my earliest memory is?

He lifts his shoulders in a shrug. “I've been meaning to ask you for a while now, but I didn't want to make you feel uncomfortable. You seem relaxed with me now.”

He's noticed. Fuck, that's so humiliating. I don't want him to know that I'm comfortable around him. It gives him all the power.

“Do you mind telling me?” he asks, holding my gaze with trained enthusiasm. “I'd like to know.”

“Um...” I run my teeth across my top lip. “I guess.” I don't answer his question right away. I'm not shying away from it, which is bizarre to my nature. I'm actually digging into my thoughts, so I can explain myself to him. I want to explain myself to him. I want him to know me. Or, I want him to know what Maksim will be okay with him knowing.

What I recall isn't a memory, per se. It's more of a feeling. A feeling of coldness and total darkness, claustrophobia, and absolute quietness for long periods of time. There's also this damp smell that I can never escape in my dreams. I tell Charlie this, laughing uneasily. “I don't really remember much before I was thirteen, and what I do isn't exactly clear enough to say it's a memory.”

“What isn't clear?” he asks, tipping his head. He looks puzzled with my answer.

I glance down, then back up at him. “I can't tell you that.”

He nods a few times, understanding my unspoken words. “Are those memories like the feelings you remember? You don't have to tell me if you don't want to.”

I take a moment so I can find the words, but all I come up with is, “They're sort of like those feelings, though fuzzier.” I won't elaborate more than that because all those unsure memories have something to do with Maksim and how he conditioned me. From what I can gather, I was drugged and forced to endure sleep deprivation for extensive stretches of time. The objective was to ensure my mind was open. During these times, images and videos would flash through my mind, images of a girl protecting her lover, slaying man after man and woman after woman. The first time I saw those things, I was petrified. They never stopped filtering through my mind's eye

until I could control my heart rate, as Maksim's voice would command me. When I could control my heart rate and my fears, I was allowed to sleep, but only to Maksim's voice. To his promises and the promises he made me commit to. The constant reminder that I fear nothing but Maksim's safety, that I live to worship and protect him.

Then there was the pain. Most of all the aches and pain. The stretched out feeling of hanging from my arms. Being drowned in cold water while my hands and feet were in scorching hot water. Electric shocks that made my entire body spasm with agony. Beltings.

It all sounds so sadistic, even to myself as I recall the 'memories', but it's not. It made me who I am now. A fearless combatant.

"Don't you think that's strange?" Charlie says softly, glowering with confusion. "How you can't remember much?"

I shrug with indifference. "What isn't strange about how I grew up?"

His eyes swim with something I've not seen before...sympathy?

My chest does this odd squeazy thing.

It's definitely sympathy.

"Don't feel sorry for me, Charlie." I turn away from him and busy myself with washing up, barely registering how hot the water is. "I'm not worth it."

"That's subjective to think you're not worth feeling sorry for," he says.

"Regardless of what you've done, you're just a kid, really."

*A kid?*

"Don't you know who I am?" I leisurely peer over my shoulder and scowl at him. "Don't you know how many people I've killed? How many lives I've ripped apart?"

"Yeah, I'm quite aware." He doesn't react with disgust, as I thought he would, but that just annoys me. He should find me repulsive and evil. He shouldn't want me as he does. The only reason I've never questioned Maksim's fascination with me is because we're both deeply sick.

"You know"—I snatch the towel off the sink so I can dry my hands—"just because I'm innocent or whatever, it doesn't mean I'm some sweet, blameless girl." I give him a hard, wolfish look. "I don't deserve your pity. The only thing I deserve is a guaranteed ticket to hell, and you'd do well to remember that."

"I didn't realize you regard yourself with such high esteem."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I ask, flinging the towel on the countertop.

“Well, ever since I met you you've been emotionally constipated, and now you're...” he shrugs, his arms still folded over his chest. “I never knew you felt guilt for the things you've done.”

I snort, affronted. “I don't.”

“I think you do,” he says under his breath. “You just execute a great job of blocking your emotions out,” his eyes taper as he says that, like he knows how I feel deep down at times. “You should ease up on yourself. Half the people you've killed probably deserved it.”

“And the other half?” I remind him that some were innocent, and I remind myself what real guilt feels like. I once killed a man who worked at the club for stealing a hundred pounds off Maksim, even after he told me it was to put the gas on and get some food for his kids. It was a cold English winter at the time. He had a nasty cough, was constantly coughing up phlegm because he was ill. While I felt pity for him, it didn't stop me from slitting his throat to make a point of him. Then came the guilt. For days I couldn't sleep. I kept seeing his face in my closed eyes, the photo he showed me of his kids who were barely five years old. He said they all had the flu and because they were illegal immigrants, he couldn't take them to a doctor.

Now, they have no father, and that's because of me.

“Collateral damage,” Charlie says frankly, and there isn't an ounce of pity in his eyes now. “It happens in the best of wars.”

Silence wraps around us as we stare at each other in a moment of reflection. I have no idea why I'm even talking to him like this. For weeks we've been teasing each other, falling under a spell of desire, and now...

Why did he have to ruin things? Why does he want to know what darkness I've suffered? Is that how he's getting his kicks now?

“Let us get a few things straight,” I snap, pointing at the ground between us, guilt trickling through my frosty heart, “I don't feel culpable for anything I've done.” I try to convince myself. “I don't care about who I've killed or who I've tortured, and I don't give a shit about your stupid, curious questions, either.” I want to keep going at him, but I can't stand the way he's looking at me, outright unbothered by my ominous confession.

I try to leave the kitchen but Charlie sidesteps me, blocking my exit with his tall, muscular body.

“Blair, calm down,” he says. “I told you if you didn't want to talk about it, all you had to do was say so.”

My teeth grind, and I fist my hands. “Is this what you're trying to do?”

Splay open my emotions?”

He doesn't answer me, just stands there in a deadpan fashion.

“Good luck with that,” I say, huffing at him. “It'll take more than sly humdrum conversation to achieve that.”

Barging him with my shoulder, I head out of the kitchen and go up to my room. I don't come down for dinner, not even when Charlie knocks on my door and asks if I'm hungry. I curl up in the middle of my bed and shut off mentally, trying to forget this afternoon ever happened, trying to forget that man's face.

I'm quite stupid really, to think I could live in a world with Charlie where only peace and desire exists side by side until I go home. Of course he's going to want to know who I am inside. That's his objective, isn't it?

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# 21

The next morning, my erratic period comes.

If there's anything I'd like to avoid, it's this time of the month. I am never myself when my period comes. I'm withdrawn, morose, and so uncomfortable it's beyond belief. I always try to keep it together and remain as Blaire as I can, for Maksim doesn't take too kindly to me being in a mood—he'd whip me to death until I learnt to control my mood. But here, however, Maksim isn't about, so I'm not quite sure how I'll cope with my period and that bothers me. Charlie has been all right up until now—minus yesterday afternoon with his prying—and I don't want to rock the boat by being overly rude. I've enough emotions to deal with, let alone his wrath.

Feeling like bugs are crawling under my skin, I wake in the middle of the night and go to the bathroom, knowing exactly why I feel the way I do. My throat is a bit sore, as if I've been screaming my head off in agony. I hand feed myself some cold water from the sink to soothe my throat. Then I search through the vanity cupboards for some toiletries. All of what I need is in here, surprisingly. It seems Charlie has thought of everything.

I sort myself out and get back into bed where I lie staring through the window for hours, the blanket draped over my waist. The sun hasn't risen yet. The sky is like a sheet of black silk, slipping down the horizon that's half alight.

I toss and turn for a while, hoping for the sun, but I just can't relax. I'm too tense and itching to do something. Anything.

Slugging it out of bed, feeling bloated and heavy, I dress in the usual and patter downstairs to the kitchen barefoot.

It's quiet in the kitchen. It feels empty without Charlie around. I've come to like him being around. It's so weird.

I make some toast and take it to the dining table, where I watch the sun rise through the back doors with burning pink rays.

“Blaire?” Charlie says, entering the kitchen. “I wondered where you were.”

I turn in my chair to look at him in the doorway. He's on the phone, wearing jeans over black boots and a white t-shirt that boasts all his muscles. His fucking hair is pulled away from his face, too.

*Great.*

A warm feeling travels right through me, making my skin flush. I'm suddenly aware of how tight my black sweater is across my swollen breasts, and how tight my trousers are against my sex.

It seems my desire for him has magnified.

This can't be happening to me. Not now. Not while I'm already uncomfortable in my own skin.

"Morning, Charlie." I drop my gaze to the now empty plate, too pissed off with everything that's going on inside me. I wish my car was here so I could go for a drive or something. I feel like I've been stuck in this damn house for years rather than weeks, lusting after *him!*

"I'll call you back." Charlie hangs up the phone, and then I hear him wandering over to me, his feet heavy against the kitchen floors. "What's wrong?"

I keep my eyes trained on the plate, clasp my hands together in my lap. "Nothing."

He pulls out the chair to my right, making it scrape against the floor, and sits down. He's showered. I can smell the clean soapy aroma of his skin.

"I know there's something wrong." Gently touching my hands under the table, he grasps my attention for a split second, but then I look away.

"Did I cross a line with asking you those questions yesterday?" he says softly. "Have I upset you?"

"What?" I frown up at him. "No, Charlie. I don't hold onto irritation for very long, as I'm sure you've noticed." I have to look away again. I can't stand that intense blueness in his eyes, not this morning, and I can't stand it when he wears his hair back. He's too handsome.

"So, I did irritate you then?"

"For all of an evening," I whisper.

"Okay. Well, if it's not me, then what's wrong? Has something else pissed you off?"

I try to avoid telling him but he goes on, and on, and on, demanding an answer. "I won't relent, Blaire. I want to know what's wrong."

"It's my period, all right?"

"Oh!" He's lost for what to say for a moment, blinking at me as if I just

admitted to something dreadful. “Have you got a stomach ache?”

Shutting my eyes, I shake my head. “But I can't be bothered to train today, if you don't mind?”

“Course I don't mind. Do you need anything? I put all the necessary toiletries in your bathroom.”

“I'm fine.”

Another long pause, then he rises from his chair. He saunters across the kitchen, rustles through the cupboards and the drawers, and then returns with two cups of coffee. “Here.” He passes one to me.

I take it from him and hold it on the table, training my eyes there. The cup is warm against my palms and smells deliciously of the morning and bitter coffee beans.

“Do you want anything in particular to eat?” he asks.

I scowl up at him. “Are you being funny?”

He snaps his thick eyebrows together.

“Why would I want anything in particular to eat?” I say.

“Don't women have cravings when it's that time of the month, huh?” I think he's trying not to smirk as he sits back against his chair, looking as cool as ever.

My scowl hardens. I have cravings every fucking second of every fucking day, but not for food.

“Chocolate?” He raises his eyebrows at me.

“I don't eat chocolate.”

“You should.” He sips his coffee with steady movements. “It's supposed to have natural pain relief chemicals known to be effective on women. And it's supposed to help with bad moods,” he adds with sarcasm.

I don't answer him. I'm worried I'll say something I'll live to regret and end up unleashing the evil within him, because it has to be there somewhere. He can't be like this with everyone, surely?

Guzzling down the rest of his coffee, Charlie gets up and leaves the kitchen without saying goodbye.

I close my eyes with a harsh sigh, simmering over the possibility that I've really upset him. I know I don't say much as it is, but I'm not usually this blank and rude to him. Or I don't think I am.

Half an hour passes, and then he's back with a flimsy blue shopping bag in hand. “Chocolate.” He drops the bag in front of me on the table, shoving car keys away in his jeans pocket. “Eat, and cheer up.”

Shit, he is pissed off.

“Sorry,” I say, looking down, squeezing the cup in my grasp. “I don't know what's wrong with me. I should know better than to be rude to you.”

“S'all right.” He winks at me when I peer up at him. “Do you want to sit with me while I make my phone calls?” He takes a seat next to me again, the wooden frame creaking under his weight. “Tis' gotta be better than being cooped up in your room, no?”

I'm confused. Is he pissed off at me?

I try not to frown at him, keeping my expression ironed out.

I can't really tell what mood he's in.

“I...sure, if you want me to?” I shrug, feeling a bit weird with today's situation. Is it just me, or does he seem different?

“Course I want you to.” Charlie empties out the contents of the bag and peels open a few bars of Galaxy Caramel. He tucks into the chocolate with gusto, popping a few cubes into his mouth amid dialing someone.

I don't think he is pissed off. He seems to be taking my bad mood in his stride.

Strange.

He starts speaking in Spanish to his caller. I make out something about prices, and I feel like I'm intruding.

“Charlie,” I whisper, pointing out, “I can go up to my room if you—”

He shakes his head, giving my shoulder a gentle squeeze. I tense up, wishing he wouldn't touch me. I can't deal with his intensity today. All I want to do is pounce on him or hit him.

Still speaking on the phone, he nods at the chocolate, I assume for me to have some. I grab a square and nip off the corner with my front teeth. The sensations that bloom in me are stimulating. It's like nothing I've tasted before. It's fucking delicious, sugary and creamy and mouth-watering. I can't find the right words to explain what chocolate is like for me.

By the time Charlie has finished with his call, which I think lasts for over an hour, we've eaten the entire contents of the bag.

“Told you you'd like chocolate.” He smirks at me, putting his phone down on the table.

I stare at him in total silence, deliberating on asking him a question.

“What?” he says. Stretching out his large body, he reaches back and holds the top of my chair.

*Fuck it.* It's not like I've got anything to lose.



“What's with you today?” I hug my middle, giving him this wolfish look.

“What's with me?” He seems confused, scrunching up his face. “What do you mean?”

“Why are you being so nice?”

Now, he looks insulted. “Am I not normally nice to you?”

“I...well...” I try to speak but I'm suddenly stuck, too. Yes, he is always nice to me, though he's usually oozing with dark sexual intensity. Today, he isn't. Yes he's still intense, but he's...I don't know...I don't even know why I'm pondering over this.

I hate being on my period. It makes me think too much.

Breaking eye contact, and needing some space, I say, “I'm going to go lie down for a bit.”

I try to stand but he rapidly catches my arm. “This isn't just your period. I have upset you, haven't I?”

I peer back at him, finding his eyes are full of apprehension.

“No, Charlie. You haven't done anything to upset me.”

He nods at my chair, so I sit back down.

“Then what's wrong? C'mon, Blaire...why can't you look at me properly?” His fingers slide down my arm to my hand where he holds me, running his fingers through mine, sending waves through my body.

“Nothing is wrong.” I lick my lips because they're dry, fisting my hand in his.

“Blaire, don't lie to me, Señorita.”

My stomach cramps with anxiety.

“I was just wondering why you're being...I don't know.” I look away from him, my cheeks burning. Why is he doing this now?

He tugs on my hand, making me face him.

“You're not usually like this,” I snap, and then with my free hand, I flick one of the chocolate wrappers. “You don't usually sit with me in the mornings or speak to people in front of me. You usually leave me alone during the day.”

He stares me down, his gaze full of questions. This has to be his most confusing expression. It doesn't suit him.

“Duly noted.” He nods at me and gives my hand a squeeze, making my bones melt.

This is so messed up. He seems to understand me when I don't even understand myself. I have no idea where I was going with this.

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The following morning, Charlie is just as weird and confusing. Actually, worse. He wakes me up by gently giving my shoulder a shake and tells me to join him for breakfast.

“Why?” I throw back the blankets and sit up in bed. “Has something happened?”

It's almost pitch black in my room but I can still see his tall frame at my bedside. He's dressed in black joggers and a black v-neck t-shirt.

“No, nothing's happened.” He goes over to the armoire and pulls open the doors, gathers some of my clothes, and passes them to me. “Everything's fine.”

On alert, I slip out of bed in my pajamas, a gray spaghetti strap vest with shorts. I rub my eyes in an attempt to gather my wits, and then I see the time. I sigh with frustration. Who the fuck gets up at four thirty A.M. unless it's work related?

“If everything's okay, why do you want me up so early, Charlie?”

“Because I want to have breakfast with you, and this is the time I eat in the mornings.”

Puzzled, I reach for the clothes in his arms, carefully studying him. He doesn't seem uneasy or fidgety, so I'm almost certain nothing has happened. He gives me his best smile as I stare at him, one that makes me feel hot from within.

“Chop, chop,” he says in a playful manner, gesturing for the bathroom.

I'm not sure what to make of his intentions but I go with the flow. I'm too tired to do anything else right now. While he's pacing around my bedroom, reading a message on his phone, I enter the bathroom to brush my teeth, change my sanitary pad, and get dressed. When I'm ready, I follow him through the house.

It's dark in the entrance hall and so quiet I could hear a pin drop. I glance out the windows on either side of the front doors. The sky is presidential blue with a glowing pink moon, or the sun.

What is with this man and early mornings?

In the kitchen, I'm greeted with an arsenal of chocolate scattered across the dining table, a few newspapers and a pen for the crosswords.

“To keep you occupied,” Charlie says, tapping a finger against the table

where the newspapers are. He then pulls out a chair, and as I sit, he pushes me against the table.

“You didn't have to go out of your way to buy me more chocolate.” I feel at fault just looking at it all.

“I know,” he whispers from behind, “but I want you happy and well.”

I don't really know what to say about that, so I don't say anything at all.

He wanders into the kitchen's alcove cooking space and whips up some scrambled eggs on toast with warm maple syrup, and then we eat sitting opposite each other like we usually do. I'm a little on edge about his behavior-mood, but he seems to be as happy as a clam at high water. He asks how I'm feeling this morning, if I have a stomach ache. I tell him I'm fine, spreading butter across my toast. “I don't really get stomach aches.”

“That's good then,” he says, his eyes glittering with something as he looks at me from over his coffee cup. “I think this time of the month suits you. You've got a nice pink tint to your cheeks.”

Wrinkling my nose, I focus on my breakfast, striving to ignore his weird mood but it's very hard. This is a new side to Charlie I've not met before.

Once we've finished with breakfast, he cleans up. I aim to get up from the table so I can go back to my room for a few more hours of sleep, but he orders me to stay put. “I want you to sit with me again today while I work.”

My face twists with bafflement. “Why? Surely you don't want me—”

“Sit down, Blaire,” he points at my chair, “I want you down here with me, not locked away in your room until lunch comes.” His tone of voice is clipped and demanding, so I do as I'm told and lower onto the chair without questioning him further.

After he's cleaned up the kitchen, he returns to the table with coffee for us both, and begins working. Keeping a suspicious eye on him, I execute the crossword puzzles in the newspapers, and read the headline stories. He makes over a dozen calls. He leaves the kitchen for a few that I assume he doesn't want me prying in on, but I still learn a lot about him today. I'm not sneakily listening in on his conversations, but I can't exactly avoid hearing what he says, because he's sitting right next to me now.

Charlie sells mercenary army details—well, the army details are for hire—and he charges a fortune. For ten men to execute a job it's ten-million English pounds, and whoever is buying doesn't bat an eyelid because there are no negotiations. I think Charlie even sells himself as a soldier, but I'm not too sure. That part of the conversation isn't so clear cut because I zone out when

he touches my hand, asking if I want another coffee.

“Yes, sure.” I forcefully smile at him as he begins across the kitchen, a question niggling away at me. “Charlie?” His name is out of my mouth before I can stop myself—I’m blaming everything on my period.

From the kitchen space, he faces me.

“Aren't you worried I'll hear something I shouldn't? You know, with you speaking in front of me?”

He laughs at me. “Who you gonna tell, Blaire?” He pours out the coffees with steady motions. “Maksim?”

“I wouldn't tell Maksim any of your business,” I spit out, illogically affronted, “even if he asked me.” And that's the utter truth. I know Maksim will ask about what's been going on with Charlie, but for some reason, deep down, I know I won't tell him about Charlie's business. It's not mine to tell.

Charlie is stunned by my snappy retort. He looks at me, wonder flashing in his eyes. The atmosphere freezes between us. I don't break eye contact. Sitting tensely in my chair, I hold his executed stare.

Still watching me, he saunters back across the kitchen and puts down two cups on the table with heavy thuds. He grabs the back of my chair, towering over me, causing me to crane my head back so I can maintain eye contact. We silently watch each other like this, and for the first time ever, I don't feel like shying away from that powerful stare of his. I feel strong in standing my ground.

“You know”—he half smiles at me, reaches out, and gently pinches my chin—“I actually believe you.”

I scoff at him, tugging out of his grasp. He fucking should believe me. I'm not a liar.

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We reach a turning point after I tell Charlie I won't speak of his business.

I don't know what changes between us precisely, but something does. I can feel it in the air in the coming days. The way he looks at me with more than desire in his eyes, and the way he speaks to me now. There's no holding back on his behalf anymore—he's not once left the kitchen to have private conversations on his phone. I find I'm more comfortable around him now than ever before. I want to open up to him on another level. Connect with him.

Over breakfast on Wednesday morning, I boldly confess, “I know you lead the Los Zetas.”

He smirks at me, sprinkling crumbs of toast from his fingers onto his plate. “I gathered that when you told me you studied them.”

“Oh.” I glance away, feeling like I've betrayed him or something. “I have been meaning to tell you that I know. I just...”

“S'all right.” He shrugs as if he doesn't much care. “I haven't exactly hidden the fact from you, have I? You've been listening in on my phone calls for days now.”

“Yes, I guess.” I don't feel bad for too long, partly because, as he just said, *s'all right*. And partly because I have other things on my mind. “Are your services for sale too?” I ask, thinning my eyes with curiosity. “Or do you just hire out your men?” He just got off the phone with someone, and I'm almost certain he said he's available in a few months' time.

“No, people can hire my skills,” he says between sipping his coffee. He explains that he charges double for himself to personally commit to a job.

“You're obviously good at what you do then?”

“Yeah. My mother ensured my skills by putting me into a secret military camp when I turned thirteen, so of course I'm good at what I do. Guns and physical combat is all I've ever known. I trained all my top ranked men, who now train their own details.”

“What do you do though, exactly?” I want to imagine what he's like in action.

He tells me that he and his men sometimes commit terrorist attacks, so the American government can blame other religious communities in pursuit of oil and gas. “But my men and I typically carry out search and rescue missions, and political correctness—In our own fashion.” He laughs when saying this.

“Political correctness?”

He nods. “We want Mexico returned to us. Others out there don't realize how kind my people are, Blaire. We don't want Mexico overpowered by the puppeteer Americans. So, when the Americans try to implement New World Order rules in our country that ensure us no economic equality, we retaliate in ways we know will force them to back off—by mostly fiddling with the stocks and shares. America cares about nothing more than money.”

Cupping my chin, I soak up everything, falling further and further down the rabbit hole that is Charlie. I even conjure up the courage to ask about his

sister. She's been on my mind the past few days, I've no idea why.

“You don't have to tell me if you don't want to,” I say softly.

“My, you're a curious little cat this morning.” He smiles at me with indulgence. His phone buzzes on the table with an incoming call but he cancels it, pressing the red 'decline' button.

“I'm not prying,” I say. “As I said, you don't have to tell me if you don't want to.”

“No”—he puts down his cup—“it's fine. I like talking to you.” His face softens as he speaks of his sister, Gina, telling me that I remind him of her in many ways. “But you're evidently a lot stronger and more perceptive than she was.”

“What happened to her, Charlie?”

He gestures for the chocolate on the table so I pass it to him, and he declines another call. “My father was a conceited, greedy French pig,” he says, peeling open a bar of Galaxy Caramel.

“Your father was French?” I give him a surprised look, widening my eyes.

“Yeah, but when he married my mother, he became an American citizen and took her name.” He tells me that his mother was a Latin American who fell deeply in love with his father. They had nothing, so his father joined the American army, though he abandoned them to create the Los Zetas when he saw that if he had enough soldiers, he could take over Mexico. “The organization he created grew stronger, and my father thirsted for money and the wrong kinda power.”

I learn that his father started trafficking young girls to fund his men because back then the Los Zetas didn't have any connections with the American government. “I was the one who solidified a political connection and other ways to earn cash. As you know, I won't deal in sexually exploiting children.”

“Yes,” I whisper. “I've heard you mention that.” I want to ask why he associates with men who do abuse kids if he's so against it. But I don't. I hold my tongue, as he continues talking to me about his sister, telling me a dark story.

“One evening, my father took my little sister and my mother to a fancy party in Columbia,” he says, “but when they returned home, the only thing my parents brought back was a bag full of money.”

So, that's why he has issues with men abusing young girls. It's because of his sister.

My heart sinks. I have no idea why. I've never felt guilt for anyone before. No one but James and Maksim—and I only pity Maksim when he tells me stories of how his parents abused him.

“I looked for Gina, but what I found wasn't her,” Charlie says, focusing on the chocolate. “You know the rest.”

“You chopped off your father's...you know?”

Side-glancing at me, he nods. “Then I cut out my mother's heart and burned it.”

I huff in agreement, crossing my arms. “I don't blame you for doing that. If anything, you should have made her death as slow and as painful as you made your father's.”

He snaps his eyebrows together. “It doesn't bother you that I massacred my own parents?”

“No,” I say honestly, confused as to why he'd think it would bother me. “Why would it bother me?”

We're quiet after I say this, the conversation lingering, and Charlie is just looking at me with some strange emotion in his eyes.

I'm glad it wasn't Maksim who ended Charlie's sister, but that doesn't make me feel any better about what I now know. I've never lost anyone before, so I can't comment on what it feels like. I only know what Maksim's told me. *“Loss is like living in a black hole that's too deep to climb out of. Only time can make it smaller.”*

“Things are different in Mexico now,” Charlie says, breaking the silence. “None of my men deal in the underage sex trafficking industry. They know I'll cut off their nuts if they do.”

“And what about girls who are of age? Why do you associate with men who force their prostitution?” There, I said it.

Charlie gives me a sympathetic look. “I can't save the world, Blaire.”

My chest aches as he says that, because he sounds like he really wishes he could.

“As much as I'd like to, I'm still a criminal who has to take care of thousands of free men, so I have to draw a line between what darkness I will and will not accept. That's just the way it is for people in my line of work. You know that.” He continues talking about his men, how he pays for each of them to have a home, an education for their children, and hobbies for the wives while their husbands are away working. “Sometimes, we're gone for months, so I like to know that everyone back home is happy and looked

after.”

“That’s really nice of you, Charlie,” I say, getting lost in him. “Do you handle things on your own? Your organization, I mean.”

“No.” He smirks at me, slyness glowing in his eyes. “I’ve got two brothers.”

I raise my eyebrows, stunned and impressed at once. Imagine that, three of Charlie?

“Nicolas—or Nic, as everyone calls him—and Andres,” he says.

“How old are you all?”

“Andres is twenty-five and Nic is thirty-two.”

I arch a brow at him.

“I’m twenty-eight.”

Twenty-eight. Wow.

I study Charlie’s face now. He looks about twenty-eight. He looks young, though with wisdom and intensity in his eyes.

“What are your brothers like?” I say, blinking at him, still studying how handsome he is. I’m really interested in his brothers. I’m interested about how similar they all are.

A large, devious smile spreads across Charlie’s face. “Andres is like me. Nic is an egotistical, smutty bastard, though loyal to the bone.”

“Are they both Los Zetas too?”

“Yeah,” he whispers, looking right at me. “They trained with the military from thirteen, as I did, and were more than ready for the world’s war when I took over the Los Zetas.”

For hours, he tells me stories about how he and his brothers grew up in Mexico. They were all happy until his father left the army. Even after he ended his parents at just seventeen, he is as close as ever with his siblings.

Night falls.

Charlie gets up to make dinner, and I decide to help him. I peel and cut the carrots while he seasons the meat. We continue talking, standing side by side in the cooking space. He asks a few questions about me and how I grew up with Maksim. “You can carry on from the feelings you were telling me about if you want?”

I tell him that I can’t talk about it. “I’m sorry, Charlie.” But he’s understanding. No, more than understanding. As if he never asked me anything at all, he returns to telling me more stories of his childhood.

I can’t ever remember a time when I felt so relaxed in someone’s company.



I'm not sure why I feel so at ease with Charlie, but I do, and I'm glad that I do. Things are better this way.

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## 22

Four days of pure mental connection with Charlie, and my period ends.

I'm so fucking glad that I could die of relief. My desire for him and my overly curious mind are back to a more manageable state, and I'm me again.

We fall back into our routine of sparring at the crack of dawn and eating dinner at sunset, however, now, we have breakfast and lunch together. I pretty much spend all my time with Charlie. I have no idea how he ever makes time for work because he's always with me. Yes, he conducts calls during the daytime—or he does now that I'm done asking questions—but that's where his work seems to end. It's like his life revolves around me. Fuck knows why. I'll be gone in around six weeks' time.

I try not to think about that, *this* ending, because I've come to like living with Charlie. I've grown comfortable around him, used to him. I'm not sure how he's achieved making me feel like this, but he has, and I'm thankful. When he first took me from Maksim, my life was turned upside down. There wasn't a single moment of peace in my days. I was always anxious about him and what he might do to me. Now, I look forward to seeing him. I'm at peace all the time. I wake feeling refreshed and rested, and I spend my days in what I can only describe as contentment. There's no carnage with Charlie. There's no brutality. There's no walking on egg shells. There is just *this*.

Even in the gym, like now, we're sparring and I'm not focusing on all my natural combat senses. I don't feel the need to with him anymore, and he knows. He tells me that he knows and asks why. “What's changed?”

I shrug at him, my chest rising and falling with heavy pants because we've been going at it for over an hour straight.

“Here.” He passes me a towel, so I can wipe my sweaty face. The soft material is cold because it's been lying over our bottles of water, and it smells like Charlie.

“Do you know what I reckon?” he says, helping me out of the ring by holding my hands.

Standing up to him, I say with a smirk, “What do you reckon, Charlie?”

And I pass back the towel.

He drapes it over the ring ropes and puts an arm around my shoulders, pulling me into his side where he's warm and damp. He's never done this before. It makes my stomach flutter.

"I reckon you like me now," he says in my ear, walking me toward the exit doors. "And not just a little bit."

"Well, sure I do." Tipping my head back, I frown up at him. That's hardly rocket science.

As if he's accomplished a great goal, he grins, then he squeezes me against his side. "It took long enough," he says, laughter lingering under his tone. "But you're worth the wait."

Now, my stomach is going like crazy. Does he really mean that?

Reaching the doors, he pushes them open with his other hand and urges me onward with him. It's a little awkward to walk with him like this, under his arm, but I don't mind. I enjoy his affections.

"I've gotta go away this weekend for business," he says. "You want to come with me?"

Today is the day I discover that he does things other than phone calls, it seems, and I will confess, I'm glad he's offered me the chance to go with him. I want to be around him all the time since that change happened between us. He's not at all like Maksim. He talks to me, spends time with me for things other than jobs, and he's never physically hurt me for being rude or insulting.

The fact that he's never hurt me has sealed the deal for me taking a liking to him. He could have tried to condition me with brutality, but he hasn't. I think that was his initial plan, to beat me into being loyal to him, but somewhere along the way he's changed his mind. I don't understand why. I don't care to understand why. All I do understand, all I do know, is I like Charlie, and I doubt anything could sway my mind from that now.

"If you want me to go with you," I say softly, as we reach the bottom of the staircase, "then sure."

"Don't you get tired of that?"

I turn out from under his arm and walk up a few steps, putting us at eye level.

"Of what?" I grip the banister, mentally holding his blue gaze.

"People pleasing," he says, folding his arms over his chest and leaning against the wall with one shoulder. "Don't you ever just want to do what you want to do, hmm?"

My features scrunch up.

“Well, for example”—he stares at my mouth as I lick my lips—“don't you want to eat what you fancy rather than what people tell you to eat? Don't you have taste preferences for food?”

I still don't get him, and he seems to know.

“Okay. How about this, do you want to come with me this weekend or stay here?” He lifts a steady hand to cut me off from interrupting him. “It's a simple question. And don't ask what I want. I'm only interested in what you want.”

“Well, yes, I guess I'd like to come.” I focus on my fingers stroking over the glossy banister outlay. “I've been stuck in this house for nearly two months.”

“I know you have.” He sounds almost sorry, reaches out and gives my other hand a squeeze, causing everything in me to tighten. “That's partly why I want you to come with me. I also need to get some food, so you can come shopping with me and tell me what you want to eat. You can have whatever you want.”

The penny drops, and I can't help this horrid sinking feeling that washes over me.

He's only interested in what I want. I can have whatever I want. That's bullshit. Men like him don't put women before themselves.

I give Charlie this look, silently telling him that I know what he's up to with this emotional bonding. I haven't really noticed it much before today. I've been too focused on fancying him and connecting with him. But now, I know. I don't know how I've suddenly realized his agenda, but I have. Him spending time with me, telling me about his sister and his brothers, letting me listen in on his phone calls, the sweet gestures, the way he looks at me. It all adds up to this.

“What?” he says, pulling his eyebrows together.

“I know what you're doing, Charlie.” I school my attention on my fingers again, so I don't chicken out of telling him what I think. “I know you're trying to emotionally bond me to you.”

He scoffs, but not out of anger. He sounds conquered. “I think we're both a bit past that now, don't you?”

I don't answer Charlie. Not even when he cocks his head to the side, and says, “Are you ever gonna open up to me about how you feel?”

Turning on my heel, I go upstairs and spend the rest of the morning alone,

a little pissed off but more confused than anything.

I try to focus on mentally preparing for London—it's been so long since I was in the city and it reminds me of Maksim in so many ways—but I can't focus. I can't stop deliberating over how Charlie responded to my opinion about the emotional bonding. What did he mean by, *I think we're both a bit past that now, don't you?* I'm almost certain he means he's accomplished his goal with me, but I'm just not sure. Or maybe I don't want to believe that's the answer.

I wrack my brain for hours, while taking a shower and dressing, but I don't come up with a better explanation than his agenda, and that hurts in a way I've never felt before.

I consider asking him what he meant, hoping he'll tell me the truth, but when he comes into my room, dressed in jeans and a long-sleeved red sweater, my thoughts blank.

“You've had a shower?” he says, opening the armoire. He's holding a duffel bag in one hand.

I nod at him, climb into the middle of my bed, and cross my legs, watching him with caution.

“We'll be gone for a few days,” he's speaking to the armoire, “but just in case business drags, I'll pack you some extra clothes.”

“What business do you have to sort out in London?”

He gathers around four days' worth of clothes for me and folds them in the duffel bag. “First, I need to see Maksim.”

“Maksim?” I say, my eyes widening. “You-you want me to come with you while you see Maksim?”

“No.” He glances back and laughs fondly at me. “You can stay at the hotel while I pay him a visit.” He then says something about meeting up with his men, but I'm not really paying attention. I'm too fucking nervous about running into Maksim while with Charlie. How uncomfortable will that be?

Strolling across my room, Charlie puts the bag on my bed. “Once everything is taken care of, we can go out for dinner if you want? Then we can go dancing or go see a movie.”

I don't think about the whole dinner and dancing-movie thing. I couldn't even if I wanted to.

“What is it, Blaire?” Holding my questioning gaze, Charlie gives me his full attention.

“Why haven't you seen him, already?” I hide my hands in the sleeves of

my sweater. “I thought you were meeting up with him a week after you took me?”

I remember Maksim saying on the night Charlie took me, *I'll see you in a week or so, Charlie.*

“I've been enjoying my time with you.” Charlie sits next to me, causing me to sink into his side because the bed dips. He looks down at me, his eyes too blue. “I've not wanted to leave.”

My chest does that odd squeezey thing as he says that. How strange that we both feel the same?

Or do we, really?

“Do you want to come with me for the weekend?” he asks, his eyes flickering between mine. “Blaire?”

“What did you mean by, you think we're a bit past that now?” There, I asked him, and I feel better for it.

There's a moment where we stare at each other. I'm beckoning him to just tell me the fucking truth. He's very deadpan.

“I've got feelings for you,” he says in time, sounding really sincere. “What'd you think I meant?”

“Oh.” I blink at him all cross-eyed, my cheeks blazing. I never expected him to say that. “I don't know what I thought you meant. I guess I just...” Shaking my head, I stop this conversation with, “Never mind.”

“Oh'kay,” he says, skeptical. He then touches a length of hair on my shoulder and runs his fingers down it. “Do you want to come to London with me then, hmm?”

I shake my head minutely, dropping my gaze. I don't want to be anywhere near Maksim while living with Charlie. It's too weird. What if Maksim calls me over or something? Would I need to ask Charlie for permission?

Fuck, this is so uncomfortable.

“S'all right, Blaire.” He gives my foot a squeeze, making my toes curl against his hand. “If you want to stay here, then you can. I've told you many times that you can do whatever you want to do while living with me.”

Closing my eyes, I breathe out with relief. That was easier than I thought it would be.

“Do you want me to bring anything back for you?” he says softly. “Do you need anything?”

I try to focus on my needs but I can't—my head is swimming—so I shrug. “All right,” he whispers.

“Will you be okay going on your own?” I ask, a sickening feeling of worry coming over me. What if something happens to him, and I'm not there to protect him?

He flashes me his most doting smile. “I'll be fine, Blaire. All my men will be around.”

“At the hotel too?”

He nods.

That eases my worry a little, though I'm still nervous something might happen to him. Maybe I should just go with him? But what if we bump into Maksim?

I frown to myself, conflicted.

Though I'm clearly acting awkward, Charlie isn't. He gets up, leans over, and kisses me on the head, sending some strange feelings through my chest.

“Here's the key for the white Range Rover.” He pulls it out of his jeans pocket and puts it on the bed beside me. “There's money under the driver's seat, so if you want to go out for anything or if you want to get takeout, spend it. There's a few takeout menus in the drawer under the coffee machine. To leave, the gate code is four sevens, two ones, and nine.”

I smile at him, mentally bidding him goodbye.

He leaves for two days. I count every minute.

## 23

Day one alone: I wake feeling relatively normal—I guess because I'm subconsciously expecting breakfast to be made and waiting for me in the oven. It isn't of course, so I thoroughly beat a few eggs, season in salt and pepper, melted butter and double cream, and scramble them in a hot frying pan with a drizzle of olive oil. It feels peculiar to be cooking again, but it all comes back to me.

After pouring a coffee, I take my breakfast to the table where I find a military style laptop and a note. Holding my plate in one hand, I put down the coffee and lift the note to my eyes.

Thought I'd leave this out for you. The password is Decena-in-numbers,  
literally.  
X

A warm feeling spreads through my chest at the sight of Charlie's note. Yes, it's brief, but it feels like he's here as I read it.

I run my thumb over that X, wondering what it means. I soon learn it's not part of the password because I type it in and get a warning.

Sitting up at the table under the warm sunshine beaming in through the windows, heating up my back, I eat my breakfast while reading over the note a few times, chewing slowly because I'm concentrating. He's left this out to keep me occupied, just like he did with the newspapers. I smile for so long that my cheeks ache, but then I roll my eyes. I've officially lost it, become a hormonal female statistic, and I suddenly feel like I've been too judgmental of women. I've always mocked their weakness when it comes to men, the whole 'deer in headlights' stare and stuttering over words. But now, I get it. Even while I'm not actually that silly yet, I get it.

To take my mind off my own inanity, I fire up the laptop but end up spending my morning reading up on French-Spanish guys, of all things. I don't know where the need to research Charlie's culture has come from, but I



find it all very calming.

The French don't waste time, Google says when I do a more thorough search, while Spanish men apparently like to draw things out, soak up every moment. I laugh to myself, thinking that's what Charlie is like to a T. He's quick to force intimacy but then takes his time once he has me in a state of desire.

Next, I look up what a capital X on the end of a message means. It denotes a kiss, Google says.

A strange sensation moves through my body, like a sinking-fluttering sensation but it makes me feel happy. He must know what an X means on the end of a message. He isn't thick.

Lunchtime comes, though I'm not hungry—I'm too hocked up on this weird fluttering sensation in my stomach—so I shut off the laptop, clean up my breakfast, and head for the gym to train.

A dark cloud comes over me in here. It's a lonely feeling, given I've always trained in here with Charlie. The space feels bigger and colder, and I jump every time I hear the slightest sound, like the drains in the walls clanging. I've never heard that in here before. It's so eerie.

I shower after working out. Then I go downstairs and make myself something to eat for dinner, which isn't much—just chicken and bacon pasta. The chicken doesn't taste half as good as when Charlie cooks it.

*Stop thinking about him*, I scold myself, but I can't. It's been a really odd day. Actually, odder than the first day I spent with Charlie. I've never been completely on my own before. I've always had my phone at least, in case Maksim needed to give me orders. But today...I don't know. I feel a bit lost and mentally white.

The sun setting on the horizon, I go outside and strive to center myself in meditating, reaching high above my head and putting my hands together to stretch out.

*I wonder where Charlie is now...if he's safe.*

I admonish myself again for thinking about him, but it's no use. I can't meditate either. The longer I try, the more mentally swamped I become. For the first time in my life, my thoughts aren't flowing freely. They're just overflowing, every emotion I've ever felt for and against Charlie romping. Fierce protection over Maksim. Anxiety when I first met Charlie. Anxiety mixed with a dollop of fear when Charlie told me in Maksim's kitchen that he'd bought me. Lust. Frustration with Charlie's prying. Enchantment. Desire.

Now, I am sure I'm fond of him. I maybe even care about him. I find that the most disturbing thing because I'm not allowed to care about anyone other than—

Giving up in the garden, I go up to my room and take a cold shower, then I sink into bed.

I don't sleep much this night. I'm flooded with dirty dreams. Charlie's mouth is all over my body, and his hands are exploring every corner of my soul.

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Day two alone: I have breakfast while again reading this stupid note. Then I clean up the kitchen and venture into the gym. I feel really isolated in here, just like I did yesterday. I find myself wondering about the gym equipment, unsure of what kind of training I fancy. I start out on the treadmill, but give up halfway through a session. I then wrap my hands for the boxing bag, hopeful it'll stimulate my mind, but even that loses my interest. I stop for a moment and stand about in a conflicted manner. I then lift my fists in another attempt and hold them there under my chin, but I'm just not into this.

I skip lunch and have an even harder time at meditating, my thoughts scattering.

I feel very lost in my days, like I don't belong anywhere or something. It's this droning style of living, I think. I'm not used to it. It's driving me nuts.

At dinner time, because I'm sick of being in this house all by myself, I decide to go out and grab something from a fast food place. Probably McDonalds. I like McDonalds. It's an easy style of eating.

I pull on my jacket, swipe the car key from the bedside cabinet and jog down the staircase, outside to where the Range Rover is parked.

“You're her, aren't you?” a Spanish peppered voice says from behind. “Blaire-Markov?”

Before I turn around, I pull my heavy gun out of my jacket pocket, hold it against my leg, and then I face her.

She's extraordinarily beautiful, standing there under the burning orange sunset, in front of a beaten up old Mercedes. She's wearing a thigh length red dress. It hugs her bronze, curvaceous body with large breasts and coke bottle hips.

Remaining deadpan in my pose, I search her face to analyze what her deal

is. Oval shaped with large, deep brown eyes and facade blushed cheeks. Her full lips are coated in something glossy, and her dark, chocolate brown hair is pulled back so tight her eyes are elongated.

How did she get through the gates? Does she know the code?

She slowly comes up to me with a walk that would make men bow at her feet, swaying her hips, her black heels crunching against the driveway. The way she's looking at me—curious and damn right pissed off.

She's something to do with Charlie. I'm certain.

“You can't be her.” Stopping a foot away, she stares me up and down with pure hatred, twisting her lips. The evening breeze carries her scent, something sweet like strawberries. “You're barely a woman, and you're not exactly pretty, are you? You're not even Latino.”

Raising my eyebrows, I blink at her, stunned by her audacity to insult me. Definitely something to do with Charlie.

“Are you her or not?” she demands an answer, pointing a red-nailed finger at me.

“Yes, I'm Blaire,” I say, keeping my tone level. “What do you want?”

“You're actually Russian?” Grimacing, she flashes gleaming white teeth. “He hates Russians.” She sounds like she's talking to herself, clarifying something. “I want to know why Charlie Decena would prefer you to me!”

“Huh?” Why would she think that?

“Yes.” She swallows down what looks like a heave. “He told me earlier tonight.”

He told her that he wants me over her? That's not right.

“I traveled five and a half thousand miles to see him because he's been gone for months now, and he told me that he doesn't want me anymore.” She scoffs with disgust, shaking her head. “It didn't take much to find out why.”

She must be a jealous ex-girlfriend. *Great.*

“Look, I don't know what's going on between the two of you”—I tuck my gun away, sure I don't need to use it on her—“but it's none of my business. If you've got beef with Charlie, call him.”

Turning on my heel, I try to walk away but toothpick fingers close around my wrist, urging me to stop.

“I'm not done talking,” she hisses from behind. “I want to know what's going on with you two. Are you his girlfriend?”

“What?” I look back, screwing up my face, on the verge of laughing. “No. I'm not Charlie's girlfriend.”

“Don't you fucking lie to me, little girl!”

“Why ask me that question if you're not going to believe my answer?” I tug out of her pathetic grasp and face her properly. I really can't be dealing with this shit. “I'm not Charlie's girlfriend, and whether you believe that or not is your problem, not mine.”

“If that is the case, then why is he at a gangster's party making a show of how much he likes you?”

My stomach rolls with nerves because I can't help thinking Maksim is at that party.

She gives me the once over again, revolted and livid at once. “How can a girl like you—a filthy Russian—entertain a man like him?” She gets in my face now, putting us nose to nose. “That man is a sadist junkie, so how the fuck can you keep up with the pace?”

I grind my jaw, feeling an irrational need to defend Charlie. “Not that I have to explain myself to you”—I walk into her, causing her to step back with caution—“but Charlie hasn't been sadistic toward me. I've no idea what the hell has happened between you two, but leave me out of it.”

I turn to walk away again, but she says, “Ohhh, come on, Señorita. You'll be telling me he's a tender puppy next. Cuddles and kisses on the couch while you watch movies, is it?” She laughs out loud with clear sarcasm. “Oh please, little girl. I know that man like the back of my hand—I've been fucking him for two years!”

“Good for you,” I say, feeling a pang of something in my stomach. “Now, if you don't mind, I have to go.” I really, really want to hit her but know I shouldn't. I've never in my life used my physical abilities to hit a woman—not unless Maksim ordered me to—and I'm not about to start now.

Using the key to unlock the car, I pull open the driver's door but notice she's writing a message on her phone, so I wait by the car, wondering what she's doing.

Her phone blows up with an incoming call, and as soon as she answers, I know who it is.

“You don't want me because of this Russian little girl, hijo de puta?” she says in Spanish, shaking her pretty head at me. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

I can hear Charlie yelling down the phone in Spanish and then she puts it on loud speaker, flashing me an evil smile.

“How fucking dare you go to my house and confront Blaire, you bitch!”

he shouts so loud the speaker cracks. “When I get my hands on you, Celine, I’ll knock the life outa you before putting a bullet in your fucking head! You hear me?! ¡No me jodas!” *Don’t fuck with me.*

“This is what Charlie is like,” she says with obvious amusement, unveiling her agenda of putting him on loudspeaker. “He’s not a very nice man.”

He doesn’t sound it at the moment, spitting out every curse word in his own language, but I know he’s just lost his cool. I’ve seen every square angle of Charlie. I know he can be nice.

“Then what’s your problem?” I go over to her. “If you think he’s not a very nice man, why are you here?”

“Because he’s mine, you little puta!” Her body literally shakes. I think she wants to hit me as I do her.

“Fuck off before I lose my patience with you,” I say in an odd, tranquil tone. “This isn’t anything to do with me, so why don’t you go find him and sort it out?”

“Yeah, you know where I am, Celine,” Charlie says down the phone in his own language. “Come here and we’ll have it out.”

There’s a long pause of silence between us all, the energy in the garden stark with fury.

“Does he strangle you to enhance an orgasm?” she says, as if to rile me, and Charlie is going nuts on the phone now. “Belt you so hard that you can’t walk for days? Order you to remain in one place on your hands and knees until he says otherwise? He’s fucked up like that, Blaire,” she says my name with such abhorrence. “He derives pleasure from hurting women, and do you know why?”

My stomach twists with—I can’t even explain.

“Celine, if you don’t shut the fuck up...!” he yells in Spanish on the phone. “¡Hostia!” *Fuck!* “I’m gonna kill her—get my car,” he yells at someone else, still speaking in Spanish. “You listening, Celine? If you’re there when I get back, I’ll fucking strangle you to death. How’d you like that, hmm?”

“You know I won’t mind, Cariño,” she says with lust, tipping her head to me. “That’s the difference between you and I, Blaire. I’ll do whatever it takes to keep him satisfied.”

My cheeks are pale and I feel sick to my stomach with anger, barely containing myself. I don’t give two shits about what Charlie fancies, but I don’t want to stand here listening to some beautiful woman who’s clearly in love with him, tell me about their sexual encounters.

In a low, deceptively calm voice, I warn, "You've got two minutes to leave before I rip your head off."

She steps back instinctively, and I can see her heart must be racing with nerves.

"Yeah," I say, prowling toward her, "I'm not sure if you know me, but I reckon I can break your neck in three seconds, and it doesn't look like Charlie will give a shit now, does it?" I gesture at her phone, which is now silent. "Get in your car and leave, before you can't."

She stands there staring at me, I imagine questioning if I'm telling the truth.

*Fuck this.*

I grab for her long, sleek ponytail and drag her kicking and screaming to her car. There, I drop her on the graveled driveway, warning, "This is your last chance to go, or I'll keep you here for when Charlie gets back."

She scrambles to her feet, dropping the phone. She fumbles to pick it up and yanks open the driver's door. Then she jumps into the driver's seat before struggling to put the key in the ignition.

I watch her to make sure she leaves, the uncontrolled way her hands are shaking. Even after three attempts she still hasn't got the key in the hole. I feel a little bad for her. She's obviously in love with Charlie and is just here fighting to get him back. I understand. He's a gorgeous man. Most women would kill for someone like him.

I lean into the car, snatch the key out of her bony hand, and fire up the engine.

"Don't come back here, Celine," I say in her face, holding her watery brown gaze, "because I really don't want to hurt you."

"I love him," she whimpers, her lips wobbling, and a single tear drops down her cheek. "I just want him back. Don't you understand that?"

There's a moment between us. I pity her, and I sigh to show that I do. I know she loves him.

"Sometimes, we love what we shouldn't," I say, then I slam the door shut and walk back across the driveway, debating between the house and the Range Rover. I won't be able to endure food now, not after this, so I go back inside the house.

On autopilot, I make a cup of coffee, desperately trying to switch off mentally, but I soon realize coffee is a bad idea. I won't be able to sleep if I drink coffee now. So, I pour it down the sink and take the laptop from the

kitchen table up to bed to study into the small hours as a distraction. I try to put what happened out of my mind by focusing on Russia and what's going on in the news, and because I can't—that woman keeps popping into my head, the things she said, how random her arrival was—I search for a book that I love to read. It's working, my idea of a distraction. I manage to get lost in the story of a queen consumed with guilt. My eyes race back and forth reading the novel on the glowing laptop screen.

*“Does he strangle you to enhance an orgasm? Belt you so hard that you can't walk for days?”*

I must've fallen asleep because the next thing I know, a hand pushes my hair back out of my face. On alert, I lean away from that hand, and when I look over the edge of my bed, culpable blue eyes smile at me.

“You're back?” I say to Charlie under my breath. Putting the laptop aside, I sit up on one elbow.

Charlie nods, crouched beside me with his elbows on his knees. He's all gorgeous in jeans and a black round-neck t-shirt, with his black hair a little longer and unruly around his face. “Thought I'd come check you're still here.”

“Of course I'm still here.” I rake my hair back over my head, squinting through the sunrise. I've been out for hours, but it feels like I've had barely an hour's sleep. “Why have you come back early? I thought you were leaving for the entire weekend?”

His eyebrows shoot up. “After what happened, you want to know why I've come back early?”

What happened...*Does he strangle you to enhance an orgasm?* I hate knowing this. It doesn't bother me that he obviously has sadist tendencies—it's not like I'm unfamiliar with men who are like this—I just hate the idea that I've met someone he's shared this with. It's the most fucked up, annoying emotion, bubbling under the surface. I don't get it.

“Don't worry about it, Charlie.” I force a sleepy smile at him, endeavoring not to let this come between us. “Did everything go okay?” I want to know if he saw Maksim, but I'm not quite sure how to ask.

“Like clockwork,” Charlie says softly, winking at me, and then there's an odd moment between us.

Silence, and he's hesitating to tell me something. I can sense it.

“What's wrong?”

“What she said”—he studies my eyes, pausing again—“I would never do anything like that to you. You know that, don't you?”

A weird tightness forms across my chest.

“You don't have to explain yourself to me,” I say, sounding mysteriously cold. “I'm not your girlfriend.”

He sighs, tipping his head to me. “I just want you to know, Blaire, that's all.” He sounds very sincere, like he really wants me to know this. “I knew she was in Europe, but I never anticipated she'd come to my fucking house and confront you. I wouldn't have left you otherwise.”

The phone calls...I remember him on the phone a while back, wanting to know who helped *her* leave The Site.

Maybe her visit isn't so random. *Just have to take better note of what's going on around you, Blaire*, I tell myself.

“I thought you said you didn't have a girlfriend?” I say, wanting to know the facts. “I asked you and you said—”

“She's not my goddamn girlfriend.” He seems illogically insulted. “I've fucked her a few times and that's it. She's always known the score.”

“Perhaps you didn't make your relationship status with her clear enough.” I scoff, lying back in bed, confused about why I even give a shit. Maybe it's because I'm tired or wired from the night's events.

Charlie gains height on his feet and sits on the edge of my bed, looking down at me. “Is this gonna cause a rift between us?”

I turn my head to him, glowering. “No. Why would it?”

He doesn't answer my question. He wants to know what she said to me before he called her back.

“Why did you call her back if you want nothing to do with her?”

“She texted saying that she was with you. My guess is because she knew I'd avoid her call otherwise, like the other thousand she's left on my cell over the last month. Obviously, I'm gonna call back. I won't have my bullshit problems confront you.

“What'd she say to you, Blaire?”

Letting out a breath, I roll my eyes and then close them, feeling hidden in the darkness of my mind. “She seems to think we're together or something. She asked why you'd want me over her. I put her straight but of course she didn't believe me.” I open my eyes to look at him, to see his reaction as I ask, “How did she know I was here?”

“She must've overheard me talking about you tonight, and because you weren't with me, assumed you were here at my house.”

I huff. “Makes sense.”



Twisting at the waist, he leans over me and presses a hand against the mattress at my side. "I don't want that woman, Blaire."

"What?" I scowl at him. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because, I don't want this to cause a problem between us," he says, giving me this hard, honest look. "I've no designs on that woman whatsoever, all right?"

My chest squeezes with relief. I don't know why I'm relieved, but I am. I nod minutely.

"Good." He winks at me, and then we stare at each other for a while in connecting silence. I'm almost certain he wants to say more, but he doesn't. He just smiles at me, his eyes glittering with some emotion.

*Kiss me...* I mentally implore, gripping the sheets in my hands while my stomach clenches in sweet anticipation. I don't know where the abrupt urge has come from, but I need him to kiss me.

He doesn't.

After a while of looking at me, he reaches up to touch my face for a split second, making my heart race. Then he gets up to leave my room, quietly clicking my door shut.

## 24

Morning welcomes sunshine in its irony. It's pouring in through the window, making my eyes sting as I blink myself awake.

My throat is sore like it is most mornings, but I put the raw sensation down to needing a drink of water.

I get up out of bed and stretch out, moaning because it feels so good as my muscles unwind. Yesterday briefly flashes through my mind, reminding me of that irritating sentiment that I've put down to jealousy. Then I notice a few bags on the chair in the corner of my room. I wander over and rustle through them, finding shampoo and conditioner, cocoa butter moisturizer, and a group of hair ties. I also notice the car key and the laptop are gone. I'm not really bothered about the car key, but I'd like to keep the laptop. I enjoy studying and reading. It helps take my mind off things when I can't meditate.

I search around my room for the laptop, under the bed and under the pillows, but it's definitely gone. Charlie must have taken it when he came back into my room last night with those bags. That's the only plausible explanation.

Giving up on searching, I strip out of my nightclothes and take a shower with my new products, giving my hair a good scrub. I then relish in moisturizing my skin, lathering the cream between both hands before spreading it all over my body. My legs are a bit bristly because I haven't visited a salon in two months.

I pause, staring blankly at my freckly reflection in the steamed up bathroom mirror.

Two months...It's been two months since Charlie bought me. That means I have four weeks left until I go home.

My heart sinks as I think of this, so I distract myself by getting dressed and going downstairs to find Charlie, leaving my hair down so it can dry naturally.

There's a note in the kitchen by the stove.

Breakfast is in the oven.

X

Smiling to myself about that stupid X-kiss, I take out the plate using a towel and eat scrambled eggs on toast at the kitchen countertop. Charlie wanders in then, dressed in black joggers and trainers, nothing else, his powerful, tan body contracting in muscles. He's on the phone like he usually is, saying something in Spanish about returning to Mexico soon, and that he isn't coming home empty handed.

Our eyes align, and he gives me this sly smile. It's sharp and savage because his hair is pulled back.

My stomach fills with a weird fluttering feeling, and I'm almost sure I'm going to be sick.

I put down my fork and stop eating.

"Yeah, just over a month," he says, still smiling slyly as he comes up to me.

He stops beside me, leaning against the fridge with his shoulder. I can smell that he's just showered, the fresh, musky scent of his skin clouding my ozone.

*Khristos*...it's too early for this.

"Morning, Blaire," he says in a chirpy manner, hanging up his call. He gives me the once over, leisurely gazing down my body. "You're up late. It's past ten."

"I've been sleeping in late," I whisper, trying to control the rage in my stomach.

"You all right?" he asks, gently tapping my arm. "After yesterday, I mean."

I feel that pang of jealousy again but will it away. "Of course I am."

He hums like he doesn't believe me. His eyes taper as they glance between mine. "How was it being here on your own?"

I lift my shoulders. "Fine."

"Yeah?" He raises his eyebrows.

I nod.

"Did you miss me, chica?" I think he's teasing me. He looks like he is, flicking up his eyebrows.

"Like a hole in the head," I say playfully, trying not to grin at him. Though he's been gone for a few days, nothing between us has changed. I like that. It

cuts through all the bullshit.

Crossing my arms, I rest back against the countertop and ask again, “How was London?”

“Same shit. Different day.” He shrugs, folding his arms over his chest.

“You've used the cocoa butter I bought you then?”

I snap my eyebrows together. “How'd you know that?”

Dark desire flashes through his eyes, and he hunches at the neck to come closer. “Because I can smell it on you.”

I glance away from him, reaching for my fork to busy myself.

“You ready to hit the gym?” he says. “Once you've eaten.”

“Actually, Charlie,” I say between bites, “I was going to ask if I could go to a salon today.” I tilt my head back so I can see his face. “I can drive myself, but the car key is gone from my room.”

“You go to a salon?!” he says, his expression lighting up with pure amusement. “Why can I not picture that in my head?”

“Believe me, I don't enjoy going,” I say, having another mouthful of eggs.

I know the joke is on me, but this is a ritual Maksim has me indulge in—going to a salon once a month. He says that he always wants me clean and hair free. I initially hated the idea but I'm used to it now, and as I'll be going home soon, I need to freshen up.

“You know, I think I remember you saying you've been to a salon before when I first met you.” Charlie is smirking at me, amusement still gleaming in his eyes. “What do you have done?”

“At the salon?”

He nods, looking like he's trying his best not to laugh.

“The usual,” I say, giving him a funny look. I don't get why he finds this so funny. Don't most girls go to a salon? “Can I go?”

“Course you can. I'll take you.” He digs into his pocket and pulls out a set of car keys. “I just need to grab a t-shirt. When you've finished with your breakfast, meet me outside.”

He leaves the kitchen, glancing back at me when he's at the door, smirking.

I shake off his humorous mood and eat the rest of my eggs. Then I jog upstairs to grab my leather jacket, double checking to see I've got my gun. I don't like going anywhere without it.

Outside, Charlie is resting against his Range Rover, wearing a black round-neck t-shirt over his black joggers. How is it that even in sportswear he

looks exquisite?

No wonder that woman is going nuts over him.

“Do you want to drive?” he asks, dangling the keys in the air.

I roll my hair around my hand so I can tie it back in a bun. “You can drive if you want. I don't know where we're going.”

Tilting his head, he gives me this look.

“What?” I tug open the passenger door.

“You're not cutting your hair, are you?”

I instinctively touch my bun. “I'll get a trim, but I won't have it all cut off.”

He nods, beginning for the driver's door. “Just keep it long.”

I pull a puzzled face at him, wondering why on earth he cares about whether my hair is long or not.

I slip into the car and pull on my seatbelt, breathing in that strong smell of lemon polish. It reminds me so much of when my car has been cleaned.

My car.

Home.

It all seems so far away now, like my old life could never have happened.

Charlie takes to the driver's seat, fires up the engine, and we drive into a local town, chatting about his stay in London. He says he didn't do anything but eat, work, and sleep. I don't buy that, not for a second. That woman said he was at a gangster's party.

“I thought you said you wanted to go out dancing or whatever?”

He side-glances me. “Yeah, with you.”

I blink at him all cross eyed. Why the fuck would he want to go dancing with me? The only knowledge I have of dancing is dancing someone around a boxing ring.

We're quiet when his phone pings with a text message, so I flick on the radio and take in the view of Tunbridge Wells—that's where Charlie's house is, just on the outskirts. It's very old English and lush with greenery, the streets lined with trees.

“Blair,” Charlie says my name, rounding a corner, “why don't you wear underwear?”

“What?” I burst out laughing to the point where my stomach aches.

“Where did that come from?”

We glance at each other, but then he looks ahead and pulls into a small parking lot. He stops in a double space and switches off the purring engine, facing me.

I try to avoid his question, but he raises his eyebrows at me.

“I do wear underwear,” I say between laughing. “Just not the ones you want me to wear.”

“What underwear do you wear then?” he asks coolly, like this topic of conversation is okay and not awkward.

“I don’t know...I wear sports bras and comfortable underwear. Not scraps of lace.” I roll my eyes, not getting these weird questions he's asking today. First he's interested in my hair, and now my underwear? “I need some money, Charlie, so I can buy an appointment because I haven't—”

Grabbing my hand, he puts a few hundred in my palm. “The salon is over there.” He nods forward. “I’ll wait here for you, unless you want me to come in?” He's dying for me to say yes. I can see the hilarity glowing in his eyes.

“Eh, no,” I say with sarcasm. “I think I'm okay.” I slip out of the car and wander across the parking lot, into the salon. As soon as I push open the heavy glass front door, I notice it reeks of toxic peroxide. I've always hated this smell.

“Good afternoon,” a blonde greets me, giving me a curt look.

I drop all the cash on the white reception desk and tell her that I need a full body wax, a haircut, and my nails filed down.

“Oh, you must be Blaire?” she says, and that curt look is gone.

An iron shield comes up and I step back. “How do you know my name?”

She leans into her desk, her eyes streaming from left to right like she's reading something. “A Mr. Decena called about an hour ago and booked you an appointment.” She peers up at me from whatever she's reading.

“Oh, yes,” I say, relaxing in my pose. “I'm Blaire.”

“Of course. We have a room ready for you. Please follow me.” Clicking her fingers, she assembles a team of beauticians to accommodate me. I spend the next few hours trying not to scream my head off because my skin is on fire from being waxed.

The appointment costs me—no, Charlie, a tidy three-hundred and fifty pounds, but it's worth every penny. My hair is trimmed, my nails are filed down and no longer like cat claws, and I'm smooth to the touch.

When I get back in the car, dripping in smooth, dark red hair, Charlie is on the phone, talking about coming to a political agreement. He addresses his caller as, Congressman. *An American Congressman?*

He gestures over his shoulder with his thumb, so I look in the back seats. There are a few shopping bags. I grab one, pull it open, and my expression

drops when I see a whole bunch of sports bras and normal underwear.

The most natural smile spreads across my face as I peer over at Charlie. He winks at me, puts the car in gear, and we head back to the house. He's on the phone the entire time, and I learn it's definitely an American Congressman he's conferring with. I'm not that surprised. He has told me that he deals directly with the American government.

“Blaire, in the glove compartment,” Charlie says, pulling into his driveway while he's still on the phone, “there's a small red book. Can you get it out?”

Leaning forward, I click open the glove compartment and rustle through a pile of papers, but I can't find a red book. Charlie leans over and tries to help me find it, saying something to his caller about payments.

“There—” he points out, so I grab the red leather book and give it to him.

As I sit back, my face brushes against his. I freeze, the sensation of my skin touching his surging right through me like a zap of electricity. He looks at me, still leaning over. We're eye to eye, and I can't breathe.

He isn't saying anything on the phone now. He's just staring at me, a million emotions flickering through his blue eyes.

I feel like I want to kiss him or something. I almost do, and I'm sure he's expecting me to because he moves closer to me.

In a fluster, I break eye contact and try to get out of the car but Charlie snatches my arm. “Stay put.”

“I was going—” I start to say, but he shakes his head at me.

Shutting my mouth, I sit back and wait patiently for Charlie to end his call, my toes curling in my trainers.

Why does he want me to wait?

---

Five minutes I remain in the car listening to Charlie cut his call short. He's still holding my arm hostage, and I'm sweating bullets.

He finally hangs up the phone and let's go of me, and my heart is roaring in my ears.

“Why do you do that, Blaire, hmm?” he says, shifting in his seat to face me.

I blink at him, silent. I just don't know what to tell him.

His eyes widen for an answer.

“Do what?” I say naively, and I'm surprised to hear my voice comes out normal.

“You know what. Don't be coy with me.”

I stare down and pick at my nails, wishing the moment away. Why does he have to make a meal out of everything?

Charlie runs his fingers into my hair and tugs my head back, forcing me to look up at him.

“I'm sorry,” I say in a sudden panic, thinking I'm in trouble. But then his lips are on mine. He pecks me with a brief, full kiss, making my head spin, and the panic I just felt evaporates. I melt into him and put my hands on his chest, moaning, wanting more, but he breaks away from me within seconds and smiles. It's a dark devil smile, sending another rush of hunger through me.

“Don't ever be frightened of me, Blaire,” he says, still holding my head craned back so we're eye to eye. “I'd never hurt you.”

We stare at each other like this, mere inches apart, his promise lingering in the air. I don't think he'd ever hurt me, but he's so unpredictable sometimes that it makes me uneasy.

“All right?” he says, his blue eyes flickering back and forth between mine.

I nod, licking my lips. His dazzling gaze follows my tongue, his pupils dilating.

“You like salmon, right?” he says, gently pushing my hair back over my shoulder to fix it in place. “Because I've got us some for dinner.”

“Sure,” I say breathlessly, wondering if I just imagined him kissing me.

He reaches into the back seats and grabs the bags. I try to take a few from him, but he won't let me. “I've got them.”

“I can manage a few bags, Char—”

He gives me this domineering look, cutting me off, so I climb out of the car, feeling in a bit of a daze.

He did just kiss me, right?

I go in pursuit of the house, my feet crunching against the stony driveway.

“If you don't”—Charlie walks up beside me—“I can make something else.”

I peer up at him. “If I don't, what?”

He laughs with sly amusement. Yes, he did just kiss me, and he knows exactly what he's accomplished by doing that.



“If you don't like salmon, silly chica.”

“Ohhh. No, honestly, I like salmon.”

His eyes journey down my body, blazing with zeal, and my heart speeds up. It's so intimate when he looks at me like that.

I pick up the pace to put some distance between us and enter the house, baffled to see the front doors are unlocked. Isn't he worried someone could break in?

Inside, the house smells like lemon and fish and... Is that boiled potatoes?

I head for the kitchen, struck to find the table is already laid, our plates set up side by side. On a huge silver platter, the fish is steaming in the middle of the table, surrounded by an assortment of dishes.

“Who cooked, Charlie?” I also notice a few fancy boxes of chocolate laid out beyond the food.

“I had someone cook for us because we were out.” Wandering in past me, he puts the shopping bags down on the countertops and pulls open the fridge, grabs out a beer, and twists off the lid. He has a deep mouthful, sighing like he's been waiting for that all day long.

“A housekeeper?” I ask, rounding the table to look over everything. I pick at some of the vegetables, to eat because I am hungry.

“Something like that.” Charlie crosses the kitchen space and puts his beer down on the table. “Here, let me get you outa your jacket.” He helps me out of my jacket before shrugging out of his own, laying them both over the back of a chair.

I settle at the table. Charlie sits to my right, having another mouthful of beer.

“I got these for you,” he says, and putting down his beer again, he leans over to grab the chocolate boxes. **Dark Sugars** is written on the sides and the lids are clear, so I can see what's in them. One is full of colorful looking cookies—or I think they're cookies. The other houses small blocks of chocolate, which I can't wait to eat. I've had a fancy for chocolate ever since he introduced me to it.

I'm not sure what's in the third box. It doesn't look like chocolate.

“These are truffles,” Charlie says, apparently reading my confusion. He opens the lid and shows me the contents. “I bought you an assortment of flavors because I didn't know what you'd like. These ones”—he focuses on the colorful cookies for a second—“are macaroons. And that”—he shows me the last box—“is the best cocoa chocolate money can buy.”

I don't really know what to say. I can't actually believe he's bought all this for me. So I just smile at him, my heart going a little faster. He smiles back, puts the boxes over there on the table behind the food, and reaches for my plate.

"Was it all right at the salon?" he asks, filling my plate up with fish, vegetables, and new potatoes.

"It was fine," I say softly. "I can do that, Charlie." I try to take my plate from him but it's too late. It is loaded with a healthy portion of everything. He puts it down in front of me, squeezes a drizzle of lemon on my fish, then he dishes up his own dinner.

We're eating much earlier than we usually do. It's just past two thirty in the afternoon. Maybe it's because he knows I'm going to pig out on sweets.

"Your hair looks pretty," Charlie says, glancing at me.

I give him a funny look, noticing there's something crafty glittering in his eyes. I'm not sure, but I feel like he's up to no good. It's the way he's acting today.

Picking up my cutlery, I dig into the salmon. It's lovely. It melts in my mouth and tastes tangy with lemon. I eat in silence, paying acute attention to him, trying to figure out if he's up to something or if I'm going mad.

"You okay?" he asks in time, chewing on a piece of salmon. "You're really quiet."

"I'm fine," I say, swallowing down my food.

Though he doesn't for a second believe me, he doesn't press on. He starts telling me about the phone call he had earlier in the car. "There's a gang crisis going on in North Mexico and my Congressman friend wants me to deal with it." He looks between me and his plate, speaking after every mouthful. "I need to send funds for more weapons, so my men can get rid of the problem before it gets out of hand."

I don't say anything. I listen intently to him, opening my eyes in astonishment when he explains how he took over three cities, so this little issue isn't a problem.

He's achieved more than Maksim.

"Have you ever been to Mexico, Blaire?" He has some more of his beer, and that crafty gleam in his eyes is still there. He's definitely up to no good.

"Yeah." I finish off my food and push against the empty plate.

"Did you like it there?"

I shrug. "It's hot."

“Yeah, it is hot.” He laughs fondly. Then he wants to know where in Mexico I've visited. If I'd ever live there. It's like that moment earlier in the car, the kiss, didn't happen.

“I'm not sure I'd be able to deal with the heat,” I say, looking directly at him, studying him and his odd behavior. He's finished his food too, and now he's leaning against the table on one elbow, bestowing me his full attention.

“People climatise,” he says softly.

I gesture at my hair. “I'm a pale redhead. Not sure I'm meant for the sun.”

He gazes over my hair, utterly fixated. It's streaming down my back in sleek locks. I haven't tied it up since visiting the salon.

“If you had to, would you give it a try?”

“What?” I wipe my mouth clean with a napkin and drop it on my empty plate.

“Try living in Mexico.”

“Oh. Well, sure, if I had to. I doubt Maksim would ever live in Mexico though.” I laugh awkwardly, not sure where he's going with this.

He reaches for my hair and strokes down a length, making my scalp tickle. I don't really know what to say again, so I remain quiet, clasping my hands together in my lap.

“I reckon you'd like it in Mexico,” he says, lifting my hair to his nose. “Where I live, it's a big estate boarded by a village with only the trusted.” He goes right into saying what sort of people live there and how many people live there, which sounds like thousands. “It's completely secluded from the world—you can't even see it on Google maps.”

“Does that woman live there too?” I ask, holding my breath for his answer.

“What woman?” he says, still playing with my hair. “Celine?”

I nod a couple of times.

“Not anymore she doesn't.” He stares right at me then, into my eyes with raw sincerity. “You don't have to be curious about her, Blaire. She's not like you. She's nothing special. Mexico is flooded with *mujer* like her.”

I break eye contact with him, feeling my cheeks heating up. I've no idea why I even wanted to know if she lives near him. It's not my business.

“What sort of things do you enjoy?” he says, going in a different direction of conversation. “Other than sports, I mean. I really want to know.”

“Other than sports *and* food, you mean,” I say, making him laugh. It seems to lighten the mood between us.

“Yeah, other than sports *and* food,” he teases, winking at me.

I tell him about my silly desire to travel to strange places. That I like being around normal people. “I know it's weird, but things are always so dark and intense with Maksim”—I gulp out his name—“so I guess I just like being around the ordinary every now and again.”

“That's not weird. It makes sense.”

“You think?” I ask, genuinely interested in his opinion.

He nods, completely absorbed in me. “We all have our own ways of escaping life as it is.”

“Yes, we do.” I glance down, then back up at him. “I'm not allowed to visit strange places anymore though. You know, since Maksim said—”

“I know what he said.” Charlie pulls the car keys from his pocket and puts them down in front of me on the table. “You can do whatever you want with me. If you want to go out, go out. I won't stop you.”

I really believe him, and in this moment, I don't think I've ever felt closer to him.

“What's it like where you live?” I say.

“There's no bloodshed, Blaire, or we try to make sure there isn't.” Charlie's eyes glisten with possibilities as he says that. “We all live peacefully and spend as much time together as possible, having barbeques, celebrating each other's birthdays, and that kinda thing.” He talks about this over a few hours, while we dig into the chocolate he bought me, and I don't know why, but I feel like he's trying to sell living in Mexico to me.

## 25

I bolt upright in bed with diamonds of sweat dripping down my face and chest.

The moon is glowing low in the curtaining black sky, set between a collection of dazzling silver stars.

Is it morning yet?

Panting steadily, I rub my face. I had a dream that Charlie broke my virginity without permission from Maksim, and I didn't stop him—didn't even try!

I grip my throat, recalling every moment, every phantom image of Charlie's muscular body rippling against mine. It didn't hurt when he thrust inside me, stretching me open. It didn't hurt when he fucked me with gentle rhythm, whispering sweet nothings in my ear, kneading my body with his large hands. I came so hard that I actually had an orgasm—that's what woke me up.

I feel between my legs, sliding my fingers over my soft folds. I'm warm and damp but there is no blood when I look at my fingers. It was definitely a dream I just had.

Why am I wishing it was real? If Charlie ruined me, Maksim wouldn't want me anymore—then again, Maksim would put a bullet in my head and it will all have been for nothing.

I scoff, disgusted with myself. Why the fuck am I thinking about this shit, betraying Maksim's orders? What's happening to me?

Putting my face in my hands, I take a moment to adjust to the real world.

I have to stop this, what's going on with Charlie, but how? How can I stop myself from wanting something when I'm around it twenty-four seven?

I wish I came with an off switch. I've never mulled over so many things in all my life, and I've certainly never remembered my dreams.

Climbing out of bed, I get dressed and brush my teeth, then I head straight for the gym to relieve some of this tension-confusion inside me before Charlie gets up.

Like hell is that going to happen. Someone *up there* is fucking with me.

Charlie is already on the treadmill in the gym. I cannot resist watching him from the doorway. I hold the frame, tipping my head. His body is exquisite, bronze and broad, dusted in hair in all the right places. I can see everything I want to see because he's only wearing gray shorts and trainers, his back muscles bunching with every step he takes. His black hair is damp and curling around his neck and face, making him look like a savage, handsome brute.

The orgasm I just had is all too real.

“What are you doing, standing in the doorway, hmm?” he asks, grabbing a towel to dry his sweaty face.

“Watching you,” I say softly and without shame, then I wander over to him. “You're up early. It's not even four yet.”

He grins, his blue eyes dancing with amusement. “Got a lot of tension in me that needs releasing, hence no sleep and working my ass off in here.”

I smirk at him, crossing my arms. “A lot of tension, huh?”

“You bet.” He sounds like he wants to laugh but doesn't. He's as cool as ever.

While he finishes off his session on the treadmill, I lean back against the wall beside him so we can look at each other.

“Why are you up so early?” he says, giving me a curious stare. “You don't usually roll out of bed until at least six—unless I wake you up.”

My cheeks flush.

“Couldn't sleep,” I say awkwardly, uncrossing and crossing my arms.

“Hmm...” he hums like he knows, his eyes thinning at me.

I glance away from him, down at his phone on the floor beside the treadmill. It's flashing with a text message. Though I'm not one to pry, I can't help reading what the message says.

Just fuck the redhead with or without permission. She'll thank you for it later.

Crouching down, I pick up his phone and double check what it says. My eyes haven't deceived me. Someone named Rico sent him that.

“Blaire?” Pressing a button, Charlie rolls back off the treadmill. “What's wrong?”

I read the message once more, growing angry.

“You've been talking about me?” I look up at him, throwing wolfish

glares.

“What?” He snaps his eyebrows together, drapes the towel over his shoulder, and tries to take his phone.

I don't give it to him.

“Just fuck the redhead with or without permission,” I say, showing him the message. “She'll thank you for it later.”

Charlie's face goes flat. “That's not what it looks like, Amado.”

“No?” I raise my eyebrows. “Well, it sort of looks like you've been telling your friend that I won't fuck you, and it sort of seems like you're bothered.”

“No.” He grinds his jaw. “If you read the rest of the messages, you'll see how the conversation started. Rumors are flying around that I've got a redhead living with me, and before people started assuming the worst of you—which they will when Celine can talk again—I told Rico that it's not like that.”

“Like what?” My voice comes out cold and hard.

“That you're not some puta I'm hooking up with to pass the time while I'm here.”

“I don't believe you,” I say, my anger bubbling on the surface.

He gestures at the phone. “Read the messages then.”

I can't. I'm nervous I'll see something I won't be able to erase from my memory.

“I don't need to read them.” I step up to Charlie. “Your friend's response is all I need. Why would he say that?”

“Give me my cell, Blaire.” He holds out a hand, and I have no idea where it comes from, but I fling his phone at the wall, shattering the glass screen.

“Fuck you.” I narrow a finger at him, looking right up into his eyes with pure wrath. “That's the last time I trust your word.” Turning my back on him, I storm toward the gym exit.

“Blaire!” he yells my name so loud I feel it shake the atmosphere. “Dios mío! Come back here, right now!”

I don't listen to him. I go up to my room and grab my jacket, then I jog back down the stairs, heading for the front door. Before I even grab the handle, Charlie is in front of me. “Where are you going?” he says, blocking my way to the door.

“Out,” I snap, avoiding his eyes. “Move, Charlie.”

“You haven't even had breakfast.”

“I'll get something while I'm out.”

“You don't have any money.”

I defiantly meet his blue stare. “Give me some money then.”

His temples tick. “You're not going out.” He walks into me, hunching at the neck to look at me. “We're not done here.”

“You said I can go out if I want to. You said you wouldn't stop me.”

“Not like this, Blaire.”

I try to sidestep him, but he mirrors my movements.

“Charlie, get out of the way”—my tone is low but violent—“or I'll move you myself.”

Grabbing the collar of my jacket, he throws me back against a wall, causing me to gasp on impact.

“If you didn't just smash up my cell, you'd see that I wasn't mocking you,” he says harshly in my face, making me feel claustrophobic.

I slap him so hard that his head turns, using the full force of my body.

**Wallop!**

“What the fuck...?” He lets me go, his entire body contracting with anger. His right cheek is red and I imagine it's throbbing. “Don't you dare slap me,” he warns, his nostrils flaring. “I've let you get away with too much but if you slap me again...”

I huff at him, not in the slightest bit worried about his warning. I'm not scared of him.

I slip past him but he catches my wrist, hauls me around and into his chest. Thrusting up my knee, I try to hit him in the nuts but he anticipates my move, blocking it with his thigh.

“Let me go!” I scream, pushing against his chest.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” he says, catching my free hand. He then wraps both his arms around my body and imprisons me, my face in his chest. “Whether I said something about you or not is irrelevant. You're mine! I've paid a fucking fortune for you!”

My heart twists and crumbles.

Betrayal. All I feel right now is betrayal for falling for him, trusting him, and caring about him.

I'm so livid that I could rip his head off.

Yanking out of his hold with sheer force, I slap him again, harder this time. **WALLOP!**

“Is that how you see me?” I say, clenching my fist even though my palm is pulsing with pain. “As something you bought yourself? Is that why you're



slagging me off to your friend?”

“No,” he says, breathing heavily, striving to control his rage. “I didn't mean to say it like that.”

“Ohhh, of course you did,” I hiss through gritted teeth. “I bet you're regretting the deal you made with me too, aren't you? Because if you didn't give me *your word*”—I air quote this in a sarcastic manner—“you'd be able to sodomize me whenever you want, until your thirst is quenched.”

His eyes burst into flames, and then he's yelling at me, “I've not touched you since that night! Not unless you've wanted me to!”

“And what? Now you're angry because I won't let you fuck me?”

The veins in his neck throb.

“Why don't you go out and find someone else to fuck?!” I scream so hard that the veins under my eyes pop. “Stop talking me under your spell and find someone else, like that fucking woman Celine!” I go into a full blown screaming rage, and I end up slapping him again. I've no idea what the hell has gotten into me. What he just said hurts. *You're mine! I've paid a fucking fortune for you!*

He doesn't stop me from slapping him, which surprises me, given his warning. He's just looking at me, his left eye red from my blows.

I stop going wild eventually, panting like a feral cat boiling with fury.

“Are you done, huh?” he says, his voice deceptively soft.

My hands shake to punch him.

“Stop being a little bitch and listen to me, Blaire.” He leans into my face, his harsh breaths burning my cheeks. “I didn't say anything bad about you. Rico messaged asking, *who's the redhead*, and I told him you're a friend, that it's not like that. I don't want people thinking you're some puta.” Though he's trying to calm me down, I know he's fuming. I can see it in his eyes. “No one but you, me, and Maksim, knows I paid for you.”

I don't say anything. I'm too agitated to speak, wondering why I even care if he's speaking about me behind my back. I shouldn't care. I don't have the mentality to care about such bullshit, but I do.

Blood pulsing in my ears, we stare at each other in a power standoff, the atmosphere between us on fire. I can't even explain how this happens, but we pounce at each other and kiss so hard that all I can taste is blood. I'm not sure whose blood it is but it's thick and metallic. It's heady.

I push my fingers into Charlie's sweaty-damp hair and cling to him, standing on my tippy toes. I taste his tongue with hungry licks, how supple

and wet it is...how salty his skin is... Charlie's holding my small face in both his hands, devouring me, moaning so hard that his voice vibrates in my body.

I'm so mad with emotions that all I want to do is take off my clothes, and his, and make my dream come true—I want to fuck him until my brains fall out—but I know I can't. I hate that I can't.

“I would never, ever badmouth you,” he says between kisses. “You have to believe me, or all this means nothing.”

“I do believe you.” I bind my arms around his neck to pull him closer. “I'm sorry.”

We stop kissing, but only so Charlie can turn me around and hold me, my back to his front. He's caging my arms to my chest in one of his, and I'm panting so hard trying to catch a breath.

“I've wanted you since the moment I laid eyes on you,” he whispers in my ear from behind. “But I won't ever take you again without *your* full permission.” He's kissing my neck now, making me tingle all over. “I respect you too much for that.”

My eyes are unfocused and my head is swimming, every nerve ending in my body buzzing.

“I want you,” I say in a foreign voice, and I'm not lying. “I'm sorry for going crazy. I'm sorry I've wasted so much time denying—”

“Hush,” he whispers, stroking over my fingers on my chest with his thumb. “S'all right.”

He slips into the front of my trousers with his free hand, still embracing me in his other arm. My ass tightens with nerves as he fingers his way into my underwear, the elastic of my trousers pressing his dusty arm into my pelvis. It enhances my arousal for him. It makes me throb with zest.

I can't believe I'm letting this happen, and after how hard I fought.

I don't feel like myself anymore.

Charlie scissors my throbbing clit and holds me with callous fingers. His huge hand completely covers my sex. I whine out loud, the feeling of skin against skin sending me into a lust fallen meltdown.

“He doesn't make you feel like this, does he?” Charlie massages me, teasing my swollen clit. Around and around he makes my body tingle. “He doesn't make you feel good.”

He's right. Maksim doesn't make me feel this good.

“No,” I breathe out.

One more kiss to the neck and I cave at the knees, my head rushing with

endorphins. Charlie holds me up with his arm still wrapped around my chest.

“I've got you,” he says softly, raining kisses down the beating vein in my neck.

I let my head fall back against his hard chest, my eyes rolling.

He changes motion, rubs me gently in a different rhythm. “I'll always make you feel good, Blaire. I promise.”

“Charlie,” I sob his name, my toes fisting in my trainers as his motions become harder and faster, more demanding.

He slows down when my leg starts to shake. I can't believe how quickly he can make me cum. Is this normal?

Sneaking through my damp folds, he dips the tip of his fingers in my virgin entrance. I try to close my legs to stop him but he whispers, “I'm not gonna break your virginity. Trust me.”

I do trust him. I've trusted him for weeks now.

I open my legs for him, standing on tippy toes again. He relentlessly flicks my clit with his thumb, making me jerk forward in his arm, while he torments me from the inside.

“I do trust you,” I say in a voice so lost to me, closing my eyes.

Carefully pulling his finger out of me, he smothers my clit in my own succulent arousal. It's hedonistic and wet.

“Fuck...” I whimper, digging my nails into his arm over my chest, arching forward.

The more he kneads me, the quicker the build climbs. It's an all new high. My left leg is shaking uncontrollably. I have no idea why my leg does this when I cum, or when I'm about to cum, but it does, and I cannot stop it. It's a tremor in my body.

“Relax,” he says softly, rubbing his smooth cheek against mine so he can speak in my ear. “Just relax, baby.”

“I can't,” I whimper, tightening my face. “I just...” Turning my head to the side, I kiss him with hope that I can focus on something other than what I'm enduring, but I can't.

The kiss turns me inside out.

“Ohhh!” I whine, trembling all over. I'm pulsing so hard, cumming so hard, that it's like every sensation in my body is being sucked into one place, then radiating outward.

He's never made me orgasm like this before. He's never made me feel so mad and wanted and hot all at once.

He wrings me dry, and when he finally stops rub-fucking me, I'm absolutely wasted. My heart is hammering in my chest. I let my head fall forward, trying to catch a breath.

“Charlie,” I pant, holding his arm with my nails. “Charlie, I...we...”

“Shhh.” He takes his hand out of my trousers, and I hear him sucking his fingers. “Kick off your sneakers so I can take your trousers off.”

I do. My legs are wobbly like jelly, but I toe the backs of my trainers and kick them off one by one. I manage to say his name again, and what I'm feeling like inside. “This is so wrong. This shouldn't be—”

“Hush, baby.” He hides his face in the back of my hair, holding me tighter in his arm in an effort to cuddle me or something. “Everything that's wrong in the world always feels right.”

## 26

Life with Charlie turns into a bit of a lusty blur after my outburst. He's twisting my mind—it's like a battle field—and I'm letting him. I don't even think about Maksim anymore. I just want Charlie, whether it's for a fight or for an orgasm or for company. Most of all his company.

He makes me cum more times than I can count—in the boxing ring, on the kitchen table, on the staircase when he catches me coming down one morning—and I never stop him. I couldn't even if I wanted to. I'm lost to myself. Lost in him.

He kisses me down there like a starving man, sucking my folds and kissing my bud with gentle pecks, turning me on so badly that my leg vibrates, until I fall apart, begging and sobbing with wild desire.

I suck his cock at least three times a day because I want to. I crave the taste of him. Revel in having him under my power for a time. I need to please him as he does me, to show him how much I desire him because I can't say the words.

He never gets aggressive with me or loses control like he did before. He never forces himself down my throat, or make me gag as he did when I first took him in my mouth. Sometimes, he doesn't even let me finish him off. He's in too much of a hurry to satisfy me, and always with his mouth.

I'm falling deeper and deeper down his rabbit hole with every day that passes. I emotionally spiral out of control when he first cuddles me. We're sitting at the dining table, having just eaten an early breakfast. He's staring at me for a while—I can sense it—until he tries to pull me onto his lap. I'm so caught off guard because I'm absorbed in doing a crossword that I actually ask, "What are you doing?" And I stop him with an uplifted hand.

Grinning, and ignoring my warning stare, he pinches the pen out of my hand and flings it on the table. He then grabs my hips and effortlessly lifts me up over his lap so we're face to face, my legs dangling on either side of his waist. His hard cock is pressed against my sex, stirring my arousal, and I can't help letting out a heavy moan.

His pupils magnify when I moan like that, and the blueness turning black with ardor.

We look right at each other, as I put my hands on his tough chest to control the rage within me. He reaches over my shoulder to let down my hair, and breathes in the smell as it falls around my body like a dark red cape.

“I want you to always wear your hair down,” he says. Tipping his head, he gazes at me with stark concentration. “Unless we're in the ring sparring.”

Swallowing past the tightness in my throat, I nod. He leans down to kiss my mouth then with a raspy groan, taking me in a dark, ardent kiss. I watch him, hypnotized by the blue-blackness in his eyes.

The sun rises behind us, causing the kitchen to glow with bright orange rays. It makes this moment that much more beautiful. Now, every moment with him is beautiful to me.

Charlie cups my face, covering my cheeks in his large, callous hands. He massages his tongue across mine, slowly, hungrily, and sucks the tip, making my stomach whirl in sensations. He then runs his fingers into my hair to wrap his arms around me and hold me to him, body to body.

I break away from our kiss because I have a sudden need to huddle in his chest and rest my head under his chin, so I do. I shut my eyes and exhale a sigh of contentment. I'm not sure why, but in this moment, I feel whole. Safe and whole. I don't ever want to leave him. Whenever I think about going home, it brings me to the verge of tears.

He strokes up and down my back for a while in silence, and I'm sinking into him like I used to sink into Maksim, listening to his heart beating at a steady pace, breathing in his scent.

I've never felt cherished before, if I can even use that word, but I do when Charlie holds me like this. It tells me that this isn't just sexual. He wouldn't waste time cuddling me if it was.

“Blair,” he whispers after a while, “have you given living in Mexico a second thought?”

He's asked me this a few times now, though in a less obvious manner.

Lifting my eyes to his, I say, “Do you know something I don't?”

“What do you mean?” He stares at me as if I'm the only person in the world, his eyes glued to mine.

“Well”—I tuck a length of hair behind my ear—“you keep asking me about Mexico. Is Maksim moving there or something?” The thought has crossed my mind more than once but I've never said anything up until now.

“Did he tell you when you visited him?”

Charlie doesn't answer my question. He doesn't even attempt to. He just gives me this look that's filled with zealous obsession.

I know he wants something from me—I can feel the sexual energy coming off him in waves—so I give it to him, and with pleasure. Crawling back off his lap, I get down on my knees so I can satisfy him, crouching between his legs. I reach for the waist of his joggers but he stops me.

“No, baby,” he husks out, brushing my hair back out of my face. “I don't want that.”

I gaze up at him from between his legs, pleading with my eyes for him to elaborate because I don't have the courage to ask, *what do you want then?*

Gripping my forearm, Charlie guides me to my feet and tells me to take off my sneakers. I do, and I also peel off my socks. He tugs down my sports trousers and underwear with one hand, his eyes with mine the entire time.

“You're so pretty,” he whispers. Pulling me forward while still holding my arm, he makes me straddle his lap. He feels so masculine under me, like a fortress of man, and I feel so vulnerable.

“I could stare at you all, day, long.” Inclining forward, he kisses my lips once. “I can't imagine a day without seeing you anymore.”

My stomach knots. I'm still not used to *this*, his sexual attention or the way he freely confesses what he's thinking.

Shifting me on his lap, he pulls down the waist of his joggers, freeing his hard cock.

“Charlie?” I say, worried. He's never done this before.

“Don't be scared.” He grips the small of my back and pulls me closer, putting us chest to chest, squashing my breasts.

I stare right at him, at the lust burning in his eyes, my lungs rising and falling with harsh intakes of breath.

“I'm not gonna fuck you,” he whispers, then he arches his hips and touches my sex with his cock, causing heat to sprint through my body.

I put my hands on his shoulders, desperately trying to keep it together. I've felt nothing like this before—sex against sex. It's so intimate.

“Rub your pussy against my cock until you cum,” he says, his eyes hooded and dazzling with lust.

I look away from him, my cheeks flushing red. I've heard men say things like that many times before, but never to me. It's so personal.

He knows I'm embarrassed, and I'm glad that he doesn't pressure me with

words. He grips my hips in both hands and tells me to kiss him, so I do. I close my eyes and kiss him hungrily, though I find his tongue and mouth are more demanding than mine. He devours me with powerful, leisurely licks, breaking away the barrier that is my anxiety. The maple syrup we just had on our breakfast tastes sweet and delicious on Charlie.

“Do you trust me?” he whispers in my mouth.

I open my heavy eyes, squeezing his hard shoulders with my nails.

“Do you?” he says again, staring right through my soul. “I want to know that you do, Blaire.”

I nod, consumed by that fixated expression on his face. He forces me to grind against him, sliding me up and down his vein swollen cock. My stomach turns with sensations.

“That's it,” he groans, closing his eyes. He curls my hips back and forth with his, harder and faster. My flesh wet, I move up and down him with slick ease, sobbing when my inflamed clit touches him.

I'm too shaky to just hold his shoulders, so I tie my arms around his neck and cling to him, deepening the kiss as I tilt my head. My heart rate hits a dangerous speed. He blinks at me, and we watch each other like this with desperate yearning, Charlie's eyes flickering between mine.

“So beautiful,” he whispers, taking my mouth again. He places one hand on the curve of my back and forces me to arch into him, ensuring my clit is constantly massaged by his cock.

I whimper his name, a familiar pressure brewing low in my stomach.

“Fuck, I want you,” he moans, the sound so loud it vibrates through us.

My leg goes into a wild spasm as his words slay me open. I want him, too.

I can't kiss him anymore, it's too intense, so I press my forehead against his, putting us eye to eye, rub-fucking him with all I have.

“Charlie,” I sob his name. I'm almost there but I just can't.

“Don't think, baby.” He blinks in a haze, grabbing my outer thigh to calm my shaking. “Just don't think. Close your eyes.”

I close my eyes, and I let my thoughts escape me like a river running free. It hits me then, like lightning. The head of Charlie's cock slides through my folds, over my bud, and I cry out so hard that my throat hurts, ecstasy bursting out of me.

Charlie finds his peak with me, groaning as if he's in pain, heat searing off his body. Warm, thick liquid inundates my sex, his cock still stimulating my clit. I cum again—or I think I cum again. I'm not sure I ever stopped. It's a



never ending spiral of sensations starting at my center and emitting supernova.

He binds his arms around me, crushing me to his muscular body, and when I can't take anymore, I fall wilted, gasping for my life, my limbs lifeless and aching beyond words.

The smells that consume me are hot, sweaty, and sensual. My head is spinning.

Charlie relaxes with me. He holds me in his arms, putting my head in the crook of his damp neck so he can kiss my forehead.

I come down slowly and in stages, and then what just happened really starts to sink in. This is the part that embarrasses me most, the aftermath of intimacy. I get so lost in the moment that I forget what I've said and how I've looked at him.

Charlie isn't embarrassed one bit. He never is. Careful not to crush me again, he stands and puts me down on his chair, tucking his cock back in his jockers. I pull my knees up to my chest, trying to hide my innocent value. I block out what happens next because it's too personal, how he cleans me up with soft tissue paper and puts me back together by dressing me.

Our initial plan today was to spar in the gym after breakfast, but I'm not in the right zone to play fight with Charlie. I'm stuck in a strange, sensual place. I have been since I let go of myself.

Charlie crouches down in front of me, elbows on his knees, and he just looks at me in utter silence. I can't hold his gaze. He looks like he's ready for round two. I reach for a glass of orange juice on the table to wet my dry throat. Then I ask, "Do you mind if I go up to my room for a while?"

A soft smile, then he rises and pecks me on the mouth, making my body crave him all over again. "No, baby," he says softly, straightening. "Course I don't mind."

It's like this all the time now. When we spar in the gym, I can't even begin to explain how erotic it is. Imagine fancying someone on this level who you're almost sure fancies you back, and time is of the essence, so you're both trying to make every moment count.

Charlie and I never talk about how long we have left together. We just do. We spend every second of every day together. Eventually, he even ends up sleeping in my bed with me.

The first night is when I fall asleep at the dining table. He's cleaning up the dishes after dinner, and I rest my head on the table in my crossed arms,

having had so many orgasms that my body is exhausted with them. I stir in Charlie's arms as he's carrying me up the stairs, into my bedroom. In the darkness, he pulls back the blankets to lay me down, and when I'm safely sinking into the mattress, half dazed with sleep, he tugs off my trousers, undressing me for bed.

Smiling at me as though I'm his most prized possession, he stands back, his head slightly tipped to one side. I'll never get enough of when he looks at me like that. I always want him to look at me like that. It makes me feel important to him.

He turns away from me, and I reach out to catch his hand, wanting to thank him for everything he's done for me but I can't find the words. My throat is thick with words. My eyes glittering with *thank you for respecting me, caring for me, and most of all, for showing me a moment of happiness.*

I know I'll never feel happiness like this again. No matter how much money I have in that offshore bank account, it cannot buy me happiness. And as long as Maksim is looming over me, my life will always exist in the shadows.

Charlie seems to think I'm saying something else in my gaze because he strips down to his black boxer briefs and slips into bed beside me, gathering me in his arms against his chest.

“Do you mind if I stay with you?” he says, and I sense he's staring down at me.

I snuggle into his warmth, breathing in the clean scent of his skin, and while I don't answer him, my actions tell him all he needs to know. I want—no, need to be right here.

He kisses my forehead as he embraces me like he's never going to let go.

Over the days, I convince myself that even when *this* is over, it's okay, because I'll always have my memories.

## 27

Today, things change, and not for the good.

Everything starts out very normal. I wake up tangled under Charlie's muscular body, to sensations of kisses being pressed all over my face, mixed with soft strands of hair tickling my cheeks.

“Well, good morning,” I say, smiling sleepily as I stretch out beneath him.

“Morning, baby.” His voice comes out low and raspy—distracted. He's moaning with zeal, and so am I when he sucks the throbbing vein in my neck, and cups my sex over my night shorts. Arching into him, I purr like a cat getting petted, thrusting my fingers into his hair and gripping him tightly.

Those kisses journey down my body, over my chest where only a thin night top separates us. At the waist of my night shorts, Charlie licks across my hipbones, starting with my right, and then my left, making my stomach quiver like crazy. In time, he takes off my night shorts. He gently slides them down my legs, tugs them off my ankles, and tosses them on the floor. He spreads my legs wide open by gripping my inner thighs with large hands and touches my clit with his tongue. He makes mouth-love to my pussy, driving me nuts before I've even opened my eyes properly.

Restless from cumming, and hungry for more, I try to return the favor but he won't let me. He orders me to get dressed while climbing out of bed and shrugging on his joggers. “I've got a busy day planned, but I want to spend the morning with you first.”

“Oh.” I stare at him with bashful embarrassment. I never understand it when he says no to a blowjob. So I ask him.

“Delayed gratification.” he's smirking from ear to ear as he says that. “It's new to me too. Get dressed, baby.”

“Um, oh'kay.” Doing as I'm told, and wary of what he's up to, I pull on my usual apparel. He wanders into my en-suite and I follow. We brush our teeth one after the other, both using my toothbrush. Then we go down to have breakfast in the kitchen.

I'm flushed from the overwhelming orgasm that's still lingering on my

skin, and he's bright eyed, teasing me about kicking my ass in the gym. He doesn't though. He's as soft as ever with me, catching me from behind every time I try to strike, and like the lust sick cat I am, I let him.

“If you notice a few Mexican guys wandering about the place today,” he says, panting in my ear from over my shoulder, “don't be alarmed. They're my men.”

My spine pricking with nerves, I turn out of his arms to look at him. “Your men?”

“Yeah.” He picks up a towel from the ropes and pats his damp face. “I need to pop out, so they're gonna be here to keep an eye on the place. Celine is still MIA, and I don't want her coming back here confronting you again.”

“I can handle the likes of her,” I say, momentarily offended. But then I'm gutted because he hasn't asked me to go with him.

“I know you can handle her, but I won't have you dealing with my shit, Blaire.”

“Do you need my help with anything?” I say, unaware that I'm pulling an evil face until Charlie tells me.

“There's nothing to worry about.” Reaching out, he pinches my chin and then playfully slaps my cheek, setting off my desire to play fight with him.

He does this a lot when I come across worried. I've noticed over the months.

When we're done play fighting in the ring, I go back up to my room for a shower before relaxing in bed with a book. I don't go down for lunch because I know he's not here.

As I said, bar Charlie's odd behavior, the day starts out very normal. No. Perfect. I couldn't ask for anything more.

At half past four, it's time for dinner, and I'm itching to ask what's going on—I know something is—but I don't get a chance to go downstairs because Charlie strolls into my room with a fancy shopping bag in hand. He puts it on the foot of my bed and remains quiet in my presence, watching me.

“What's that?” I frown up at him, studying his clothes. He's dressed in well fitted jeans and a tailored royal blue shirt tucked in at the waist, the sleeves rolled up, revealing a big silver watch on his left wrist. His hair is pulled back, and I can smell he's wearing some spicy-musky cologne.

Charlie never wears cologne.

“A present,” he says, waving a hand at the bag. So that's where he's been, shopping. He smirks at me, his blue eyes flashing with amusement.

Leaning over, I put down my book on the bedside cabinet and sit up with crossed legs, my eyes thinning with wonder. “What's going on?”

“We're going out for dinner.”

My stomach knots as he says that.

“I've bought you some nice clothes and shoes, so if you get dressed, we can leave.”

“Leave to go where?” I can feel the color draining from my cheeks as I think about the last time he said he wanted to take me to dinner, when he was visiting Maksim. I'm staring at the bag now, dreading what's inside. If that's a dress, I'll kill him. No. I'll make him fucking wear it. “You're not going to make me dance, are you?”

Charlie throws his head back and bursts out laughing, though in a fond manner. “Not if you don't want to.”

Well, that's a relief, I think.

When he's done laughing, he rustles through the bag and pulls out a green strappy top, light blue jeans, and a pair of *heels!*

Worse than a dress.

“I am not wearing them,” I say before I realize, unsure of what face I'm pulling. Shock, probably.

“You're not wearing what?” he says, demurely pretending he cannot see my expression. Putting everything down on the bed, he comes around to me, his stride slow and confident. “The shoes?”

I focus on the shoes, one toppled over on the jeans. Nude and strappy. They're not very high but I've never in my life worn heels—and I'm not about to.

“What's wrong with my clothes?” I look up at him standing beside me, at his face glowing in shrewd hilarity.

“Well,” he crosses his arms, still smirking, and licks across his lips like he fancies something, “I'm a very big fan of your tight sports trousers, Señorita, but where we're going, they're not the right attire.”

“So, where are we going then?”

“It's a surprise.”

My heart is hammering in my chest, and my mouth is so dry that I'm surprised my voice comes out even when I say, “I'll wear the clothes, but I'm not wearing those shoes.” I don't really want to wear the clothes either, but I'm used to the whole give and take thing that's between us now.

“All right then, chica,” he says, shocking the hell out of me. “Get dressed

and I'll meet you downstairs.” He saunters off, leaving me dumfounded.

I expected him to put up more of a fight about the shoes. He obviously wants me to wear them, otherwise why would he have bought them?

I climb out of bed and pick up the clothes, twisting my face. They're so girly. Where on earth is he taking me that requires me to wear shit like this?

Perhaps I should have asked him. I always leave it too late to ask him things.

I strip down to my underwear and dress in the jeans, which are so tight they might as well be painted on. I shake off how much I dislike them, pulling the strappy top over my head. It's made of silk, the green material shimmering under the lights in the room, the straps crisscrossing my back.

I feel odd, like I could be a different person. Maybe that's what he wants.

I have to shun the thought because it's like being punched in the stomach.

I slip on my trainers, tie the laces, and go downstairs to meet Charlie, fighting to keep my anxiety leveled. He said we're going out for dinner, so it shouldn't be so bad, but I've never been out for dinner like this before. I usually man-watch Maksim while he dines.

Coming down the staircase, I find Charlie is wandering back and forth across the entrance hall like a caged tiger. When he gazes up at me, a huge smile spreads across his handsome face. He nods a few times. “Yeah, you look bonita in green.”

I scowl with bafflement and walk past him for the front doors—he's in one of those funny moods again.

“Not just yet,” he says, taking my hand in a feather light grip as I reach for the handle. He turns me away from the door.

“Huh? But, I thought you said we were going—”

Entwining our fingers together, setting my blood on fire, he leads me into a room I've not seen before, left from the staircase. It's really warm, humidity hitting me like an Indian heat wave as soon as we cross the threshold. It's a long, wide room with dark rosewood paneled walls and high ceilings, aglow with fancy brass lamps on side tables. The parquet flooring is covered in huge expensive rugs, with chocolate brown leather couches in the heart of the space.

“Sit here,” Charlie says, helping me lower onto the biggest couch that faces the window. The sky is crystal clear, the sun burning low in the horizon.

When I look up at Charlie, I'm not sure which is more beautiful: the

strange expression on his face, or the sun.

He smirks at me, his eyes flickering between mine, then pivots and disappears into the entrance hall. I pull my eyebrows together, wondering where he's going.

It smells strongly of lemon polish in here, which is strange, given I've not seen a cleaner here at the house. I can't imagine Charlie polishing this big old room. Yes, he has a knack for cooking and the odd bit of cleaning, but this room is much too big for one person to clean.

Charlie comes back a few minutes later and passes me a small black box with gold detailing, BVLGARI written in gold across the lid.

"What is it?" I ask, taking it from him.

He's still smirking. He gestures at the box. "Open it and you'll see."

I hesitate for a moment, tied up with anxiety. Then I click open the lid. I find a silver bracelet inside with BVLGARI written across the side. There's a row of sparkly crystals in the center.

"If you want my opinion on jewelry, you're out of luck." I laugh awkwardly, peering up at him. "I know nothing about jewelry, Charlie."

"I don't want your opinion." He's trying not to laugh, biting his lips closed.

I screw up my face. "Then, what?"

"What do you think?"

"About this?"

He nods.

I shrug, glancing between him and the bracelet. "I guess it's...nice looking?"

*Where is he going with this?*

Something switches on in my mind—the clothes he just gave me—and I point at myself. "Is this for me?"

"Yeah, Señorita. It's for you." He's still trying not to laugh. Inclining toward me, he takes the bracelet out and puts it on my left wrist, clicking it shut.

The metal is cold against my skin. It's a hard band, not something delicate.

"Do you like it?" Charlie squats in front of me with elbows on his knees, eyes dazzling like blue diamonds.

I blink at him, feeling like he's putting me on the spot. "Yes...eh...sure."

Now he laughs, fond of something, his eyes crinkling in the corners. He takes the box from me and puts it down on the coffee table, grabs my hand and holds it in his, covering mine completely.

“Why would you buy me a bracelet?” I just don't get this. First he says he's taking me out to dinner, and now he's giving me a bracelet?

“Why not?” He looks me dead in the eyes, his gaze steady and observing.

His question lingers while we stare at each other, and the moment is so intense that I think I stop breathing—especially when he reaches out and pulls my hair forward, so it hangs over one shoulder, down my front.

I can't help feeling a little...I don't know. Why would he buy me a damn bracelet? And why's he looking at me like that?

“I'd like to give you a lot more than just a bracelet, Blaire,” he says. “Anything you want, I want to give it to you.”

My chest does that weird squeeze thing. I find myself gripping the bracelet on my wrist with my free hand.

“You don't have to buy me things, Charlie,” I say softly, “I've got my own money.”

His eyes...*Fuck*. He looks raw with passion and promise, making my chest squeeze even tighter.

“I'm not just talking about things,” he whispers, his words coming out slow and hypnotic. “I'm talking about you and me.”

Now, not only is my chest squeezing, but my heart is in knots.

There's something about Charlie tonight, something about his mood. I can't tell if it's sexually fueled or what.

“Can I use the toilet before we go?” I ask, to stop whatever is going on with him. Hopefully, by the time I come back, he'll be his normal self.

Letting go of my hand, he stands. “You don't have to ask for permission, baby. You know that.”

I sink into my shoulders, push to my feet, and begin to leave the room. Really, why would he buy me a bracelet? It has no real use to me. It can't protect me or feed me.

“Blaire—”

Stopping on the threshold, I peer back at Charlie, anxious beyond words. I just want the moment to be over with already.

“What's that on your back?” he says, glowering at me.

“Huh?” I push my hair aside, trying to see what he sees. “What?”

He's behind me now, pulling the strap down my shoulder. “Those marks.”

I scowl at him, baffled. Then I feel him run a finger over one of my scars.

“They're whip marks.” I don't sound too bothered telling him this because I'm not. Maksim gave them to me, as a gift and a way to remember him, he



said.

Charlie stands back and practically gapes at me. He doesn't say anything for a moment. He looks a bit...I don't know, angry? Confused or angry?

“Charlie?”

“Did he...” his voice is so low that I can barely hear him. “Did Maksim do that to you?”

“Do what?” I cannot fathom what he's talking about for a moment. “The marks on my back?”

He nods, swallowing, the large apple in his throat bobbing up and down. I'm having a hard time trying to process the look on his face.

“Well, yes. Why?” I pull up the strap and fix it on my shoulder.

Charlie is still quiet, looking at me like I'm a stranger.

“Are you okay?” I ask. Then I realize he must not have seen my scars before. When he first took me on that horrible night, the first night, I was lying down on my back, and when he pulled me onto his lap, my hair must've curtained them. Any other time we've been intimate, we've not had a chance to fully undress because our moments are just that, moments, wild and unthought-of.

“Don't look at me like that, Charlie,” I playfully nudge him in the arm. “They're just marks.” For a second, just a brief second, I think he might find them hideous. The women he's had are probably perfect in every way. Celine certainly looked it. “Do you want me to put on a sweater or something? Do they make you feel ill?”

“No! No!” He reaches out to me. But then retreats. “Course I don't want you to cover up. And they don't make me feel ill, Blaire. I just...” He doesn't finish. He cups his forehead and scratches restlessly. “I can't believe he's whipped you that hard.”

I gulp, wrapping my arms around my middle. I remember Charlie saying that he's all for a bit of sadism, and Celine confirmed his dark desires. Does he feel like he's missed out now he knows I can take a beating?

I don't know why I just thought that. It's ridiculous. Charlie would never hit me—or, I don't think he would.

“I'm just going to the toilet,” I say, and I'm out of the living room before he can utter another word.

I don't use the downstairs toilet. I dash up to my room and shut the door, giving him a chance to come down from whatever mood he's in.

I'm dreading the next moment I see him, which is now.

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## 28

“Open the door, Blaire.” Charlie knocks on my bedroom door with three heavy taps that echo through my room. “I want to talk to you.”

My throat restricts, and I don't know why, but I'm scared shitless.

With a shaky hand, I pull open the door. He marches in past me and kicks the door shut with his foot, making me flinch as it bangs.

“When did Maksim do that to you?” He towers over me, his temples ticking.

I step back, not liking that darkness in his eyes.

“Blaire?” He raises his eyebrows at me.

I look down, knotting my fingers together over my lap. “You know I can't talk about Maksim.”

We're quiet after I say that, but the tension in the room is like blow horns going off.

“Can I see them?” Charlie says eventually.

I keep my eyes down.

“I guess,” I whisper, shrugging minutely. “If you want to.”

“Do you mind if I see them?”

“I'd rather you didn't.” I descend into my shoulders. “I know they're making you uncomfortable.”

“They're not making me uncomfortable at all.” His voice darkens as he yells, “They make me want to rip Maksim's fucking head off! When did he do that to you?”

I cringe against his yelling. I've never seen Charlie this mad before.

“I want to know when he did that to you, Blaire. Does he still hit you? When was the last time he hit you?” He goes on and on, baffled that he's never seen the marks on my back before. “Why haven't you told me the extent of his abuse?” He's practically spitting fire as he yells, “Answer me!”

I take a step back and look up at him with tears in my eyes, putting up a mental wall between us.

“Why are you doing that?” he says, glaring as he studies my eyes. “Why

are you moving away from me?”

“If I don't answer you, are you going to hit me?”

“What?!” He backs away from me now, his face draining of color. “No. I would never. I'd never lay a finger on you! Why would you even ask me that, Blaire?”

I drop my gaze to the floor, fighting to shut off.

“I'm sorry,” he says, trying to reign himself in. “I'm not angry with you. I'm just angry.” He steps up to me but I step back again. “Baby, don't do that. Don't back away from me. I'd never hurt you, I swear it.”

My skin is pricking with anxiety. How can I escape this situation?

“Talk to me, Blaire, please? Tell me what's going on with those marks. Are they all over your back?”

“Can we drop this?” I sound like I'm on the verge of tears because I am. “I don't want to talk about it.”

“I can't just leave this alone. I won't!”

I glance up at him. He still looks angry as hell. His eyes are like blue balls of fire.

“How would Maksim feel if I whipped him like that, hmm? Maybe I will, just to show him how much it fucking hurts.”

I don't feel any instincts over Maksim as Charlie says that.

I stare at my feet, shaking a little.

“You know that you're supposed to go back to him soon, don't you? We've only got a week left together.”

Lifting my eyes, I glower at Charlie. “Of course I know that.”

Why does he have to point that out now?

“Do you want to go back to him?” He reaches for one of my hands, but I don't feel his touch.

His question echoes.

Do I want to go back to Maksim?

I'm not sure it's a matter of *wanting* to go back to him. It's a matter of knowing I have to. Regardless of how much I want to stay with Charlie, my subconscious works on another level. I'd probably end up returning to Maksim in my sleep, if I didn't willingly go in my conscious state.

*Just do your job and come home to me,* Maksim said. Recalling his orders seem to put me back two and a half months. I'm Blaire, My Little Pet, again.

There's this weird ringing in my ears and it won't go away.

“Blaire?” Charlie gently tugs my hand, trying to grasp my attention.

I nervously scratch the side of my leg with my free hand.

“Do you want to go back to him?”

“Yes,” I say, though I don't let on that I might miss Charlie. What's the point?

“I don't believe you,” he says softly.

“Why not?” I peer up at him, then I look past him because I cannot stand that intense blue stare of his.

“Because I think you're lying.”

“I'm not,” I say innocently. “I've really come to...I don't know...enjoy being around you, but I've known Maksim longer than I've known myself. My life is with him. It's all I know. It's all I'm allowed to know.”

“He treats you like a dog. You can't possibly want to go back to that?”

“Yes, you're right, he does.” For some unknown reason, I get lost in my explanation, in trying to make Charlie understand me. “He beats me for his own pleasure and pets me for mine. I protect him. I work for him. I study, execute jobs, and that is it. I'm not meant for another life. I won't be able to function properly in another life.”

Charlie takes my other hand and runs his thumbs over my knuckles, but still, his touch doesn't affect me.

“You can have a different life if you want one, Blaire,” he says, his eyes glowing with desperation. “If you want to stay with me, you can, and you won't ever, *EVER* have to fight or kill to please Maksim again.”

The ringing in my ears intensifies. I start blinking really fast, trying to get rid of that annoying sound.

“Blaire?” Charlie whispers. “Baby, what is it?”

Snatching out of his grasps, I pace my room, raking my fingers through my waist length hair.

*If you want to stay with me, you can*, Charlie said, like he's God or something.

Maksim told me to complete my jobs and come home. That's what I have to do. I know it. Deep down, I know it. But, why is something in the back of my mind telling me to choose Charlie?

I feel all jumbled up inside. My ears are ringing and my head is pounding.

“Blaire,” Charlie implores, “stay with me. Don't go back to—”

“You think you can offer to keep me, and I'll leap into your arms?” I say through gritted teeth, cutting him off. “You think you can take me away from Maksim?”

“You've enjoyed being here,” he says with caution, “being able to live and being able to feel alive. Why wouldn't you want that?”

“Yes, I have enjoyed the past weeks,” I say hopelessly. “But I cannot stay with you in this make believe life.”

“Why can't you?”

“Because I'm wired wrong!” I yell, pointing at my head. “And I can't do anything to change it. I-I want to please Maksim—he's my master. He's all I know.”

“You've barely mentioned him over the past two months,” Charlie says frankly. “He can't mean that much to you.”

“It's you!” I pull at my hair, needing to feel pain, pacing faster now. “I did forget, but now you've put him in my head with just saying his name...I can't...Fuck!” I stop dead in the middle of my bedroom. “I can't think about anything but him!”

“You can learn to be different.” Charlie closes the space between us. “You can change the way you think.”

“Ohhh, because it's so easy, isn't it?” I cannot keep the sarcasm out of my voice. I go around the room again, holding my head. “I wish you didn't bring him up. I wish you wouldn't talk about him. You make me think of my orders.”

“I'm trying to help you.”

“That's a lofty goal,” I scoff.

“Don't you dare get snarky with me, Cariño.” His eyes narrow. “Not now.”

“Ugh...Charlie,” I sigh his name, rubbing my temples. “You just don't get it.”

“Tell me then.” He reaches out to me like he's praying or something.

“Make me understand. I'm here. I'm listening.”

A while passes where I don't know what to say. Then it spills out of me. I ramble on about who I was and who I am now. “I've never even spoken to someone the way I speak to you, and I probably won't ever again. I wouldn't dream of it. But you...you make me feel...everything goes out the window with you!” I wave out angrily. “You're going to get me in trouble because when I go back to Maksim, I won't be the same and he'll torture me for it.”

“Then don't go back to him,” Charlie says. “Come and live with me in Mexico.”

“What?” My face scrunches up. “I can't decide that.” The penny drops, and I stop pacing again. “Is this why you keep asking me questions about

living in Mexico? Are you trying to take me from Maksim?”

“No. I want you to decide for yourself.”

“You know I can't do that.” I clench my teeth, trying to keep it together, but I can feel my cool slowly slipping away. “I do care about you, Charlie, that's obvious, but the fact is, I belong to Maksim, and nothing you say or do can change that.”

“You can decide for yourself,” Charlie says. “I don't give a shit about how ruthless and brainwashing Maksim is. You'd rip him apart, and you damn well know it.”

“I can't hit him.”

Hunching down, Charlie meets me at eye level. “Why not?”

I frown. “What do you mean?”

“Why can't you hit him?”

“You know why.”

He shakes his head. “I know you think you can't, but believe me, you can.” He scans my face, going quiet for a few seconds. “All you have to do is raise this”—grabbing my hand, he makes me ball my fist—“and swing.”

I don't know what happens to me, but I explode.

“Aargh!” I punch him in the chest, hating the way he's gotten in my head. “Why have you done this to me? Why did you buy me and make me feel things I don't want to feel?”

Charlie doesn't fight back when I punch his chest again. He just stands there looking down at me. I hit him over and over, pounding viciously.

“Why?! Charlie? Fucking tell me why!” Because he isn't answering me, I really lose it. I grab my jacket hanging by the bedroom door, pull out my gun, and put it to my head. “Is all this because Maksim wronged you?!” I scream. It's like shards of glass tearing through my throat. “Are you breaking me down to get some payback?!”

Silence. I can almost hear Charlie's heart pounding through the tension.

“Tell me”—I click back the hammer—“or I'll fucking shoot myself.”

Charlie sprints at me and snatches the gun out of my hand. I hear a loud thud—I think he's tossed the gun somewhere—and then he uses his full strength to put me down. I fight against him, scratching to get free, but I'm not in my right mind. Fisting the back of my hair, Charlie drags me across the room and folds me over the bed. He presses a forearm across the back of my shoulders, burying my face in the mattress.

“Calm down,” he says.

“You're a twisted bastard,” I spit out weakly, turning my head to the side so I can breathe. “I'm a cold blooded murderer. I've taken hundreds of lives, some with my own two hands,” I taunt him, my endeavor to make him hate me. “And you want me? You want to take me out on stupid dinner dates? You want me to come and live with you? Be with you? Do you know what sick things I've done?”

“I don't care,” he says under his breath.

“I once butchered a man, Charlie.” I moan beneath the pressure of his weight. “I cut off each of his body parts while he scream-cried for me to stop, and I bathed in his blood for Maksim. I've blown away entire families. Killed people before they were barely out of their teenage years. I've watched girls get raped and done nothing. NOTHING! Do you still want me now?”

Pressing me further into the mattress, he puts his mouth on my ear, and whispers, “No matter what you tell me, I'll still want you. You're worth saving, and do you know why?”

A huge lump forms in my throat.

“Because you feel guilt for the things you've done.”

“I don't,” I say with pity, barely convincing myself.

“You do. I know you do. I've heard your screams in the middle of the night. You beg for someone to stop the torment—and don't tell me you beg for someone to stop Maksim from hitting you because you say names, and none of them were ever Maksim's. Nothing you say can change the way I feel about you, Blaire, because regardless of all you've done, you're innocent. You want to be guilt free.”

“Stop! Please...Just stop!” I beg, unable to take this.

“No. I won't stop. You need to know that I really, really care about you. You need to know that I won't let you suffer because of what Maksim's turned you into.”

I'm shaking now, tears leaking out the corners of my eyes.

“You're lying,” I say naively. “You don't care about me. You care about your objective.”

“No, baby, you've got that all wrong. I fucking care about you, and I won't sit back and watch you sell your soul to the devil before you've barely become a woman.”

I burst into tears, unable to stop, my entire body wracked with emotions that I just don't understand.

“I-I won't come with you, Charlie,” I snivel. “I won't come and live with



you in Mexico. No matter what you say or do, I'll-I'll go back to Maksim."

He doesn't say anything to that, so I just cry away my pain.

"Shhh, baby." He strokes down the side of my face, catching my tears.

"S'all right."

"It's not all right," I sob each word. "I'm not all right." *I'm lost.*

I'm inundated in tears, sobbing like a child, soaking the blanket under me.

When my body goes flaccid, Charlie pulls me down to the floor with him and gathers me in his lap. He rocks me back and forth, telling me again, "Everything's gonna be all right. I promise."

I bury my face in his chest and cry so hard that my belly hurts, often squeezing out hiccupping whimpers. I don't even really know why I'm crying. Am I sad because whatever is happening between Charlie and me will be over soon? Do I miss Maksim? Am I just angry? Did Charlie's words cut too deep?

I just don't know.

"I'm sorry," Charlie whispers against the top of my head. "This was never supposed to happen."

## 29

I wake alone in bed the next day, and cold, but I'm okay. I feel no anger, no confusion, nor a sense of being lost. Having a little cry seems to have helped because I actually feel okay.

Once I've showered and dressed in the usual, I go downstairs. Charlie isn't in the kitchen. He hasn't made breakfast, I notice, checking inside the oven, so I wander into the living room on a hunch. He's in here, amongst piles of clothes and handbags and shoes. He doesn't greet me with the usual, *morning Blaire*. He doesn't even look at me. It's as if he can't. He just stands there at the other end of the room, by the huge window, wearing gray joggers—no top. His glossy black hair is freely curling around his neck and face, and his broad, masculine body looks exquisite under the morning's sunshine coming in through the window.

“Morning,” I say, smiling at him.

He doesn't answer me, and my heart sinks a little.

“Did you rob a clothes store?” I laugh warily, grabbing a pair of trainers from the coffee table. They're nice. I turn them over. And my size.

“It's all from a truck robbery.” He glances over everything, his expression dark and almost empty. “I'm holding it all here for a friend.” There's something tense in his voice.

When I peer up at him again, I see two Mexican looking guys lingering by the open doors that lead off the living room, onto the garden. “Hello, Señorita Blaire,” the taller of the two says.

I force a smile to say hi back. Charlie tells them to give us a minute, and they do, head bowing respectfully to him, and then me.

“How are you feeling this morning, Blaire?” Charlie says, crossing his arms. He stays on the other side of the living room, behind the couches, and I see it's true. He can't look me in the eyes.

“I'm fine.” I dismiss him because I don't want to go over last night. I lift the trainers to show him. “I like these.”

He frowns, staring at the trainers in my hands. “Have them if you like

them. Have whatever you want.”

Sitting down on the leather couch, I kick off my trainers and put on the new ones, twisting and turning my ankles to get a good look at them.

“Put them in your bedroom, so they don't get taken,” Charlie says. He still doesn't sound like himself. His tone is flat, a million miles away from here.

“What's wrong?” Putting my old trainers in the box, I get up and roam over to him, pulling the sleeves of my sweater over my hands. “Why do you sound like that?”

He turns his back on me and gazes out of the window. His broad shoulders rise and fall with long, drawn out breaths.

My stomach twists with rejection.

“Charlie?” I touch his shoulder, desperate for his attention.

“You put a fucking gun to your head last night”—he's speaking to the window—“that's what's wrong.”

I'm stunned, and I know I look it. I revealed to him an inkling of what sick, twisted things I've done in my life, and he's upset because I put a gun to my head?

I should have pulled the trigger. The world would be a better, safer place without me in it.

“I'm hungry, Charlie.” I decide not to answer him. Not that he asked me a question, but I know he's expecting me to say something.

“Tojo!” he calls out, making me jump.

A dark-haired guy—the taller of the two who were in here a moment ago—pops his head in through the open back doors.

“Have the housekeeper whip up some eggs for Blaire,” Charlie says.

Tojo nods and leaves immediately.

“The housekeeper?”

“Yeah.” Charlie sighs, running his fingers through his hair. “I sent her away when I brought you here. She's back now.”

“Oh.” I linger by Charlie, picking at my nails. I don't really know what to say.

After a while of silence, he faces me, his arms still folded over his chest. I don't look up at him, but I can sense he's staring at me. He stares for so long that I burn under his gaze.

What is he thinking? Does he think I'm crazy? I am, so I wouldn't blame him if he did.

“The job is happening tomorrow.” He breaks the silence.

Finally, I lift my eyes to his, immediately wishing I didn't. He still cannot hold my focus.

“We need you to shut London down”—he glances away, and then back at me but only for a second, grinding his jaw—“and then you can go home.”

*WHAT?* But we still have a week left...and he wanted to go out for dinner.

“We'll leave first thing in the morning,” he says.

Out of nowhere, while I'm staring at his face, tears well-up in my eyes.

“You got that, Blaire?”

I nod at him a few times, trying to study his deadpan expression.

He says nothing, and I can't stomach the way he's struggling to look at me, so I walk past him for the garden. I need some space.

Home. I'll be going home tomorrow and all this will be over.

Why the hell do I feel so sad?

“Blaire, I'm sorry,” Charlie says, following after me. “Wait.”

I stop on cue, as if his orders affect me like Maksim's do.

“I don't want you to go,” he whispers from behind. I can feel the warmth from his body at my back. It makes me think about how I woke up this morning without him in my bed.

“I want you to stay with me,” he says. “I'll make Maksim give you to me, even if I have to pay him to tell you you're free.”

I swallow down the lump in my throat. That's not ever going to happen. Maksim will die before giving me up indefinitely. I'm his. I know I'm his, and even while he's clearly scared of Charlie—I just know he won't give me up. I don't even want to choose Charlie over Maksim because when all is said and done, Maksim and I are the same. We're both as fucked up as each other.

“Blaire, I want you. I dunno how many different ways I can tell you.” Charlie sounds frustrated, his tone of voice sharp and demanding. “I want you to come and live with me in Mexico. I want to be with you.”

I remain quiet, staring down the garden, my throat swelling up even more. I just don't know what to tell him.

“All right,” he says, clutching at straws, “if Mexico is the problem, I'll buy you a place in England, or wherever you want to be—away from Maksim. I'll set you up with an allowance so you'll never be without. I'll come see you as often as I can. No one will know where you are.” He goes right into selling a new life to me.

Does he really think Mexico is the problem?

He touches my arm from behind, trying to grasp my attention. “Why aren't

you saying anything?”

I scratch my face, searching for the words. “I...I just...Thanks for treating me well, Charlie. It's been...different.” That's all I have, and I say it knowing my fairytale has come to an end.

“Thanks?” he questions, scoffing like he can't quite believe I just said that. “I don't want you to thank me. I want you to say you'll stay with me. Please, Blaire. Or tell me what I have to do?”

I remain staring down the garden. “There's nothing you can do, Charlie. I'm sorry.”

I wander off into the garden, and I'm surprised that he doesn't stop me. I wish he would stop me. I wish he would stop me and tell me that we can have this last week together.

Trying hard to shut off mentally, I lose myself in the day. It's a little chilly. I haven't got a coat on. I don't care.

Tomorrow, *this*, Charlie and me...it'll be over.

I'm not sure how I feel about that. I'm not even sure I can block the fact out.

I want to cry.

I do cry.

I huddle by the back fence that feels miles away from the house, hug my knees to my chest, and I bawl my eyes out.

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I wring myself dry of tears and wander back to the house, feeling very disconnected, stuck between the idealism of the past two and a half months and the reality of what I have to go back to tomorrow. As much as I try to shut off mentally, I can't.

Charlie has treated me so well—it's almost been like a dream. He's fed me and clothed me, trained with me for whatever reason, and he's ensured me some happiness. He's spoken to me on a platonic level, comforted me, and he's never hurt me. He wouldn't ever hurt me. I know that deep down. I trust him.

Maksim hasn't treated me very well, but he gave me a life when I didn't have one. I can't help feeling grateful for that. Though, I now know he might've stolen me. Thinking of this confuses me. I start to wonder if I had a family, parents that might have loved me, so I put it out of my mind.

It's too painful.

I round the swimming pool and make my way up the patio steps, and the more I think about what-is and what-could-be, the more I realize it doesn't really matter what I want or need. I can't stay with Charlie unless Maksim says I can. Subconsciously, I don't want to stay with Charlie unless Maksim says I can. But he won't ever say that. He'll kill me before letting me go, as he's always promised. Up until now, that threat has never bothered me, I guess because I thought a life without Maksim wasn't a life at all. Then I met Charlie.

I'm not sure if I'd rather die than live in an unemotional world again. Ever since Charlie tapped into my emotions, all I want is to feel good things. I don't want anyone to hurt me anymore. I need the scars on my back to remind me of how strong I can be, not how strong I have to be.

I'm in thought mayhem, and I hate it.

Reaching the back doors that lead into the living room, I overhear someone speaking about me in a Latin brogue, telling Charlie to just take me. "She'll be happier and safer in Mexico with us rather than staying here with that dirty Russian pig."

Stepping back, I plaster myself against the wall and listen in, wondering if that's Rico. It sounds like something that Rico guy would say. *Just take her.* I'd like to rip him apart, the smarmy ass bastard.

"I can't take her," Charlie says, his voice full of uncertainty.

"Why not? Nothing's ever stopped you before. Have you gone soft?"

I smile with fondness at his observation. Charlie has gone a bit soft on me.

"It's not about going soft," Charlie snaps. "She's too conditioned for Maksim."

Someone's pacing about in brooding silence, footsteps heavy. I'm almost certain it's Charlie. I know the way he walks in anger and solace, either way, he has heavy footsteps.

"It's as simple as this," Charlie says eventually, sounding calmer now, "if she doesn't make the decision to come with me for herself, she'll never feel comfortable and at home with me, with us. She'll run back to Maksim the first chance she gets because deep in her subconscious, she thinks she has to go back to him."

He's right about that. It's tormenting how well he knows me.

"How has he conditioned her?"

"You don't want to know." Charlie doesn't give the Latin guy any more

than that. I smile again, though with something else this time. He's always said I can trust him, and along our journey, slowly but surely, he's ensured that.

“What I can tell you is,” Charlie says in his own time, “Maksim apparently outbid a government agency for her, but I dunno if that's true, and I dunno what government.”

That's news to me.

“Why would a government want her?”

“She's smart,” Charlie says. “Knows technology and numbers like a second nature, so everyone keeps saying.”

I don't think it's true, that Maksim outbid a government agency for me, not for a second. I think he made it up to stop others from prying about the fact that he bought or stole me.

But, then again, Maksim did know about my skills before I even told him, and he's cashed in on them, big time.

Maybe it is true.

“Cutting the story short,” Charlie says, drawing my attention. I hold my breath to listen in. “Maksim took Blaire and locked her up for years. He conditioned her to evoke loyalty and worship, and it's worked. She only has to hear that someone's gonna hurt him, and she'll make hell rain on earth.”

“Jesucristo,” that guy says, and I imagine he's raking his fingers through his hair. It's the tone of his voice. “Who told you all this?”

“Carl.”

“Is it true what they say about her fighting talent?”

Charlie chuckles under his breath. “Yeah, she's dangerous as hell. I've been full on sparring with her, and while I suspect she thinks I've been holding back, I haven't. She's just like Nic told us.”

*Nic?* His brother Nicolas?

“Doesn't Carl know where she comes from or what government wanted her? Because if this is true, the bodying government will have a paper trail that we can get access to. All we have to do is contact them, and we'll get the information you want.”

“Carl doesn't know where she comes from,” Charlie says. “Believe me, I've asked. I've also asked Maksim and Tatiana, but they're playing their cards close to their chests.”

They talk for a while about what I'm like. How I word things. How I analyze things. I don't get why they're discussing me like this. What's their

objective?

“She's got a slight Russian accent,” Charlie says, “so I started my search based on that, but I know she doesn't come from Russia or Ukraine, nor England or America for that matter. I've checked every country.”

“Don't take this the wrong way,” that guy says, sounding wary, “but, have you bothered to ask her where she originates from?”

Charlie scoffs, and the floor just inside the doors near to where I am creaks. “She's as likely to fight me as to speak to me about herself. Trust me, she doesn't say anything without Maksim's permission.”

I take a step back to stay hidden.

“Okay. So, do you know her last name?”

Silence between them. The creaking moves further and further away.

I assume Charlie has shrugged at his friend because his friend says, “She has to have a last name. Put her photo through every government system. Search the missing persons' databases. Have her fingerprint checked.”

“I have had her fingerprint checked,” Charlie says, “and nothing. How'd you think I searched the government ID databases for her?”

I'm numb to the touch, mentally digesting what he's saying about me.

“All I know is, she drives illegally in a Porsche that would cost the average person four years of wages, doesn't own a real passport, and she's got no friends. I've searched every inch of her apartment for information and ID but found nothing.”

How the hell has he gotten a hold of my fingerprint?

My mind whirls from every cup I've touched to every piece of cutlery.

And what the fuck is he doing snooping through my things?

“Maksim lets her drive a Porsche?”

“Kinda.” Charlie tells him that I've got my own money. “Piles of it in her apartment and in the glove compartment of her car, and she's got an offshore account with a few million in it.”

My jaw drops. He knows how much money I have in my bank account?

“Huh?” that guy says, absolutely confused. “So, if she's minted, why does she live under Maksim?”

“I asked myself that very question when I first learned how much money she's got.” I'm on edge listening to Charlie psychoanalyze me. “I rang the shrink at The Site,” he says. “I was so confused that I could barely get my words out. She told me that I have to look at Blaire's conditioning as I'd look at a child who loves its parents no matter what they do.”



“No,” that guy says. “That's not right. A lot of kids turn their backs on their parents because of cruelty and abuse.”

“Yeah, I agree, but in Blaire's case, she apparently works on an emotional bonding level, like most kids do. She'll love and worship Maksim no matter what he does to her because when all's said and done, she knows nothing else.”

“That's so messed up, Charlie.”

I shudder a little as his friend says that. Yeah, I am fucked up. Tell me something I don't know.

They discuss all of what the psychologist said, which isn't much, how I've never had a normal life, and how it'll be hard for me to adjust to anything different than what I know, blah, blah, blah.

“Do you know her date of birth?” that guy says. “How old is she?”

There's a long pause before Charlie admits reluctantly, “She's young.”

“How young?”

“Told me she was eighteen.”

“Eighteen!” that guy practically yells.

Charlie laughs. “Don't look at me like that, Andres.”

*Andres?* He's talking to his brother!

I think I've gone white.

“She's a pretty girl,” Charlie says, praising me to the high heavens, “smart, witty, strong, and keeps me on my feet because she's feisty as fuck.”

They laugh together like men do, pompous and proud.

“Well...Dios mío.” Andres says when he's done laughing, “The only time you ever want to be with someone, she's barely a woman, mentally warped, and comes with a bent Russian military force.”

Charlie laughs again, sounding as smug as ever.

“Look, you obviously want her,” Andres says in a reasoning tone, “and you sound sure that she won't come with you. So, how about I have a chat with her? You know how persuasive I can be. Maybe I can find out where she comes from. I might be able to save you the trouble.”

That's what this is all about—Charlie wants to know where I come from. I want to ask why, what does it matter?

“No.” Charlie cuts him off from saying anything more about talking to me. “You don't know Blaire. She won't speak to you unless Maksim says she can. It took me weeks just to find some common ground with her, and she actually had permission to speak to me.”

“Maksim gave her permission to talk to you?” Andres sounds confused again. “Why? And, why's she here with you anyway? You never said.”

So, whatever Charlie's agenda is, he's kept it to himself.

That makes me nervous.

Charlie doesn't say anything for a moment, but he soon brushes his brother off with saying, “It's a longass story, and I promised Blaire that it's our business, so I can't tell you.”

“That bad, huh?”

Charlie's voice is dark, almost filled with shame, as he says, “I reckon you'd think I'm a callous motherfucker if I told you how I came to having her.”

For some reason, the first night I spend with Charlie whips through my mind.

The leather couch creaks under someone's weight and hairs all over my body narrow. I take another step back to keep hidden.

“Hermano, you don't think you want her because you can't have her, do you? I know what you're like. You desire things people say you can't have.”

“No,” Charlie doesn't hesitate. “I can take her if I really want too—and trust me, you don't understand the irony of me saying that—but I won't just take her. I respect her too much to just lock her up like an animal. I want her to feel freedom and peace with me.”

Peace. He catches my emotions with one, single word. I have felt peace with Charlie. The idea of never feeling it again cuts deep.

My eyes sting with tears.

“She sounds like a slow burning project,” Andres says.

“She is, but she's...Oh, I dunno.” Charlie sighs, and my lips wobble because there's something moving in his voice when he says, “if you ever get to know her, you'll see why I like her.” His tone softens even more as he says, “She's so eerie and intense with eyes that take you straight to the dark side. She's gotta stinking redhead attitude. But she's the loveliest little thing. All I want to do is look after her, but she won't let me.”

My heart goes. If only he knew how much I care about him. I wish I had the stomach to tell him.

Andres asks about me on a personal level. He wants to know how Charlie and I have spent the past few months. “I know you said she's a bit feral, but have you taken her out or anything? Girls like that kind of shit.”

*Feral?* I nearly laugh, even through my depressive mood.

“Blaire doesn't want dinner dates,” Charlie laughs mordantly at his brother. “Trust me, I already tried that one and she looked at me like I was speaking a dead language.”

“Okay. Well, I know you said she's very into sports.”

“Yeah, she loves sports—and food.” Charlie's voice is thick with amusement. “I'd love to see her at The Site, executing the training course.”

“Yeah, that'd be pretty cool,” Andres says. “I like women who are into sports. What was it like having her here with you?” Andres goes off in a different direction, studying his brother. “I mean, I know you like your own space.”

Charlie tells his brother everything about our time together, minus any sexual intimate details. “Life sort of became routine once she opened up to me. We have breakfast, a sparring session, dinner, and free thinking conversation. I even told her about our parents and Gina.”

“What?” Andres is lost for words. “But you—you don't talk to anyone about that.”

“I trust her on another level, hermano.”

“Why though, Charlie? She's just a girl.”

“She's not just a girl. You won't understand what it's like to be under Blaire's spell until you've experienced it”—he sounds lost in deep thought—“she draws me in with her undivided attention and keeps me there in an odd state of trust, consuming my fucking soul with the way she looks at me. It's like a therapy session talking to her.” Charlie laughs under his breath, as if he's recalling a memory or something.

I can't actually believe how he sees me. It's baffling. I'm nothing special. I'm just...well, I'm me.

“What'd you say to her about our parents exactly?”

Silence. Then Charlie says, “She knows what I did.”

“What?! And she doesn't think you're...” I don't hear what he says, so I shift a little closer to the door. I can just see a large figure dressed in black clothes sitting on the couch. It's not Charlie.

“No. She actually understood, and said I should've tortured our mother.”

“Fuck,” Andres says, and I see he lifts a hand to his head. “You can't just send her back to Maksim. You obviously have feelings for her.”

“Course I do,” Charlie says with a hint of anger. “Nothing makes sense without her anymore. I can't imagine a single day without her.”

“Then take her, idiota!”

Panic races through me and I step back again, clamming up.

“We'll keep her locked up for a while if need be. Then we'll put a tranquilizer tracking bracelet on her and introduce her to The Site and our people. She'll learn a new way of living, Charlie. We've all had to do it.”

Charlie doesn't utter a word. I'm not sure if he's ignoring his brother or being slowly influenced by him. Either way, I'm anxious. I won't let him take me. I can't.

“Look, I get why you're forcing her hand by sending her back early, but what if she doesn't change her mind and stay with you? What if she leaves?”

“That's a chance I have to take. I love that girl. I won't make decisions for her. I won't treat her like my property.”

The world closes in on me, and I have to grab my chest because it aches. No one has ever said they love me before.

Someone sighs, I think Andres. “You're *como loco* for not taking advantage of this last week with her. You'll regret it, Charlie, trust me.”

“I probably will, but last night something happened that scared the shit outa me, and I won't risk it happening again.”

I flush with embarrassment, and as Andres badgers Charlie for what happened, I'm unable to listen in anymore. The last thing I need to hear is Charlie telling his brother that I'm fucking crazy and explaining the reasons why.

Pushing away from the wall, I sneak around the house, click open the front doors, and peer through a crack to make sure I don't run in to anyone.

I hope Andres can talk Charlie around to letting me stay for the last week. I'm not ready to go home yet. I'm not ready to go until I tell Charlie that I care about him.

There isn't anyone in the welcome hall, so I sneak upstairs to my room and sink into bed fully clothed, trying not to wish the day away because I know it's the last day of peace I have left. It's the last day with Charlie I have left.

It amazes me that I've just overheard Maksim outbid a government agency for me, and I'm more concerned about my time with Charlie. I don't even remember how I got like this. I'd usually focus on the imperative, boycotting anything less. Now, I'm emotionally selfish.

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“Blair, baby,” Charlie says, startling me.

Peering over the blanket at him, I see he's standing there in the open doorway, dressed in dark jeans over black boots and a red polo shirt under his brown leather jacket. He looks like he's going out.

Nervous, I find his blue gaze but he still cannot look me in the eyes.

That hurts.

“The job has been moved forward,” he says in a deep tone.

I frown, studying the carrier bag he's holding in one hand.

“Why?”

He scratches his head, blinking at the floor. “We've been waiting for a map of the bank vault. Maksim got it a few hours ago, so we need to do the job now.”

Why do I feel like he's lying to me? Why do I feel like the whole 'waiting for a map of the vault' has been an excuse to lengthen my stay? He was in such a rush for me to grasp control of London for fifteen minutes, yet he's only mentioned the job once in the entire time I've been here with him. And, to add to my suspicion, he confessed to his brother that he's trying to force my hand by sending me home early.

I think about all this for a moment, but then what's about to happen hits me like a ton of bricks.

“We-we're going back to London today?” I push the blankets aside to stand, and suddenly, nothing else matters to me. I have to do the job at my apartment. My computers are the only computers set up and equipped for the job.

Charlie nods, the muscles in his temples ticking.

I glance down at the floor, then back up at him, my throat burning to cry. “I...Charlie...I...” I have a million things I want to say. *I don't want to go!*

“We need to get a move on.” He waves me onward, and still cannot look at me. “We have to be at your apartment in two hours.”

“But, I—”

“C'mon, Blaire,” he says, stopping me from speaking

This is happening too quickly. My anxiety is through the roof. I thought we had tonight at least. I have so much that I want to ask him. So many questions about what he's found out about me. But most of all, I want to tell him that I care about him. He has to know the depth of my feelings for him.

Raising his eyebrows, he urges me onward. I drop my eyes to the floor and go over to him on mental command. He exits the room before me and leads the way downstairs in absolute silence. There by the front doors, he puts the

carrier bag down on the floor and grabs my leather jacket. I snap my eyebrows together, remembering having it upstairs.

“Don't bother trying to find your gun.” He pushes my jacket up my arms, walks around to in front of me and fixes my collar.

I'm just staring up at him, panicking.

“I've got it,” he says, his eyes flickering up to mine, and then back down to his hands where he's still playing with my collar. “You can have it back when I drop you off at home.”

I don't give a fuck about my gun right now. I can't get my head around the fact that *this* is over.

His hand hovering over the crest of my back, he picks up the carrier bag and leads me out of the house, to his car. I peer over my shoulder at his house, at the stately aspect of it, feeling it drift further and further away. I really, really don't want to go.

“Charlie,” I whisper his name in a broken voice, but when he looks down at me, blue eyes full of conspiracy, I can't speak. I glance away, feeling like the biggest coward in the world. I care about him so much but have no courage to tell him.

Reaching his car, he opens the passenger door and helps me inside, putting the bag he's holding on my lap. He even buckles me in. I guess he can read my dismay.

“I made you something to eat,” he says, gesturing at the bag.

“I'm not hungry,” I say softly, blinking at him.

“You'll eat, Blaire.” Shutting my door as a way to suggest there's no room for discussion, he rounds the car and jumps into the driver's seat. He opens the bag and tells me to eat at least half the sandwich. “I won't be around anymore, and I'll be damned if I'll leave you unfed.”

“Okay,” I whisper, every hair on my body spiking.

The sandwich doesn't get past my lips. I fiddle with crumbs of bread to make it look like I'm eating, but I'm just not hungry.

We make the drive to London in total silence. Charlie has the radio on low. I'm grateful for the music cutting through the tension that is us, though it's doing nothing for my panic.

I can't believe this is probably our last few moments together and we're like this. It's heartbreaking.

“Eat some of that sandwich, Blaire,” Charlie orders, making me flinch.

I do this time. It tastes of nothing, and it's so hard to swallow, clogging up

my air passage because my throat is so dry and tight.

As soon as we enter London, my panic turns to dread. I have to say something. I have to sway him into taking me back with him after I've done the job, so I can spend this last week with him. I miss him already and he's not left me yet.

We pull into my underground parking lot, pull up beside my Porsche, and Charlie turns off the car. He's quiet for a while, staring ahead. I watch him from the corner of my eye, unsure of what to say. I have so much that I want to say but no capacity to speak.

Charlie leans down for the glove compartment, digs out a phone—my phone—a set of keys, and my gun. He passes it all to me.

“I've put my number in your cell. It's under Decena.” He looks me right in the eyes now, causing mine to water. “If you ever need me, no matter the reason why—no matter what time of day it is—call me, and I'll come.”

I can't even nod at him. I'm cold to the bone.

“Are you sure you don't want to come with me?” Twisting at the waist, he grabs the back of my headrest and looks down on me, putting us mere inches from each other. “Because I can turn the car around and we'll leave. You can come and live with me in Mexico, or I'll set you up here in England. I'll take care of you. I'll do whatever you want.”

I stare down at everything in my lap. “I can't go with you, Charlie.” My voice is so small. “Maksim said I have to come back.” *But I can stay with you for this last week.* Why can't I tell him that?

He doesn't question me further. I can feel that he wants to, but he doesn't. Staring at me with powerful intensity, he reaches over, grabs my left hand, and shows me the bracelet he bought me. “Don't take this off,” he says, stroking over my palm with his thumb, turning my need to cry into a full blown stream of tears. “It's got a tracking device in it.”

My heart contracts.

“I can't let you go without knowing where you are, Blaire”—his eyes pace between mine—“I'll not be able to live with myself if something happened to you.”

Oh, fuck...it's over. I cannot get my head around how we've gone from being madly in lust with each other, to this.

I'm not sure I'll ever see him again, not unless I call him, as he just said, which I won't. I won't be allowed to call him.

I don't know how, but we seem to be on the same page because in a

moment of desperation, we lean over and hug each other. He squeezes me to his chest, burying his face in my neck and my hair. I wrap my arms around his waist and hold him like it's the last time, breathing in his scent and taking in the warmth of his body.

“Goodbye, Charlie.”

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## 30

I step inside my apartment and stare at everything, frozen, remembering when Charlie said my place is incredibly clinical. It is. I've never really noticed before. The double height ceilings and the vast curving walls are gleaming white with no imperfections, cold to the eye. The arc staircase beyond the kitchen consists of smooth brushed steel, the floating steps wrapped in white veneer. The furnishings are white and ultra-modern with sharp edges. Even the air smells clinical with bleach.

It feels like forever since I've been here.

Shutting the front door, I wander around the dining table and through the kitchen area, where I put down my keys and my gun. I flinch at the sound of the keys clanging against the countertop.

It's so quiet.

Charlie's house is quiet too, but it's so full of things and personality. I miss his house already, the way it smells of him, the homely feel to it.

Stopping in my lounge area, I gaze deadpan out of the windows. The sky is dark gray and almost breaking with rain. The clouds twist and churn to the tune of the wind. It was sunny this morning. Now, it's gloomy.

I lower onto the middle of the leather couch, holding my phone in my hands, trying to remember a time when I felt comfortable here.

I can't. It doesn't feel like home. It never has.

Warm tears spill down my cheeks, spitting over my hands in my lap.

I cannot believe Charlie just left me here. We still have a week and he just left me?

Hunching over, I break into mute sobs, my chest aching so badly. In one day, I've discovered that my entire life might have been a lie, that Maksim might've outbid a government agency for me, but none of that bothers me. I don't give a shit about anything before Charlie anymore.

He said he loves me, and that he wants me to choose to leave Maksim and go with him for myself. No one has ever given a shit about what I want. No one has even thought to give a shit about what I want.

I cry harder and louder, to the point where I can't really breathe, hoping it'll make the pain in my chest go away. It doesn't. If anything, crying makes *this* seem more real.

Why has Charlie played Devil's Advocate by forcing my hand like this? He knows me. He knows I can't make such a massive decision for myself.

A part of me wishes he'd listened to his brother and just taken me. I can't bear to think of a life without him in it. A life where only Maksim matters.

Panic rolls in my stomach as I think of Maksim and I start trembling, my mind whirling. He might be here soon, and then everything goes back to the way it was before him. Before Charlie. Maksim might want to hit me. The satisfaction he derives from causing me pain might be stronger than ever before because we've never been separated for so long.

I'm scared.

I think about the first time I saw Charlie in Maksim's office, how crafty and careless he was, and how wicked he looked. He's changed so much over the past few months. He's not the man I first met. He said he loves me. Why does that hurt so fucking much to know?

My phone vibrates in my hand with an incoming call from Maksim. My stomach coils with dread.

I haven't spoken to him in so long that he almost feels like a stranger. I don't want to speak to him. I want to go back to Charlie, but I can't.

"Hello?" I say softly, putting the phone to my ear with a shuddering hand. I have to answer Maksim's call. If I don't, he'll definitely come over and belt me, and it's been so long since anyone has hit me. I don't want him to hurt me.

"My Little Pet," he croons, his voice bizarrely warming me from within. It's an unanticipated, relieving feeling. "How are you?" he says huskily, his Russian accent like home to me.

Combing my hair back over my shoulder, I blink ahead, filtering the familiar sensation of his voice.

I still have Maksim, I remind myself, breathing in and out steadily to stow my tears. I still have him, so it's going to be okay. If I had neither Charlie nor Maksim, I'd really feel lost.

"I'm okay," I say, a little nervous.

"Good. I'm glad." He sounds very relaxed, nothing like I was expecting. "Are you ready to shut down London, My Little Pet? Everyone is waiting on you."

Everyone? Does that mean Charlie as well?

I try to push him out of my mind because I can't think about him right now, not while I'm on the phone with Maksim, and not while I've got a job to do. I can cry over him tonight if need be.

From the couch, I roam into my dark computer room, sliding open the paneled door. I'm stunned to see my computers are all turned on. The room is aglow with white light.

Maksim has already been here today, it seems.

Did Charlie tell Maksim that he was going to leave me here today? That he's relinquishing his last week with me?

*Don't think of him.*

I sit in the large office chair and set my phone on loud speaker, putting it on the desk. "I'm just setting up," I lie softly to steal a moment. I take in a deep breath and let it out, allowing my emotions to flow freely as if I'm meditating. I need to get a grip. I can't function in a state of emotional turmoil.

Blanking, I say, "I'm ready, Cəp Maksim."

"She's ready," he tells someone. "Right, My Little Pet, first, I want you to shut down a mile radius around Canary Wharf."

Putting my fingers on the keyboard keys, I lock in a few codes and a decent percentage of London goes down, giving me full control. I scan the CCTV screens to be sure it's worked. Cars skid to a stop at blind traffic lights, causing a few minor accidents. Shop owners dart outside and glance about in a panic because their electricity is now nonexistent.

*Perfect.*

The next code I enter turns every traffic light red, causing mayhem.

"She's done it," I hear someone say. I don't recognize his voice.

"Good girl," Maksim says, which is strange because he never calls me a *good girl*. "Now, the black truck parked outside of Canary Wharf Barclays bank, the one with a number plate reading, Zeta, do you see it?"

Looking up at the top left computer screen, I zoom in using the computer mouse.

"Yes, I see it." My chest aches. That's something to do with Charlie.

*Please, stop thinking about him!*

"You are to guide that truck through London to a private underground parking lot with no mistakes. Do you understand?"

"Sure," I say softly. "I understand."

He tells me the underground parking lot address. Then he snaps, “Podgotovsja!”

Sharp hairs cascade down my arms at the sound of Maksim telling me to prepare, and my entire body comes to attention.

I train my attention, and so it begins. While I bash at the keyboard keys like a robot, locking in some more codes to keep control of London's traffic system, I listen to all of Maksim's instructions. “Make these traffic lights red. Make those green.”

The truck is on target, speeding through every green light I summons.

On the screens, I notice the police are going crazy, lighting up London with their blues and reds, the sirens howling through the streets. I shut them off by the Museum of London Docklands, ensuring the traffic is so wild that they cannot get through. I then focus back on the truck, on getting it to point B with no hiccups.

The job is done within ten minutes. I delete my codes to hand back control of London's Closed Circuit System and sit back, clasping my hands together in my lap.

I listen to a commotion in the background on the phone, an array of voices saying, “We need to go. You get the money. I'll burn the truck. Tell Charlie I'll drop the money off to Andres.”

*Charlie.*

“You did well, My Little Pet,” Maksim says, pulling me from my crushing thoughts. “But I never for a second doubted you.” He goes quiet for a moment, and I suspect he's covering the phone speaker because I cannot hear a thing. Then, his voice fills my ears, “I want you at my house in an hour. I'll be here waiting for you.”

“Of course, Cəp Maksim,” I whisper. “See you soon.”

We bid each other goodbye and I hang up the phone, wondering what he has in store for me. I've done everything he's asked of me, so he has to be happy with me. He has to be. If he isn't, I'm not sure I can handle his wrath right now. I'm not in the right frame of mind.

*Don't think of that, Blaire.* I beg myself.

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Pushing to my feet, I make my way out of my apartment, grabbing my keys and my gun off the kitchen countertop on my way out. I shove my gun

in my inside jacket pocket, just as my phone pings with a text message. Checking the screen, I see it's from Decena.

My heart drops through me like a boulder. Why's he texting?

Eyes glued to my phone, I subconsciously press for the elevator and step inside, torn over whether I should read the message—*itching to read it*.

I shouldn't. I need to let go of Charlie. I need to let go of the past two months if I'm to get back to normal. Maksim will appreciate me getting back to normal, and even more so if I suffer no problems. He won't hurt me if I behave.

My heart splitting in two, I delete the message without reading it, and exit the elevator when the steel brushed doors slide open.

The lobby is dead quiet, like my apartment. I carry on through the building, pushing open the underground parking lot doors with effort because they're so heavy.

In the parking lot, it's cold and dark, the ceiling lights flickering on and off while buzzing with electricity.

I reach my car and click the keys to unlock it, making it beep and flash. I remember Charlie asking me stupid questions about this car. Why does my chest ache when I think about him?

Sinking into the driver's seat, I press the button to beckon the purring engine, and while my car warms up, I scroll through my other unread messages on my phone.

James has been going nuts. I've got over thirty messages from him, asking if I'm okay and where am I.

Blair where are you? I'm in Maksim's house looking for you. People are saying that Charlie Decena just shouted at everyone to leave the kitchen, though not you. Are you okay? I need a favor. Text me back ASAP.

Is it true that you had a fight with Charlie yesterday because he tried to kiss you? I've just overheard Maksim telling Rumo.

Blair I'm worried. It's been over a week since anyone has seen or heard from you. Text me back to let me know you're still alive.

I've been to your apartment and taken some of your money. I'm hiring someone to find you. I have to know you're okay. You've been missing for

three weeks now.

Blaire things are getting strange. MI5 has been to see Maksim. Your image and your fingerprint has been processed through the British system without Maksim's knowledge. What the fuck is going on?

Maksim has tried to pay off MI5 so they stop your search but they won't. They say the order has come from above. Where the fuck are you?

Some Latin American guy called Nicolas is in Maksim's office with him. He's trying to find out where you come from, asking questions about your parents. Please, I'm begging you Blaire if you can, message me back.

Blaire I'm fucking nervous. Charlie is at one of Maksim's parties and he's making a show of his feelings for you, saying how lovely you are, that he'd like to have you for himself. What's going on? I'm losing the plot here!

If you're getting my messages, here's an update. Tatiana has just flown in. She's going crazy at Maksim for supposedly bartering you. Why haven't you texted me back to tell me what's going on? Are you staying with Charlie?

Is it true that Charlie pardoned Maksim a debt of thirty-five million Euro's for three months with you? Tatiana is screaming at Maksim as I write this text, saying that he should've gone to her for the money, not sold you. Maksim is fighting his corner, telling her that Charlie wouldn't take any amount of money. He wanted you as payment. Is this all true?

Blaire Tatiana has warned Maksim that if Charlie doesn't give you back, he's not allowed to come after you. She won't start a war with the Los Zetas. Everyone is shit scared of the Los Zetas, and when I say everyone, I mean everyone! The Albanians say not to fuck with them. The Turks. The Columbians...Who are the Los Zetas?

I know you haven't messaged me back, but it doesn't matter. I know what's going on now. Tatiana has been questioning me, and in exchange for my answers, she's told me where you are and that you're okay. Apparently, she wants to talk to you also, but Charlie refuses to let her. I'm glad he won't let

her.

I just want to say, if you can, you should stay with Charlie and try to find  
some peace Blaire.  
I'll never forget you.

I read a small portion of his text messages, stunned. I'm so stunned that I can't really process anything. It feels like so much has gone on in my absence. It's almost like everyone has been going crazy over another girl, and I'm reading about it from afar.

Feeling numb, I shove my car into reverse, straighten up, and then I steer out of the underground, into the gray day.

Charlie wasn't lying when he told his brother that he's run a check on me. I don't know why this thought creeps into my mind, but it does, and I can't will it away.

Turning right, I cross The London Bridge, barely registering the city bustling before me.

How did he get my fingerprint? I subconsciously watched him wash up everything after our meals, and when I ate alone, I cleared up my own mess. There wasn't any surface he could have gotten my fingerprint from.

Maybe he obtained it from my apartment?

I stop at a roundabout as the lights signal red to wait, amid bumper to bumper traffic.

And, how did he get my photo? Maksim doesn't even have a photo of me.

The light flashes green, so I maneuver through the traffic. I take the third exit off the roundabout and reach the motorway junction for Dartford, and I don't know what comes over me. Hitting the break, I come to a screeching stop in the middle of the road, all those messages hitting me like lightning.

MI5.

Tatiana.

Tatiana telling Maksim he's not to come after me if Charlie decides to keep me. *Fuck*, if Charlie didn't send me home, I'd still be with him.

A flock of people surround my car, and I vaguely hear them yelling to see if I'm okay, am I hurt.

I stare at the sign that will take me back to Tonbridge Wells, to Charlie.

A part of me, my heart, wants me to turn toward Tonbridge Wells. I want to go back to Charlie. The other part of me, my head, tells me to veer for Dartford. I know I have to go back to Maksim. I've always known. But there's

something else at play now.

I don't know what to do, so pushing the car in gear, I do the only thing that feels right.

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# 31

I find Maksim at his house in his office, sitting behind his desk with cool composure.

My heart drums at the sight of him. He's wearing a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up and his brown hair tied back, his golden eyes trained on me in the doorway.

The life that I've spent with him coils in my mind, his voice on repeat while I slept, whispering, *We will kill for each other. We are each other's.* The hidings, the darkness, and the dampness.

Half an hour ago when I was in my car, conflicted between my heart and my head, I chose this path because it's the only path I am allowed to walk. Of course I'd greedily take a life with Charlie over a life with Maksim, but I'll only do that with my master's permission. I *can* only do that with my master's permission.

So, here I am.

Holding the doorframe, I smile awkwardly at Maksim. He extends a hand for me to sit in the chair opposite his desk, so I do, keeping a wary eye on him.

"You are wearing your hair down?" he asks in Russian—the whole conversation is in Russian. Then he tips his head, his eyes thinning at me.

"Oh, sorry." I grip a length that's hanging over my shoulder. "I-I didn't get a chance to tie it back. Shall I—"

"No." He lifts a hand to stop me. "Leave it down. It looks nice." He sits forward, cupping his clean shaven chin.

That's new.

I try to stay focused, but I can't help screwing up my face. Why has he shaved? Maksim always has stubble dress his oval chin. And since when did he tie his hair back?

"You look different, My Little Pet. Nervous."

That's because I am nervous.

I'm surprised to find I'm not upset with him for bartering me to Charlie. If

anything, I'm grateful for the time of peace and happiness he's given me.

"It's been an odd few months, Cəp Maksim," I say vacantly.

"Yes," he drawls. "Charlie told me earlier today that he isn't taking you back with him. Is he bored?"

I shrug because I don't want to tell him about what happened yesterday, or today.

He cocks a brow at me. "You don't know if he's bored of you?"

"No, Cəp Maksim."

"Hmm. I see. How was your time with him?"

I don't even blink when I say, "It was okay."

"And your health?"

I frown, not following.

"Your virginity?" Every word he says is executed with slow purpose. I almost forgot how intense he is.

I swallow. "Still intact."

"Good." He grins at me. "I imagine Charlie Decena wanted so badly to take it."

I don't know what to say, so I just look at him. I imagine Charlie did too.

"Before you give me a thorough account of your time with him, I want to know something." He runs his thumb across his lower lip. "Did you overhear any of his business dealings? Is he speaking with an American Congressman?"

My eyes widen. How the fuck does he know Charlie deals with an American Congressman?

"No. I never heard anything," I flat out lie, but it weirdly comes naturally to me.

"He never spoke in front of you?"

I shake my head, desperate to ask why he wants to know if Charlie spoke to an American Congressman. What's that to him? None of the Russians deal with the Americans.

"Huh, strange—" he brushes this off, believing me. Maksim thinks I'd never lie to him, and I wouldn't have lied to him before meeting Charlie, but Charlie has changed me.

"So tell me, My Little Pet"—he's still musing, pinching his bottom lip now—"what did Charlie do to you exactly?" He says that he wants intimate details, when and where, and he wants them now. "What did he do to you sexually? How did he make you feel?"

I have to start right from the beginning, so I bashfully tell him about the first night. “I woke up in a strange bed with-with Charlie sitting next to me, playing with my hair. He told me what was going on. I attacked him with feeble effort because I was drugged but it was enough to put some distance between us. Then, once I calmed down, he told me to take off my clothes but of course, I-I refused. I wanted to speak to you.”

“Of course you did, My Little Pet. Of course.” His eyes glow with mockery. “Carry on. I'd like every detail.”

“Well, after I spoke to you”—I blink at Maksim—“I did what I was told. I let him take off my clothes.” I tell him all of what I remember. It's internal torture when I get to the part where Charlie first went down on me, how he splayed me out and forced me to orgasm over and over. The sensation of his cock sliding in my ass. I want to cup my face and hideaway in my hands. Everything feels too private to speak of—this is *our* private business, as Charlie once said. I now understand what he meant.

I stop and pause a few times but Maksim yells at me, “Every bloody detail! How did he make you feel? Did he go down on you more than once? Masturbate you with his hands? Did he fuck your pussy with his tongue? Tell me everything, Blaire.”

Cringing, I do tell him everything. My cheeks heat under my pale skin as I speak of my emotions. “I felt...broken and whole at once when he had sex with me anally. The sensations made me feel a bit head-drunk. The next day, Char-Charlie kissed me on the mouth like he was in love with me or something. I-I was terrified, Cэp Maksim. I didn't know whether to fight him off or not. You told me not too, so I—”

“What next?” he urges me to get to the good parts.

I'm almost green with embarrassment when I say Charlie had me please him with my mouth. That he would use his hands to stimulate me when he didn't go down on me.

I don't tell him about the deal we made, the deal where if I put Charlie on his ass, he wouldn't touch me. That feels more private than the sexual intimacy between us.

“Did you like it when he made you orgasm?” Maksim says, his eyes tapering with wonder.

Silence, and I nod.

Maksim grinds his teeth. I can see his mind working overtime.

“How were your days when Charlie wasn't abusing you?” he says, running

his tongue along his upper teeth. “Were you kept in one room? Did he let you out?”

“No. He didn't keep me locked up.” My voice softens when I speak of our friendly fights, and when I explain how he took care of me. “He cooked me food—breakfast, lunch, and dinner—and he ate with me. He always made sure I was okay.” I shrug. “Charlie was nice to me.”

There is another long pause where we look at each other, blue eyes to golden brown.

“You care about him,” Maksim says eventually. He's not asking. He knows.

I nod.

His expression drops, his eyes flashing with some emotion I've not seen on him before. I'm not sure, but he almost looks, frightened? No, can't be. Why would he be frightened that I care about Charlie? If anything, he should be angry, ready and willing to belt me.

He doesn't.

Fondling with the collar of his shirt, he tries to straighten up in his chair, plastering on that iron stare he executes so well. “Do you care about him more than you do me?” he asks.

I don't know why, but I hesitate. All I can think about right now is how Charlie cuddled me, touched me, and kissed me.

I know I have to say something, so I tell Maksim, “No. I don't.”

My words don't affect him. I suspect he knows I'm lying. It's only a half lie. I care about Charlie in a different way compared to how I care about Maksim.

“What he did to you, Blaire, did it hurt?”

I visibly flinch as he uses my given name.

“Did it hurt more than anything I've ever done to you?” he says.

“No.” I look down at my hands in my lap. “Nothing hurt.”

“Not even when he fucked your ass? Ohhh, I find that hard to believe. You were a virgin there.”

“Um...” My stomach tightens with nerves. “I'm not sure. He-he prepared me.”

“How? How did he prepare you?” He's back on par, taking no prisoners. He wants to know every fucking factor. “You left those details out, didn't you?”

“He...” I gulp, blinking in the sight of my trainers—the trainers Charlie

gave me this morning. “He used my orgasm for lubricant and fingered me for a while, starting with one finger, and then two.”

“How long until he took you?”

I'm tomato red. I can't look Maksim in the eyes. *When is this going to be over?*

“A while...maybe an hour...I'm not too sure. I was dizzy because he drugged me, and he was using these strange oils that he said would help me relax.”

“Isopropyl Nitrite.” His chair creaks as he sits back. “So, when he penetrated you...”

*Oh, God. STOP!*

“It didn't hurt?”

“It hurt a little at first but he took his time. He said he wasn't in a rush.”

“Do you miss him, Blaire?” Maksim's abrupt question causes me to look up at him. There's no expression on his face.

I nod innocently. I cannot lie about this. It's written all over my face.

His eyes enlarge, and there's that look again. That look of fear. I've never seen Maksim seem frightened before.

“Does that hurt?” he says with caution. “Missing him, I mean? Does it hurt, Blaire?”

My lips wobble because that ache in my chest, it consumes me.

I nod.

“So, he has hurt you.” He sounds relieved, taking in a few purifying breaths.

My hands start to shake in my lap.

“I guess so.” My voice comes out all small, peppered in tears. “But that's the only pain he's caused me. He's never hurt me like you do, Cэp Maksim.”

“Do you like that he didn't physically hurt you?”

Swallowing, I nod.

I'm expecting Maksim to lay into me, to give me a good bloody hiding—I can feel his anger on the surface of my skin—but he doesn't. He's acting carefully, and utterly confusing me when he diverts by telling me about his time over the past two and a half months. That he went to Russia to visit Tatiana. That he missed me more than he thought he would. “I visited my parents' graves and laid burnt roses,” he says, giving me this heartless look. He burns the roses to take the beauty out of them. In his mind, anything burnt and damaged represents his parents.

“Red roses?” I ask softly, feeling sorry for him. He hates his parents. He has a hard time visiting their graves. He usually takes his anger and hurt out on me—or James—after visiting them.

I suddenly wonder where James is, but I'm too nervous to ask.

“Of course, red roses, My Little Pet.” Maksim glances between my features—his features strangely soft and inviting. “Whenever I'm there, I think of you, of your loyalty, and your passion to defend me. It gives me strength.” He touches his chest. Then he goes right in to how he feels about me. “While I do not always show it, I do love you, Blaire.”

My heart is in my throat. He's never said that before. He never explains himself to me or tells me that he loves me. And just to really fuck with my head, he offers me a week off duty.

“I-I don't need any time off, Cэp Maksim. I don't...” I pause, lost for words. The last thing I need is ample time off to think about the last few months. “If you need me, I'm here.”

He smiles maliciously at me. “I know, My Little Pet. I know.”

We talk a while longer about his time in Russia, how cold it was there and how Tatiana was colder. “She isn't happy that I bartered you, but in all honesty, I'm not glad I did, either. I shouldn't have used you as a bargaining tool. You were mine and mine alone, and I've failed you.”

I don't know what to say—I'm wavering under his golden eyes—so I say nothing.

When he's done pouring out his emotions to me, he tells me that I can go home now. “I'll call you when I need you, My Little Pet.”

I rise to my feet, feeling awkward. I'm not sure if I should say goodbye or just leave—it's been so long since I was under Maksim's power.

He decides for me. He rounds his desk, walking tall and gracefully masculine, and he ushers me to the front door, where he kisses the side of my face. “I'm glad you're back, My Little Pet. So, so glad.”

I smile at him, and just when I think it's over, he grabs my wrist.

“Where did you get this?” He lifts my hand to eyesight, inquiring about the bracelet.

I hesitate to speak but he narrows his eyes at me, making me feel small and feeble.

“Charlie gave it to me.”

It's like I just slapped him. His face drops again, and he blinks at me, flabbergasted.

“So, he's tried to spoil you with twenty-thousand dollar bracelets, has he?”  
His fingers dig into my flesh. “Give it to me.”

My entire body sinks with panic. “No. I-he...he said...I can't, Cәp Maksim.”

“You can't?” His hand wrapped around my wrist shakes with fury. “Are you taking orders from him now too?”

“I...he said I—” I don't know what to tell him. *Just give him the fucking bracelet!*

He laughs under his breath, and it's like the last hour didn't happen. Old Maksim is back, and he means business.

“Okay, My Little Pet, then I guess you will earn that bracelet.”

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## 32

Fisting the back of my hair, Maksim drags me through his house and up the stairs, tearing my scalp. I don't stumble. I'm gracefully poised as he hauls me along with him.

Outside his bedroom, he stops to kick the door open and yanks me inside, yelling in Russian as he does. The curtains are drawn and it's almost too dark to see anything. Almost. Surrounding the edges of the ceiling, blue lights beam down, illuminating an assortment of gadgets meant to inflict pain. The Saint Andrew's Cross with leather handcuffs stands in the tall bay window. It looks like hell warmed up, old scratch marks crisscrossing the wooden surface where someone has tried to escape. Whips and leather floggers are lined up around the huge wooden four poster bed, like ornaments. A cattle prod hangs on the wall above the dull fireplace next to the bed.

My blood runs cold. I'm absolutely terrified, my eyes glazing over with tears. He used to sting me with that cattle prod until I could stomach the pain.

“Get out, now!” Maksim yells, and I cower, his voice sharp enough to raise hairs.

I wonder who he's talking to, thinking it might be James, until I see a little blonde girl in his bed. She's wearing a black leather leash, nothing else. She flicks the blankets back, scrambles to her feet with her lush parts jiggling about, and dashes out of the bedroom, slamming the door shut with a loud ***bang!***

I don't cringe. I'm trying to stay mentally balanced. *Block it out.*

There's a strange smell in the air of strawberries or something, a sweet, fruity aroma. I don't know why. Maksim usually burns brut candles.

He pulls on my hair and forces me around to face him, bends my neck back and glares down at me with fiery golden eyes. “You will forget about the last three months, My Little Pet”—his hand in my hair twists and tightens to the point where I moan in pain—“because I'll beat the memories out of you. And if I can't beat the memories out of you, I'll medicate them out of you.”



**WALLOP!** He slaps me around the face, knocking me onto the bed. Tangled in my own hair, I land with a heavy bounce, my knees hitting the carpeted floor. My cheek throbs and my head...fuck, it hurts. I cup my face, frightened shitless, suddenly thinking about Charlie. He never once hurt me. I remember when he said that I might be the only girl he won't hit. Why the fuck am I thinking about that?

“Last chance to give me that bracelet, My Little Pet?”

I sob in my closed mouth, not wanting to give it to him. It's mine. It's the only thing I have of Charlie.

Trembling violently, I shake my head to say no.

“Okay then. As you wish.” Maksim tears me out of my jacket, then my t-shirt, his nails scratching my skin because he can't undress me quick enough. I sink to the floor in my sports bra and trousers, desperately looking up at my master who I shouldn't ever refuse.

“You look scared, My Little Pet,” he sounds pleased as he says this, smiling evilly at me with crinkled eyes.

He points out, and I know what he's gesturing at. I've been trussed up in this room many times before. Unfolding myself from the floor, I get up and walk across the room, stopping in the corner. *Breathe. Focus.* Closing my eyes and shakily reaching up, I grab two sets of chains that are fixed to the ceiling. The metal is cold in my palms, but the room is too warm, creating a mist of sweat down my spine. I feel like I can't breathe.

A rustling sound by the bed draws my attention, wood clanging against wood. I peer back through scraps of hair, immediately wishing I didn't. He's choosing his weapon.

“Podgotovsja!” Maksim yells for me to prepare once he's behind me, like he usually does.

I cower, bracing myself, then he whips me senseless with a sjambok—an African cattle whip—**Wa-tch! Wa-tch!** Each assault blazes through my mind like red flashes of light. Screams get caught in my throat, my body jerking back and forth against his attack.

**Wa-tch! Wa-tch!**

It goes on for what feels like hours. My back arches and my flesh splits open, hot blood slithering down my spine and soaking the waist of my trousers.

By the time he's finished, I'm in such a strange zone in my mind that I can't really see anything. I hang here feeling like a shell of a person, the old

Blaire—the Blaire before Charlie.

*Charlie...Why does thinking about him make me want to cry?*

I break into sobs, and Maksim punches me. Holding my neck in one hand, he swings with his other. **THUMP!** He knocks my head back, knocking me to the floor. Blood trickles down my cheek, over the throbbing where he slapped me.

*No pain, I tell myself, you can't feel anything.*

While I'm a messy, lifeless pile on the floor, he cuts me out of my trousers and my underwear.

“Awh!” I wince in agony as he snaps open my bra and hauls it down my arms, tossing it across the room.

“On the bed,” he commands, panting with anger. “Head down. Ass in the air.”

Not registering what's going to happen, I crawl to my master's command like a cat, from the floor, up the side of the bed, until I'm in the middle with my hands and knees sinking into the mattress.

The night gets so dark with punishments. Maksim is doing fucking awful things to me. Things I can't even bring myself to think about.

The sound of buttons clangs against the wooden floors. He's undressing, dropping his shirt, and then his trousers. The bed dips at my feet, almost knocking me off balance. Large, cold hands on my hips. Nails digging into my flesh with hungry pursuit.

“Open your legs,” Maksim says. He's breathing so hard I know he's excited, warm air blowing up my back.

Shivering, I do as I'm told, my ankles twisted inward because I'm nervous. He pushes against the low of my back, forcing me to arch, shoving my face in the sheets. They smell like musky man sweat.

I squeeze my eyes shut.

*Don't think.*

It's so hard not to. Nausea rises through me when I feel him parting my ass cheeks with callous hands, saying, “That Latin fuck is lucky, testing my goods before I have.”

A dripping, spitting sound. It makes me retch. The head of his cock is wet, I feel as he smears it against my anus, urging the tip in. My insides churn, and now I'm silently crying my heart out, struggling to mentally will away what's happening.

He's going to fuck my ass, and he's not even preparing me.

A powerful thrust, he's roaring with dark passion, and then he's wedged right inside me, causing me to spew up all over the pillows and all over my hands. The smell is vile, acidic, and I heave again. My insides burns, my throat, and my ass muscles. It's too much. I feel too full.

“Show me your bracelet, My Little Pet,” Maksim's voice is stark and enraged, evil lust coming off him in waves. “Show it to me!”

I whimper, terrified out of my mind. Then I brace myself up on one elbow and reach back to show him my bracelet. Long fingers curl around my wrist and pull my arm back some more.

“Aargh!” I scream, hard, as his teeth sink into my wrist.

He kisses the bite mark after and I hiss. It's so sore. Then he licks over each puncture with the tilt of his tongue. “Every time you look at this bracelet, you will think of me—this scar will make you.”

Letting go of my wrist, he shifts on his knees, causing his cock to shift inside my ass. My stomach rolls. I vomit again, retching so hard that my belly pangs in pain.

I think I mentally pass out from here. It's just too much.

I vaguely hear Maksim ask if I want him to stop, and I tell him with weak effort, “No, Cəp Maksim.” I wouldn't dare say anything else.

“Now that your mind is frail and open,” he lies over my back, crushing me, and says against my ear in a head drunk voice, “you will succumb to my orders.” Pulling out halfway, he tells me to prepare, and then plunges back in me, balls deep, tearing me apart. “You will not think about Charlie anymore, My Little Pet.”

Out, and back in with viciousness, he stretches me open. I'm crying in agony through closed teeth. He's groaning with rawness, the sound pulsing through my chest.

“You will not speak to him or anyone else without my permission. You'll not look at another man.” The rules are never ending, as is his cruelty. “I am the only man you want.”

Grabbing a hand full of my hair, he yanks my head back as he sits on his knees and fucks me with all he has, skin slapping against skin, him pounding my ass.

My body is shaking uncontrollably with cold sweat. I scream in agony every time he practically hits my stomach, until he cums violently. His cock gets longer and thicker, emptying inside me.

He doesn't beckon my arousal, not once. There's nothing hot about this.

I'm as dry as a bone, disgusted with what he's doing to me, whimpering in pity for myself.

“That was good,” he drawls. “Worth the wait.”

Curling his fingers around his cock, he slowly pulls all the way out of me. Warm juices slither down my inner thighs, over my knees, dripping on the bed.

Gasping with relief that it's over, I drop on the bed, but I only get a moment's rest before he continues his torture.

He climbs off the bed, causing me to bounce up and down on the mattress, and picks up a different whip from the floor.

***Wa-tch! Wa-tch! Wa-tch!***

He beats me into a numb state, yelling with zeal that I'm his. “You will always be mine, My Little Pet!”

I don't even know how many times he sodomizes me. It's a pattern. He cums, stops for a while to whip me on the bed, then he fucks me again.

By morning, I'm so empty that when he tells me I can go home and have the week off, I find my keys on the floor amid my clothes and leave the house naked, bar my bracelet. I fucking well-earned this.

It's freezing outside, a typical English morning with a burning pink sunrise and silver frost on the trees. My breath mists the air. My nipples are bruised and hard like bullets. He must have pinched me. I don't remember.

The stony driveway crunches against the soles of my feet, but still, I can't feel a thing.

There's a blanket in the boot of my car, so I get it out to wrap myself up, and then I drive to my apartment.

London is before my very eyes, but I don't see a thing. I'm lost in my mind, trying to focus on anything other than what Maksim has just done to me. It's not as if he hasn't beaten me like that before, but last night felt different. It felt like a different kind of conditioning. Maybe because he's never had penetrative sex with me before.

Pulling into my underground parking lot, I get out of my car and walk lifelessly into the elevator, and then into my apartment. I drop the bloody blanket on the floor by the front door and patter into my bedroom, heading for the en-suite bathroom.

I'm not in any sort of pain until I get in the shower. The water isn't too hot but the welts on my back are on fire, so sore it's almost too much to bear.

While I wince in agony against the soap, I don't cry. I don't do anything. I

simply get clean of semen, blood, and Maksim's saliva, and I crawl into bed without drying myself. I should clean up the bite mark on my arm with some vodka and bandage it up, but I can't will myself to move.

I sleep for as long as I can, hoping that the next time I see Maksim, he won't be so mad at me.

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# 33

The following week passes in agonizing, numb slow motion.

I wake the next morning—after Maksim beat the shit out of me and sexually violated me for the first time—in agony. My back is split and crusty with scabs, my hips ache from being banged so hard, and my arm is throbbing, oozing with clear fluid.

I manage to climb out of bed and hobble to the kitchen so I can thoroughly clean the bite mark. I must before it gets infected.

Slumping against the kitchen countertop, I grab a bottle of vodka from the side and twist off the cap, keeping all thoughts at bay. I'm in no frame of mind to be thinking. I hold out my wounded arm over the sink, shut my eyes, and pour.

“Aargh!” I scream my heart out, tipping up the bottle to stop the cold, burning liquid from touching my skin. I'm trembling from head to toe, cool sweat clinging to my flesh. My arm feels like it's double the size because it's so swollen, and the puncture marks burn like a bitch.

I pour again and scream. Pour and scream.

By the time the bottle is empty, the wound is throbbing.

Taking deep, steady breaths, fighting not to pass out, I put down the bottle on the countertop and get the medical kit out of the drawer to wrap up the wound, ensuring it's not too tight nor too loose.

I roll the bandage around my arm with caution, wincing at the pressure, the smell of the elastic material reminding me of something clinical.

*Done.*

I breathe out.

It feels better already, though I'm dizzy from the pain and my mouth is watering like crazy.

I take a moment, holding my dizzy head, trying not to look at the bright ball of fire that is the sun streaming up the sky. I've got such a headache.

Pouring myself a glass of water, I try for a sip but my stomach rolls with queasiness. I don't think I've ever felt such a vast collection of overwhelming

sensations in one sitting before.

Needing to rest, I grab my phone from the kitchen side—for if Maksim calls. I crawl back into bed, my mind still empty of thoughts. I sleep the day away, occasionally stirring to screams that I recognize as my own. Screams that wrack my body with panic and pain. I don't remember any dreams, thankfully. I can't deal with anything more fucking with my head right now. I need to get over what Maksim has done to me.

It's midday when I open my eyes again, the sun burning high in the sky, streaming in. Every limb I have feels heavy and tight and my ass is so sore it's almost unbearable.

There's a text message on my phone from James. He wants to know why I didn't stay with Charlie, if I'm alright, and why I'm not working. I can't even manage a smile about the fact that he cares. I'm too empty.

Pushing the blankets back so I can get up, I grimace, my hips feeling like they've ceased up. When is the pain going to end?

In my grasp, the sheets are wet and heavy. I glance over my bed. The white sheets are covered in streaks of dark red blood. My back must've been bleeding while I slept. The notion doesn't bother me. Nothing seems to be bothering me. Yes, I'm in pain, and that's overwhelming, but inside, I'm numb.

It's been a long, long time since Maksim gave me a hiding like that, and I'd usually be sad with guilt for pissing him off so furiously, but not this time. This time I'm just emotionally numb.

My throat is raw. I limp to the kitchen for some water, which doesn't make me feel sick this time. I also try to eat a bowl of cereal, barely registering the fact that there's fresh milk and food in the fridge. Hovering over the bowl, elbows on the countertop, I manage a few mouthfuls of cornflakes but I'm just not hungry. I'm in too much pain to do anything other than sleep.

I use the toilet, heaving at the sight of blood on the tissue, then I slip back into bed and rest for two days without showering.

Day five: the bite mark on my arm is scabbing over. I can feel the scabs rubbing against the bandage every time I move.

Lying in bed, I unwind the bandage to let the wound air so it can heal better. I drop the bandage on the floor. Twenty puncture marks I count on my forearm, each one red around the edges and a bit itchy. I try my best not to scratch the wound but it's difficult, like an itch you can't quite reach.

Slugging it out of bed, I use the toilet and manage a full bowl of cereal

today, though only because I need to eat—I need to regain my strength if I'm to heal—then I'm back in bed.

Day six: I attempt a shower but the welts and cuts on my body are so sore that even *I* can't bear the pain. I turn off the faucet, then I shrug into a pair of sports shorts and a t-shirt, and I curl up on the couch, watching the sun rise over London with burning orange rays.

Still, I feel nothing. It's so strange. I don't know what's happened to me. It's like, before this moment I'm in right now, nothing exists.

I float in and out of a dark slumber.

Day seven: I endeavor the gym but I can barely make it up the stairs. With one hand, my phone in my other, I grip the banister so hard that my knuckles turn white, but every step I take is like walking Mount Everest.

Another step and another step. I'm halfway up the staircase now, but I just can't make the rest.

I struggle for another step, fighting with lower body force, and a wound on my back splits.

“Aargh!” I scream through closed teeth, and finally, I break down. I can't take this numb feeling anymore. I can't stand the pain anymore.

Sliding down the wall, I sit here on the stairs, cradling my phone, wondering why I don't feel anything. Wondering why I'm so empty. I want to cry but I can't.

Is this a result of Maksim or Charlie?

*Charlie...*

“Fuck!” I scream so loud that I can feel my voice in the atmosphere. I thrash my fingers into my hair and pull at the strands, inflicting my own pain.

It's the first time I've thought of him since... He shouldn't have sent me home early—the week I could have been with him is a week I've been in pain. He shouldn't have given me this damn bracelet. All of this, the pain and the vacancy in my chest, it's all his fault.

Warm tears spill down my cheeks, and a rush of emotions hit me like a dam has been smashed open.

I don't want to live like this anymore. I don't want Maksim to hurt me anymore. I just want to find some peace.

I felt peace while living with Charlie, after the first night with him, of course. But even then, he didn't hurt me. It was all mental. I miss waking up to his little notes in the kitchen, saying, *breakfast is in the oven*. I miss knowing he'll be in the gym. I miss that excitement I eventually felt when I



knew we'd be having dinner together. I miss...him.

My heart crushing, I scroll through my phone for his number.

Decena.

The air gets caught in my throat. Tears drip on the screen, making his name look fuzzy. Wiping the tears off with my thumb, I read his number from back to front, storing it in my memory. I delete the name Decena and replace it with Charlie.

Charlie

I can't explain it, but just seeing his name makes me feel better. My chest tightens—no, squeezes, and a strong sense of contentment comes over me. I cannot even feel the pain anymore.

I miss him. I miss him too much.

Before I know it, I'm dialing his number, willing him to pick up because the ringer goes on and on. It takes a moment to register that he's still in England—I can tell by the ringtone—and another moment to wonder why. He said the only reason he was here was for me, and he sent me home, so why hasn't he returned to Mexico?

The ringer dies off but I call him again, and then again. I won't give up until I've spoken to him.

"Pick up," I whisper, blood roaring in my ears. "Please pick up."

"What?" he answers snappily on the sixth call, and my stomach sinks.

"Charlie," I say softly, "it's-it's Blaire."

"Shit, I'm sorry, baby." His voice softens now, the deeper notes melting my bones. "I was expecting a call from someone else."

"Oh...I-well...Shall I call back later or something?"

"No!" He sounds horrified that I'd even ask. "You can call me whenever you want. I've told you that."

I let out a purifying breath of relief. My nose tickles with more tears. It's so good to hear his voice, and it's so good to know I can still contact him whenever I want.

He tells someone to leave the room, then I hear a heavy door shut.

"You took your time, didn't you?" he says. "I texted you a week ago."

Though it hurts stretching out the tight crusty skin on my back, I lean over

with my elbows on my knees and shut my eyes, imagining I'm with him.

"I didn't read your text," I say honestly.

"Why?"

Pausing, I wonder if I should tell him that I was trying to move on from him, but then I chicken out. "I don't know."

"You don't know?" he snaps, aghast. "I knew I should've called you or just come over to your place." There's a few seconds of silence from him, and I imagine he's thinking hard about something. "So, if you're not calling about my message, then—"

"What did it say, Charlie?" I ask, wishing I read it now. I should have kept it too, and then I could have looked over it when I felt numb and empty like I did only moments ago. It could have been my salvation.

"I wanted to see if you were okay," he says, his voice soft like silk. "And I wanted to tell you that I'm in love with you, Blaire. So in love with you that I can't think of anything else since I sent you home."

I'm wordless, choking up, barely tolerating the hit of his confession.

"You mean everything to me," he says desperately. "I fucking miss you. I want you back."

I whimper in my palm, my emotions imploding. I want to go back, too, but I know I can't, and the thought is like having my heart ripped out.

"Blaire, you still there?"

"Yeah," I squeak out. Covering the speaker with one hand, I stifle back my tears.

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to upset you. I just need you to know that I want you more than anything, Blaire. I want you to come home to me."

*Home to him.* Fuck, that hurts more than Maksim's torture.

"Where are you?" I ask to divert from my emotions because I cannot stand this chest crushing feeling.

"At the house," he says. "Have you spoken to Maksim today?"

"No." I shudder at the sound of Maksim's name. "I haven't seen him for a week."

"Why do you sound like that?" he asks, and I hear a chair creaking, as if he's sitting forward. "Are you crying? Has that motherfucker hurt you?!"

"No," I lie feebly, wiping my nose with the back of my hand. "I just miss you, is all," I can't believe how easy it is to say that to him.

"Don't be upset over missing me, baby. Everything's gonna be all right."

"It is?" I say, my stomach pooling with hope. I want to go to him. It's such

a devastating need. I need him.

“Yeah, course it is. I'm sorting things. I promise.”

“Sorting what, Charlie?” I ask, but then my front door clicks open and I freeze.

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## 34

Maksim, James, and a guy I don't recognize, pile up a whole bunch of duffle bags by my dining table.

A weak, shivery feeling washes over me.

One bag is open. There's a ton of money inside.

“Charlie”—I curve my hand over the speaker and whisper his name—“Maksim's here. I have to go.”

“No, Blaire, wait!”

I hang up on him and switch off my phone in case he tries to ring back, putting it down on one of the steps. I peer through the banister rails with fearful eyes, scanning the situation. Ten bags. I count as the pile gets higher, my eyes going back and forth. Twenty bags. Thirty bags. James and the other guy have to do a few runs downstairs, while Maksim wanders my apartment, his shoes delicately clinking against the marble floors. He's dressed in black slacks and a white shirt that's rolled up at the elbows, revealing a gold watch. He looks like he's ready for business.

As he passes by the staircase, not noticing me, I'm swamped with nerves, trying to figure out why he's here with all that money.

By the time James and the other guy are done running up and down like headless chickens, there are fifty bags piled around my dining table.

I want to go to James. He's the closest thing I have to safety right now.

“My Little Pet?” Maksim calls out from the kitchen area.

I cringe, trying to be as small as I can.

“You can leave.” He turns to James by the front door, his voice deceptively gentle. “Wait for me in the car.”

“I don't mind staying, Cəp Maksim,” James says, I assume to make sure I'm okay. “I can—”

Maksim only has to give James an iron stare before James head-bows, casts a sneaky glance around my place, and then he's gone.

*Shit.* I don't want to be alone with Maksim right now. I'm in too much pain and terrified he's going to cause me more.

Maksim saunters through my personal space once more, into the living area, and then back out again. He stops at the bottom of the stairs this time, tips his head back and smiles up at me. “Ah, there you are,” he says, a cunning gleam in his golden eyes. “Are you going to come down and see me?”

I nod, then I struggle down the stairs, meeting him on the bottom step. I hug myself, shrinking.

“How are you feeling?” He cocks his head at me, reaches out and runs his fingers down a length of my hair.

“I’m okay.” I blink at the floor, unable to endure his wicked gaze.

“Ohhh, now, My Little Pet”—he tugs on the strand of hair—“don’t lie to me.”

I cringe again, expecting a blow for lying. “I’m in a little pain, but I’ll be okay,” I say softly, focusing on his shiny oxford shoes.

“Of course you will be okay. You’re strong.” Taking my arm, he helps me hobble over to the dining table, where he insists I sit down next to the duffle bags.

Lowering onto a chair, I wince as my ass feels the pressure of the hard, flat surface, a jolt of pain shooting up my spine.

“Hurting?” Maksim says, amusement in his voice.

Distracted, I nod, peeking over the bags. There has to be millions here in crisp new notes.

“Do you know what this is all about?” Maksim pulls out a chair next to me, scraping it against the floor. “Do you know why I have so much cash?”

I peek up at him, taking a wild guess. “Charlie?”

He said he’d pay Maksim to set me free if he has to, and he’s one of the few I know who would have access to this amount of money.

The way Maksim smiles at me makes my blood run cold.

“Clever little pet.” He takes one of my hands and holds it in his lap, occasionally squeezing me with long, cruel fingers. “He’s paid me to tell you you’re free.”

My eyes enlarge because there’s negotiation in Maksim’s voice, but then he gives me this surprised look and I glance away, trying to control the brewing of hope inside me.

“Is this what you want?” he asks, sounding strangely calm. “Do you want me to set you free?”

I shrug. It’s all I have. I’m too nervous to say yes. I’m too nervous to tell

him that I want to be with Charlie.

Tugging at my hand, making me whine out in pain, Maksim forces me to look up at him.

“Okay.” He nods a few times, turning my hand over so he can see the bite mark on my wrist. “You have two options.”

My heartbeat reaches its summit, pounding so hard that I'm sure he can hear it.

“Option one”—he looks up from my wounded arm, right into my eyes —“I'll set you free, but I want you first.”

I draw in my eyebrows, studying the expression on his face. Lust?

*Does he mean?*

Maksim leans closer to me, his soft, shoulder length hair just touching my face. Dropping my eyes to the floor, I sink into my shoulders. I know exactly what he means.

“I want to fuck you,” he whispers in my ear, confirming my suspicions.

I quiver as vulgar, disturbing images romp through my mind, the memory of him fucking me with such viciousness.

“I want to show you what you're walking away from, Blaire. I want to kiss every inch of you. Make love to you.” He pushes his other hand between my legs and cups my sex over my shorts, making me heave internally. “I want to make you feel good. Know once and for all how much I desire you.”

I can't take that deal. I can't even entertain it. Charlie won't want me if I'm tainted by Maksim, and I don't want to be on my own. I'd rather stay with Maksim than be alone.

I wait for Maksim to say, “Option two.” He pauses for a few seconds after, removing his hand from my sex.

I squeeze my thighs together. My toes curl with nerves.

“If you won't let me fuck you,” he says, “then you'll stay with me.”

Still with my eyes down, I whisper, “Okay.”

“Is that what you want, My Little Pet?” Leaning into me, he kisses the side of my face with suspicious affection, his cold lips chilling me from within.

“Do you want to stay with me?”

“Sure I do,” I lie, squeezing my eyes shut.

He pulls on my hand again, urging me to face him properly, so I'm practically sitting between his legs. The movement emphasizes how tight and painful the skin on my back is, as well as how new the scabs are.

“Blaire,” he says my name, causing me to shrink away, “for us to go back

to the way we were before Charlie, you have to get rid of him.”

I blink at Maksim as he sits back, my heart splitting in my chest. I don't want to tell Charlie to go, but if it means Maksim will be nice to me again, I'll do my best to achieve his objective.

“Charlie won't listen to me if I tell him to go, Cэp Maksim, but...I'll-I'll try.”

A smile, and then Maksim laughs. “No, My Little Pet. I want you to get *rid* of him.” He elongates *rid*. “You're the only person I know who can get close enough to slay him. So I urge you—”

“No!” I say too abruptly, too willingly, pushing to my feet. My body floods with pain, but I stand my ground. “I won't do that.” I point at Maksim, warning, “I won't kill Charlie.”

Just the thought of hurting Charlie makes me want to put a bullet in my head. I will if I ever feel the urge to hurt him.

To my utter surprise, Maksim doesn't look annoyed with me. He looks entertained with my daring.

“Then, I guess you'd better take your clothes off, my stunning little redhead, so we can say a proper goodbye.”

---

Maksim gets up from his chair and peels off my t-shirt. I look at the floor the entire time, as he pulls it up over my head, leaving me topless. I couldn't bear a bra when I dressed earlier. I'm in too much pain for anything tight to touch my back.

I descend into myself, hiding in my waist length hair that curtains my nudity, wishing this moment away.

“You know,” Maksim husks out, his vodka clinical breath blowing over my face, “you are a subjectively beautiful girl.” He pushes my hair out the way to kiss my neck, making me grimace. “But to me, you are the most stunning little thing.” His lips are affectionately inexperienced, rough and hurried as he pecks up my pulsing vein. His kiss makes me think of the way Charlie kissed me, how he took his time when he caressed me, made every touch count, every action executed with tenderness. I never truly understood his attention to detail before today.

I'm not sure I can do this.

“Do you want me to make love to you?” Maksim runs his teeth over my

collarbone, sending some horrible vibes through me. “Then you can decide between Charlie and me. For the first time ever, you can choose your own path.”

Brutal silence, and I'm mentally trying to block out his closeness. But then he asks, “Or do you want me to fuck you the way I've wanted to fuck you since I first saw you as a little girl?”

I try to speak. *No. I don't want either offer.* While my lips move, words don't come out. I'm silently paralyzed with what's happening.

Maksim grabs a clump full of my hair and tugs my head back. He then licks up the center of my throat until he's sucking my chin, his saliva trailing my flesh.

I shut my eyes, trying to deal with this, but then Maksim thumbs the waist of my sports shorts and I can't take anymore.

“I don't want this, Cəp Maksim,” I say with a sob. “Can't we just go back to—”

“It's either this,” he cuts me off, sharpening his teeth on my jaw line, “or you will end Charlie Decena. You choose.”

I press my lips together, suppressing the urge to fight Maksim off my body. I've never felt the urge to fight Maksim before. It's an alien emotion but powerful on another level. Inside, I'm shaking with panic. I just don't feel like I'm *his* anymore.

Maksim slips into the front of my shorts, his dusty arm chafing against my abdomen. He finds my sex with coarse fingers. My stomach rolls with dread. I squeeze my ass cheeks together, enhancing the pain inside for a moment. Then my senses narrow as I feel a single finger being pushed in me, sliding through my folds with violent force.

“No!” I scream, smashing my fists against his chest, forcing him back a step.

The tension skyrockets, our eyes narrowing in on each other's.

“You won't let me have you?!” Maksim yells, his eyes glowing like golden balls of fire. “Nor will you get rid of Charlie?!”

“No,” I say in defiance. “I won't do either.” For the first time in my life, I look right at him with reprisal, balling my hands at my sides. “You don't give a shit about me!” I shout at the top of my lungs, but the effort tires me out. “All you want to do is hurt me.” My words come out weaker now, as I stagger back to rest against the wall for support, putting my hands on my knees. “I don't want you to hurt me anymore, Maksim. I just want it all to



stop.”

“It is Cəp Maksim to you,” he says, appalled. “And that's not your decision to make. You're mine to do with as I see fit.”

It's a feeble attempt, but I shake my head. “I'm not yours anymore.” As I say that, his face changes. “You made sure of it when you handed me over to Charlie. A man who has been kind and caring to me. Who made sure I was happy. Why couldn't you ever be kind to me, or even James?” It's like being punched in the chest as I think about my friend, and what he's been through in aid to protect me. “We've given you our all and what we haven't, you've taken anyway.”

Maksim grinds his jaw, furious, standing there in the middle of my whitewashed apartment.

“Please, Cəp Maksim”—hot tears flood my eyes as I stare at him, the back of my nose tickling to cry—“tell me why you couldn't be kind to *me* at least. I need to know.”

We look at each other, predator against predator. I'd tear him apart if it really boiled down to it, but he knows my subconscious won't allow me to. Or maybe he doesn't. He looks uncertain.

“Tell me,” I whisper, my voice cracking. “Tell me. Please?”

“Because...” he's not sure what to say for a second. Then, “Because I knew the moment someone tapped into your emotions”—he lifts a finger to me—“you'd be lost to me.”

“What?” My face twists with perplexity. “But that doesn't even make sense.”

“Oh, it does, My Little Pet,” he husks out, deceptively calmer now. “I don't think you quite realize what you're capable of. I don't think you realize how important it is to keep you emotionless. To keep you totally loyal to me. I need you, Blaire.” His finger circles my frame, emphasizing me. “I trust no one else.”

“But-but I'm not emotionless,” I say, sure that I'm not. “I've always cared about you.”

“Because that's all I've ever allowed you to feel.”

I sob, staring at him through watery eyes. It's now obvious that I could have felt more in my life, been more than what I am, and he stole it all from me.

“Why?” I say, and he hesitates a second time, so I yell, “Why?!”

“I couldn't risk unleashing your emotions,” he says with no shame,

shrugging. “You have to understand. You are so powerful with your Chinese combat skills and your technology skills, if you ever truly understood your merits on the level that we do, and learned how to be a leader, you'd realize you don't need me. Tatiana wouldn't need me. She'd just want you.”

I let my head drop forward and cry quietly, gripping my knees with my nails.

“I did want to be kind to you, Blaire,” he says, and he swears it, holding out his hands like he's praying for forgiveness. “But I'm not that sort of man—I hunger for darker things—and I knew that if I ever did have you, if I tried to sexually bond us, I'd unleash your deepest desires as a woman and you would have longed for that sort of affection, affection I can never give you. You'd have left to find something more, as all women do. Women need to feel love once they've had a taste of it. So keeping that sentiment dormant in you was my best option at ensuring you were always mine. And I'm not sorry.”

Looking up, I shake my head at him and something in me—my loyalty to him—splinters, because it all makes sense now. The beatings to ensure I was frightened of him. The isolated sexual abuse to connect us on a semblance of an emotional level, as he promised that I was the only one he truly wanted those moments with. Everyone else was just a fuck because he didn't want to rape me. The mental conditioning so I was only able to think of him. His voice in my dreams. The fear that there's nothing else out there without him. The darkness and the coldness that I think was my captivity, which forced me to rely on him for basic things like shelter and warmth.

It was all for his own selfishness.

Charlie understood. That's why he's been slowly breaking me down to gain my trust. Why he's been doing his best to peel away each of my layers with kindness. He knew I'd never felt kindness before. It's the only thing that would have ever worked on me.

“And James?” I say to Maksim, wiping my running nose with the back of my hand as I stand up straight. “Why have you always been so cruel to him?”

Maksim lifts his shoulders, a merciless display. “I just don't love him.”

*Poor James.* My heart breaks for him.

In emotional misery, I hug my breasts to hide my nudity, feeling too exposed. He's ripped out my soul and swallowed it whole, so I'll be damned if I'll just stand here naked and let him look at me.

“I can approach your conditioning from a different direction,” he says with

a hint of panic, using his hands as a talking point. “We can go back to the way we were. Nothing has to change. Not really.”

The audacity of him.

“Where did you take me from?” I say with pure hatred. “I know for sure you didn't buy me from a guy in Russia.”

He chuckles suddenly, like he can't believe I've just asked that, his face lighting up with impressed amusement. “You're resourceful when I'm not around, aren't you, My Little Pet?”

I say nothing. I just stand here cuddling my nudity.

“The IRA was recruiting child geniuses”—he leisurely steps toward me, one hand in his trouser pocket—“so they created a few cryptic puzzles that were sent out nationally in magazines. Your parents let you have a go at them and posted off your results.” From walking toward me, he changes pattern and wanders from left to right, appearing to be deep in thought. I am in deep thought too. I can't believe I'm Irish. I've always believed I was Russian.

“How does that connect me to you?” I watch him carefully, studying everything he says.

“Well, stories began flying around the underworld about a little redhead girl in Ireland who had executed the cryptic game, and after doing some extensive research, I found out this girl wasn't just talented. She was exceptionally talented, the only person who cracked the code of the puzzles, and that meant she was born for hacking. The IRA wanted you of course—even submitted an offer to your parents for you—and that was when Tatiana sent me to get you.”

The shock that comes over me is overwhelming. “You stole me from my parents?”

He smiles like a dark angel, as if to say yes.

“Where are they?” I swallow past the growing lump in my throat. “My parents, where are they?”

“Dead,” he says without hesitation, unbothered by the fact.

“What?” My heart twists. Any hope I had of finding them shatters right there.

“Did-did you kill them?” I swear, if he did, I'm not sure I won't slaughter him right now.

“No,” he says, and I'm swamped with relief. “Your father died two years ago from a natural illness, and your mother...” There's a long, intense pause. “She followed a few months later, maybe of a broken heart.” He laughs with

sarcasm after saying that, like the idea is weak and pathetic.

Perhaps it is pathetic but I think I understand. If you love someone so much and can't live without them, why not die of a broken heart? It seems as good a way to go as any.

“Where did you take James from?” I want to find this out for my friend. Maybe he still has someone out there who's looking for him, who loves him.

“Fuck James,” Maksim hisses, and I know he won't spill his guts. “Where I took him from is none of your business. How long have you known I didn't buy you from a man in Russia, Blaire?”

I keep my mouth shut about how long I've known and how I know.

“He told you,” Maksim spits out, “Charlie Fucking Decena.”

My heart goes a little faster at the mention of Charlie. I should never have left him.

“Don't look at me with those doe eyes because I said his name! He's been using you, you stupid girl. Whatever you feel for him isn't real, and he doesn't care about you either.” Maksim taps his own chest, lifting his chin in a pompous manner. “He's been using you to get back at me.”

“Lies,” I say through gritted teeth, absolutely sure. “Charlie does care about me.”

“No, My Little Pet. I am not lying. He doesn't.” Maksim falls silent for a few seconds, watching me in scrutiny, and then asks, “Did he tell you that he's had the map of the bank vault since the day he bought you from me? That he's been ready for the London job for almost three months now?”

I blink at him, and he nods.

No. I asked Charlie about what was going on with the job, and he said it'll happen when it happens. I asked him the first night we had dinner together. He didn't say anything about a map or even tell me he was waiting on one.

“He held off on the job for a reason”—Maksim tips his head—“and do you know why?”

Shaking from head to toe in anger, I say, “I don't give a shit why.” I can't even think about the reasons why. I don't want to consider that Maksim is telling the truth. Charlie does care about me. He does!

“You and me,” I point at the ground between us, cuddling my breasts in one arm, “we're done.”

Maksim's eyes enlarge with horror.

Running on adrenaline, I stagger past him and up a few steps to grab my phone. I switch it on with fumbling fingers, trembling impatiently as it loads

up.

“What are you doing?” Maksim says from the bottom of the staircase.  
“Blaire!”

When my phone screen blinks white at me, signaling it's ready, I call Charlie. I choose him. I should have chosen him all along.

His phone rings a few times, while Maksim is shouting, “What are you doing?! Who are you calling?”

“Shut up!” I yell with all the force my body will allow, moaning against the pain in my back. “Just shut up.”

“Blaire?” Charlie says on answering.

“Yes,” I whimper in relief, desperate to go to him. “Come get me, please? I don't want to be here.”

“What's going on?” I can hear he's in the car, the engine roaring with speed. “Is he still at your place?”

“Ask him,” Maksim whispers, nodding a couple of times. “Go on, My Little Pet. Ask him.”

“Yes,” I say to Charlie, holding Maksim's golden gaze the entire time. “He is here. He's...” I go quiet, and I'm not sure if my master is fucking with my mind, but I suddenly can't focus on anything other than the need to know if Charlie really has had the map of the bank vault for all this time, so I ask. “Don't lie. Just tell me.”

I hear the car pull over to a sharp, screeching stop.

“Blaire,” Charlie says my name with caution, “listen to me, I dunno what he's told you, but—”

My heart splits in two. Maksim is telling the truth. I know it. I can sense it in Charlie's voice.

“I told you so,” Maksim says, fueling my fire.

“Just give it to me straight!” I scream in frustration down the phone, but then I whimper in pain, my back feeling stretched out. “I'm sick of lies, Charlie.”

“Don't trust his word,” Maksim says, battling to coax me. “He will lie his way out of this. He knows you care about him. He will use that to his advantage.”

I'm scowling at Maksim, furious and heartbroken that he might be right again.

“Tell me, Charlie!” I scream, my voice breaking.

“All right, all right,” he says warily. “Just calm down and I'll tell you.”

There's a moment of unsure quietness, his breathing heavy down the speaker, then he confesses, "Yeah, I've had the map for months."

"No," I gasp, having to grab my stomach because it feels like there's a sharp knife in me. I'm physically in tatters because of what Maksim did to me but inside, the emotional pain hurts a lot more. "Why didn't you—"

"I used you to get back at that hijo de puta, okay? And I held off on the job just in case I needed a reason to send you home early. Fuck...!" He says the one thing I never thought he would, and my stomach twists in more pain. "I served four fucking years in a Russian jail because of him."

Agonizing silence. No one says a word for a moment, but then I want to know why Charlie ended up in jail. I search Maksim's face as I ask, expecting him to tell me. He doesn't. He's as impassive as ever, standing there with his arms hanging by his sides.

"We did a bank job," Charlie says, "it went wrong and I was the only person with the kahunas to hold off the police chase. Maksim told me that if I got caught, he'd get me out of jail, but he lied about how much control he had over his government. I was forced to serve my sentence."

"He-he left you in jail?"

"Yeah, he did," Charlie says. "So, I bid my time. I used the time you and I had together to break you down, to make you fall for me so I could teach Maksim a lesson." He hesitates once more, I imagine gutted that he has to tell me all this. "I wanted you to hate him. I've wanted you to hate him for so long."

It's anguish to know he really was using me. Of course, I've suspected all along but hearing it...

"When you said you wanted me from the moment you saw me." I have to squeeze out every word because my throat is restricted with burning tears. Does he really care about me? Has he ever?

"Course I fancied you. You're a pretty girl. But I won't lie. I had an agenda, and that was to turn you against Maksim because I'd heard from every person in his inner circle that you were his most valued possession, his Achilles' heel." Every word he says is like taking a slug to the gut. "Then I was going to send you back to torment him, whether it be physically or mentally, and I was going to leave feeling satisfied that the four years I spent in jail were redeemed. Losing you is worth far more than four years, trust me, I know."

I'm not moved by his sweet nothing. I'm too hurt.

“Why didn't you just kill him, Charlie?” I say, striving to control this possessing urge to cry. It's the most obvious question. If Charlie is so powerful in this world and feared by so many, why not just kill Maksim and be done with it?

“He's too calculating for that,” Maksim butts in, and I look down on him. “He fancies darker things than I do, Blaire. Four years of revenge has satisfied him nicely, I will bet.”

“Death is too easy,” Charlie says eventually, sighing with aggravation. “And that motherfucker knows it—expected it.”

I'm sure Maksim did. It must have come as a surprise when Charlie asked to hire me, instead of putting a gun to his head.

“None of that matters to me now, Blaire. You have to believe me. I don't give two fucks about Maksim, or what he did to me anymore. I just want you. I'm so in love with you it's insane.”

“You could have told me all this, Charlie.” My voice is breaking with tears. I feel like I can't breathe properly. “All those times we talked and bonded in the kitchen...and you just sent me home? Did you send me home to torment him, as you planned?”

“No! I told you, I didn't want you to go!” he yells that with such passion, desperate to convince me. “Don't you get that? I want to take care of you, give you anything and everything you desire.” I hear him punch something, probably the steering wheel. “Please, don't let him do this. I fucking care about you, Blaire! How many times do I have to tell you?”

I can feel the urgency in him. I believe him. He does care about me. And that's all I need to hear, that he loves me. If his plan was to make me hate Maksim and leave me here to torment him, he wouldn't be asking me to come back.

“I do get that,” I croak out. It's crazy how I trust him so explicitly, but he's Charlie.

Keeping a suspicious eye on Maksim—who's now practically blowing steam because he can see that I'm weak to his adversary's spell—I again tell Charlie that I want him to come and get me, that I can't live like this anymore. “I don't want to be with Maksim. I want to be with you.”

Charlie exhales down the speaker. “You don't know how long I've waited to hear you say that.”

*James...*

“Can James come with us?” I ask. “Please, I can't leave him here.”

“If that's what you want, baby,” he says, and I hear that he's smiling. “I'll be with you in less than an hour. I'm already half way to London. Put that motherfucker down if you have to and leave your apartment. Don't pack anything. Just meet me by the river.”

“What about James? I don't know where he is.”

“Don't worry. I'll have my men get a hold of him. Just get away from Maksim.”

A great sense of hope makes me smile, even through my tears. I should never have doubted him. I know he truly cares about me.

“Okay,” I whisper, nodding to myself. “I'm going to leave and wait for you by the river.”

“No, you're not!” Maksim dashes up the staircase then. I kick him back down, knocking myself over in the process. I drop my phone to grip the banister rails, gasping out in pain as I bump down a few steps.

Glancing back on instinct, I see Maksim unfold his tall body from the floor and slowly get to his feet, the look of the devil in his eyes. His hair is ruffled and his bottom lip is bleeding. Thick claret slithers down his smooth chin, dripping on the collar of his white shirt.

“You've gone too far, My Little Pet,” he says, his lips thin as they curl against his teeth. “I feared this day would come. The day you feel something other than the need to protect me. But this is beyond the latter.”

“And whose fault is that?” I say through gritted teeth.

I reach for my phone because I can hear Charlie yelling something, but then I see Maksim pointing a shiny silver gun at me.

I go cold in place, lifting my hands in defense, my phone in one.

“Put the phone down, Blaire, and I mean it.” He clicks back the hammer, gripping the weapon in both hands.

“You wouldn't dare,” I say, holding his golden iron stare.

“No?” He laughs at me, the skin around his eyes crinkling.

“No,” I hiss. I gain strength on my feet, and while my back is killing me, I lift my chin with nerve. “You won't do it,” I say, almost sure. “You need me more than I need you.”

“Ohhh, Blaire, if you are lost to me, then what use are you to me?” There's something like sadness in his voice. “I'd rather you were dead than leave me for that Latin fuck!”

“Drop the gun, Maksim,” someone says from the open front door. “You shoot her and I'll blow a fucking hole in you.”



I whip my head in that direction, as does Maksim. It's James! He's stalking in across the kitchen space holding a long gun in both his hands.

“No!” Maksim growls like a dog, his golden eyes blazing. “How dare you even think about pulling a gun on me?!”

James isn't fazed by Maksim's disappointment and anger toward him, but I'm suddenly so terrified for my friend that I don't know what to do. When it boils down to it, James won't shoot. He can't. We're not wired that way.

“Ten years I've spent on you both and look at yourselves.” Maksim screws up his nose, shaking his head. “Blaire is a lovesick puppy for my enemy, and you're pointing a gun at me? You should be ashamed!”

James walks up behind Maksim and points the gun at the back of his head. “You steal us from our childhood beds, and we should be ashamed?”

“You too?” I say, my stomach flipping. “You know what happened to us?”

“Oh yeah.” James nods at me. “I know everything, especially the fact that you're my little sister.” He jabs Maksim with the gun, knocking him forward a step.

My face drops, and I stare in mute shock.

James is my brother.

I grab my mouth, barely believing what I'm hearing.

I had a whole family!

“How do you know?” I say.

“You were gone for months, Blaire. I had to find you, so I broke into his office and found the files he has on us. Have you told her why she can't remember anything before you?” James prods Maksim with the gun again. “He used a Chinese experimental drug on us called Wángjí. It literally means *forget* in traditional Chinese.”

I'm not surprised by that. I have often wondered why I can't remember a thing prior to Maksim.

Our master isn't saying a thing, just standing there at gunpoint, shaking from head to toe with pure wrath.

“Ten years you've stolen from us,” James says, tormenting him by poking him with the gun. “Ten years we could have been with our parents and now they're dead!”

The way Maksim glares up at me, I really fear for James now. I've no idea why. He's the one with all the power at the moment. But Maksim's face...if looks could kill.

“You have to leave,” I say to James. “I-I don't want anything happening to

you.”

James slowly shakes his head at me. “I won't let him hurt you anymore. I've done my best to prevent him from sexually abusing you but not enough to stop him from hurting you. I won't let him hurt you anymore,” he repeats, as if it's all he cares about in the world. “I won't!”

**BANG**

A flash of spitting yellow, and then a sharp pain jolts through me, making my entire body quake.

“No!” James yells.

**BANG**

**BANG**

A moment of total quietness follows.

I feel like I'm floating.

In the distance I can hear someone screaming. I think it's James. I think he's in pain. I can also hear Maksim screaming, saying this is our fault. “If neither of you broke protocol, none of this would be happening!”

Pressing one hand to my own stomach, I touch a small wound, soaking my fingers in warm, thick liquid—blood.

He did it. He shot me.

My body plummets to the ground.

# 35

It's like watching something in slow motion, life actually flashing before my eyes.

I remember the first time someone whipped me to the point where my flesh ripped open, as if it is happening right now. I am on all fours against a damp, concrete floor. My body is buzzing with a doped-up-confused sensation. I can't remember my own name or how old I am, but I'm young. A man is telling me that if I call for Maksim, he'll stop the beating. *“That’s all it takes. Just say his name.”*

***Wa-tch!*** He draws back and strikes, forcing me to arch to evade his attack. ***Wa-tch!***

*“Awh!”* I whimper-scream against the next blow, my face crumpled with tears.

This is the first time I truly need my master, so I beg for him. *“Maksim! Maksim! Maksim!”*

Pushing open the heavy door to my cell, he lets in a tunnel of light. He lifts a hand to stop his lackey from hitting me. *“Your job here is done.”*

After this day, I start to recognize his presence as protection. When he begins beating me himself, I recognize it as punishment, so I try to be good.

*“Your name is Blaire when you are in trouble with me, and My Little Pet when you are not, do you understand?”* Maksim is crouched down in front of me, looking into my eyes as he brainwashes me. *“Anything before now doesn't exist.”*

The memory of being strapped down on a chair pulls me in. My eyes are taped open. My arms are hooked up to wires and machines that read my pulse. There's a television hanging on the wall in front of me but it's blank white. I cast a troubled glance about. My cell is dark and cold, causing my breath to mist the air. It smells like piss and something stale.

Image after image flickers across the television screen, attaining my attention. It's a story about a girl who will do anything to defend her master. She's holding a sword in one hand and a gun in her other, symbolism that

she's a warrior. She's me with long red hair, wearing a black combat outfit. Her master stands there at her side with pride, one hand on her shoulder. He's smiling just like Maksim does, as if he has a hidden agenda.

The images turn into a video. She slices open throats with one clean swipe of her sword, punishment for those who have done her master wrong. She cuts out hearts to prove that she does not have one.

*"She's no longer responsive to fear,"* Maksim says. He un-cuffs me from the chair, peels the tape off my eyes, and stares at my deadpan face.

*"Perfect."*

*Charlie...* I suddenly think of him. I visualize I'm smiling at him, reaching out to touch him but he's just too far away. He is the muse of my affections. I don't think I've ever cared so much about someone in all my life.

*"Please stop,"* I beg for Maksim's voice playing on repeat to just stop, curled up in the corner of my cell. My hair is just past my shoulders, and I'm nothing but flesh and bones.

How did I get here?

A small window up on the back wall brings in a channel of daylight. Dust is trickling through the air, small particles of dirt that are visible in the light. I gaze around, my tear varnished eyes recognizing everything. This cell was my captivity until I was fourteen. There are numbers written in white chalk all over the dark brick walls, some smeared because the ceiling is leaking, water dripping down in places.

The dripping drives me insane.

I wrote those numbers. Maksim said they were secret agent codes and that it was my job to remember them all. To prove I could, I covered my cell, the order of sequence just like it was written down in the file. My hands rubbed against the chalk for so long that I had sores on my palms. The sores bled but I kept going.

*"You're becoming a good fighter, girl,"* Demetrius says, dragging me to another memory. He's my trainer, a famous Asian Wing Chun artist known throughout the underworld.

*"I'm learning from the best,"* I tell him, flexing my hands because my knuckles hurt.

*"Yes, you are,"* he says, panting for breath as we stand opposite each other. The space under Maksim's house where we train, just down the hall from my cell, is huge but you can't see how high because the ceiling is pitch black. *"Maybe one day, you'll beat me,"* he adds with sarcasm.

I attack him then, going for his face but I change my attack at the last minute.

The images in my mind zoom in and out of focus.

“*This is James,*” Maksim says, introducing him to both Demetrius and me. “*He will be training with you.*”

We look at each other as the seconds tick by, while Maksim is ordering Demetrius to teach James one style of fighting, to kill. James is wearing a leash that's attached to a black leather collar wrapped around his neck and a pair of black trousers, nothing else. He's slender, and I imagine hungry. His skeleton ribcage is a disgusting sight, the bones all but screaming their way out of his tightened flesh. He eventually lifts his lips in a smile like he knows me, and I blink at him with confusion, glaring in character. He doesn't know me. I don't even know myself.

The only thing I know is Maksim.

Numb to emotions, I stand there day after day, night after night, and watch Demetrius beat James half to death. He will keep beating him half to death until James fights back.

James begins to fight back, and I feel admiration for him. It's the first thing I remember feeling except for fear.

When we're alone after training, he starts talking to me, asks if I know who I am.

“*Blaire, when I'm bad,*” I say, because my master has told me I can talk to him. “*My Little Pet, when I'm good.*”

“*It's the same for me,*” he says. “*Though I'm just called, My Pet.*”

“*We should leave,*” James says from within my cell this time, as we flicker to another time. He's pointing at the open cell door—my cell door—shaking from head to toe. “*Now's our chance.*”

My instincts come over me for the first time, like a red mist erupting.

“*I will never leave Maksim.*” I shove James up against the damp, watery wall with my forearm pressed across his now strapping chest, growling in his face, “*Disloyalty means punishment! Disloyalty means punishment!*”

“*He won't know.*” James begs for me to just leave with him. “*We won't get another chance!*”

“*There's nothing out there for us without Maksim.*” My voice comes out detached, but this is me now. “*If we're good, we're rewarded with his good mood. If we're bad, you know what happens.*”

“*You've passed,*” Maksim says from behind. “*Take the boy and tag him.*”

After this, I see more. So much more. The years go by in my mind faster than I thought they would.

Maksim leaves me out in the cold unmanned. It's dark and I can hear rustling in the nearby bushes. He's testing me again. Though I remain on alert incase trouble breaks out, I don't move. I stand there under the trees in my master's garden until he returns and pets me.

In Russia, it's so cold. My teeth chatter and I can feel the chill in my bones. Maksim leaves me outside Tatiana's house to stand guard. That's when I hear them, the Turks, speaking badly about my master and his master. I pull a knife from my belt and give the first Turk a smiley, slicing through his mouth, unresponsive to the blood pouring over my hands. I cut out the next Turks tongue, so he cannot speak poorly of my people again, then I shove it down his throat. James watches me, doing nothing.

My reward doesn't come but neither does a punishment, so I'm okay.

I flash to a corner in my cell, cowering under Maksim looming over me, disappointment ruling his expression. His eyebrows are drawn together, making him look evil. He pulls up the zipper of his trousers.

*"I'm sorry,"* I sob, sliding down the cold, damp wall. I stuff my head in my naked knees as I pull them up to my chest. *"I'm sorry for saying no."*

*"Please don't hurt her."* James stands there in the doorway, pleading with glossy blue eyes to our master. *"I'll do whatever you want, just please, don't hurt her."*

It's just about to happen—the first time I ever see Maksim fuck James—and then, I go to a place where I want to be this time. I dream I'm lying in bed with Charlie, embraced in his arms. He's playing with my hair, his fingers running through the strands. Maksim is nowhere to be seen, and I like the idea. It's just us.

*"Don't leave me,"* Charlie whispers in his familiar, raspy voice. Cupping my face in one large hand, he turns me into him, putting us eye to eye. His are glowing with fear, bluer than I've ever seen them.

Why the fear?

*"You hear me?"* he says, raising his eyebrows. *"Don't. Leave. Me. Blaire. Stay with me!"*

Why would I leave him? I'm not missing a moment of this.

I sigh with contentment and snuggle in his masculine chest, but then somewhere in the back of my mind, I'm sad. I can't feel how warm he is. I can't smell him.

It didn't happen like this. I could always feel and smell him.

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“Wake up, My Little Pet.” Maksim's voice resounds as if under water.  
“Wake up.”

I feel like I'm under water, hovering in and out of certainty. I pull at my hands but I'm paralyzed, my limbs heavy and restrained by numbness. I must be dead—Maksim shot me—but there's a dull ache in my stomach and a tight hotness across my lower back. The pain forces me to register that I'm still alive.

I pull again. Nothing. It's exhausting. My breath is woozy as I breathe in steadily, whistling from the deep of my throat. I can smell burnt flesh and warm metal. I try to open my eyes. They flutter and spasm but won't open fully. I'm so tired. So tired.

*“I won't let him hurt you anymore.”* James fought valiantly, and I think Maksim shot him for it.

*“I'm going to leave and wait for you by the river.”* Charlie is waiting for me. I need to go to him. But I'm too exhausted to battle.

“Get the doctor.” Maksim's words wave through the air in vibrations. “She needs stitches.”

Strong hands close around my wrists and ankles, elevating my body. Taut heat races across my lower back like fire. *Fuck*, it hurts. It hurts so much that I have to forcefully center myself on the weightless sensation of being carried through the air. But then I'm dropped onto a hard, flat surface, whacking my forehead against the pane.

“Awh!” I gasp out, my skull throbbing.

The surface is cold, making me aware that my skin is clammy and sweaty, my face soaked in damp lengths of hair. I try to bend my knees so I can get up, but the pain in my stomach is excruciating. I heave against the agony, trying to add pressure to the wound but I can't move. Why the fuck can't I move?

“Wipe up the blood,” Maksim says.

I'm still bleeding? That's not good.

*Charlie...* He has to know that I care about him. Before I die, he has to know. And I must find James. I need to know that he's still alive.

Pushing into the hard surface, I strain against my own heaviness. I will

myself to get up and fight free of Maksim so I can see Charlie just one last time and find James, but I fall back down with a heavy thud.

*Fuck.* I really am so, so tired.

I suck in another whistling breath to gather my strength, my head hazy, stuffed with cotton wool.

I need to get up. I need to get up. *Come on, Blaire, get up!*

I struggle against the surface once more, but then—***wa-tch!*** I jolt in reaction to the hot lick of a belt across my back, enhancing the ache in my stomach with the sudden movement. It's not a dull ache anymore. It pulses with fire.

“Welcome back to the land of the living, Blaire,” Maksim says from a distance.

I blink open my eyes, though all I can see is blackness.

“Cəp...Maksim?” I croak out, turning my face to the left where his voice came from.

“Yes, Blaire, it’s me, your master.” His gargling voice comes from the right this time. “Now you're fully awake, I'll make you completely mine.”

I want to cry because I know this is going to be hell.

“Let us first list your wrongdoings—”

***Wa-tch!***

“A whip for talking back to me.”

***Wa-tch!***

“A whip for refusing to end that Latin piece of shit.”

***Wa-tch!***

“A whip for refusing me.”

***Wa-tch!***

“Awh, please”—I sob too hard, trembling and flinching—“please, please, stop!”

“Stop? Do you know what you've caused?” he says with strange calmness. “I'm in hiding, since your lover wants my head on a spike.”

***Wa-tch!***

“Agh!” I groan, sob, and scream because each lashing is harder than the next. It goes on and on, sending me into a fucked up zone. At some point, I think I pass out until—

***WA-TCH!***

“Ouch—aargh!” I grab the edges of the surface, my entire body shuddering awake. That’s the hardest blow yet.



“Ahhh, you are still awake then?” Maksim says from beside me, his chest heavy with pants. “I was starting to worry.”

**Click, click.** I hear the faint hissing of a flame. My mind is too messed up to really register what's going on. I smell metal being warmed up, the metallic scent almost strong enough to taste. I remember the smell from when Maksim burned an M into my back.

“It's time for the last few letters,” Maksim says with lust in his voice. “Stay still, Blaire,” he warns, and then he burns my lower back with a scorching branding iron.

“AARGH!” I scream through gritted teeth, clawing at the surface I'm lying on. I can't move because my limbs still feel tied down. I manage to shake from left to right, thrusting my hips trying to get free, but my efforts are useless.

“How does that feel, My Little Pet?” Maksim says, laughing at me. “Like home?”

He peels the branding iron off my skin and I slump in relief, panting like a dog, cool sweat veiling my flesh.

I want to scream some more but I just can't, so I suffer in the silence of pain.

“Cəp...Maksim,” I gasp his name, turning my head to the other side, wheezing for breath. “Why?”

“Why? It's the age old question, isn't it, My Little Pet?”

I can hear sizzling and feel pure heat beside my face.

“Once my name is burned into your flesh”—Maksim strokes wet lengths of hair back out of my face—“you'll know who you belong to.”

“Your name?” I ask in horror. “You're burning the rest of your name into—Aargh!” I scream out desperately as he puts the hot iron to my skin again. It crackles, melting through layers of flesh. I beg him to stop. I beg him to forgive my disobedience. “I'm so fucking sorry!” I have no idea where my vocal strength has come from, but it's useless. I'm drowning in my own pleas.

“I'll stop when I know you're loyal to me again, Blaire.” He holds the iron to my skin for longer this time, causing me to blackout from the pain.

I wake to cold droplets of water raining down on my skin. I sigh, basking in the tenderness.

“Cəp Ma-Maksim?” I croak his name, wondering if it's him treating me. *Please don't let it be him. Please, please don't let it be him.*

“Yes, it's me,” he husks, and I whimper, all hope of being free of him

fading. He kisses between my shoulder blades, making me wince. Then a cool waterfall washes over me. “It feels good, doesn't it, My Little Pet?”

I moan, wishing for more cold water, and he lays a heavy, cool piece of material over my wounded back. That’s when my mind propels to where the darkness is.

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# 36

The next time I wake up, the room is spinning and I'm trembling uncontrollably.

I pant so hard to catch a breath, feeling as though my heart is pulsing on the outside of my ribcage.

*What's wrong with me?*

Closing my eyes, I try to center my world and focus on my breathing but I can't. If anything, I'm panting faster now, drying out my throat. There's a hot sensation in me, too. I am burning from the inside out, warm sweat trickling down the sides of my face, gathering near my eyes.

High temperature, abnormal breathing, and abnormal heart rate...I'm in trouble. If I can't control my own body, I know I'm in trouble.

The first thing I do is push against the bed I'm lying on to rise on all fours. I'm no longer tied down. I pull up my knees to rest on them, but my stomach throbs and my back is so raw and taut that I sob out in pain.

Hunched over on my palms, gasping through my nose, the torture comes back to me in flashes of white light.

The gun shot.

The beatings.

The branding.

What has Maksim done to me?

Peering through hazy eyes, I glance about. I'm alone in a strange bedroom with gleaming white walls that won't still—and again, I realize I'm not tied up.

I need to get out of here while I can. I need to get away from Maksim. He's never been so violent in such quick succession, and I've never felt so disorientated.

Rolling onto my side, I fall off the bed and hit the floor.

“Aargh!” I screech, my knees and palms buried in glass. The wound on my stomach pulses, and I vaguely feel blood slithering down my navel.

I try to ignore the pain and the blood because I need to focus. I need to get

out of here before Maksim returns.

Trembling with fatigue, I fight to my feet, groaning through closed teeth as I stand on the broken pieces of glass, each shard piercing the soles of my feet.

Why is the floor covered in broken glass?

My head swirls when I'm upright. I press a hand to the wall but slide against the smooth surface, my hand seeping with blood.

I don't understand what's wrong with me. I've not been drugged. I know that feeling all too well. No. This isn't the sensation of being drugged. This is an illness.

Blinking about, I search for some clothes because I'm naked. Even my bracelet is gone.

My bracelet.

Charlie.

My heart twists, but I urge myself to pay attention. I can find Charlie when I'm out of here. Hopefully, he knows where James is. Hopefully, James is still alive.

Stretching across the far back wall are a collection of white doors. Wardrobe doors? They're too far away. One step, and I'm walking on glass. At the foot of the bed, there's a white shirt. I fall onto the bed with a bounce, enhancing the throbbing in my stomach. I shuffle for the shirt and slip my hands down the arm holes, struggling to shift it up over my shoulders. Every motion is agony, drawing my focus to the splits across my back. As I button myself up, I'm very aware that the cold material clings to my back, like it's soaking through with water or something.

Blood. It has to be blood.

Before I get up again, I try once more to calm my heart rate and my breathing, but neither will slow. I touch my chest, feeling my heart hammering against my palm. Maybe Maksim has drugged me? That's all I can make sense of. If he has, that means my mind will be clear in a few hours. I just need to find a few hours of freedom then I can battle for more.

Thinking on a subconscious level, I knock the pillows off the bed, onto the floor, and use them as a bridge to walk over the glass. My legs are fragile, rickety under me, and I go off balance as my feet sink into the pillows, soaking them through with blood.

At the door, I pull down the handle and stagger out of the bedroom, clutching my stomach.

Music. I can hear music booming from downstairs. A party. That means Maksim will be excited on drugs and booze.

I swallow past the dry-tightness in my throat, willing myself to be as quiet as a mouse. Gripping the banister, I stumble down the stairs and across a small oval entrance hall, my vision a mazy vapor. Everything is enhanced with colors, giving me double vision.

Front doors. I blink a few times. Definitely front doors. Pulling down the handles, I yank them open and fall through, landing on my bloody palms. I don't scream out, even though I want to. That hurt. With a heavy, pounding head, I negotiate to my feet and stagger across a paved driveway, between tons of flashy cars, leaving a trail of blood in my wake.

The air is so cold it's hard to handle, making my eyes feel like balls of ice in their sockets.

A country lane. I gasp in relief, though I have no idea where I am. I'm not near London, that much I'm sure of.

It's dark. The trees are tall and thick, clawing over me. As I stumble onward, the moon flickers through the leaves in silver streams of light.

I'm not sure how long I wander around until I see blinding white headlights. I shield my eyes with my forearm, squinting to see who it might be. I haven't passed another house. Maybe *this* is one of Maksim's friends?

My heart drops through me.

The car stops with a jagged screech, and I hear a door clicking open. I stop there, frozen to my core, struggling to focus my eyes.

*Please, don't be Maksim or one of his friends. Please. Please. Please.*

"Oh my God!" a woman says with shock. "Are you okay? Wha-what's happened?"

I blink up to see who she is, but my vision is so blurry. "Where am I?" I say, wobbling pattering onward. Unable to bear the weight of my own body, I fall into her like deadweight. She catches me around the waist and I scream out in agony, her fingers digging into the shot wound.

"Ohhh, I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" she cries, helping me sit down on the curb side. "Here. Just sit here."

I grab my face, noticing the heat in my cheeks. My skin is really hot.

"What's happened to you?" that woman asks. "You're bleeding, and you don't look—"

"A phone," I pant, wiping my hair back. "Do you have a phone?"

"Yes!" Fumbling through her pockets, she pulls out a phone and passes it

to me. I grab it in both hands and try to dial Charlie's number. He's the only person I can think of who'll come get me. I'm not sure James is okay or even alive.

My fingers won't still against the digits. My hands are trembling like mad. With the screen glowing, offering me some light, I pause, studying the color of my skin. My hands are really red and blotchy with thin red streaks. Has Maksim poisoned me?

"Miss," that woman says, touching my knee, "we should call an ambulance."

"No!" I yell at her, then I slowly and shakily dial Charlie's number. The ringer hums on and on and then it dies off. "No," I whimper, redialing him, panic setting in. "Come on, Charlie," I beg.

It dies off again, and now I feel sick with panic. I swallow back a heave. *I won't be sick. I won't be sick.*

"Look, I don't know what's happened, but I really think we should get you to a hospital. I can take you." That woman leans in to scan my face. "You look very poorly."

"No, please, just wait," I plead to her.

I try Charlie's phone one last time and he picks up, asking warily, "Who is this?"

"Charlie, it's Blaire." I hug the phone to my ear with both hands.

He gasps my name with what sounds like relief. "I've been looking for you for over a week!" He turns his attention to another, saying, "It's Blaire."

"Charlie, listen to me." I gulp down a lung full of air, hunching over to put my head between my knees. "I don't know what Maksim's done to me, but I'm sick."

Silence. It's the longest few seconds of my life. Then Charlie reels off so many orders I can't keep up. "Track this number," he says to someone. "Get the chopper up. Get the men in their cars. Get every fucking person we have on our side in cars with guns! Blaire, do you know where you are?"

I peer up at that woman with watering eyes. "Where are we?"

"Kent," she says. "Sevenoaks."

"Did you hear?" I say to Charlie.

"Who is that?" he asks, his tone taking a chilling edge.

"Some woman who just pulled over to help me."

"Take her car and go to a police station," he says in a bizarrely calm voice, then he yells at someone else, "Get a fucking move on!"

I flinch against his voice. It rings in my ears.

“Blaire, you hear me, baby?” Charlie says. “Take that woman's car, get to a police station, and call me from there. I'm coming.”

“No!” that woman screams, staring over me with wide, horrified eyes.

I don't know what happens, but I feel a heavy whack to the back of my head and I think I faint.

---

“Charlie warned you not to hurt her,” is the next thing I hear. “He warned us all with death threats, so what the hell are you playing at, Maksim-Markov?”

Maksim's here? That's enough to knock me out cold again.

For hours, I float in and out of perception, sweating my ass off, and my heart is pounding.

When I can open my eyes again, I find I'm in the same state. I'm loosely aware that I'm in Rumo's snooker room, slumped in a chair. It's the smell of mucky cigar smoke that gives my location away. No other place on this earth smells like this snooker room.

There's something cold on my head. A wash cloth?

“Where are you going to take her?” Rumo says. I only assume it's Rumo because I'm in his house.

“It's best that you don't know, my friend.”

*Maksim.* He is here.

My heart is already racing through my ribcage, so it cannot possibly go any faster without forcing me into cardiac arrest.

There's someone else in the room too, saying something in Spanish. Carl?

“Speak English,” Maksim snaps. “I can't fucking understand Spanish!”

“Why are her hands and feet covered in cuts?”

“I had nothing to tie her down with, so I scattered glass across the floor to prevent her from escaping.” Maksim laughs like he's proud. “Though, it seems shattered glass is no match for my little pet.”

They talk about me for a while. Carl wants to know why I'm in such a state. “What did she do to reap your wrath like this?”

I study the voices, trying to regain my strength so I can get out of here. I can't go back to Maksim. He'll make me suffer gradually and painfully, until I die. I know he wants me to die. I want to die, too, after all the pain, but not

like this, and not before I see Charlie once more. I have to see him. And I have to know James is okay!

When the voices leave the room, I stumble off the chair, landing on gory hands. The room is whirling and the back of my head is throbbing like a bitch. I cup my face in one hand, straining to my feet. I sway, the soles of my feet tender and shredded to pieces. Using the snooker table for support, I make my way out of the room, blinking rapidly to steady my vision.

In the welcome hall, I hear voices by the front doors. Maksim and Rumo.

“I’ll pull up your car,” Rumo says. “But that’s it, Maksim-Markov. I’m not getting in any deeper. I’m not going to be a part of Blaire’s death.”

I can quite honestly say that in all my life, I’ve never felt so hurt by someone’s words. Maksim really does want me dead.

“I understand, my friend,” my master drawls. “I just want to thank you for bringing her back to me. I owe you.”

“I don’t suppose I can talk you into giving or selling her to me?” I think Carl says.

Maksim laughs his head off, his voice echoing through the hall. “I want her death. Not money. I have enough of that now that I have Decena’s cash. Pull up my car, Rumo. I need to go.”

Panic races through me. I’ve not got long. If Rumo is pulling up the car, that means Maksim intends to leave now.

Pushing open a set of doors, I struggle into a room I’ve never seen before. A living room. It’s dark and the air reeks of old musk. I lean against a wall and fold over on my knees, gasping for breath.

“Where has my little pet gone?” Maksim says from the entrance hall.

I whip up my head too fast and rock off balance.

*Shit.*

I’m either going to have to fight my way to freedom or beg him to just kill me.

I’ll beg him to take mercy on me. He has to see reason. In that dark soul of his, there has to be some kindness in there somewhere. Even I have kindness in me.

“She must be in there. The door was closed,” Rumo says, and all thoughts of begging go out the window.

Fuck knows how I manage it, but I dart across the living room, stubbing my toe on something. “Ouch,” I gasp under my breath.

Another door. I shove it open and stumble through, finding myself in the



hall that leads to the ballroom where James and I fought. The floors are so cold that they burn my wounded feet.

Running my hand along the wall for stability, I make my way to the ballroom, knowing French doors lead off there, into the garden. I can get out of the house through the ballroom.

“Blaire,” a voice whispers from behind me, and a red mist descends. All my pain fades into the background, and the only thing I can think about is escaping Maksim.

I spin around. It knocks off my equilibrium. But I'm well aware who I come face to face with. Carl.

“I won't go back to Maksim,” I say under my breath, and acting on instinct, I swipe for his throat with wicked pursuit. “You hear me?”

He gasps as I pinch his windpipe, digging in my nails so hard that I draw blood.

“I won't go back to Maksim,” I hiss in his face, squeezing my teeth shut for strength.

“Let me go!” he chokes, clutching my wrist with both hands. “I-I'm trying to help you.”

I'm numb to his plea. He's slowly fading, and I'm slowly ripping into his throat. I don't want to do this but I can't go back.

“I'm sorry,” I whimper, watching Carl drift away.

“Blaire!” someone yells from down the hall.

I freeze, staring at Carl's bloodshot eyes, my own blood roaring in my ears.

Heavy footsteps come toward me, followed by a fuss of voices.

Tears stream down my face, bitter tears. Maksim. He's going to take me.

A hand closes around mine and yanks me off Carl, who crashes to the floor in a pile of skin and bones. That black switch goes off in my mind. I can't stop it. I don't want to stop it. It's the only thing keeping me alive.

Screaming at the top of my lungs, I pound at God knows who—I'm not even sure if it's Maksim. I don't give a shit if it is. I won't go back to him.

“Calm down!” Maksim fights to restrain me but I'm going wild, clawing at anything and everything. “Calm down, Blaire! It's me, Charlie!”

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“Charlie!” I sob out his name, craning my head back to look up at him. I squeeze my eyes shut a few times because I so desperately want to see him, but I can't make out a face.

“Yeah, baby, it's me,” he says, and I know it's true. I recognize his raspy voice now. “Where did Maksim shoot you?”

Bursting into tears, I fall into him, letting my vulnerability take over. “He-he's back there.” I swallow down my nerves, hiding in Charlie's body.

“Please, don't send me back to him. I don't want to go back to him!”

“I'll never send you back to him again. Dios, I'm sorry, Blaire.” Charlie wraps his arms around my shoulders, burying my face in his chest to embrace me with safety. “S'all right. Don't cry. Everything's gonna be all right.”

He smells like home, clean and soapy and musky. I hold him like I'll never let go. It's so bizarre that in just a few short months, he's come to mean more to me than anyone in this world.

“Baby, you need to sit down so I can check you over.” He tries to urge me backward. “I know Maksim shot you. I need to make sure the wound—”

“No!” I protest, clinging to him. I don't want to sit down. I don't want to be anywhere other than where I am right now.

“All right,” he says. “All right. Just stay calm.”

I distantly listen to a commotion behind, which I assume is Carl coming around. Then Charlie starts barking orders to God knows who. “Guard this entrance. Guard the front entrance. Have the Scour Detail ensure our exit is safe and get back to me. We need to leave as soon as possible.” A long, questionable pause, before he adds, “Whoever brings me Maksim gets a bonus.”

“I'm on it, Señor,” someone says.

“Where did he shoot you, Blaire?” Charlie asks again, kissing my damp forehead. “I need to make sure the wound is clean and bandaged up.”

“In-in the stomach. And my back...he burned my back.”

“No...” Charlie urges me back an inch so he can look down on me, but I

step into him, gripping his shirt with desperate fingers, not wanting him to let me go. “Baby, s'all right. I'm not going anywhere. I just want to check you over and wrap up your wounds.”

I sob then, shaking from head to toe. “Please, just stay with me.”

“I am. I'm not going anywhere, I swear.” Holding me to him in one arm, he lifts my chin with his other hand, forcing our eyes to align. His enlarge and glaze over with guilt. “Dios mío, your face...”

He's seeing the bruises where Maksim slapped and punched me. He touches them, my black and blue cheek, and my eye.

“James didn't mention this.”

“James?” I heave his name. “Charlie, he-he was at my apartment.”

“S'all right. He's okay. I found him with a few bullet wounds to his shoulder—”

“Bullet wounds?” Anger comes over me, bubbling in my stomach with such rage I swear if Maksim was here I'd fucking shoot him!

“James is fine,” Charlie says, reassuring me. “He's had an operation and he's fine.”

Relief sweeps through me, but it only serves to make me feel ill. I squint through the lights in the hall, a warm rush of nausea coming over me. “I don't feel good.”

“Sit down then, please. It won't be long before we can leave.” He manages this time to sit me on something hard. The concrete cools the backs of my naked thighs.

I blow out a long, exhausting breath, and shut my eyes, holding the edges of whatever I'm sitting on. There's the sound of material being ripped apart, then I feel pressure wrapping around my left knee. It makes me moan in pain.

“I'm sorry, but I need to stop this bleeding.” Once Charlie is done bandaging up my right knee, I hear that ripping sound again. He wraps more gauze around my palms, first my left, and then my right. It doesn't hurt so much having him fondle with my hands.

Next, he lifts up the shirt I'm wearing and bundles it around my chest. Cool air blows over my skin. It's so refreshing. I'm too warm.

“Aargh!” I scream through clenched teeth, as Charlie wraps something around my waist, over the burn on the low of my back and the bullet wound in my stomach. I grip his shoulders instinctively, panting through my nose.

“That's it. Just take easy breaths.” He lifts my left arm from his shoulder and turns my wrist from side to side like he's assessing me, finding the bite

mark. Then he yells in a panic, “Andres!”

He lays something heavy over my naked legs. It’s his leather jacket. The material is cold but welcomed.

Charlie crouches in front of me, and I can feel that he's staring at my face. I sit forward, elbows on my legs, trying to control my breathing. Years and years of meditation and I can't control my breathing? I know something isn't right.

“Is that her?” a man asks in a Latin seasoned voice.

I glance up with blazing eyes, ready to attack.

“Relax.” Charlie grabs both my arms on my legs and holds me there.

“That's Andres.”

“Your brother?” I say in a shallow tone, peering back at Charlie.

He nods at me, his face tight with anxiety. Then he looks up at his brother.

“We need to go, hermano. Look at the streaks of red on her skin.”

“Dios mío!” his brother says. “She's the Irish girl from the missing person's report I got this morning.”

“What?”

“Yes,” Andres says to Charlie. “Her and her brother were kidnapped from their home in Ireland ten years ago. She looks exactly the same as the girl in the newspaper article.”

“The boy we’ve got at the house is her brother.”

Charlie knows James is my brother?

A blazing pain shoots through my lower back. I screw up my face, reaching around to touch the burn. Gaining height on his feet, Charlie leans over me and a hand lifts the shirt at my back. The anger that comes off his body in waves is stark.

“I'm gonna murder that motherfucker!” he shouts. “We haven't got time to wait for the Scour Detail. I think she's got blood poisoning.”

“No, no. Stop, Charlie!” Andres says in a fluster. “If we run into trouble...just wait. Keep her calm.”

I feel Charlie's presence move away from me, and then I hear the low murmur of his voice, “He's branded his name on her back and bit her arm, shot her, and I’m pretty sure she's got blood poisoning. If we don't leave now, she won't make it anyway. She's dying.”

Another hand touches my back where the burn is under the bandage, causing me to whine in pain. “Please, don't touch my back,” I sob.

“Jesucristo,” Andres gasps. “James must've been telling the truth when he

said Maksim shot her.”

Charlie's anger rises, as he says sarcastically in Spanish, “You think?”

A tall guy whose features I can't really make out squats before me.

“Blaire, I'm Andres,” he says in a deep, soft voice. “I'm not going to hurt you, Cariño. I'm just going to look at your arms.”

“We don't have time!” Charlie yells.

“Hermano, let me check her over,” Andres says, and I imagine he's giving Charlie a serious look because nothing else is said.

I blink up at Charlie standing at my side, and he nods, so I let his brother examine me—for whatever good it will do. He gently grips my hands and turns them over. I let my head hang, coming down from my rush of adrenaline-panic, but as I do, the tension in my back and the wound in my stomach become unbearably painful. The fuzziness is back. The throbbing in my head makes my skull pound.

“You're right,” Andres says. “She does need immediate medical attention, but she's got time.” He touches my inner elbow, which stings a little. “That puta pig has been giving her fluids, I think, so she's hydrated. If you stay calm, Blaire, you'll be okay,” he says in my face, warm puffs of air blowing over my cheeks. “All right, Cariño?”

I nod a couple of times in a hazy state.

“Did you know he was doing this to her?” Charlie asks someone.

“Because if you did, I'll have your fucking nuts!”

“No,” Carl chokes out. “I swear. None of us knew.” Between coughing, he tells Charlie that Maksim was warned a few years ago by Tatiana that he's not allowed to whip me anymore. “She's the reason Blaire has money, a car, and an apartment.”

“How'd you know this?” Charlie sounds dark with intrigue.

“Maksim's other pet, James”—Carl clears his throat—“he told me. A few years back, Blaire apparently overheard the Turks bad mouthing Tatiana behind her back. She slaughtered the lot of them for it of her own free will, no orders needed. Tatiana found out and commanded Blaire's freedom as a reward for her loyalty.”

I fucking knew it! For years, I've wondered about her involvement in my freedom from Maksim's house, but now I know for sure.

“I don't know any fine details,” Carl says, “but James said Tatiana was swooned with Blaire's natural loyalty to her and Maksim, and that's why she granted Blaire with freedom and protection.”

“So, why's he still whipping her then, huh?”

“I don't know,” Carl says. “Rumo is just as confused—and before you think he's betrayed you, he was trying to delay Maksim from taking Blaire tonight. That's why he brought her here and didn't take her back to the whorehouse.”

Someone butts in and tells Charlie the coast is clear. “We need to leave now, Señor, if we're to avoid a showdown.”

“Call the Lone MD's,” Charlie says to Andres, his words coming out strained and fast. “Tell them to get to the central hospital, now. Tell them what's wrong with Blaire so they're equipped.”

“I'm already on it,” Andres says, pushing back from me. “Give her this, just for if anything happens, and put pressure on that wound. It's bleeding too much.”

Charlie grabs one of my hands and puts something heavy in my grasp. A gun. He then grabs my other and forces me to hold the wound on my stomach. I whimper because it's agony to touch.

“Oh, I know it hurts, baby,” he says with raw sympathy in his voice, stroking my hair back out of my face. “But you have to press on the wound to stop the bleeding. I'm gonna pick you up now.” He swathes one arm around my shoulders, the other behind my knees, and lifts me into his chest.

“Aargh!” I scream-sob through the pain, feeling like my back is being stretched out.

“I'm sorry but I've gotta get you outa here,” he says. “Let's go.”

My mind coils as I feel the steady gait of his movements. He's running. An array of heavy footsteps follow. With the pain and the tender feeling of being ill, I just want to shut my eyes. I want to wake up and feel better. I'll feel better if I get some rest.

“Don't let her sleep,” Andres puffs out. “She'll slip into a coma.”

“You hear that, Blaire? Don't go to sleep,” Charlie warns, though it's almost too late. I'm so tired.

“Look at me,” Charlie snaps, his strides long and powerful, knocking me back and forth in his embrace.

With all the might I have, I open my eyes and lift them to his but I can't really see him.

“Keep your eyes open,” he says in clatters of breath. “Don't. Go. To. Sleep.”

I think I nod at him, but I do shut my eyes. I'm just so, so tired.

Outside, the cold air hits me. My stomach rolls. I'm going to be sick. But then we come to a sharp stop that makes me wince, pulling me back from the sickness and the tiredness.

“Maksim...” Charlie's tone deepens as he says his name. “I fucking warned you not to hurt her. Did you think I was joking?”

He's here. Maksim is here.

Still holding the gun in one hand, I cover my face with both arms, cowering, panic coursing through me.

“Put-put her down,” Maksim says, his voice dripping in fear as he stutters. “Put-put her down and let's talk, Charlie. Let's not start a war ov-over one girl.”

“She's not just one girl, hijo de puta! She's *the* girl.” Charlie's voice vibrates in his chest with raw, inhumane anger. “Andres,” he says, and then I feel someone else's arms around me. Charlie is passing me to his brother, who huddles me against a hard torso, careful not to hold my back.

Bile rises through me, burning the back of my throat like acid. I lean over quick enough to spew on the ground and not on Andres, gagging and coughing up. I'm not sure what's coming out of me but it's not food. I haven't eaten in a while.

“Oh, shit,” Andres curses, carefully putting me down on my knees where I let go of the gun. “Blair, just let it all out. Don't try to stop it.”

“Maksim,” I retch, trying to stop the nausea. “He's—”

“Don't you worry about him.” Andres is on his knees with me. “If you need to be sick, just be sick.”

Holding myself up on all fours, I toss up my guts—I can't seem to stop. Someone gathers my hair at the back of my neck. I heave harder and faster, projectile vomiting through my nose and my mouth. My eyes bulge and water. My stomach pangs in pain. I think I'm spewing up blood.

I can't hear anything but my own choking, then, “You're dead, as are your lackey's,” Charlie says in a voice that's strangely unfamiliar to me. A loud commotion trails, which I'm sure are guns going off—

**BANG**

**BANG**

**BANG**

I cup my ringing ears and hunch over, curling up in a small ball.

**BRATATATAT**

Fuck, my head hurts and I can't see. My vision is so woozy.

I suddenly think of Maksim, and that he might be a danger to Charlie somehow. If he lives, he could be a danger to James!

My anew instincts kick in and I don't know how, but I swipe the gun from the ground and battle to my feet in a state of vertigo. I squeeze-blink about. There are soldiers everywhere firing guns, lighting up the night with flashes of burning yellow. More soldiers than I think there really are.

Double vision.

Maksim. I squint harder but I can't see or hear him.

There's a large man standing next to me, one of Charlie's men. He's firing a powerful machine gun at what's left of Maksim's security detail, blowing them away. The shots are so close that I can feel my ears pop with each blast.

"Aargh!" I screech as steely arms close around me from behind. I buckle at the knees with excruciating pain. The gun goes off in my hand with a powerful jolt that sends a shooting pain up my arm, but it's nothing compared to having someone flush against my back.

"Blaire, stop fighting," Andres says in my ear, using his full strength to hold me down. "We're here to save you."

"Let me go, please!" I beg, burning up with a fever. I claw to get free but I can't. I think I call out again, but I cannot hear my own voice anymore.

In the distance by a stretch of SUVs, I see Charlie kneeling over someone, pounding him in the face with a clenched fist. He's strangling the man with his other hand, ensuring he cannot escape.

*Maksim.*

He has to pay for what he's done. He has to pay for shooting James.

"Let. Me. Go!" I scream so loud, a burst of adrenaline coming over me. I fling out my arms, forcing Andres to release me, and stagger to my feet once more. Through the firework of gunshots shaking the atmosphere, I stumble over to Charlie and Maksim, barely registering any pain now.

"Blaire, My Little Pet?" Maksim's golden eyes, swollen and full of blood, widen at the sight of me. He's gripping Charlie's wrist in an attempt to get free.

Charlie stops his attack and turns his head to look at me. His face is covered in specks of blood. The devil is in his eyes, blazing with fury.

"You shot him." I lift the gun to Maksim and click back the hammer, trembling from head to toe. "You-you've done some terrible things to James, but shooting him? Me?"

"I'm sorry," Maksim splutters. "I went too far. I realize that now."



“Sorry isn't enough,” I say, cold of emotion. Finally, I feel nothing but hatred for him.

Releasing Maksim, Charlie pushes away from him and stands at my side, his breathing ragged. He puts one arm around my shoulders to hold me, steadying my stance. I notice the gunshots have stopped. It's so quiet. There's an eerie feel to the night.

Staring at Maksim as he stares at me, I consider two options for him: suffering or death.

“He has to die,” I croak out, my lips wobbling with uncontrollable tears. “He cannot live.”

“I'll do it, Blaire,” Charlie says, but I tell him no. I try to crouch down to my master, to put us eye to eye, but I buckle at the knees. Charlie doesn't let me fall. He controls my equilibrium, gripping my shoulders tightly in his hands and carefully helps me to my knees.

Maksim is coughing up blood, straining to stop himself.

“Blaire,” he chokes, reaching out for my hand with cold fingers, “you can stop this. You can save me.” Holding my hand, he pleads physically, squeezing me. “Don't let him kill me,” he says under his breath in Russian.

“Why not?” I search his eyes, blinking a few times to clear the white film in my vision. “There is nothing for you anymore.”

“I won't go to hell yet!” he yells with all the power his body will allow, hunching over on his side in pain to cough up some more. He pulls me with him, and I moan at the pain of my back being stretched out. But then Charlie snatches my hand out of Maksim's.

“Get off her, you puta motherfucker.”

“I cannot go to hell yet,” Maksim's voice softens as he says that, and I think he's crying. “I am not ready, My Little Pet.”

I blink tears of sadness and rage, knowing I've failed to do the only thing I've ever known—keep him safe from anything and everything in the world.

I lean over to say in his ear, wincing in agony, “Hell is ready for you.” And putting the gun to his temple, I squeeze the trigger and blow him away with a thunderous **BANG**.

My body doesn't react to the sound, and I don't move away from him.

I'm not sure if I shut my eyes, but the world goes black. I feel a strange sense of weight being lifted off my shoulders, like his soul is leaving me.

We're safe now. James and I. Nothing can hurt us anymore.

“I'll see you again someday,” I say under my breath, so only Maksim can

hear me, “I’m sure.”

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# Epilogue

I cannot recall a time I felt like this, neither empty nor fulfilled. Somewhere in the middle. Must be the drugs that doctor gave me, keeping me in a hazy state of limbo. But still, I can't deny there is this strange emotion lingering within me, something I've not experienced before. I've just slaughtered my master to save everyone I care about, so I can be with them in total liberty, and all I want to do is get up from the hospital bed I'm lying on and walk out that door right in front of me. I want to escape the captivity of this tiny room and the horrid clinical scent of the hospital. I'm not sure where I want to go. Perhaps I want to stand under the rain, to feel cleansed of myself and completely free—because it is raining outside, spitting against the window above my head. I imagine it's washing away Maksim's blood from Rumo's driveway, erasing any evidence of his death.

No matter how much I desire to leave though, I can't, because I'm sick with infection. I'm lying on my side with cushions propped against my back, keeping me in this position. A lightweight blanket is pulled up to my chin. There's a sharp cannula inserted in the top of my left hand, feeding my body clear fluids from a medical bag hanging on a tall silver pole next to my bed. A plastic clip is attached to my right index finger, reading my blood pressure and my pulse, a long, droning beeping near my ear.

***Beep...Beep...Beep...***

The door creaks open and Charlie wanders in to stand at my side with crossed arms, painted in specks of dried out blood. He's followed in by a balding Indian doctor who's scribbling something down on a clipboard, dressed in a long white coat with a stethoscope hanging around his neck.

“Dr. Shyam, I want a full medical report while she's unconscious with an internal and external examination, swabs and blood tests, the lot. Don't leave an inch of that girl unchecked.”

“Do you suspect she's been attacked sexually, Mr. Decena?” the doctor says in Arabic accented English, jotting down Charlie's every command. “Because I can call in a specialist to check her over?”

“I don’t suspect”—Charlie's voice comes out harsh with controlled anger —“I know.”

Of course he knows. Maksim must have confessed what he did to me when Charlie was punching his lights out.

“And while you're removing that brand from her back, be fucking delicate or we're gonna have a problem. I've seen the way some of you surgeons handle your patients.”

“We will be extra careful, Mr. Decena, you have my word. I have the best surgeons on hand to assist your girlfriend, so once we get her blood pressure under control, we'll take her in for surgery.”

“Good,” Charlie says.

They're quiet after discussing me, and then I hear the door click shut. I weakly lift my head off the pillow to look up at Charlie, blinking away the cloudy film in my eyes.

“Charlie,” I breathe out his name to attain his attention.

“You're awake?” He uncrosses his arms and pulls up a chair to sit at my side. “I'm sorry you had to hear that, baby. I thought you were sleeping.”

“No.” I rest against the pillow with a sigh. “I've just been lying here.”

There's a moment between us, as we look at each other in connecting silence. Then he smiles at me with pure guilt. “You all right, baby?” He sounds guiltier than he looks. “You in any pain?”

“No.” I shakily reach out to him, needing to touch him. He takes my hand, causing the cannula needle to pinch, but I don't care. The muse of my affections, he is, and I miss him so much. His tan is darker against the pale green room we're in, and his unruly hair looks death black under the lights. Maksim's blood is marring his skin under those striking blue eyes.

“When are we leaving for Mexico?” I whisper, slowly blinking at him. I just want to leave this place forever.

He flashes me a forced, doting smile, stroking over my knuckles with the rough pad of his thumb. “As soon as you've had the operation, we'll go.”

“Today?”

“Maybe tomorrow morning, baby,” he says softly, tipping his head. “You'll still be asleep but by the time you wake up, we'll be home.”

*Home.* It's so weird to hear him say that. It's all he was talking about on the ride over here from Rumo's house, just after I murdered Maksim. In the back of the car, I was vaguely aware that I was curled up on his lap, and he was cradling my head to his chest. I could feel his heart thudding against my

ear. I could hear his rushed intakes of breath. He told me over and over what it will be like when we're in Mexico, and apologized endlessly about what's happened to me. "I should never have sent you back," he said, his words cracking with tears. "I should have listened to my brother and kept you. But if you fight to stay alive, Blaire, I swear I'll make it up to you. There's a whole life waiting for us." He kissed the top of my head, speaking to me there, begging me not to die.

"I'd like that," I whisper, turning up my lips in another dazed smile. "I'd like to wake up and be at your home. I'd like to see what your room looks like."

Another smile—he's forcing every one, though I understand. He blames himself for the state I'm in, but it's not his fault. Whether he sent me back to Maksim or not is irrelevant. I would have gone. Nothing could have stopped me. I was programmed to go back.

"And James will come with us"—Charlie hunches down so we're a little closer, so I can feel his warmth—"if you want him to, that is?"

"Yes. He's my brother," I remind myself, unexplainably content that I still have some family left in the world. "I want him to know that while Maksim is gone, he still has me."

"Us," Charlie corrects, raising his thick eyebrows at me. "James has us both."

I search the piercing blueness in his eyes, my emotions for him all but bursting out of me. "Yes. Us." I shift my head on the pillow, taking in the sight of his lovely face in a moment of gratification.

"Where is James?" I ask eventually.

"He's at the house"—Charlie gestures at the door with a nod—"and he's fine. Don't worry. My brother Nic is keeping him company."

*His brother?* I'm not sure how James will feel about that. Judging from what he texted me the other week, he was nervous about the Los Zetas, and now he's at Charlie's house with one of the leaders?

"Why isn't he here?" I ask. "I'm sure he'd want to be here, no?"

Charlie can't look at me as he says, "He feels too guilty to see you like this."

"Mr. Decena"—the Indian doctor interrupts our conversation, coming inside the room—"Blaire is ready for the next shot of antibiotics."

Charlie lets go of my hand and turns around in his chair to usher him forward. "Come in then."

On command, the doctor carries in a medical tray and puts it down on the bed near my stomach. He picks up a syringe and flicks the tube before inserting it in the cannula, making my arm rush with cold. I wince because it's uncomfortable. He then checks the monitor beeping by my head, and writes down some notes on his clipboard.

"How's her blood pressure?" Charlie asks, still sitting in the chair at my bedside.

"It's coming down, Mr. Decena. She's doing okay."

Charlie nods a couple of times, satisfied to hear that. For some reason, I can't help thinking about when we lived at his house, how at home and safe I felt there, the times we shared together eating in the kitchen, talking and holding each other...the mornings I woke up tangled in his arms.

Why did I leave him to go back to Maksim? It's the stupidest thing I've ever done. If I'd stayed, James wouldn't be wrecked with guilt and none of this would have happened.

"Blaire, you with me?"

I blink up at Charlie, coming back from my thoughts.

"You know," I say, my tone low and soft, "maybe we can put Mexico on hold for a while. Maybe we could go back to your house here, and it'll be just like before when it was just us. We can stay in my room again." My foggy head likes to imagine life as it was. It was perfect. There was no Maksim, just Charlie and me. Just how I want it to be.

Just as it is now.

And now James will be there too.

"If that's what you want," Charlie says. Reaching out, he wipes a few loose strands of hair back out of my face.

I take his hand from my face and hold it, fiddling with his long, callous fingers. It's then I see the bloody bandage on my wrist, covering Maksim's bite mark. My bracelet is still gone. I stare at my wrist where it should be, eyes welling up.

"What is it, Blaire? What's wrong, baby?" He turns his head and snaps at the doctor, "What did you give her?!"

Dr. Shyam flinches away, obviously scared of Charlie. "It-it was just a strong dose of antibiotics."

"My...my bracelet," I croak out, my nose tickling to cry. That silly piece of metal has come to mean so much to me, and I fucking well earned it. How dare Maksim take it from me!

“Hey”—Charlie gently squeezes my hand—“Don’t be sad.” Pressing his foot into the floor, he lifts his hips off the chair so he can dig through his jeans pockets, and shows me my bracelet.

My mouth opens to a huge O. I can't even put it in words how I feel. Despite it all—the suffering and the pain, broken by the thought that James might be dead, thinking I'll never see Charlie again, and killing my master—I think I'm finally happy.

But, do I deserve to be happy?

Charlie unclips the pulse reader from my finger and slips the bracelet over my right hand this time. He then puts the pulse reader back on, clicks the clasp shut on my bracelet, and lifts my hand to his mouth, kissing my inner wrist. We stare at each other in this moment, the rest of the world nonexistent. All I can see is his handsome face and those powerful blue eyes. I care about him so much it’s painful.

“Blaire is ready for the anesthetic now,” the doctor says. “I can administer it but we will need an anesthetist present pretty soon after she goes under.”

Charlie glances at the monitor. I notice the beeping has slowed, but then it picks up as fear belts through me. Some people don't wake up from anesthetic, and given my physical state, I'm frightened I won't make it through the operation. I'm frightened I'll be joining Maksim sooner than I want to and that I'll never see Charlie or my brother ever again.

“Charlie”—I stare at him in obvious fear—“if I don't wake up, you-you'll take care of James, won't you? You won't send him away because I'm gone?”

“Hey”—he leans into me so we're eye to eye, his widening in what almost looks like anger—“don't you dare say things like that, Blaire. You're gonna wake up. You're gonna be fine. I'll be there while you have your operation, and I'll be there when you come around. Nothing bad is gonna happen.”

I swallow down my nerves, shakily nodding.

“Don't be scared, baby. You know I won't let anything happen to you.” His eyes examine mine in a desperate attempt to keep my focus. “The sooner the operation is done, the sooner we can leave and go home and everything will be fine. It'll be just like before, except there'll be no one between us, all right? And James will be there. We'll both be there for him.”

“Okay,” I say in a bated breath. The idea is comforting, so I hold onto it.

“Here, I'd like to do that.” Charlie reaches for the syringe, and the doctor doesn't hesitate to give it to him. Though, he does help guide the needle in

and tells Charlie to press down on the syringe slowly.

I stare at Charlie the entire time, urgently storing the image of his face in my memory, so I can dream of nothing else but him. I don't want to dream of Maksim and his torment.

My vein burns with cold, the medicine spreading through my bloodstream.

"If you can count down from ten," the doctor says, I think to me, "it will help you doze off."

"Charlie," I breathe out his name, fading toward a foggy vapor. *Ten. Nine. Eight. Seven...*

Charlie cups the back of my head and draws me closer to him, so we're mere inches from each other. I want him near. His clean musky scent and the warmth of his body calms my nerves. He kisses my lips with the softest of intentions, like if he kisses any harder I might break. My heart squeezes. It's like all those times before when my chest squeezed but I now realize it was my heart all along.

"I love you, Blaire," he says softly against my mouth. "Now close your eyes, baby, and think of something nice."

The end

*Keep turning the pages for **BLAI2E***

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I dedicate everything to the love of my life, Shane, and my boy, Bradder's. You're both incredibly patient with me, given I lock myself away for hours — sometimes even days — on end to write. It only makes me love you more (if that's even possible). XOXOXO

Eli, my hubba hubba Cleaner, friend, and trusted confidant, I dedicate the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of **BLAIRE**, to you. You came to me when I needed you most. You helped me relax, you helped me sleep, and you saved my life. With love, and giggles, Anita XOXO

To my reader and blogger friends, I love and thank you because you helped make my dreams come true.

# **BLAI2E**

## **PART 2**

by

**A N I T A G R A Y**

*#1 International Amazon Bestselling Author*

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

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**TRIGGER WARNING:**

BLAI2E, PART 2 in BLAIRE'S SAGA, is not suitable for readers under 18.  
Contains psychological impairment, dubious permission, and violence.

**PLEASE NOTE:**

BLAI2E is written in American English with references to numerous languages.

It is primarily set in Britain.

There is a language index at the back of the book for your reference.

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# Prologue

“I love you, Blaire,” Charlie says softly against my mouth. “Now close your eyes, baby, and think of something nice.”

I struggle to shake my head, refusing to close my eyes. I’m too frightened of the operation. *I’m just not ready to die.* For as long as I can, I battle the foggy anesthesia burning cold in my veins. I lie here on the hospital bed gazing, searching the depth in Charlie’s eyes. They’re such a piercing shade of blue, yet so dark and haunted like mine.

My paradise.

I need him more than I’ve ever needed anyone. The tenderness I seek from him is no longer foreign to me. It has become me. I am innocent with Charlie, an oxymoron to what I really am: wicked, corrupt, impure, and peccable. Most of all, peccable: *capable of sinning.* But who gives a fuck? Charlie doesn’t. He loves me. He told me so.

His full lips seal over mine in a holy kiss of adoration, creating an orb of power around us. Turning up my chin, I try to kiss him back, though I’m fading. *Fading...* My eyes grow heavy, and I blink. *Blink. Blink.* But Charlie’s handsome face turns fuzzy and white, disappearing into the distance as I vanish with a breathless, *goodbye.*

My subconscious takes me to a place in my dreams that makes me happy; the moment Charlie gave me my bracelet. It’s humid in his house, just as I remember. I’m wearing the clothes he bought me. We’re minutes from leaving to go out for dinner—but he makes me sit on the couch in the living room. He crouches at my feet, and I frown, wondering what he’s doing. His eyes are glowing in raw emotion, a million words of want hanging on his lips.

“*I’d like to give you a lot more than just a bracelet, Blaire,*” he says, his Latino voice so deep and raspy, echoing through the heavenly haze of my mind. “*Anything you want, I want to give you.*”

My stomach erupts with flutters, as I know what it meant now, why he was treading carefully. He loved me—no, he loves me. He wanted to tell me,

and he wanted me to choose him over my master, who is now dead.

*Maksim...Maksim...*

Even in an induced slumber, at the mere thought of *him*, adrenaline attacks my system, coursing through my body in waves of anger. I want to cry with madness, scream, and hurt people. Hurt *him*. I fucking hate *him* for what he did to me—and for what he did to my brother, James. I hate that I could have stopped his abuse, yet I didn't. I hate that I could have stayed with Charlie when he begged me to, yet I left.

My rage and bitter regret morph in my dream, charging with energy, making the world around me tremor. I can't see anything, though I feel my body being thrown from side to side. I hear the roaring sound of an engine and smell the titanium stench of gas.

*Am I in a car?*

"*Stop him! Shoot him!*" men shout one after the other, voices reverberating in my ears, and my heart rate soars. I recognize them, but I can't pinpoint how.

***Bang, clatter! Bang, clatter!***

I flash to another moment. Maksim is taking James roughly on the metal framed bed in my cell, yanking on his hair as he pounds his naked body from behind. I watch with irrational horror, suspicious of what's happening. *Why am I seeing this?*

"*Don't look, Blaire,*" my brother says in smashes of breath, struggling against Maksim warning him to shut his mouth. "*Cover your eyes! It's okay!*"

My eyes dart to ghostly movement in the corner of the cell. It's a younger version of me. She's curled up on the cold, concrete floor with her knees to her chest, hiding in dirty, long red hair. "*It-it's not okay,*" she sobs in messy Russian, wishing to be anywhere else. My heart aches with agony for my brother; for her. I wish to be anywhere else, too, as I can't see Maksim rape James anymore. I can't let this happen anymore.

Whimpering, I slam my eyes shut. When I open them, I'm standing on Rumo's driveway.

Guns fire through the night while men rush back and forth attacking each other, ducking and diving through the bullets. My head snaps in every direction, trying to figure out why I keep going from one moment to the next. That's when I realize this is the evening I escaped Maksim's attempt to kill me, when Charlie saved me. *What does it mean?*

From a distance, I spot Charlie's powerful outline. He's bent over Maksim on one knee, teeth clenched as he pounds at my master's bloody face. He wants him dead, as I did—as I do.

Yes, I want him dead.

My hand weighs heavy with an object. I turn it up to see I'm holding a gun. It glimmers silver from the moonlight, fueling my desire to be free with Charlie.

*"He has to die,"* I croak, sudden tears pouring down my cheeks as a sense of cruel sadness comes over me. *"He cannot live."*

*"I cannot go to hell yet. I am not ready, My Little Pet."*

*"Neither am I!"* I shout back at Maksim, so fucking desperate to be free of him. I must keep my brother safe, and I just want one more day with Charlie. *Please, just one more day.* I want to kiss my lover. I want to feel his hands on my face and in my hair when he plays with it.

I won't be able to do either if Maksim lives.

*"I'll do it, Blaire,"* Charlie says, appearing at my side. I feel his warmth before I see him, pulling me in.

My head turns up and I look at his fallen angel face, blooming with novel affection. He is darkness blended with light. I think I could love him, I really think I could *live* with him, so I can't let him kill Maksim. I can't risk Maksim's blood on his hands as I don't know what I might do.

And I cannot risk hurting him. That would be the end of me.

I kneel at my master's side, wobbling off balance when a dizzy spell comes over me. Charlie's hands land on my shoulders and hold me steady, a physical promise to forever catch me should I fall. I lean down to level the gun at Maksim's temple, lips quivering in anger as I whisper in his ear, "Hell is ready for you."

**BANG!**

# 1

The fogginess diminishes, draining out of me.

My head drops to the side as my eyes spasm to open, searching for Charlie. It's a misty visual at first, until I see glimmers of shapes in the darkness surrounding me, the outline of a couch and a side table against the farthest wall. It's so quiet all I can hear are my melodic breaths. Too quiet.

A tall, slender figure clothed in white drifts past in the shadows, a nurse, most likely. I must still be in the hospital.

*Where is Charlie?* I can't sense him, smell him, or feel his warmth. In fact, I'm so cold my teeth chatter. From above, a cool gust blows over my naked stomach and chest, followed by a marathon of pimples, and a shiver rips through my body. I huddle over on my side to get warm, scratching itchy spots on my inner elbows. My calf muscles convulse and cramp, enough to make me wince. That's when I feel the surface beneath my body is springy and lumpy, and the rough material chafes my skin. *Odd.* The bed I dozed off in didn't feel like this, and I had a blanket. I wasn't cold.

Flashes of orange illuminate my sight, followed by a flicking sound, like a cigarette lighter. A heated, vinegary scent floods the air, so toxic my breath hitches on every inhale.

*What the hell is that?*

Footsteps thump toward me, piquing my attention, and someone shoves my shoulder to turn me over on my back. I moan with discomfort radiating all over, tangled in my long, messy hair. I reach out for security, trembling with weakness, and it's then I notice something is very wrong. I don't feel right. I feel...missing and out of touch. Fuzzy. I can't really remember anything.

"Can you hear me, girl?" says a woman with a husky, Arabic accent. I don't recognize her voice.

I lift my eyes to find she's standing there in floaty white clothes, blurry in my line of vision. The nurse...she must be the nurse. She's holding something in her hand. It's thin and long with a sharp, needle end. A syringe, I think.

She flicks it with her finger, tapping it with her nail. I squint to study her face, but I can't make out any features.

*No. This isn't right.*

"Charlie?" I whisper for him, but break in to coughs. I curl over on the mattress, choking so hard my eyes bulge and stream with tears.

I hear no reply from Charlie. He must not be here.

Before I explode with panic, I try to remind myself everything is okay, that I must remain calm. Charlie won't be far. He promised he'd be there while I had the operation, and he promised he'd be there when I wake up. Light in the darkness, he is. Every scar on my back has led up to him, and now, they really do remind me of how strong I am, not how strong I have to be.

*No. He won't be far.*

"Why were you sick?" an Arabic accented man speaks this time, when I'm done coughing. His voice is lacy but raspy, a gargle in his words.

I don't recognize him, either.

"Why were you sick?" he repeats. "The man we took you from said you were in the hospital. He said you still needed medical attention."

I don't answer him as I'm not supposed to speak without permission. I just lie here playing a mantra in my head, *Charlie needs to come back now. Charlie needs to come back now.*

"The scar," the woman whispers, stroking the edge of my tummy, making it quiver. "Here, take this and dose her up. If she is ill, she'll show signs soon enough."

I briefly wonder why they aren't aware of my afflictions if they are medical professionals, but my arm is yanked out. A rubbery length of material wraps around my bicep and pulls tight, restricting the blood flow. I hiss through gritted teeth as a spot on my inner elbow pinches, but then heat blasts through my vein, a rush—a power like no other, and it carries my soul from my body.

I breathe out in slow motion. My arms fall slack at my sides, and my legs go numb and tingly before I lose all the feeling.

A hand taps my face, gently knocking my head from side to side. I don't react, practically drooling from the high. I lie staring into oblivion, ecstasy dancing over my senses. It's like the mattress is hugging me with magic. It goes on for so long that I'm not sure if I ever want to leave this place, as nothing hurts here. I don't need to care about anything here. Until the



euphoric rush begins to wear off, and I'm left feeling cold and restless.

I embrace myself, nestling in my hair to keep warm, but the chill lingers deep in my bones. It doesn't last long, though. The Arabs stab spots on my body like they're making artwork of me; my ankles, thighs, wrists, inner elbows, and my neck. Every time, it propels me to a place of ignorant bliss. It leaves me numb to the world. I vaguely register moments of food being crammed in my mouth or cool water being squirted in my face, but I'm too fucked up to care. I'm too fucked up to eat or drink.

At some point, I'm plucked off the lumpy mattress and shoved to sit against a wall. A length of material is strapped across my forehead, holding me prisoner, and a tube is shoved down my nose. It rubs the back of my throat, and I heave from the pit of my stomach. My floppy hands flick out to stop whoever is doing this, but my fight is languid and sloppy.

"You need to eat, girl," the Arabic man says near my face, causing the heat of his breath to beat against my cheeks. "You can't exist on drugs alone."

*Drugs?*

A sharp **bleep** goes off and a low humming fills the room. My stomach bloats, filling with fluids, and I projectile vomit. It splutters everywhere, covering my arms and my naked lap. It burns my sensitive skin.

"That is enough milk," the Arabic woman says, followed by another **bleep**.

The low humming sound vanishes, and the tube is pulled out. It tugs at my tummy, slipping up out of my throat. I gasp for breath, gagging on the acidic taste of vomit. "What...what are you doing...to me?"

"Just a little hit this time," one of them whispers, and my senses narrow. My heavy eyes whizz about for whoever promised another hit. They mean the ecstasy. I'm sure of it.

I want the ecstasy. I want to be lost again. I don't like this dream.

Elastic fastens around my inner elbow and the skin there scratches, causing me to hiss in reaction. But I don't scream or resist. I let the euphoria take me.

The strap is removed from my head, and I go lax against the wall like a corpse, slouched there indulging in the stimulating, floaty sensation. The ground hugs me, and I think I smile. The magic strums at my senses, and I think I laugh. In all my life, I've never felt so free. I can't remember anyone or anything. No pain. Only pleasure. Especially when grabby hands knead

my body, my waist and my hips. A rough mouth nips at my collarbone and licks up the beating vein in my neck.

*Hmmm, Charlie.*

My core tingles, and I ache between my legs for his mouth. I ache for the sensation of his smooth face on mine, his kisses and his voice in my ear, whispering, *“I love you, Blaire.”*

“You want dick,” that mouth purrs in my ear. His breath tickles, and I feel so fucking high I could fly.

*“Charlie...hmmm, Charlie...”*

Knees nudge my thighs open, and my legs are so slack they just fall apart. Heavy weight presses me into the ground, crushing me. Something fat and long smears up my inner thigh, to rub against my groin. My body grinds back, seeking out my lover.

But he smells weird. He smells...musty.

Charlie doesn't smell like this.

“You like that, don't you? You want it hard, you little whore?”

*Whore?*

I digest that Charlie would never call me a whore, and my eyes flutter to open.

The damp head of a cock rubs my private lips. I clamp my legs shut, but he's wedged between them.

*“No one but me is allowed to touch you, My Little Pet.”*

*“Blaire, I want you...I want you to come and live with me in Mexico. I want to be with you.”*

My mind twitches, Maksim's orders and Charlie's promises of love flicking on my black switch. The essence of it charges in my core, emanating outward with fierce power.

“Open up and let me in, whore.”

“No! Get...off...me...!” I barely manage to scream. Tensing from within, I battle to shove at the man's chest but I'm so weak. “Get...! Off...!”

“Stop!” a woman screeches, her voice so sharp it makes my skull throb.

The weight on top of me jumps off, and I turn over, grumbling for strength to crawl away. A hefty **smash** hits a wall in the room, and I flinch, screwing my eyes shut. I would get up and deal with them both but I can't. I physically can't. I don't understand what's wrong with me.

“I told you not to touch her!” the woman cries, spitting a bluster of foreign curses. “She diminishes in value if she's not pure! If we get caught,

and she's been raped, you know what will happen, *ya kalb!*"

They detonate in a ruckus of shouting, with more smashing and doors slamming. I paddle to all fours, fighting to crawl away. *Charlie. I need to get to Charlie.* Though, I can hardly move. My body is so heavy it feels like it's made of steel.

Another door crashes open but before I can get away, sharp nails grab at my feet and yank my limbs out from under me. My head smashes on a hard surface, and the impact knocks me sideways. Everything swirls, shifting out of focus.

"Get her cleaned up, now!" the woman shouts in an echo of words, heaving my half-conscious body across the gritty, dirty floor. "We need to leave! People are waiting!"

*Leave? Leave to go where?*

---

"As you can see, the item isn't fit for arousal," the Arabic man says in the vapor of my mind. "She is scarred all over, though certified pure by my medical professional."

I stumble around on unsteady feet, heels arched higher than my toes like I'm wearing stilettos or something. My body is draped in a lightweight cloak made of silk, hair combed down my sides. I can smell the noxious stench of bleach; feel the heat of beaming lights all around. Reality is warped. I try to focus on the cloudy white lights for a sense of stability, but they're too bright. They make my eyes sting.

"Show them what's on offer"—a sharp nailed hand clamps down on my jaw, turning my head from side to side—"see for yourself, ladies and gentlemen, she is a pretty girl."

When the hand lets me go, I stagger back a step, groaning under exhaustion. I cannot be bothered with this, whatever this is, or wherever I am. I just want to lie back and slumber in my own architect of nirvana. The last rush they forced me to endure was different. It was more...indolent. There hasn't been any ecstasy. I want the ecstasy—or I want Charlie.

*Where is he?*

"If you enjoy sadism," the Arabic woman appears, her voice circling me as she speaks, "I guess she could be of use, and knowing you are the only person to have ever played with her could be appealing."

“You are all most likely wondering why she is on sale, no?” the Arabic man’s voice shadows the woman’s. “So, let me explain who this girl is. Her name is Blaire-Markov.”

“I knew it!” a Hispanic-accented lady shouts from across the room.

Deep gasps fill the distance, too, as chairs scrape against the stone floors. It’s too many noises. Men begin yelling in a gust of foreign profanities, warning *they’ve* made a big mistake. The Hispanic lady disagrees. She thinks *this* is justified punishment.

I can’t keep up, too hazy to understand. I tumble to my knees and my palms smack the smooth stone floors, ringing with pain. I don’t move. I count down the seconds, hoping that by the time I get to ten they’ll leave me alone, and let me rest in peaceful silence.

“Ensure our departing guests checkout with no issues, will you?”

“*Idiota,*” someone snorts, and I catalogue people are leaving.

“We should stop the auction,” the Arabic woman insists, but the man shushes her, promising it’s payout day.

*Payout day?*

I’m desperate to figure out what’s happening, but my head starts to spin. It gets faster, and faster, and faster, until I collapse. I tumble over on my ass and lie there in an incoherent whirl, legs splayed out. My hands rest on my chest where my heart beats low and measured, and the dark ceiling churns in slow motion, twitching to keep going.

*Focus, Blaire,* I beg myself, but I still don’t know where I am or what I’m doing here. The last real thing I remember, I killed Maksim, and then Charlie was telling me to close my eyes and think of something nice. He said he loved me. I was having an operation. We were going to be happy once I woke up. But now, every time I wake up, it’s to this crack-head sensation and extreme loss of reality.

“Credible hacker and martial arts trained fighter,” the Arabic man pitches his sale, “as you all may know, Blaire-Markov is virtually priceless to any government body. But this is the black-market, people; everything has a price.”

“You’re selling the boy, also?” the Hispanic lady asks.

“The boy comes as a freebie,” the Arabic woman says, walking past my head in her clinking heels. “He’s a necessity to keeping this girl in check, for if you don’t, she will end you.”

*The boy...the boy...* A young boy? Or are they speaking disrespectfully

about someone? Charlie does that. He calls James a boy.

Tears prick my eyes while a spot in my chest constricts with emotional agony.

*Where is Charlie?*

“Before the auction begins, I must offer full disclosure.” The Arabic man laughs, and for some reason, I imagine he’s rubbing his sweaty hands together. “The leader of the Los Zetas claims this girl is his—he’s been searching for her for three weeks now, and with brutal force—so you will also need the boy as collateral to ensure she keeps your identity a secret, unless you want the Los Zetas hot on your ass.”

A kafuffle of voices dominate the room again, swearing they’re having no part in this.

“*He will rape our daughters in front of us for this!*”

“*He made a public warning!*”

“The bidding starts at one million sterling!” the Arabic man calls regardless of the warnings. “Ignore the eccentrics. Charlie Decena has no idea where she is or who took her—and he certainly won’t know who buys her—so no one is going to rape your daughters.”

*Charlie Decena?*

I register they’re talking about Charlie, and worst of all, James. They’re saying they need to use James to control me.

“No!” I scream—or groan, rolling over on my front. I don’t even know what’s processing in my mind, but it’s the most intense sentiment. I will myself to get up and fight. I press into the ground, but my elbows buckle, and I whack my head. “Not James! Pwease!” My words come out slurred as I reach, clawing to get to them. “Pwease, not James!”

“Subdue her, now!”

Heels clink across the floors, rushing in my direction, and then I’m crushed into the ground with a knee between my shoulder blades. From behind, scrawny hands wrestle to get me under control as my arms fly about in a pathetic attempt of battle.

“I-I’ll kill you!” I stutter to warn. “You...you know I will!”

She grunts while shackling her fingers around my wrists and yanks out, pushing me face down, so I’m spread out like a starfish. There is no flickering lighter, and there is no heated, vinegary scent. A ready needle scratches the skin on my inner elbow as it has a hundred times before, and my every sense blasts with elation fueled heat.

“Pwease, I-I’m begging you!” I cry, eyes rolling to the back of my skull.  
“Not...not James...anyone but him...”

“Just be quiet, girl,” the woman bends to say in my ear, “be quiet, and everything will be okay. Your new master is paying top dollar for you, so everything will be okay.”

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## 2

I dream of the dark and the light, Maksim and Charlie.

I'm on my knees, and Maksim is holding my tiny face in both hands. He's rubbing my temples with the calloused pads of his fingers, and his cock is jutting out at me through the zipper of his gray trousers, twitching for attention.

"Suck it, My Little Pet," he says in gruff Russian, arching his hips forward.

I'm cringing in my shoulders, terrified, as James cannot save me today. He's training with Demetrius. It makes me cry. *I don't want to do this!* Though, I have no other choice. My master will beat me again if I say no.

He takes a hand from my face, fists his cock, and shoves it in my mouth. The crown is seasoned in salty pre-cum, smearing across my tongue and stretching out my cheeks. I gag from the pit of my stomach when his thick, warm flesh prods the back of my throat, forcing my tonsils to give way.

"O da," he moans, *oh yeah*, in Russian, satisfied I'm taking him in compulsory submission. "No hands. Ahhh, good little pet. Take it all."

His head falls back in rapture, hips pumping in and out of my saliva saturated lips. I grip my naked thighs with jagged nails, overlapping bloody bruises from where I held myself yesterday while doing this, in fear and defeat. James wasn't around to save me then, either. He usually interrupts the beatings. I hope that one day he can interrupt the sexual violation, too.

Maybe he will, when he knows it's happening.

"Yes, suck harder. Faster!" Maksim is getting breathless, groaning and grinding his lean body. "When I cum, I want you to swallow every last drop again. That's it...suck it! Make me cum!"

*Oh no.* This is when he gets mad. I shut my eyes and cower, dreading he's going to slap me and blacken the other side of my face this time. But he yells for me to look at him, shoving his entire length down my throat so his balls are mashed against my chin.

Heaving with my eyes watering, I lift my head a little, praying he'll take

pity on me for doing as I'm told.

*Charlie!*

My stomach bottoms out of me at the sight of him.

“Hey, baby,” he rasps, smiling down on me. His sleek black hair is tied away from his handsome face, making his features appear savage and hard. He's wearing fitted jeans and a gray, round-neck t-shirt, easy attire to compliment his dark beauty. Holding up the hem, he gives me full access to the most private part of him, so I can see every powerful muscle in his stomach.

In an instant, I realize he's dressed in the exact clothes he wore when I first went down on him. *This* is the first time I went down on him.

The heavy blueness of his eyes darkens as he tips his head to watch me in a mixture of lust and affection. I watch him back with confusion, unsure of where he came from. Where did Maksim go?

*It doesn't matter, I tell myself. Charlie is here.*

*Yes, Charlie is here.*

I shift forward on my knees and clutch at his muscled hips like a pawing puppy, knowing I am safe now. Charlie might toy with me, but he said he loves me. He came for me, he tried to save me, so it's okay. *Everything is okay.*

He molds one hand around my cheek and strokes under my eye, tickling the spot there. “S'all right,” he whispers. “I'm here, Blaire.”

I nod without ever looking away, waiting eagerly for his tenderness while my tummy swarms with butterflies—but his tenderness doesn't come. He knocks me off kilter by thrusting his hips so hard I choke on his shaft. At first, I'm so stunned that I don't know how to react. My eyes bulge, and I unwillingly hack up clots of spit. It dribbles out of my mouth and off the end of my chin; worse when he thrusts again and again, obstructing my will to breathe. I hold out for as long as I can, squawking and gargling with ugly noises, but the drums of panic roar in my ears. I whack his thighs to put some distance between us, desperate for oxygen, though he won't stop. His powerful body fucks my mouth until he tenses and tremors, and warm, salty liquid spurts out, suffocating my air passage. My vision flashes with spots, and a wave of vertigo comes over me, conquering my fight.

This isn't right. It didn't happen like this. I'm having a nightmare. I'm certain of it.

*Wake up, I beg myself. Wake up!*



“*Përshëndetje, Blaire,*” a man says in reality, and I bolt upright for a huge gulp of air.

Whatever I’m sitting on creaks and squeaks while I grab at my throat, vibrating with anxiety.

I sense someone backing away from me as the sound of a zipper comes up. My head whips from left to right, wondering who’s there. I can’t speak. My throat feels like it’s clogged. There’s a horrid taste in my mouth, and a thick coat of salt spread across my tongue.

I gasp against my straining lungs, opening and squeezing my eyes shut to gain focus.

“Focus, Blaire,” the man husks from my left, seemingly reading my mind. I don’t answer him, too overwhelmed by the inability to breathe properly.

A large figure sits in a narrow chair at my bedside, zooming in and out of focus. It’s not Charlie. Whoever *that* is, he’s fat. He’s dressed in a heavy, long black coat over a tailored blue suit, and his skin is lightly tan like caramel. His face is round, and his cheeks are podgy with long sideburns marring the light stubble on his oval chin. When he smiles at me in a combination of zeal and curiosity, it makes his cheeks indent. It makes those icy brown eyes, under fuzzy eyebrows, ooze an intense sense of death.

*Is that Robert, the Albanian?*

I don’t know if it’s him, and I don’t know where I am. I squint to look about the gloomy room, seeing a shallow, curving ceiling made up of old, gray blocks. The pale walls are uneven, hanging with long tube lights that glow in the shadows. The floor is aged-cobbled stone, a mish-mash of sandy colors. It’s like I’m underground or something. At the realization, I smell dampness in the air, a stench you only encounter in old, abandoned houses.

The level of concentration it takes to study this place ignites an odd sense of screaming in my body; a scraping sensation within my veins. I can’t stand it. I reach for my neck again, rubbing my sharp collarbones. I run my hands down my slender arms, narrow waist, and toothpick legs. I’m spikey with faint hair, and I’m extremely thin—my shins are poking out.

This doesn’t feel like my body.

When I slip around to touch the base of my spine, I notice that doesn’t feel like mine, either. While my whip scars from Maksim’s belt are still lumpy and intact, the skin on the base of my spine is smooth and desperately tender, tickling as I circle certain places. It doesn’t hurt anymore, though. There is no tightness or pain and there is no burning.

*Why do I remember pain and burning?*

Maksim's name... He branded his name in my flesh, but it's gone.

I don't understand. How did someone remove his name?

Paranoid, I push the itchy blanket aside to look at myself. I'm not wearing my own clothes. I'm wearing a gray t-shirt and matching shorts. Lifting the hem of the t-shirt, I study the tiny, angry scar on my withdrawn stomach—from where Maksim shot me. It's bumpy and tender to touch as I round it with a finger.

My world reduces in size when I register the small, purple bruises disfiguring my skin, stretching down from my inner elbows and forearms to my wrists. They are ugly, tiny puncture wounds. I turn my boney ankles in and out, examining them. I have bruises there, too, little dots in my veins scattered about all over the place.

*What are the bruises from?*

They itch, and it's an under the skin itch I can't stimulate no matter how hard I scratch.

Still scratching, I stare about again, certain I'm dreaming. Nothing feels real. I can't string together a coherent memory.

There's a door directly opposite the single bed I'm sitting on, made of heavy, old wood with a wrought iron handle. On the right wall, there is another door.

I turn my head, aware the man is scrutinizing me with a deep frown. A huge cove window, bricked up in faded red stone, dominates the left side of the room, surrounded by heavy, russet colored drapes.

An odd-looking fly *buzzes* past midair and I flinch in reaction, causing the bed to squeak under my convulsing motions. *What the hell...* I think it's a mayfly, ones that barely live for a day at a time. It has broad, transparent wings and an inch-long stick-like body.

I shut my eyes, wishing this place away. Wishing the pain in my body away.

"You won't recognize this room, Blaire," the man says in his gargling foreign twang, and I know it is Robert.

I might not remember much right now, but I never forget a voice—or a face.

---

I scowl at Robert, battling to level my mind so I can warn him off and gather intelligence.

I don't see any shoes or keys in the room. No clear view of a location.

*Where the fuck is Charlie?* I wonder for a second if that's why Robert is here. Maybe he's watching over me in Charlie's absence? They were somewhat...friends, the last I remember.

My head twitches.

*Scan the subject. Assess the subject.* It's tough. I feel so uncomfortable in my own skin that I just want to scratch myself all over.

"You had b-better start talking, Robert." My Russian voice comes out thick with daring, though weak and croaky with fatigue. "Tell me where Charlie is, or I-I'm going to rip off your—"

"Ah, ah, ah," he interrupts, shaking a porky finger at me. He digs into his coat pocket, rustles around, and pulls out a long black tube with a red button on top beneath a clear, plastic lid. "I have James under my care, so be very careful with how you react, Blaire. One click of this button and your friend will receive one hell of a hiding."

Right then, I know he's not watching over me until Charlie returns. I try not to react, hunting through my memories for James' previous location, so I don't end up playing chess with his life. He was with Charlie. *No*. He was at the house with Charlie's brother. I'm certain of it.

I finger my temples as my skull begins to pound.

*"The boy we've got at the house is her brother."* That's what Charlie said to his own brother, Andres, on the night he saved me from Maksim.

Robert must be lying, which means I've got the upper hand.

As if following my train of thought, Robert grins knowingly with his brown eyes glowing in amusement. He reveals a mobile from his inner jacket pocket, presses a button, and lifts a finger to his lips. "Shhh," he whispers, "and listen."

My eyebrows crease.

"Blaire!" James' gruff voice fills the cell we're in, and my attention tunnels. "Whatever Robert tells you, don't listen! I didn't mean to—"

***Thump!***

My eyes flash at the heavy sound of someone punching James while my stomach balls with natural instincts of protection.

"What the fucking hell are you playing at, Robert?" I practically growl, but he doesn't offer a remark. I continue listening to my brother shouting at

the top of his lungs, causing the speaker to crackle. He grunts and barks in tune with a loud clanging, as if tugging against restraints.

“When I get out of here,” he yells, “I’m coming for you! If you touch her, I will murder your entire family as you watch!”

*Touch her?* He’s defending someone. Defending me.

He knows I’m with Robert.

*This cannot be happening.*

“Why don’t you quit whining and say something valuable—perhaps to Blaire?” Robert sounds amused on the audio recording, and he looks equally amused sitting before me. “Why don’t you tell her what happened? Warn her of what happens if she tries to escape me?”

“Fuck you, motherfucker—agh!”

I flinch subconsciously, listening to more heavy punches and groans as James hollers bloody murder at anyone who will hear him. I try to assess anything that could give off his location, but I get nothing. I can’t hear a single thing over his madness.

“The more you resist, the more you will endure, you know?” Robert teases on the audio like it’ll actually subdue James rather than fuel his rage. “Why don’t you get to the point, boy? Tell Blaire what happened. Tell Blaire what you did.”

“*The boy comes as a freebie.*” I recall what occurred the second Robert says *boy*. That’s what the Arab called James during his sales pitch.

I’m suddenly stone cold sober. My eyes whip around the room we’re in once more, taking in the visual: a jail. My jail.

Robert shuts off his phone and tucks it back into his jacket pocket. “As I said, ah, ah, ah.”

“What have you done?!” I shout, balling my fists at my sides. “Do you even understand what James and I will do to you for this? Do you even—”

“I did only what was done to me.” Robert shrugs, justified. “Eye for an eye.”

I don’t get what he’s talking about. I wrack my mind, but my head starts to hurt with the edges of my skull pulsating. I cup my face to rub my forehead, to invoke the cerebrum part of my brain that obviously isn’t working.

“In pain?” Robert asks, though I’m not listening. I’m calming myself, conjuring up a plan that could actually help my situation. I need collateral. I need to get out of here. I need to find Charlie. And I can’t react on impulse as

it could result in James receiving a beating—or worse.

“Where are we?” I say, still rubbing my head. “How did I get here? What’s wrong with me?”

“That”—he points with the button—“would be the date rape drug they’ve been feeding you, and the heroin. Mostly the heroin. It has a very, very nasty aftereffect when it wears off.”

“The, what?” I blink at him, mortified. “Heroin?”

He nods once to answer and tells me that I was all fucked up. He gave me an injection about an hour ago, apparently, to wake me up from a hazy slumber. “Was like an adrenaline-based liquid medical practitioners use to bring people out of comas. You should be good, for a while.”

I suddenly remember the stabbing sensations I felt in my arms and legs, and I scream, “You hooked me on heroin?!”

“Wasn’t me.” Robert turns up his lips in a shrug. “Trust me, girl, I want you for your talents—I even teamed up with treacherous rats just to get you. I have no desire whatsoever to keep you dosed up on drugs.”

The veins under my eyes pulse, furious someone would load me with any drug—let alone heroin, one of the most addictive narcotics of them all.

I want to explode, tear out Robert’s throat, and make him bleed to death.

“Who gave me the drugs?” I reel with questions, stuttering and shaking to get them out. “Whe-where are you holding James? Where the fuck is Charlie—if you’ve done something to him...!” I shatter into coughs with a hand over my mouth, choking and spluttering up everywhere.

“As I said, James is under my care, and Decena has no idea where you are, so please, don’t hope.”

Hope. That’s what led me back to Charlie in the first place.

*“The bidding starts at one million sterling.”*

My stomach hangs as the memories slowly but surely trickle into my reality. I subconsciously rub my left wrist where Maksim’s silver teeth marks disfigure my skin, where my bracelet used to be. Where my bracelet *should* be.

Everything is so wrong.

“I will tell you what happened.” Robert frowns at me in interest. “If you want to know, that is?”

I gawk in disbelief. “Of course I want to—”

“Let me speak.” He lifts a hand, on some level reasoning with me. “The sneaky, swindling Arabs got their hands on you while you were being

transported from a hospital in London.”

*Arabs. London.* I mentally note it all.

“As the story goes, Decena turned his back for a minute to take a call, and they hijacked the van with you and James inside. He told me himself.”

“Who-who told you this?” I ask, kneading spots on my arms.

“Why, James did.”

My face drains of an expression.

“Christ, when the Arabs took you, they were lucky they got away. Decena lit up London with guns, storming every gangster and foreign syndicate in the city looking for you.”

That means he’s coming for me.

“How long has it—ow,” I hiss, scratching sore layers of skin on my inner elbows. “How long has it been, Robert?”

“Since what?” he says, but he knows exactly what I’m asking. “Ah, you were in the hospital for just over six weeks. Three weeks with the Arabs, plus one day with me. Come on, Blaire, you are a smart girl. Do the math.”

My eyes wander off while my brain calculates it’s been nine weeks. Nine weeks since I shot Maksim. Nine weeks since I last saw Charlie.

*Fuck.* My heart aches. I fought so hard to get back to him, and now I’m stuck here, under Robert’s control?

Robert smiles, his coffee stained teeth matching the color of the drapes. “I spent a pretty fortune on you, girl. Even got double-crossed in the process of collecting you and had to outbid a Spanish organization for you, but you are worth every penny.”

“Why did you buy me? You-you don’t even know me.”

“Hmm.” He taps his oval chin, making his cheeks wobble. “Call it...payback, because I know the Mexican took what was mine.”

Arjana—the girl Charlie saved from the Prince’s party. There’s Robert’s reason.

If I can get her back, maybe I can bargain James’ freedom.

“That girl *was* special,” Robert says, and he snorts, genuinely insulted by something. “I wouldn’t normally pay for pussy—if I want it, I steal it—but she wasn’t just a virgin. She was half-Palestinian with royal blood, a prize on its own to my people, till Maksim and his friends fucked her up and made her a whore.”

My eyes roam across the room to mask the truth, and he says, “There’s no need to hide what happened. I know Decena set things up so it looked like

Maksim kidnapped Arjana. James told me.”

*James told him?*

I’m absolutely stunned. This is a fucking joke. What happened to our Russian code of silence?

“What do you”—my neck twitches—“want, with me?”

“Anything. Everything,” Robert says, waving out a hand to elaborate. “And now that I own you, it’s all achievable.” He flicks his long coat back on either side of his waist, sitting forward on the creaking chair. “I won’t...how do they say this in English?” His eyes travel up to the ceiling, musing.

“I don’t know,” I snort, passively itching places on my neck. “I’m not fucking English.”

“Dilly-dally? Ahhh, yes, that’s the word. I won’t dilly-dally. First thing’s first”—his deep brown eyes crinkle in the corners, smiling at me with wickedness—“you ever try to run, girl, and I will cut off James’ limbs with a blunt knife. Do you understand?”

My mouth twists. If he dares, I’ll cut off his fucking cock with a blunt knife.

“Secondly, for you to start earning your keep and ensuring James’ safety, you are going to get me Maksim’s body.”

I gape at him, thinking he must be kidding.

“Why do you want his body?”

“Tatiana has secretly spread word that she wants Maksim’s body, to lay him to rest, and since I need her on my side to help get rid of a certain someone—because we all know Russians are geniuses at hiding treachery—I figured I should get her what she wants.”

He actually thinks Tatiana will merge with him on a job because he got her Maksim’s body? I want to laugh, but I can’t conjure it up. What a dumb *durak*. Russians don’t team up with anyone unless they’re close friends.

“If you refuse to pacify my request,” Robert’s mouth cocks with a sly grin, “well, I hear James likes getting fucked by men.”

My heart drops.

I won’t let that happen to James again. No matter what I must do. I can’t!

“How am I supposed to find his body?” I say, shaking off the blanket to cool the heat. It’s suddenly so hot in here I feel like I’m going to melt.

“Decena has it,” Robert says. “Rumor speculates Maksim is hanging upside down somewhere, rotting without a burial—courtesy of Charlie Decena.”

He's going to send me back to Charlie?

*Slava bogu!*

I rest back on the bed, hiding my relief that I'll be going home soon. Once I'm with Charlie, we can hatch a plan and get James back.

"I can see your brain working," Robert says, circling his own head as a metaphor to my mind spinning. "Is it a struggle to concentrate while withdrawing from heroin?"

"What am I supposed to say to Charlie?" I speak over his question. "He's going to want to know who took me and where I've been. He won't settle for, *I cannot tell you*. Charlie isn't like that. He's calculative, smart..."

"Tell him what you like." Robert shrugs again. "As long as you keep my name out of it, you are good, and James will be good, too."

*Suits me.*

I'm just about to ask when can I leave, but he interrupts by informing me one of his *top whores* is going to come fix me up with some opiates, and that I'll be locked in this cell until I'm completely clean of the heroin.

"I am not taking any more drugs," I say. I feel sick just thinking about it.

"No?"

"No."

"Hmmm." Robert's eyebrows arch. "Well, if you don't take a substitute for the heroin, you'll be clucking like a chicken within a few hours. Your last hit was around..." He flicks his wrist, revealing a heavy, gold watch. "...Eight hours ago. I would suggest you rethink—"

"I. Am. Not. Taking. Any. More. Drugs," I hiss every word, so he understands.

"Blaire, you've been on heroin for quite some time, amid the other drugs they used to keep you mostly unconscious—look at the evidence. Look at all those puncture marks on your body." He points at me, at my arms and then my legs. "You also just barely recovered from whatever illness you were suffering from when the Arabs stole you..."

Just barely recovered is an understatement. I remember now: I was on death's door with blood poisoning—Charlie assumed as much when he found me at Rumo's house after I escaped Maksim—plus I had a bullet wound to the stomach, and my back was torn to shreds. The six weeks I spent in hospital would not have been enough. To recover from the stomach wound alone, I'd have needed a few months.

"I don't want you hooked on anything, trust me on that," Robert says,



striving to reason with me. “But I also cannot let you go cold turkey. It’s dangerous. You cost me a fortune. I need your skills. You’re no good to me dead. Just take the pills. You will be okay.” He goes on and on. I wish he would shut up. I scream it over and over in my head. *Shut up! Shut up! Just shut up!*

“Blaire, are you listening to me? If you don’t have a supplement, you will \_\_\_”

“I don’t fucking care!” I scream, vibrating with anger. I imagine he is right about the aftereffects when the heroin wears off, but I’m strong. If I can survive Maksim, I can survive this. “If anyone tries to give me drugs, you holding James will be the least of your problems.”

Under my warning, Robert’s face pales of color, and my eyes widen. *Is he frightened of me?*

In an act of self-preservation, he rises to his feet. He clears his throat and nods a couple of times, pocketing the red button. “Fine. Suffer, if you want. That’s your decision; the only decision I will allow. The bathroom is through there”—he points at the other single door in the room, and then he points down beside the bed I’m sitting on, at a funny looking basket—“in there, you will find supplies. Take a week or so to live in the withdrawals. Then, ill or not, you will appease my request, Blaire.”

I’m more than happy to *appease* this fat mudak’s request as it means I will see Charlie again.

### 3

Robert reiterates that I can have time to get over the heroin withdrawals before I must get him Maksim's body. Then he shuts me in the cell, alone.

The key turning echoes, emphasizing my solitude, and his shoes *clink, clink, clink*, down the hall outside until their sound is nonexistent.

Desperate to stay in control, desperate to fight the alleged withdrawals, I listen to my shallow breathing and the raucous thump of my heart in my ears. I tense my hands when the itchy, scraping in my veins begins, twisting and turning my wrists to ease the discomfort. It somehow worsens, spreading like fire throughout every nerve ending in my body. And then Robert's voice is spinning in my mind, daring to torment me. *I have James under my care. You will appease my request. Decena has Maksim's body.*

Motherfucker.

When Charlie finds out, he will slaughter Robert for what he's doing to me.

If he finds out.

What if he never finds out?

My stomach knots, magnifying with nerves.

What if something happens, and I don't get to go home to him?

I tell myself to stop being stupid. Even if I can't get to Charlie, he will come for me. He's like a dog with a bone. He fought the Russians to keep me for himself. And Robert said he shot up London searching for me.

He. Will. Come.

The itching under my skin becomes nearly unbearable. I scratch the needle marks, creating sore, thin red streaks. That's when the metal bed I'm sitting on clatters on the ground. My eyes whip around the cell, searching for signs of life, but I realize it's me. My legs are twitching like wiggly worms from the most indescribable discomfort burrowing in my muscles. I shuffle forward to sit on the edge of the bed, passively tapping my feet as a distraction.

*What was I thinking about?*

Heat breaks out all over, starting at my cheeks and emitting outward. I assume it's because I'm moving so much, or there could be a radiator on full blast.

I glance about for a radiator, pressing the back of my hand to my forehead. It's sweltering. Hot sweat slithers down my cheeks, dripping onto my chest. I wipe my forehead and wipe my hand on the bedspread. I pinch the chest of my t-shirt and shake it out to create some cool air but it's no use.

"Focus... Focus. Focus. Focus," I chant to the empty room, blowing out a long-winded breath. I try to anchor my mind on Charlie, on what we have together, but—something slithers down my chin. I smear the spot with my inner wrist, noticing it's saliva. I'm actually drooling.

*What the hell is this?*

I can't think about the state I'm in. I battle to stare at the wooden door as I know it signifies freedom, but my eyes start to water like crazy. They sting, too, and my lashes are soaking through.

*Stay focused.*

The door...it beats and pulses in my vision, a hallucination from the withdrawals. I squeeze and blink, squeeze and blink, hoping it'll still. That's when the shivers set in, chilly pimples overpowering everything else. They race up and down my arms and legs in icy tracks, burrowing bone deep. I cuddle myself, cowering in my long hair to use it as a cloak, but I'm so cold.

*It's just the flu.* I remind myself I was ill like this once, that it'll pass in a few hours, but I couldn't be more wrong.

My head snaps forward, and I sneeze in cupped hands, stuffed with a sensation of cotton wool. I wipe my snotty palms on the bedspread before pinching the bridge of my nose to soothe the tickling, to soothe the blocked feeling. It doesn't help. My eyes glaze over some more and become puffy, causing my cheeks to stream with tears.

"Co-count. Just count it away...*one...two...ten...fifty...one-hundred...*" I'm certain that by the time I get to one thousand, I'll be all right.

But again, I don't even realize how wrong I am.

My head throbs. The boundary of my skull is pounding like my brain is swelling beyond its capacity. I massage my temples, so tender to the touch that even this hurts. And the more I massage, the angrier I get. It blooms in my stomach, emitting outward with fierce power. My entire body is mad with trembles, hot and cold at once. And to ice my nightmare, the worst symptom of them all sets in; a formidable, unexplainable, all-consuming need—a

blazing, painful hunger in my chest, like a nagging voice telling me *you want and need a fix*. I want to kill someone just to take the pain away.

I knead the spot on my chest to ease the painful hunger, but it grows tighter and stronger. I feel as if I'm suffocating in my own fucking body.

"Aargh!" I scream, the veins in my neck pumping, and before I know it, I lose all sense of sanity. My muscles tear as I flip the bed, sending it crashing into the wall. I draw back to kick the sheet of springs, using lower body strength to make an impact, and I can't stop. I'm mad with madness, and my pulse is through the roof. I snatch at the basket of supplies and rip it apart, causing the contents to explode around the room. I dash over to the main door and kick it time and time again, screaming at the top of my lungs, "Robert, I'm going to fucking murder you! Do you hear me?! Yeb tvoyu mat'!" *Go fuck your mother!*

My craze goes on for so long that it wipes me out completely, leaving me feeling weak with something I'm not used to.

De-fucking-feat at its best.

I stand there panting and wheezing, shoulders aching as they rise and fall. The door has never looked more appealing. Escaping never seemed more appealing. I could pick the lock and go murder that fat fuck, but I can't guarantee I'll find James.

More defeat engulfs me, more than I can stomach.

I notice the long-winged fly is on the floor in the corner of the cell, dead.

*Don't even think about dying.*

Still angry, I pace the room until the muscles in my legs cramp. I crouch to the upturned bed and pull out the thin mattress, straining as I haul it to the middle of the floor. Snatching for the blanket, I lie down and cover myself from neck to toe. I think going to sleep will help this affliction pass but, *fuck*, I am so wrong.

I couldn't sleep if my life depended on it. It makes me anxious. My heart rate doesn't come down. It hammers in my ribcage, sending sharp pains through my chest that often catch my breath. I toss and turn on the mattress, unexplainably uncomfortable—moaning because I'm so fucking uncomfortable. No matter what position I lie in, I just can't be still. Then I'm hot again. My forehead boils with sweat, my eyes run wet with withdrawal tears, and my nose tickles to sneeze.

I kick the blanket away and groan as my stomach cramps and knots.

"Ow!" I curl over on my side. It's like my muscles are rubbing against

each other with serrated edges, tying up with barbed wire. “Just, stop!”

---

My body twitches on its own now, and the cramping knots in my stomach are beyond pain.

When my nose tickles, I sneeze and splutter everywhere. My bones crack when I do, and the sudden movement shoots waves of pain throughout every inch of my body.

Bested, I whimper in self-pity. I ask the empty room for Charlie, begging him to come get me. “I’m sorry I left you to return to Maksim! I won’t ever leave again! I *promise!*” I screech *promise*, turning angry with him.

I know he can’t hear me. I sob in the pillow, nose running with snot. No one can hear me.

This is the worst part, being alone endlessly. I don’t want to be on my own. I feel lost. Isolated. Scared. My own presence terrifies me.

*Escape.* “I can’t!”

I don’t know what time it is or how long I’ve been here. It feels like days—weeks. Though, if there was a clock nearby, I’d also swear it hasn’t moved a tick.

I hug myself and rock from side to side, attempting to comfort my lonely soul. It becomes anguish. The bones in my body are pulling out of their sockets one moment, crumbling the next. The more I move, the more intense it gets.

Everything is intense.

Icy sweat clings to my chest and face, droplets forming on my eyelids. The roots of my hair are damp and heavy—I’m tangled in hair every time I change position. The clothes I’m wearing itch the backs of my shoulders. Every-fucking-thing itches.

“Please, stop!” I beat my legs against the mattress, riding the waves of hell. *Move, keep moving*, my body insists, but it’s agony. The pinprick marks on my inner elbows and ankles scream. “Stop!” I screech, squeezing my eyes shut. “Stop! Stop! Just fucking stop!”

After what seems like hours of internal torment, I climb off the mattress to pace the shady room, bouncing up and down on the balls of my feet.

My skin, bones, head, heart, stomach...they all hurt now. But nothing compares to the consuming, painful hunger in my chest—except for

sneezing. Whenever I do, the muscles in my center contract, punting from the inside out. That's the only way to describe it: kicking.

*"Just take the pill...you will be okay."* Robert's voice is like a serpent in my fucking ear, but I fight with inner strength to resist his offer.

Though, not for long.

When I notice another long-winged fly flapping about near the other, I park my butt up against the wall, knees to my chest, and I crumble. "Robert...Robert...Robert..." I begin saying his name in subconscious whispers, then I'm screaming out the anguish. "Robert! Come back! Please come back! I give in!" I break down, hiccupping sobs so hard my tummy hurts. There's thick, crusty snot stuck to my upper lip, running wet with whatever else is coming out of my body, though I don't give a shit. "I give in, okay? I fucking give in!" I smack my head on the ground, causing a sharp pain to shoot through my skull. It's a pain I welcome compared to everything else.

Everything else is far past agony.

My throat grows sore with my shouting, and my eyes swell with tears and tiredness. I can't sleep though. I try, but my brain keeps on going. *Relieve the need. Ask for a fix. Continue asking. Beg!*

"Charlie, where are you?"

---

A strong, creamy scent fills my senses and I dry heave.

I'm spread eagle on the floor like I passed out. My cloudy head seesaws from side to side, trying to recollect, but I'm totally blank for a while, lingering in a vegetated state.

I've never wanted drugs so much in all my life—the burning hunger in my chest is past pain. To feel that colorful dance of ecstasy right now...oh, it would be paradise. The sensations on my skin and in my body, and the reverie...how I miss it.

Eventually, my dream-like-state drifts away and all the hurt sets back in. My limbs squirm, pleading for release, but pleading is useless. If anything, the torture exaggerates. All I can hear is my own voice calling out for Charlie; my loneliness embodied.

*Charlie...Charlie, Charlie, Charlie!*

He isn't coming for me. His absence must be a punishment, since I left

him and returned to Maksim. I played them both; cared for one, and fell for another. I caused this. It's all my fault. I deserve what's happening.

*Don't say that.* I try not to wallow, but it's so damn hard. I have nothing to hold on to anymore.

Squinting through crusty, sore eyes, I lift my face, determined not to give up. I see the single metal framed bed is turned upright in the heart of the room, covered in that itchy, gray blanket. Someone has been in here to tidy up, and I missed them because I was passed out?

"No," I say, conquered once more. I'd rather die than suffer like this, losing a losing battle. I cannot deal with the all-consuming, painful hunger or the loneliness. I just need a little remedy, or that pill Robert was talking about. I'll be able to function then, and find Charlie. He will help me get clean.

"Charlie," I whisper—or sob his name. "Charlie, please...please, I'm sorry..." Sobbing still, I run my tongue over the jagged cracks on my lips, tasting salt. And with every breath I inhale, *yuck*, I can smell that creamy stench. Soup. It smells like soup.

I struggle to turn on my hands and knees, every limb in my body aching with the bones grating on each other.

I need to get rid of that vile smell.

There's a wicker basket over by the main door with a stack of white towels, a food tray housing a steaming white bowl, and a huge bottle of water.

*Water!* I might not know a lot about drugs, but I know enough to be sure water can only make me feel better.

*Get up, Blaire.*

Pressing in to the ground, I strain, trying, but it hurts. My arms shake and my knees crack. I crawl, lumbering over on all fours, feeling like I'm competing in a marathon.

"Ah-chu!" I sneeze hard enough to make my eyes stream. I sniff and swallow, wiggling my nose to get rid of the itching.

By the door, I buckle to my elbows and snatch for the bottled water, twist off the cap, and turn it up to wrap my lips around the lid. I gulp greedily. *Hmmm.* It tastes salty and sugary, same as the sports drinks I used to devour when training. *Isotonic water.* My body needs this, badly.

It seeps out the corners of my mouth, streaming down the sweaty curves of my neck. When the bottle is empty, I crunch it up and toss it across the

room, gagging to keep the fluids down. I catch a glance of the bowl of soup and push it aside, shoving it out of reach. Then I snatch everything out of the basket, thinking Robert has appeased my request for a remedy or given me that pill he offered before.

Shampoo. I toss it aside. Toilet tissue. Toss. Soap. Toss, and it hits the wall with a light thud. Dried fruits in see-through packets with Albanian written ingredients. I yank one packet open and eat what I can, grimacing on crunchy, tangy pieces. I carry on digging through the basket. Toothbrush and toothpaste. Toss, and they skid under the bed. I frown at a note that reads, *Three days have passed. You are almost over the worst.* The sight of it turns my heart upside down, and the burning in my chest becomes a full-on blaze of starvation.

Just three days...that's impossible. I feel like I've been here for weeks—months!

Pressing my forehead on the floor, I hiccup cry so desperately my soul hurts, wondering why he isn't giving me any drugs. I just need a little to get through this.

A warm breeze travels under the threshold crack, carrying that horrid creamy soup scent. Bile rises through me so fast I projectile vomit on the floor, spluttering all over my hands. I scramble to my feet and sprint into the shadowed bathroom, whacking open the door with a loud **crash!** I reach the toilet just in time as it sprays out like a waterfall, splashing in a frenzy. It burns. I try to gulp back, but it makes me retch harder and harder, panic gulping for oxygen.

Only when the heaving stops can I take a full, deep breath, though it doesn't help. My torture worsens when a sharp twinge rips through my lower stomach. I grunt in agony with my insides bubbling and roaring. I fumble to pull down the shorts I'm wearing and sit on the toilet, and I cannot even explain what's coming out of me. I cup my face with elbows on my legs, internally fighting to deal with the burning.

This is hell personified, and in my misery, I can't help thinking I deserve it. If I hadn't betrayed Maksim's honor, or if I had just stayed with Charlie when he asked me, I wouldn't be here. Robert would have still been sour with wrath, but he'd have had a swarm of Los Zetas to go through. Charlie and I could have stood united and eliminated our enemy together. I'd be safe in his arms, in my warm bed at his house. *Home.* I would be at home.

But instead, I'm here. James is Robert's captive. And it's all my fault.



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## 4

Endless time goes by, and I am nothing but a walking virus.

I puke, burn with diarrhea, and sneeze so hard my eyes nearly pop out of my skull. I pace the cell with hours of insomnia before passing out somewhere, often near the pile of dead flies. I'm like a wild animal eating and drinking my way through seven baskets of supplies, desperate to feel better, but I vomit it all back up again.

It gets worse when my period comes, a disgusting experience as I don't have any sanitary pads. Blood stains the mattress I sleep on and blotchy red trails mar the cobbled floors. Since I can do nothing about it, it's a practice of wash and wash, keep washing, until it passes.

But my period isn't the only thing to pass.

After a long night on the can, emptying from both ends, I wake up feeling totally different, aware the second my mind switches to conscious mode. I peel my face off the tiled bathroom wall and gaze through puffy, raw eyes into the shadows. The quietness is serene; a low drone in the drum of my ears. The warm air on my skin is nice, no longer clammy, and that crazy, burning need of relief in my veins and chest is gone. I grab my chest where it's a little tight, as is my neck when I stretch from left to right, making it crack. But nothing hurts beyond what I can tolerate.

I don't understand this metamorphosis.

Taking things one step at a time, I reel out some toilet tissue and wipe myself clean, leaning over to use water from the sink, splashing between my legs. I pull up my shorts before flushing and wince in slight pain to stand. My spine twinges, but it's zilch compared to the suffering I've been through over—what's felt like—weeks of torment. It's as if overnight, or however long I was out for, all my symptoms just disappeared. I don't know if this is normal or if the last basket of food and water was spiked with something. If it was, I'm not sure I care. I would have given anything to feel normal.

Hunching over to ease my tender stomach, I lumber into the bedroom, working on an intuitive level. The creamy stench of soup is gone, replaced

with...*hmmm*, an aromatic floral fragrance. Lavender. My eyes land on the incense stick burning near an air vent in the corner, white smoke snaking through the atmosphere.

This attentiveness is confusing. Am I not Robert's captive?

I bend for the towels stacked near the main door, scoop up some toiletries, and I hobble back into the bathroom. I pull the string hanging near the cracked doorframe, and a tube light buzzes on. The bathroom is small and narrow, tiled from floor to ceiling in burnt orange terracotta, as is the cool tiled floor under my feet. There are no windows.

It's insane to think I've been in and out of this room at least one hundred times, yet I've not mentally filtered what it looks like.

The shower in the corner doesn't have any edges, just a hose hanging above a drain in the ground. I lean in to flick on the faucet, hooking the towels on the squeaky rail while dropping the toiletries in the tray. I turn for the sink to brush my teeth, wincing as the paste initially stings.

My numb state shatters when I see my reflection in the dusty mirror, when I look at the sunken blue eyes in an overly defined skull. My skull. Using the heel of my palm, I wipe a patch clean. My dark red hair is full of grease, hanging flat around my gray, freckly face. My lips are dry and cracked, too, covered in some sort of white foamy shit. It's not the toothpaste. It's a sign of dehydration.

Charlie wouldn't recognize this girl staring back at me. I don't. This is not the Blaire I know.

My chest aches with the mere thought of him tearing me up inside. *Why is he taking so long to come for me?* I strip from the filthy clothes, dump them on the floor by the toilet, and tiptoe into the shower, swearing I won't cry. He will come for me. I know it. He said he loved me. People don't say that unless they mean it, do they?

*I hope they don't.*

The shower temperature hurdles between boiling hot and ice cold, like my fever a few days ago. I jump and groan in reaction, rushing to wash with the soap and my nails. I catch another glimpse of the silver bite mark on my forearm but glance away. I can't let Maksim into my mind right now. I'm already hurting over the fact that Charlie might not be coming for me. Anything else will crush me.

When I'm clean, I pat myself dry using a towel, rubbing my long mane until it's barely damp. I wrap the towel around my boney frame and slog back

into my cell, falling face down on the bed with a heavy bounce. I'm determined not to think about anything, knowing the mind is a dangerous place when one is lonely. All I want to do is sleep until this parallel universe I awoke in vanishes—and if there's anything like a God in the world, Charlie will be here. I just want him back. I don't want to do this anymore. I'm tired of fighting to live. I want to live to fight.

---

The main door in my cell opens with a loud *crash!*

I leap out of bed on red alert, scrambling to cover myself in the towel. My skull is throbbing, harder when I focus my sight to see what the hell is happening.

Robert is standing in the main doorway, holding a pile of clothes in his podgy hands. He's stooped at the neck, glaring at me for whatever reason, with his bulging, hairy stomach hanging over checkered blue shorts—pajama shorts. My eyes widen. That means he's probably residing here, which also means James might be here, too.

I glance at the open door. *Freedom.* Then I glance back at Robert, so he doesn't notice where my thoughts are heading. *Kill him. Break free. Return to Charlie.*

Robert wrinkles his nose, grimacing as he stares me up and down. "You look like shit."

My eyebrows shoot up. I grip the towel at my chest with white knuckles. "Maybe because I've been sick, but you know that, don't you?"

"You are okay now, aren't you?" he snorts, ignoring my question. "You are over the withdrawals. They fade after twelve days like they do for everyone withdrawing from heroin, you dumb *kurvë.*"

*I've been here for nearly two weeks?* No wonder I feel like time has stood still.

Robert throws the clothes at me, and I instinctively lift a leg to shield my side, cringing into the wall.

"Get dressed, or I'll do it for you."

"Why?" I ask, scowling at him from over my shoulder. "What's going on?"

"What the fuck is going on?!" he yells so hard my ears buzz, running up to me in a storm of screams. "There are videos floating around The Dark

Web that your lover has implemented drug and human trafficking sanctions until you are returned! That's what the fuck is going on!"

My stomach somersaults as I realize he's still coming for me. But then I think about my brother. Robert is going to severely punish him for this if Charlie doesn't get to us in time.

"Anyone caught disobeying the sanctions are being considered enemies of the Los Zetas!" Robert screams in my face, losing any essence of sanity. "Good business men are being slaughtered! All my associates are suffering! Deals I've set up are on the line!" He grabs his balding head, actually shaking with anger, while I'm gawking like a slack-jawed idiot.

I can't believe Charlie would risk so much money to get me back.

"To ensure the underworld adheres to his temporary commands," Robert hisses, "to ensure wars do not break out, Decena is offering up scandalous deals that go live when you're returned—deals I've spent my fucking lifetime trying to solidify!" He spins around and punches the wall next to my head with such power I hear his knuckles crack. "Charlie-fucking-Decena...that fuck, fucking Decena! Do you know that *he* is the only one allowed to sell drugs on the streets? Do you know that he is raising the price of his stuff by the day until you're returned? Every fucking day the price goes up!" His hands fist under his chin, like he's pleading with me for an answer to this problem. "Do you know what all this means? Many of us are going to lose millions—millions! And not to mention the clientele...!" He turns his back on me and paces about my cell like a caged dog, wiping his forehead and flicking his bodily fluids on the floor. "And he's not even done there. Ohhh no! Do you know what else he's executing?"

*There's more?*

I shake my head to answer his rhetorical question, too stunned to speak.

Robert literally growls, curling his lips against his teeth. "He is slaughtering anyone who has had recent dealings in human trafficking because a traitor tipped him off that you"—he walks up to me and pokes my cheek—"were sold at an auction. Until someone fesses up about selling you, everyone fucking dies!"

My mind flashes to the moment I'm certain I heard someone in the auction room say *idiota*, Spanish for idiot. Either a Mexican or Spanish associate of Charlie's must've been there. They must've told him that they saw me. But, if they did tell him, then he'd know exactly who sold me and exactly who bought me, surely?

I'm so confused.

“The Turks and the Chinese”—Robert is going insane reeling off a list of people Charlie has already publicly executed, using his hands to emphasize numbers—“he’s murdering everyone because of you, you *lavire!*” he screams with dying passion, tensing from head to toe to get it out. “You cannot even comprehend how much money the human trafficking sanction alone is costing me! And I can’t even give you back...you know I bought you, and look at the fucking state of you...his demands are that you are returned unharmed. Fuck...!”

“This isn’t my fault,” I cut him off from speaking, telling him it’s not James’ fault, either. I’ve had enough of his rambling, and now I know for sure Charlie is coming... “We’ve done nothing wrong. *You*, bought us. *You*,” I point at him, surprised he’s even listening to me, “deserve all that is coming. I could have warned you of what Charlie would do if you double-cross him. Even Maksim was frightened of him, and Maksim was frightened of no one.”

Robert’s podgy cheeks tick while he hangs on to his composure by a thread, glaring at me.

“I know Charlie is bad fucking business when mad,” I say. “You should have known that, too, since you were acquaintances. Haven’t you heard the rumors that he takes pleasure in castrating men who wrong him, huh? Don’t you remember him coming to broker peace between you and Maksim? His arrogant bravery to stand against you should you reject the only offer he put on the table to pay for that girl, Arjana?”

He raises a hand as if to slap me, but I lift my chin in insolence. “Do it. But, expect it back in tenfold.”

“Awww,” he growls again, deeper this time, “you are one brave, stupid *kurvė*.”

I don’t for a second believe he thinks I’m stupid. He’s afraid of me. If he wasn’t, he’d have hit me. Maksim never hesitated.

His raging, brown eyes flitter back and forth between mine in an ominous moment of silence. Then he orders and warns at once, “Get dressed, or I’ll put you to sleep and do it myself, and I’ll likely enjoy it.”

“Why? Where am I going?”

If Charlie is hot on my trail, I don’t want to leave this place. James might be here, and I definitely don’t want to leave him.

“I’ve had enough of your resistance, you *kurvė!*” Robert grabs my

shoulders, but I slap his hands away and shove him with my forearm. He bounces down on the mattress, making the frame squeak under his weight.

“I can get myself dressed,” I say, keeping my chin high and my attitude straight. I bend at the knees to pick up the clothes, moaning in discomfort. My back strains, as does my headache. It throbs in my eyes.

“You’ve got two minutes.” Robert shuffles about to stand, glaring at me. I try to walk past him for the bathroom, but he extends an arm. “There,” he says, “where I can see you.”

I glance at where he’s pointing, the space next to my bed. “No way. I’m not—”

“Last chance, Blaire...” Something wild flares in his eyes as he says my name, and a horrible feeling comes over me. If I don’t do as I’m told, I don’t think it will end well for me.

Listening to my gut instinct, I turn my back on him and huddle in the towel. I pull on a plain black underwear set, struggling to fasten the bra clasp before shrugging into tight black sports trousers, and a matching long-sleeved sweater. That’s when Robert snatches the towel from my hand. I scowl at him from over my shoulder. *Iisus Khristos*, if I ever get lucky enough to take him out...

“She’s ready,” he says, sneering at me.

I frown at first, but then my hackles come up as a group of men fill my cell one by one, lining the walls. They’re dressed in fitted black clothes with padded areas, and their faces are shielded behind black masks. I take note that they’re all likely trained, standing with their legs open for balance.

My vision tunnels in on one man—who’s holding a syringe full of liquid.

Robert grins at me, and nods right at the man who’s holding the syringe.

I step across the room into the bathroom doorway, gesturing out. “What is that? Wha-what’s in that syringe?”

“You can’t know where you are.” Robert shrugs. “I don’t trust you.”

“But, where are you taking me? Are you sending me back to Charlie? You-you said you were!”

Robert is amused at my anxiety, grinning from ear to ear. I can’t explain why, but I sense he isn’t sending me back to Charlie. It’s in the way he’s looking at me, damn right smug by whatever plan he’s concocted.

“Hey, if you dare touch me with that,” I warn the man coming at me with the syringe, “I’ll tear off your fucking arm.”

“Take her,” Robert commands, and I see red.

---

I wipe sweaty palms down my trousers, standing here stealing a second to gather my equilibrium, to gather my mind. I'm not in the best shape. I'm weak and thin from Maksim's brutal torture, the heroin, and my head is pounding. But in the light of day, it shouldn't matter. I was born to fight. If I'm going to die, I should die fighting.

Two combatants run at me, past the man holding the syringe, and adrenaline zaps at my senses.

I grab the right guy's arm and hurl him across the cell with a deafening scream of strength, then I spin around to hammer my fist in the other's throat. He chokes on impact, gargling for breath as he drops to his knees. Another man sprints out of line, but I kick him back on instinct, knocking myself off balance as I do. He somersaults across the room while I stumble into the wall.

Robert seizes my moment of weakness. He silently commands more to attack, and a swarm of men come at me, caging me in by the bathroom.

I'm quick on my feet to pledge my defense, dancing around in a clean circle to take them out one by one. I cross-whack my arms to block oncoming punches while kicking out at side assailants, bobbing and weaving whenever necessary. Bodies slam into walls, and others tumble back on their asses. The last man fists a handful of my hair from behind and yanks me back. I whip around to whack the inside of his elbow, buckling his arm, then I draw back and boot him in the stomach with such force he trips over his own feet, crashing into his men.

The bout of energy nearly wipes me out. I double over with hands on my knees, wheezing and heaving for breath. I ache from head to toe, the muscles in my legs burning and cramping, and my skull is absolutely throbbing.

"Stupid girl," Robert seethes. "Stupid, stupid, girl. James will pay for this, you know?"

I'm aware James will pay for this—and I internally apologize to him—but I can't just stand here and let Robert take me. He could send me anywhere, and then I'll never find my brother or Charlie.

From under my eyebrows, I glare up at Robert, mockingly nodding at his men. They're icing the floor in a messy pile of bodies, groaning and rubbing their wounds. "Is that all you've got, huh?"

"You're going to regret it," he spits through clenched teeth, and I catch a



flicker of movement out the corner of my eye, more men in the corridor outside.

“Ohhh. Come. On,” I moan, watching them flood the room. I’m going to lose this battle. It’d be hard to beat this many on a good day.

It all happens in a blur of action, and I’m more outnumbered now than I was before. It’s hard to fight over all the bodies, too, without to mention the tiny space we’re crammed in. I take a few blows to the face, being shoved about all over the place until someone tackles me to the ground. It knocks the air out of me. We tumble across the cell, all arms and legs scrapping at each other. He’s successful at pinning me down, crushing my chest as he bestrides my body.

“Aargh!” I screech, swiping for his face. “Get! Off!”

“Blaire!” Robert shouts over me at the top of his lungs. “Stop! I mean it, this is your last chance! I’m warning you...!”

“I am Blaire-Markov!” I pull back my fist and clout my attacker in the face, busting his nose. “I will never stop!”

My attacker manages to get his hands around my throat, squeezing so hard his eyes turn red. I choke and gasp in his hold, heaving for air. I kick at the ground to turn us over so I’m straddling his lap, wrestling with all my might. His hands flay about to get me under control, pulling me down by my collar, but I rear-up and pound at his face with lefts and rights, turning him into a bloody, bruised mess.

I’m not ready for it when an arm wraps around my throat from behind. I clamp down on it with my nails, screaming to pry him off, but he’s too strong. We struggle, and his buddy under me shackles his hands around my wrists and stretches them outward, restraining me.

“Agh!” I tense my thighs to crush his ribcage, making him cough and choke. “Fuck you, pizda!”

A sharp prick on my shoulder sets my anger afire, and adrenaline re-zaps. I snap my neck back to head-butt the guy behind and smack my arm to get the needle out. I leap to my feet ready for another round, but a wave of dizziness comes over me. I spill into a wall. My hands slide down the bumpy surface. I open my jaw wide to control the vertigo, forcing my eyes open and shut, but it worsens. It courses too fast. I buckle at the knees, walloping my head on the guy under me. I look around blinking slowly, vision blurring, all the large figures shifting out of focus.

“No...” I say in a breath. “Wob...bert,” I slur his name, struggling to get

up as the hazy rush takes hold of my soul. I press into the surface under me. My elbows give way, and I drop like a sack of bones. “Where...are...you...taking...me...? Wob...Wobert!”

**Whack!** Someone clocks the edge of my jaw, and I black out.

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## 5

I wake to a sudden jolt with tires screeching under me, and my head whips forward.

G-force throws me back against a cushy surface, making me moan on impact.

For a second, I don't know anything. It's all so foggy. My ears are buzzing, neck straining, and my calves cramp like there are blisters in my muscles. In fact, every muscle in my body strains and aches.

From battle.

It comes back to me in bursts of moments, and I remember that I lost the fight. Now, I have no i-fucking-dea where I am. I could be anywhere! A thousand miles from James and even Charlie—and he was coming for me.

Charlie was coming for me.

The need to cry rushes through me so fast it catches my breath, making my throat swell. I try to ignore it, desperate to come around from the fog and figure things out.

My head flops from side to side, aching and throbbing. I blink in a vague state, seeing nothing but blackness. My lashes are squished under a tight length of material tied over my eyes. I try to reach for it, but my hands are flaccid. I weakly squeeze the surface I'm sitting on. The seat is rough, cold leather. My hand twitches against a bulky...bag? I feel the buttoned-up pockets. It's definitely a bag with a long strap. My right shoulder is pressed against a door. I think I'm in a car. It smells of oil, so strong I can taste it at the back of my tongue, tickling my throat.

I blow out a heavy breath and give in to the fog, to let my body rest from whatever Robert had his man inject me with. Wasn't heroin. I don't feel high or fidgety, and I've got a rotten headache. I feel lethargic and hollow, fatigue clinging to my senses.

The seat under me rocks with heavy motions like someone is moving about. My system comes to attention and I tense my face trying to come around quicker.

“Sa gjatë?” I hear in the front somewhere, then another gruff voice talks in a foreign language I don’t understand. I think it’s Albanian. They sound like Robert.

I try again to remove whatever’s covering my eyes, droopily scratching at the material. I manage to yank it from my matted hair, drop it on the floor at my feet, and squint to see where the fuck I am.

Fuzziness. Shapes. My vision gradually comes into focus with colors and then the whole image. I am in a car. It’s heavily tinted, cascading me in shadows. There are two masked men in the front. They’re so big their elbows are mashed against each other’s, and the tops of their heads nearly touch the car ceiling.

“What’s going—” I cough in a fistful hand, finding my voice to ask what the hell is going on and where I am. It makes my head pound harder, as if my brain is swelling out of my skull.

The passenger glances back at me, deep onyx eyes in the balaclava-mask holes. I relax against the seat in submission, questions dangling on my lips but I don’t utter a single one. He’s dark. I can sense it in him. And I’m too pathetic to fight right now.

“You are awake,” he grouses, his accent thick and hoarse like he smokes too many cigarettes.

I nod, eyes trained on him and his partner.

He reaches over with a big, hairy hand, groaning to grab my door handle. He shoves it open, letting in a channel of light. It makes my eyes sting, pain shooting through my head. A frosty breeze touches the side of my face, causing hairs all over my body to stand on end. I huddle in my long hair, teeth chattering. I squint, blinking to adjust to the daylight. It’s then I realize I’m still wearing the black sports trousers and the long-sleeved sweater Robert gave me. He’s added the addition of horrid pink trainers.

Trainers. *Fuck*, if Robert didn’t have James hostage, I could run—or try to run. I doubt I’d get very far in this state though.

“You have one week to fulfill Robert’s requests,” the Albanian mumbles while grabbing the bag on the seat next to me. He tosses it out of the car, explaining that I’m ordered to make Decena lift all the sanctions and retrieve *the body*. “Should you fail on your mission, there will be consequences.”

“The body?” I ask, and my eyes are like saucers with understanding. “You’re sending me back to Charlie, now?”

He nods.

My stomach flips. We must be in England—it's too cold to be Mexico. I scan the outside of the car, seeing clustering trees off a bumpy country lane. A burning pink sky hangs over the branches, evidence of dawn.

*Nearly home. Nearly there.*

“You understand your instructions, girl?” the Albanian breaks our silence.

“What do you mean, *make*?” I question, rubbing my temples to ease the ache in my head. “How am I supposed to *make* Charlie lift the sanctions?” I ask thinking Robert might have a trick up his sleeve to help me bend Charlie to my will. He might admit he loves me or whatever, but bargaining a deal like this is going to take more than magnetism. He's going to want to punish his enemy.

“Perhaps I should show you a visual of your friend suffering, rather than an audio?” the Albanian teases wickedly. “Perhaps that will help you *make* Decena lift the sanctions?”

I snarl at him, lips curling over my teeth. I should tear off his fucking face for even daring to harm my brother.

“Didn't think so.” He chuckles in his gravelly twang, nodding at my open door. “In the bag, there are pills for if you become ill, and they will also help with the headache you're suffering.”

How does he know I've got a headache?

He grins at me. “Happens to us all after a heroin bender, regardless of the withdrawal process being over. You will be all right in a week or so. Robert says to take it easy on how many pills you pop. Don't want you overdosing.”

I snort, openly insulted by his mockery. I am not taking the drugs.

“There are also clothes and a cell phone in the bag,” he says, still amused. “One number in the call list. The password to speak with Robert is *sekret*. Do not call until you have made Decena lift the sanctions. As I mentioned, you have one week. Robert trusts you will evade Decena should he resist letting you go.”

That's not a problem. Charlie let me go home to Maksim before. And even if he did refuse to send me back, I'd escape anyway.

The Albanian shoves my shoulder, making me gasp in surprise, and I tumble out of the car. I scrape my palms landing on all fours, webbed in my hair.

“A few words for thought, Blaire-Markov,” he leans over the seat to tell me, “You will have the urge to confess to Decena who bought you, since you know he will hunt Robert, but remember what could happen to your friend,

James, in the meantime.”

I swallow past a growing lump in my throat, taking his warning seriously.

“If Decena cannot get to James quick enough, he disappears”—the Albanian clicks his fingers—“and you will never see your friend again.”

I sort of already knew that, but hearing it...it means I can't tell Charlie anything at the risk of jeopardizing James. Because I won't ever jeopardize my brother.

Before I can respond to my enemy, the car takes off in a squeal of tires, leaving me in a gusty smog. I cough and wheeze through the fumes, harder as three tinted SUVs whizz past.

“Motherfucking *mudaks*,” I curse, brushing myself off. Hooking a hand into the bag arm-strap, I crawl to the side of the road and park up on my butt, rummaging through the bag for water and the mobile phone. I can use it to find my location, see how far I am from Charlie's house.

I smile at the thought of seeing him again, tummy breaking out in a mess of flutters. It's been so long. I miss him more than words could express. In my suffering, when I was nearly dying from the heroin withdrawals, he was the only thing I wanted and needed.

He *is* the only thing I want and need, and I'll be with him soon enough.

A tramp of feet hammering at the ground pulls my attention. I look up to find a group of men sprinting toward me, coming from down the lane.

“¡Rodear la mujer!” one yells, *surround the woman*.

“Iisus Khristos,” I whisper to myself, shoving the bag in defeat. “This cannot be happening.”

They're pointing machine guns in my direction, clad in heavy, black combat attire and hulking black boots. Soldiers, I presume; a private detail with blood red Zs printed on the chests of their armored vests. They don't look British. Their faces are tan, and their eyes are dark against black hair. For a second, I think they might be Charlie's men. But I'm not taking the chance at presuming they're Los Zetas. I've never seen that symbol before.

The guy in front gestures from left to right, silently ordering his team to spread out. I lift my hands to surrender, and the main guy crouches at my feet, searching my face for whatever reason. On reflex, I snatch the gun out of his hands. I flip it around and aim, tumbling back on my butt.

“Whoa! Está bien,” he says, *it's okay*, jumping to his feet while signaling at the men to stay back. “You are safe. You do not need that gun.”

“Who the fuck are you?” I hiss, straining to hold the weight of the

weapon. I lean on one knee, steadying my balance. “Don’t make me ask twice.”

“My name is Tojo”—he touches his chest in a gesture—“I’m Charlie Decena’s man.”

“Charlie...where is he?” I bolt to my feet, screaming to ask, “Where is Charlie?”

“¡Telefonar, el Señor!” another calls out, his voice reverberating through the forest. That’s when I grasp we’re on Charlie’s lane. It’s a five-minute run from his house.

My heart jackhammers with nerves, palms gathering in sweat.

“Answer my damn question!” I demand while aiming through the Los Zetas, asking *where is Charlie* on repeat. “¿Dónde está Charlie? ¿Dónde está Charlie? Mi nombre es Blaire, Blaire-Markov!”

“Hey, I know who you are,” the main guy says, motioning for me to drop the weapon. I don’t. My grip tightens, finger clasped on the trigger. “Relax, por favor, Señorita. I told you, you’re safe.”

I’m not going to relax. If they knew who I was, why were they aiming guns at me? And if they are Los Zetas, then why haven’t I seen that Zs symbol before? I remember when they stormed the Prince’s party in London; they were not printed in symbols.

Maybe because Charlie didn’t want anyone to know he saved that girl, Arjana. He was trying to frame Maksim...

I’m so confused.

“No more talking,” I say, jabbing with the gun. “If you’re Charlie’s men, take me to him, now.”

“All right.” The main Los Zetas nods without hesitation, extending a hand. I shoulder past him and walk between the shield of armed men, as they pivot about scanning the road. My attention is on high alert, too, aware this could be a ruse. It’s too easy—and surely Robert’s minions weren’t brave enough to drop me off mere meters from Charlie’s house?

No one is that stupid.

I’m suspicious of whether Charlie is even at the house until a radio signal cuts in from one of the men’s walkie-talkies. “Where is she?!” Charlie yells, and my thought process blanks.

I try to sprint for the house, desperate to get to him. My leg cramps, and the Los Zetas soldier lunges to catch my fall, but I warn him not to touch me. “I mean it!” I yell, backing up with the gun in his face. “Don’t fucking touch

me!”

“Okay,” he says, holding up his hands. “Okay. Just calm down. I’m just trying to help, Señorita.”

Still aiming, I struggle to walk on by. The huge, spike-topped iron gates come in to view, and my mouth dries. It’s a dominant visual with more combat-suited men stationed on guard. I pick up the pace, regardless of my taut muscles. *Charlie...Charlie, Charlie, Charlie.* His name is my mantra to keep going.

“Abres!” the man at my side shouts, and the gates buzz open. We march through, down the stony driveway toward the house I register as my home. It’s an architecture of three stories made from chalky redbrick with huge sash windows lining every floor. On the pitched roof, the chimney smokes in a cloud of white. Heat. *Home.*

My chest squeezes to the point of pain. My heart booms in my ears when I see him, a tall, powerfully muscular man pacing back and forth between all the cars. He’s dressed in black combat trousers and a padded black sweater marked with the red Zs, unruly, inky hair pulled away from his tan face in a ponytail.

“Charlie!” I scream his name, and he lifts his head, eyes locking on me.

“Blair!”

Without a second thought, I toss the gun aside and bolt up the driveway, stones kicking up behind me.



## 6

I leap into Charlie's open arms and burst out crying. The need comes over me so fast and so consuming I can't hold back a single hiccupping sob.

He curses *fuck* in relief, crushing me in his powerful arms to the point where I can't breathe. I don't care. I hug him back like my life depends on it, wrapping my legs around his waist. I strain to tie my ankles at the crest of his spine while burying my face in his muscled neck, hiding from the world.

"Hush, baby, don't cry," he rasps in my ear in Latin-infused English, kissing me there. "S'okay now. Everything's okay."

I nod, screwing my eyes shut to hold back the tears. He is wrong—nothing will ever be okay while Robert is pulling my strings—but we're together now. We have today. If all else dies tomorrow and the sky comes tumbling down, we'll always have had today.

"Are you hurt anywhere?" he asks, still kissing the side of my face. "My men said you were on the roadside. Tojo said you were struggling to walk?"

"I-I'm fine," I snivel. "I'm just weak and tired."

There's a beat of silence until his voice cracks with sympathy, and he hides his face in my hair. "I'm so fucking sorry, Blaire. I'm so fucking... I'll get you better," he promises. "Whatever it takes, okay?"

I nod, and my chin is wobbling, chest aching for him. I can sense his mood on another level, guilt bleeding into our atmosphere. I hate it. None of this is his fault. Charlie was there when I needed him. He came for me, and he never stopped looking for me. He doesn't deserve to feel guilt.

His mood takes a turn for the worst when he steps forward on the stony driveway, shouting in Spanish, "Why aren't you on duty at the gates?! Where are those motherfuckers?!"

A rush of Mexicans jump to answer, but no one has any information of value. They apologize profusely, unsure of what else to tell their leader.

"I don't want to hear you're sorry!" Charlie accidentally yells in my ear, making my headache pound. "Go and find out what the fuck is going on! Don't come back unless you have intelligence, *comprender?*"

His people spread out to fill their orders in a gale of feet storming the stones.

Charlie paces in quiet anxiety. I slide down his body with every step, too exhausted to climb back up. He cups the curve of my head, hooks his other hand under my butt, and lifts me up so we're chest to chest. "I've got you," he says softly, resting his head on mine. "Don't worry, I've got you." Reaching around my shoulders, he smooths my hair down my back. He puts us cheek to cheek and rubs his face against mine, trying to get closer. I notice he's all rough and stubbly, a sensation I don't associate with Charlie. But it doesn't matter. He smells the same. I breathe him in with a deep, meaningful inhale, relishing in his clean, naturally musky scent.

*Home.*

He's my fucking home, and people are trying to keep me from him?

*Don't think about that right now. You're here. You're together.*

A Los Zetas guy jogs up to us with news, puffing in Spanish that he found *this* near me. "Y estos." *And these.* A rattling sound follows his statement, piquing my ears, and a violent shiver rips through Charlie's formidable body.

The first thing I think is, the bag; the pills.

My eyes widen.

I completely forgot about the bag. I need the mobile to contact Robert.

"Doble los guardias," Charlie says, *double the guards*, and tells everyone that only Nic is allowed in the house. "I need to talk with Blaire in private." He turns for the porch, steady and unhesitant as he moves. He carries me inside, across the entrance hall, and into the huge living room, putting me down near one of the brown, leather couches.

My legs are like jelly from the excitement of seeing Charlie. I subconsciously grip his long fingers while casting a glance around the place, noting nothing has changed. Brass side lamps on end tables glow orange in the corner shadows, warming the empty facade. The paneled walls are a rich shade of rosewood, streaked pink from the scorching sunrise pouring in through the bay window. On the focal wall, the open, redbrick fireplace dances with spitting flames, smoking up the chimney. That's new. I never saw the fire lit before.

On the coffee table between the leather couches, my bracelet box is open: a small, black case with BVLGARI scripted in gold on the lid. The bracelet isn't there. My heart twists because I lost it.

I plaster myself on Charlie to hug his waist, wanting to tell him that I lost it but I can't.

"Hey, s'all right." He wraps around me like a flag so I'm sheltered in his warmth, bending to kiss the top of my head. "You're safe now."

He said I was safe before when he saved me from Maksim, but I woke up cracked out of my mind, owned by that filthy Albanian.

"I just want to hold you for a moment longer, Charlie."

"All right, baby." He strokes his hands down my back over my hair, making a point of gently squeezing me in places, my ribs and my hips. I wince where it hurts. "You're so thin...why have you lost so much weight?"

I don't know what to say, so I don't say anything at all, just stand here holding him. I might feel smaller to him, but he feels bigger. The tense muscles under his thick sweater are like steel in my embrace.

"Listen to me," he gives me another gentle squeeze, and I hold back moaning in discomfort, "I know you just got back, but I need to ask you some questions, Blaire. The sooner the better. We have such a small timeframe to figure things out."

Arching my neck all the way back, I frown up at him, to stare in the piercing blueness of his eyes. They're just as intense as I remember, feathered in lengthy, black lashes under straight, black eyebrows. The pretty lashes are deceiving. His stare is intimidating, reeking of darkness, blood and murder. His full lips are set in a line, dusted in the dark stubble that dresses his strong, square jawline.

I've never seen Charlie this rugged and unshaven before. Even his sleek hair is longer, tied back with disorderly black strands tucked behind his ears. With that Latino blade of a nose and the stubble, it makes him look more ominous, more handsome, if that's even possible.

"Figure out what?" I ask.

He traces a finger down my freckly face, from my left eye to my mouth. "Everything."

He isn't playing light when he says, *everything*. He interrogates me with his Spanish Inquisition, firstly reiterating his earlier question: am I hurt anywhere? I tell him I'm fine, then he asks after James. I half lie, looking away to whisper, "I'm not sure where he is."

By the time Charlie demands to know where I've been, my head is throbbing. I can't tell him, of course, and I hate that I can't.

"Why can't you tell me, hmm?"

“I’m sorry,” I mutter under my breath. I let my head drop forward, focusing on the stupid pink trainers on my feet.

He brushes my hair out of my face to turn up my chin, cupping my cheeks in his large, calloused hands. “I need to know where you’ve been, baby. I need to know—” His voice evaporates, losing his channel of thought in my eyes. I stare back at him, spellbound as our bubble of power charges around us. I look at him like there is nothing else in the world. His expression softens, glowing in so many emotions. “You have no idea how much I missed you, Blaire. Even now with you here, I miss you so much.” He hunches at the neck and kisses my mouth, besting my will to stay strong.

I grip his wrists and kiss him back, sobbing that I missed him too. It hurts, this crushing ache in my chest. It hurts to have missed him so badly. Everything fucking hurts right now.

We envelope our arms around each other, both at home now, and I swear to myself to never let go ever again. I will never walk away again. I will not allow another to tear us apart again.

“Los atrapamos,” a man says, *we caught them*, and I step back out of Charlie’s embrace, half tucking up behind him.

The man standing tall in the doorway, primal in his pose, is an intense machine. Ice blue eyes in a dark, severe face, under thick black eyebrows. He looks like Charlie, though tattooed up to the neck with his deadly black hair cut into a messy crop, short around the sides and long on top. He’s also wearing black combat gear like Charlie, the red Zs printed on his chest, and there’s a gun and a big knife tucked in the sheath on his holster belt.

Were they on a job, or getting ready for work or something? I hope not. Robert and the Arab said Charlie was looking for me, not working.

“Blaire, this is my brother, Nic.” Charlie gestures between us with a steady hand, peering back at me to smile softly. “I wish you could have met under better circumstances, but say hello, baby.”

“It’s nice to finally meet you, Señorita. Charlie has told me so much about you.” Nic touches his chest and head-bows to me. His hands are big and tattooed with *LOVE* inked across his left knuckles.

I give him a strained, minute smile to say hello, gripping Charlie’s muscular forearm. It’s strange to feel so nervous around other people. Perhaps it’s because I’ve been locked away on my own for so long?

“What shall I...*do*, to them?” Nic asks, choosing his words carefully.

Charlie has no such trouble. He tells his brother to skin the traitors for

information. “Start at their feet and work your way up,” he says, spitting a wave of Spanish curses.

I frown, blinking between them, wondering who they’re talking about.

“If that doesn’t give them incentive to speak,” Charlie says, and orders, “needles in their eyes. After that, truth serum. I want to know how they had the balls to come near *my* house to drop off *my* girl.”

The SUVs that whizzed past...they must have been Charlie’s men chasing the Albanians, and they caught them.

*Fuck.*

“Understood. I’ll be back when I know something,” Nic says, turning to leave the house.

Charlie pivots to me and nods at the couch, rolling the sleeves of his sweater up hairy, veiny forearms.

As white as a ghost, I sit on the creaking leather cushion, hugging my middle, speculating if Robert’s men will waver under torture. Skinning...needles in the eyes... No one could withstand that level of torment. Maybe I should just spill my guts? Charlie is probably going to find out who took me anyway.

Charlie crouches at my feet and takes my hands to hold in my lap. He kneads spots on my inner wrists, adding just enough pressure with the pads of his thumbs to soothe my unease. “Now, no more hesitating, okay?” he says, maintaining a low, lenient voice. “Tis’ just you and me. So, tell me what’s going on, baby. I received an email this morning notifying me you were coming home, that you have demands?”

With my mouth hanging open, I gawk at him, hardly believing Robert informed Charlie that he was sending me back. How audacious is that man?

Charlie raises his eyebrows, demanding an answer. “I won’t accept your silence this time. You need to answer my questions. I know you were sold at a human trafficking auction—someone tipped me off—and I know you’ve been fighting. Were you both strapped for cash?”

*Both?*

“C’mon, Blaire,” his eyes chase between mine, coaxing me on, “talk to me, baby. What are the demands?”

“I...I’m ordered to get Maksim’s body,” I say, glancing away for a split second, “and I’m ordered to ask you to lift the drug and human trafficking sanctions.”

Charlie’s face ruffles with perplexity as a heavy frown drops across his

eyes. “Why would *he* need the human trafficking sanctions lifted?”

I shrug, confused with how he says *he*.

“Is that all of your orders?”

“Yes,” I whisper.

“All right.” He nods a couple of times and tips his head, studying me in a moment of silence.

“What?”

“What are the pills, hmm?”

My eyes dart sideways in shame. He *was* looking at something when we were out there on the driveway; the bag. And the rattling sound was definitely the pills. This means he definitely has the mobile Robert gave me.

“You can tell me.” Charlie adds a little more pressure from his thumbs, circling my inner wrists, sending tendrils of unwelcome pleasure through my body. “I don’t care what they are. I don’t care if you’ve been taking drugs, Blaire, I promise. I just want to make sure you’re all right.”

“I am all right,” I whisper, struggling to swallow past the dryness of my throat. “Other than this awful headache that comes and goes, I-I’m fine.”

“My doctor will sort your headaches,” he says, shifting on his feet to come closer, so his legs are open on either side of mine. His proximity enhances how gut-wrenchingly guilty I feel about keeping things from him. But I must, for James. If what Robert’s man said is true, if Charlie finds out who bought me and cannot get to James in time, my brother will disappear.

“I want to know what the pills are, Blaire. Do you need them? Are you addicted to them?”

I shake my head.

“Who gave them to you?”

I glance down at our hands to fiddle with his long fingers and the big silver watch on his left wrist, distracting myself.

“It’s only a matter of time before I find out what they are.”

I shrug.

“All right then.” Charlie bows to kiss my fingers, amplifying my guilt. “What about those men who brought you here today, hmm, do you know them personally? Did they work for Maksim?”

*Maksim?* Why would he think those Albanian lackeys would have anything to do with Maksim? He’s dead.

“Dios mío, Blaire, will you talk to me? Where have you been? Tell me that at the least. Where has James been keeping you?”

“James?” I lift my eyes to his, scowling in misunderstanding. “What do you mean, where has James been keeping me? What does he have to do with any of this?”

“He kidnapped you from the hospital,” Charlie says, the muscles in his neck ticking. “That’s what the fuck he’s got to do with this.”

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# 7

I listen with rocks in my stomach as Charlie explains what happened.

I was in a coma for six weeks, recovering from extreme blood poisoning, a bullet wound to the stomach, extensive lashings from my shoulders to my ass, and severely bruised kidneys due to Maksim's beatings. To wake me in that state would have been hell for me, so the doctor and Charlie agreed it was best to keep me sedated.

"You also had skin grafts to remove the..." Charlie nods down at my waist area, and I assume he's emphasizing the branding I had on my lower back, Maksim's name seared into my flesh letter for letter. "When that was nearly healed, everything else was, too, and the doctor decided it was time to bring you around. But I wanted to take you home first since I promised you'd wake in your bed here at the house, do you remember?"

I nod, incapable of speaking right now. I don't care about the coma or the illnesses I suffered or coming home. I just want him to get to the point. I need to know why he thinks James kidnapped me and try to figure out how I ended up with Robert.

"James got wind that I was bringing you home," Charlie says. "He confronted me, threatening to take you..."

"Take me?" I ask, and I pull out of Charlie's hands, demanding to know what that even means.

"He didn't want to leave you with me. He said I couldn't *control* you, that you're dangerous without boundaries. After a heated discussion"—my body stiffens as Charlie says heated discussion because I know he means they had a fight—"I told him to leave, and he did. I assumed that was the end of it, so I carried on with arranging to bring you home..."

"Then what happened?"

"I loaded you in the medical van with my usual security precautions, surrounded by my detail, but I got a call from an unknown, foreign number. When I answered, a team of assailants shot down some of my men. It was madness, Blaire—a raging shootout in the middle of fucking London. While



it was happening, one of the assailants snuck in the van, killed the driver, and sped off with you.” He pauses to scoff, still baffled with disbelief that anyone outwitted him. “My detail nor I had a chance to catch up with the van because James planned it so well. There was a road block at the hospital”—he waves out an angry hand, highlighting the chaos—“my detail and I had to cause bloody mayhem to get through it.”

I feel pale, sinking with dread. This is exactly what Robert said, except, he told me the Arabs hijacked the van. Not James.

“You said *one* of them snuck into the van,” I stress, thinking it could have been the Arabs. Charlie didn’t actually see who kidnapped me. “You-you don’t know for sure that it was James. And, even if it was, he-he thought I was better,” I insist, stuttering to plead my brother’s case. “He knew you were bringing me home.”

“That’s no excuse!” Charlie shouts, and I flinch in reaction. “Yeah, you were a lot better at that stage, but we didn’t know what your physical state would be when you woke. Your body had been starved of oxygen and besieged with sepsis, Blaire—you nearly died. I had a whole medical team on standby for you just in case anything went wrong. James knew all this, and he still took you.”

“But—”

“No, Blaire. No buts. I know it was him. We had his tracker removed, for a gift to mark his freedom from Maksim”—I cringe as he mentions Maksim’s name—“then he went into hiding. Why would James hide if he didn’t kidnap you, hmm? Why would he hide if he’d done nothing wrong?”

I don’t have an answer. I blink away in a state of skepticism, refusing to believe it. I can’t imagine James would put me in danger. He spent the better part of his life trying to spare me from torment, so why would he put me in the heart of conflict?

*No.* I won’t believe it. It makes more sense that the Arabs took me and sold me to Robert.

“I’ve told you what happened. Now you need to talk to me, baby. Why do you look so ill?” Charlie gives me the once over, rubbing my arms and shoulders, stroking his way up to my face. “Whose clothes are you wearing? Where have you been?”

“I-I can’t tell you anything like that.” My eyes find his, burning with guilt. “I’m not allowed.”

“Not allowed?” His expression turns dark with barely controlled rage.

“Like hell you’re not allowed. You can speak to me—you know you can! Tell me where you’ve been and why your damn brother sold you at a trafficking auction.” He tugs on my hand, dominating himself over me. “I want to know where your motherfucking brother is, now. I’m not kidding, Blaire. Speak!”

“I haven’t been with James.”

“Stop lying.”

“I’m not!” I shout in his face, and he flinches this time. “I don’t lie! I haven’t been with him, I swear! I don’t know where he is! And you don’t know for sure it was him who took me! You can’t—”

“You don’t believe me, no?”

“What? No! It’s not that I don’t believe you.” I grab my face, rubbing my throbbing temples. “It’s...I do believe you. It’s just...” *How do I put this in words without landing Robert in trouble?* “It wasn’t James.”

Without wasting another second, Charlie digs a mobile out of his trouser pocket, swipes across the screen, and passes it to me. “I understand your desire to prove his innocence, but why don’t you see for yourself what he planned, hmm? Maybe then you’ll trust my word.”

I take Charlie’s phone with rife curiosity and tap the glass screen to press play, stomach wrapped up in knots.

*It wasn’t James. It wasn’t James.*

The room on the video footage is large with high ceilings, ashen paneled walls, and old, scuffed wooden floors scattered in guns and other combat machinery. There’s a desk in the heart of the space, stacked with paperwork and an open laptop glowing over a large figure: Charlie. He’s slouched in a big swivel chair, dressed down in gray joggers and a slack black t-shirt. Flicking up his wrist, he checks the time as if waiting for someone.

My eyes flicker down when James walks in to view from a corner camera, his left arm wrapped in gauze. He’s wearing green camouflage attire: combat trousers, black boots, and a heavy jacket. His dark red hair is longer, framing a pale, serious face.

His arm must be wrapped up from where Maksim shot him. How could I forget?

“Andres said you wanted to see me?” Charlie’s deep voice fills the speaker as he drapes his hands over the chair arms. “I left Blaire at the hospital for this, so it’d better be important.”

James folds his good arm behind his back and voices in Russian-tinted

English, “I overheard that you’re bringing her home, and the doctor is waking her?”

Charlie nods.

“When?”

“*When*, doesn’t concern you,” Charlie says, matter of a fact. “You’ll see her when I say you can.”

From the phone in my hands, I glare up at Charlie crouched before me, furious at his insolence toward my brother. I know he’s arrogant, but being this cold toward James isn’t okay. I won’t stand for it. James and I come as a pair. He’s my family. If Charlie cannot accept that...

Unbothered by my reaction, he nods at the phone. “Pay attention.”

I focus, even though I want to punch him. On the video, I notice my brother is holding his tongue, staring out in a moment of musing. Strategizing, that’s what he’s doing. When James goes quiet, he’s strategizing.

This isn’t good.

“What else do you want, boy?” Charlie asks, flipping his laptop shut. “I haven’t got all day. I only agreed to speak with you personally out of respect for Blaire, so spit it out.”

“If that is how you want it.” James turns up his lips, shrugging with conceit. “Thought I’d let you know that when she’s awake, we’re leaving. I’m taking her with me.”

My eyes zero in.

In the video, Charlie throws his head back laughing, the sound menacing and utterly sarcastic. “Dios mío, you’ve got some kahunas.”

“I’m serious, Decena.” James squares his shoulders as best as he can, reserving himself. “She’s lived ten years in misery under Maksim, but she’s free now. She has a shot at a semi-normal life. I can give her that.”

“And you thought you’d tell me, hmm?”

“Something like that.” James nods on an arrogant shrug. “But I’m only telling you because it seems like she’s fond of you. And if that really is the case, she will want to say goodbye before we leave.”

“Before you leave, yeah?” Charlie is still laughing, eyes watering in dark amusement. He sits forward with elbows on the desk, entwines his fingers, and asks, “Tell me, *boy*, how exactly are you gonna take her, hmm? If I’m not at the hospital with her surrounded by my detail, Andres is with her, or Nic is. I wouldn’t dream of leaving her unprotected.”

“I will ask, and she will come. It really is that simple.”

James’ boldness surprises me. He was never this verbally audacious before.

Charlie explodes in another bout of laughter, shaking his head at my brother’s nerve. “You will ask, and she will come, yeah? Damn, you Russians really do lay ignorant claim to her, don’t you?” He rubs his eyes, coming down from his rush of amusement. “You want her like everybody else does, but that’s just tough. I will tell *you* in plain English exactly what I told them. Fuck you”—he points out for every *fuck*—“Fuck your cause. Fuck your reason. And if you dare bring this to me again, I’ll fuck you up. Got that, *boy*? I don’t give a crap if you’re her brother.”

“You are being selfish, *Decena*,” James says *Decena* with bitterness, twisting his nose. “You fancy her for yourself. I get that. Blaire is mysterious and alluring. But this isn’t about *you* and what *you* want. This is about Blaire and helping her find a sense of peace. She deserves some happiness.”

“Blaire will be more than happy with me. Anything that girl wants, she’ll have. Rest assured.” He motions at the door behind James. “You can leave now. We’re done.”

Charlie attempts to open his laptop, business as usual, but my brother paces across the room and slams it shut. “You obviously don’t know Blaire if you think *things* will bring her peace.”

“My, my...” Intoning his dissatisfaction, Charlie shoves the laptop aside. “You are one brave maricón idiota, coming here and disrespecting me. I’ve killed better men for less.”

“I’m not disrespecting you.” James lifts his chin, an air of Russian egotism blooming in him. “I’m just telling you what is happening.”

“And, what if she doesn’t want to come, hmm?”

“I have a plan in place for her resistance. If she doesn’t agree to come, I will take her anyway, one way or the other.”

“Yeah?” Charlie says, raising his eyebrows.

“You bet.” My brother nods. “I’m not scared of you, *Decena*. I won’t let anyone hurt her again. I love her—I have loved her since the day I saw her.”

My jaw drops.

“I fucking knew it.” Charlie gets up to round the desk and meets James toe to toe. He bends at the neck so their faces are mere inches from each other. “She’s your sister. ¡Tonto del culo!”

James shrugs, unbothered. “I’m sure this isn’t the first time a brother has

been in love with his sister, and I doubt it will be the last.”

Charlie’s teeth flash as he hisses, “You need to leave, boy, before I lose my patience.”

“Not without her.”

The tension in the room hits high, and my brother’s daring reaches a whole other level. “She can’t stay with you,” he says. “Not only do you not deserve such a captivating girl, but you don’t have the mental tools to control her.”

“I don’t need to control her, idiota.” Charlie grimaces, looking James up and down. “I need to set her free.”

“Set her free?” James snorts, doubtful. “You’re insane. Do you even know what she is or what she can do? Do you even know how Maksim conditioned her?”

Charlie doesn’t offer a remark, and James laughs, mocking him. “No, I didn’t think so because if you did, then you would understand my concerns. You would understand why she needs controlling and boundaries, rewards for being good and punishments for being bad. Without those restrictions, she’s dangerous.”

“She’s no more dangerous than you.” Charlie lazily gestures at my brother. “And I’ve set you free.”

James shakes his head, watching Charlie with intense concentration. “I wasn’t conditioned the same way she was. I was just a means to tap into her emotional side in the beginning, before Maksim obtained the serum that wiped our memories.”

“If that was the case,” Charlie says, pointing at the ground between them, “then why did he keep you for all those years? Why not just get rid of you?”

James shrugs. “Since he’s dead now, that’s something I guess we’ll never know.”

“And good fucking riddance,” Charlie spits, turning to walk away. “Now fuck off.”

“No, Decena, you can’t turn a blind eye to this. I won’t let you!” My brother snatches for Charlie’s arm, tugging him back a step. “You enjoyed three months with a mysterious girl you didn’t know...I understand your desires. But it’s just fascination. What happens when she no longer fascinates you? What happens when she cracks and mentally blacks out—because she does that, you know? What happens when she goes on a rampage in your village in Mexico, slaughtering your people, and there is no Maksim around

to rein her in?” James’ voice deepens with insistence as Charlie pulls out of his hold, determined to state his case. “Blaire thinks killing people for wrongdoings is normal! She thinks everything she does is normal, so what happens if the authorities catch up with her?”

“I’ll deal with it!” Charlie spins around to shout in my brother’s face, making the mobile speaker crackle. “I’ll handle her as she’s my business now. *Mine*. Not yours.” He pauses for a breath, simmering about to boil over. “Get the fuck out of my office, James. I’m holding on by a thread, wanting to wring your damn neck.”

“I’m not going without her. I can’t allow this! I can’t leave her with someone who cannot handle her! Only when she’s told no with a beating will she realize what is right and what is wrong. That’s the only way to keep her safe. Can you do that, Decena?”

My heart sinks, gutted that he seriously wants to hit me to keep me in check. What’s happened to him?

Charlie snaps his neck forward and head-butts James, knocking him to the floor. “You ever lay a finger on that girl, and I’ll cut off your fucking hands.”

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I shut off the video, staring out in disbelief.

*“I have a plan in place for her resistance.”*

It wasn’t my resistance that drove James, but I believe it did happen. I believe James kidnapped me. Then the Arabs somehow seized his heist, and I got sold at a human trafficking auction.

I can’t believe this is happening.

“Now, do you see?” Charlie says, still crouched at my feet. “He’s in love with you, Blaire. That’s why he took you.”

I shake my head, numb to the notion. I just can’t digest it.

“Oh, c’mon...” Charlie gasps in disbelief. “You can’t genuinely think it wasn’t him after watching the footage? Who else would have dared to kidnap you, Blaire? Everyone knows you’re mine. Even Tatiana bargains for a moment to talk with you but accepts it will never happen.”

I shrug, wordless. I feel like my world has imploded. I feel like the artifacts of my being—Maksim and James—are total strangers. Maksim was my master, and he cherished me above all in his own twisted way, but he

tried to kill me. As weak as his position was, James was my hero, but he handed the reins of my life to an enemy.

They've both screwed me over.

"Blaire?" Charlie's hand lifts to my face and curves my cheek, covering half my features. "I don't believe he meant to cause you harm, baby. I know he loves you."

It's sweet of Charlie to assume I'm heartbroken or whatever by what James has done, but I'm not. I'm just in shock.

I try to analyze the situation, aware James couldn't have hack-called someone to give off the impression he's in another country. It takes experience, and the right equipment to call someone on a foreign number while in the same country. He must have been working with someone hardcore, which makes the whole situation worse. To know my brother not only stole me while I was ill, but had help from another who was possibly dangerous, sickens me. He must've known no one small-time would willingly help him rob the Los Zetas.

And then begs the question: how did the Arabs get their hands on me?

"I'm not lying when I say I haven't been with James," I confess, giving Charlie the right amount of information without blowing my cover. "He might have stolen me, but he didn't sell me at the auction. I haven't been with him."

"I don't understand," Charlie says, turning up my chin to make me look at him.

"They've got him," I point out to subconsciously motion at Robert, "and if I rat on them, they'll hurt James, or worse."

"They?" Charlie glances at my mouth as if I'm going to keep talking, then up at my eyes. "Who are *they*? Where is James?"

"I don't know where he is—that's the point!" I push him away, so he's not touching me, because I just can't focus when he touches me. "They're using James to control me, threatening to hurt him if I reveal who they are or refuse to do jobs." I sigh, devastated by what my brother has done.

He's fucked it all up.

"All right," Charlie says, sounding like he's cataloging things. "So, who are they?"

My face crumples with bitter regret as I look at him. "I can't tell you. I won't risk James' life, Charlie. I...I just can't. I know he's caused a lot of trouble, but he's...he's my brother."

He doesn't answer me, too wired with frustration. The muscles in his jaw are twitching like crazy.

"I'm supposed to return in a week," I say. "I was ordered to get Maksim's body, make you lift the sanctions, and then I must go back."

"That's never gonna happen. I won't let you outa my sight again." Charlie gets up to rest on the coffee table, hunched over with elbows on his knees. "Blair, tell me why you look ill, please? I fucking love you. I just want to know why you're still unwell so my doctor can treat you properly."

My chest squeezes as he says that he loves me. I crumble, knowing I have to give him something. He came for me in my most desperate hour. He fought the Russians to save me. If I can ease his torment by explaining my state of health, I must.

Shame washes over me, so I glance down at my lap to say, "They...hooked me on...heroin, and I—" I can't finish. I tell him I'm sorry, shaking my head in dishonor. It's all I've got, apologies for what others have done.

"The pills in your bag," he says, reaching out to lift my chin with a single finger, "are they opiate based?"

"I don't know." I shrug. "I think so."

"Have you taken them?"

"No. I haven't touched anything since...you know..."

"No, baby, I don't know, so you're gonna have to explain."

I pause to find the words. He doesn't seem ashamed of me, and it makes confessing a lot easier, but I have to find the right words.

"When I woke up a few weeks ago, I felt a deep, burning need, a high fever, and confusion"—I pat my chest to motion where the burning was—"they told me it was because they addicted me to heroin."

Charlie is horrified. His expression is drenched in repulsion.

"I fought through the withdrawals," I say, searching deep within myself for just an ounce of self-respect. "It was one of the hardest things I've ever done. I don't know why they have given me those pills."

Charlie's throat contracts, and his hand drops from my face. In that very second, I feel abandoned. Cold. Desperate. *Please don't back away from me.* There's nothing worse than the feeling of rejection from Charlie.

"I'm sorry," he whispers, unable to look at me. His hesitant eyes wander, unable to focus on one thing. "You shouldn't have had to go through that. I was supposed to be there when you woke up from the operation. I was



supposed to help you recover.”

“No! It’s not your fault, Charlie. I-I don’t blame you.”

He doesn’t answer me. He leans over to take the mobile in my hands, pushes to his feet, and walks out of the living room.

My heart sinks.

He thinks I’m disgusting. I know it. I don’t blame him. I think I’m disgusting, too.

Burying my face in my knees, I want to cry. As pathetic as it is, I just want to curl up somewhere, cry, and fucking die.

“I’ll take the samples,” Charlie says when he walks back through the open doorway. I glance up to see he’s holding a mobile to his ear with his shoulder, carrying a large, green medical bag with a big, red cross printed on the side. He pulls it open on the coffee table, barking down the phone to his caller, “No, not in an hour. Get to my house now, or I’ll pay your family a visit later tonight.”

When he hangs up, he flings the mobile on the couch. He digs an elastic band, some thick clear tubes, and a cannula out of the bag.

I jump back on the couch, pulling up my knees to my chest. “What the hell is that needle for?”

“I need to take a blood sample.” He nods at my arm, assuring me it’s okay. “Roll up your sleeve.”

“Charlie, no—”

“We don’t have time for this, Blaire.” He puts the cannula in his mouth, holding it with his teeth, and grabs my wrist. I try to pry him off, snapping at him to let me go, but he won’t yield.

“Listen to me”—he yanks on my arm, forcing my attention—“using dirty needles can result in dangerous diseases. I need to take a blood sample, so my doctor can run tests to make sure you’re okay.”

“And what if I’m not?” I sob unwillingly, tears rushing to my eyes.

No hesitation, he says, “Then we’ll handle it.”

My throat clogs with more tears, and my chin quivers, but I fight to keep my shit together. I loosen my grip on Charlie’s hand, giving him my arm. He can see the fear in my eyes. He can sense I’m terrified. “It’s just me,” he whispers, stroking down the side of my face with his other hand. “You know I’d never hurt you like this.”

I breathe in through my nose and out through my mouth as he pushes my sleeve up my forearm, past my elbow. He stares at the little bruises from the

needles they stabbed me with, twisting and turning my arm as if they'll vanish at any moment.

I try to pull away in disgrace, but he won't let me.

"Whoever did this," he hisses, "will die a painful, slow death." He reaches back for the elastic band and wraps it around my bicep so it pinches. The blue vein there swells, and he sticks me with the needle several times to enter my bloodstream, making me wince through gritted teeth.

"I'm sorry it's uncomfortable," he says softly, eyes fluttering up to mine. "Where they pierced your vein so many times, it's collapsing."

I nearly heave, vivid images of the Arabs stabbing me over and over filling my mind.

I didn't even think to wonder why they stabbed me in so many different places. It makes sense if my veins were collapsing.

There's not an ounce of uncertainty in Charlie's actions as he connects the thick, clear tubes to the cannula and fills them one by one with my blood. Five in total. I'm glad when it's over.

"Everything's gonna be all right, Blaire." He gently pulls out the cannula needle and presses a cotton ball on the tiny scratch, adding pressure to stop the bleeding. "If there's anything wrong, I promise we'll handle it together, okay? I'll look after you."

I shrug, blinking away from him. He won't want me if I'm sick. I know it. Who would?

He fiddles with a ball of medical tape, biting off a length. He tapes that over the piece of cotton on my arm and carefully rolls down my sleeve. Then I feel the pressure of his lips on my inner wrist, kissing me there.

My chest squeezes, stomach coiling with sudden, mad flutters. Maybe he will look after me if I'm sick. I want to believe he will. I care about Charlie. I don't want to be without him ever again.

That's hell incarnate.

He lets go of my wrist to put all my blood samples in a large see-through bag. That's when his brother comes in, asking, "What's the plan?"

"It wasn't James who sold her at the auction," Charlie says, elaborating on all I've divulged—including the fact that I won't spill my guts on who is pulling my strings.

Nic glances at me. I can't look at either of them at this point. I feel like a traitor.

"Are you okay, Señorita Blaire?" I'm surprised by the eldest Decena's

concern, and I don't know how to react.

"She's supposed to return in a week with Maksim's body," Charlie says, "plus a promise that I've lifted *all* the sanctions."

Nic raises his eyebrows, and Charlie nods. It's like they're silently communicating to each other.

"We need to get the boy back," Charlie says, speaking with his hands in a display of confidence. "If we don't retrieve him within the week, Blaire will call *them* to say I've lifted the sanctions. She'll then request a few more days because..."

"She could say she hasn't asked for Maksim's body yet?" Nic jumps in, adding to the plan.

"Yeah," Charlie agrees. "She could say...I dunno...I've been proving difficult on the sanctions alone, and she wanted to focus on one thing at a time."

"That could buy us a few days," Nic says.

"Why?" I ask, scowling when I catch Charlie and his brother sharing more suspicious looks.

"Because, as Nic stated, it'll buy us more time to find James—if we need it. Whoever *they* are, they should know it takes up to five days to arrange an uncharted flight. That means we have the week *they* gave you, plus—at the very least—a few more days to track your brother. In the meantime, we'll continue following the trail we had on you in hopes that it leads us to something."

I nod a few times, mentally going over potential plot issues. It actually sounds like a good idea. It actually sounds bulletproof—unless Robert refuses to give me more time.

"I think it's best Blaire doesn't disclose where she was or who had her," Nic says, resting against the doorframe with crossed arms. "If they somehow manage to get their hands on her, they could wire her up to a polygraph or use truth serum. It's what we'd do." He shrugs. "They're likely to punish her if they find out she's been feeding us intelligence."

"No, you're right." Charlie paces about with his bristly chin in his palm. "For now, let's just try to bargain time. Call Andres and tell him to fly in with his squad. He is to bring Luna, too. She can keep an eye on Blaire if we're away."

"I don't need a babysitter," I snort in offence, and they look at each other with sly glances again.

I figure there's a reason they want someone watching over me. I think they're worried that if they don't get my brother back, I will leave with or without Charlie's permission—and they're right to assume that because I will. I know James has done wrong and caused a lot of trouble, but his purpose in taking me was good. He just wanted to keep me safe. He'd never hurt me.

“Does this sound good, Blaire? Are you all right with the plan?”

I shrug at Charlie. “I need that mobile.”

“I've got it, baby. You can have it when you need to make the call, okay?”

I nod in response, glad we're all on the same page. If they find James, it's a score for me. If they don't, at least I haven't ratted on Robert, so he shouldn't harm my brother.

“What happened with the adversaries?” Charlie asks, walking up to Nic.

“No good. They chewed off their own tongues before we even got started.”

## 8

After Charlie and his brother are done plotting, he chaperones me out of the living room and into the kitchen.

It's just as I remember, airy with ample space. The walls are a warm, pallid yellow and the high, vaulted ceiling is crisscrossing in dark wooden beams. In the heart of the dining area, the long table hosts a proud spread: breads and jams in jars, sliced sandwich meats stacked against each other, and three different styles of eggs. There are plates and glasses laid out, surrounded by shimmering silver cutlery. Guess someone knew we were coming for lunch.

Beyond the table, the clear stretch of windows—on either side of the open French doors—are pouring with electric orange sunshine. I squint to adjust to the brightness, with my temples borderline pulsating again. I'm cold, too. The afternoon chill is harsh, causing hairs to stand up razor sharp on my arms. I hug myself, sinking into Charlie's side for heat. It's nice to be able to seek out his body heat. It's nice to be home. Seeing this place brings back so many memories—especially the garden. Bizarrely, it reminds me of when I used to train out there to escape Charlie's sexual attention.

I won't be doing that anymore.

My head bolts to the left at the sound of clattering. There's a skinny, old lady dithering about in the large cooking space, stacking up pots and pans near the sink. She's got gray-streaked hair pulled away from her tan, wrinkly face, and frail looking limbs, dressed in a dirty apron.

"Buenas tardes, Señor," she croaks, and head-bows to Charlie and me. "Buenas tardes, Señorita." Her eyes are on mine, hollow and brown, sunken into her skull. She looks like she's had a tough life.

"That's Eliza," Charlie leans down to say, steering me over to the table by a hand on my lower back. "She's the housekeeper. If you need anything whenever I'm not around, ask her and she'll get it for you. She's a good woman. Been around since I was a kid."

I nod as he pulls out a chair and pushes me up to the table. He disappears

out of the kitchen for a moment, returning with some kind of beige, wooly shawl. He drapes it over my shoulders and gives me a squeeze before reaching for the plates on the table.

“Thanks, Charlie,” I say, tipping back my head to see his face.

He flashes a smile, one that melts my body. “You’re welcome, baby.”

The housekeeper brings a jug of orange juice, cool water, and a steaming pot of coffee on a tray. I can smell it before she announces what it is. That’s all I want, coffee. No food. The thought of eating still makes me want to puke.

When Charlie’s done serving our lunch, he lowers onto the chair at my left and pours two coffees. I wrap the soft shawl around myself and pick up the fork to push scrambled eggs around my plate, plucking up the stomach to eat, but my attention is constantly pulled. My eyes flicker up at every sound: combat-suited Los Zetas wandering past the back doors several times, and Eliza is so loud it hurts my head, rattling about at the sink.

“Just relax, Blaire,” Charlie says, noticing my unease. “There’s no one here who shouldn’t be.”

“Why isn’t your other brother here?” I vaguely remember Andres. He came with Charlie to get me from Maksim. I assumed he would be in England, too.

“He’s been in Mexico the past week sorting some political business in my absence. Why’s that?”

“I overheard you talking to him,” I confess, and Charlie’s eyes lock on mine. “Before, when you sent me home, I mean.”

The memory is both good and bad. That’s when I first heard Charlie say he loved me, and also when my life spiraled out of control.

“I know you overheard,” Charlie says, chewing slowly on a piece of bacon. “I saw it on the CCTV system.”

Looking away, I pull a slice of toast apart, feeling guilty for eavesdropping. “I just wanted you to know, is all. I don’t usually snoop.”

“S’all right, Blaire. I’ve nothing to hide from you. Next time, just come in. Andres would’ve loved to meet you.”

“It was hardly the right time to come in.” I flash him a mocking glance. “You had just basically told me I had to choose you or Maksim.”

A heavy *smash!* rings through the kitchen, and I jump in my skin, gripping Charlie’s arm. It’s Eliza, scurrying about picking up broken shards of glass with a cloth.

“Finish that later, will you?” Charlie says in Spanish, rubbing my hand on his arm to sooth my anxiety. “And have Nic tell all of Rank Two to standby on point A and B out the back.”

She leaves on command with a head-bow, swathing the towel over the sink edge. Charlie asks if I’m all right, and I tell him that I am. I’m just jittery and jumpy. It’s that cell Robert locked me in, and the drugs. They’ve fucked with my head.

I challenge myself to focus and mouth a piece of toast, but my stomach churns.

“Do you understand why I sent you home?”

“What?” I say to Charlie, spitting the half-eaten toast on my plate. “What does it matter?”

“It matters because it’s important. I tried to make you pick one of us for a reason,” he says, snagging a napkin from the table to wipe my mouth. “I wanted you to have a choice. But I didn’t get a chance to elaborate on my reason, given you never replied to my text.”

“I know you were giving me a choice. I did understand.” I pinch the napkin from his hand. “I didn’t mention it because of that. I just wanted to tell you I was eavesdropping.”

“All right. I get it,” he says, pulling back from questioning me. He gestures at my food. “Is your head still hurting? Is that why you’re not eating?”

“No. I’m just not very hungry.”

“You need to eat something,” he says on a sigh. Though his tone is soft, he sounds like he’s ordering me to eat rather than asking. “You’re too thin, Blaire.”

“Maksim never made me eat if I couldn’t.” I push the plate away and rest back in the chair, nestling in the shawl. “I’d like to take a shower.”

“After you’ve eaten something and seen the doctor, you can take a shower.”

“What?” My face scowls with affront. “I don’t need to see a doc—”

He stands from the table, cutting me off from speaking as he wanders into the cooking space. He moves about to boil water on the stove, pours a mixture of nuts into a little bowl, and gathers a whole bunch of fresh fruit. I sit here baffled for a moment, watching him chop up the fruit, prepare a hot drink, and he lays everything on a serving tray. He returns to put the tray down in front of me on the table, lowering onto his chair. “If you don’t want

the eggs, eat this—I'm not asking, Blaire," he cuts me off again. "That's herbal tea. It's good for you, so try to drink at least half of it if you can."

I turn at the waist to glare at him, clutching the shawl at my chest. "Don't force me to do things, Charlie."

His eyes enlarge, burning with surprise and provocation.

"It didn't work before, and it won't work now." I kick back my chair to get up, at the same time stating I *am* going to have a shower. "Thank you for the food and the tea," I add because I adore this man beyond words, and know he's just being nice. "But I'm just not hungry."

A moment passes between us where I sense he wants to push me but isn't certain if it's the right time or if it'll do any good. I don't look away. I hold my own, determined to set our boundaries. This is how we were before; we worked to reason with each other, and I'm not about to let that change. I'm not his pet.

He eventually reaches for a napkin to wipe his mouth and gets up with me, towering over me. "Once you've had a shower, will you try to eat something?"

I turn up my lips in a shrug. "Sure."

"All right then," he says, nodding a couple of times. He touches the base of my spine to usher me out of the kitchen and across the entrance hall.

I'm relieved that didn't turn in to something. Disagreements with him usually do.

A few of his men standing guard at the main doors step up to greet us, clasping guns over their stomachs. They eye me with sly, brown-eyed gleams, and grin up at Charlie in what looks like approval. He introduces me with pride, going through a haste of traditional Latino names. I'm not one for talking, so I force a smile and walk off.

"Tis' nothing personal," I hear Charlie say from behind with amusement before he jogs up to catch me on the staircase, smirking.

"You don't need to come with me if you're busy," I say, nearing the landing top. "I'm capable of taking a shower, you know?"

"You are so rude." He chuckles, nodding left. "Come to my room, Blaire. All your things are there, so you can have a shower and relax in my bed if you're not feeling great."

"My things?" I glance down the hall. I was sort of looking forward to seeing my old room. I was looking forward to being in my old, personal space.



“Yeah, your clothes and all your books.” He tucks a length of hair behind my ear, running his fingers down the strand. “I bought everything you need, including nice casual outfits for lounging about, rather than the sports stuff you usually wear. C’mon.”

“Oh. But...” My eyes dither left and right, between his bedroom direction and mine. “I don’t want to cramp your private space if you’re—”

“You’re not cramping anything.” He chuckles again while bending to kiss the side of my face. “I’m not taking no for an answer. I want you in my bed, relaxing. C’mon, baby.”

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I let Charlie take my hand and guide me down the long hallway to a set of double doors at the very end.

I freeze on the threshold and squeeze his fingers, glancing up at him.

“What’s wrong?” he says, tipping his head. Curiosity shines in his eyes as they flutter back and forth through mine.

“I don’t know.” I frown and blink at once. “I’m...nervous.”

He smirks, glowing in fond amusement. He lets go of my hand to push the doors open, making the panes creak.

The first thing I notice is his clean, musky scent mixed with a citrus, polished leather fragrance. It’s the brown leather seating area at the foot of the bed, a huge couch and masculine, twin armchairs set around a sturdy coffee table, resting on a mink colored rug. The solid floors are highly buffed with deep red grains in the wood, extra shiny in places from the afternoon sunshine.

“Go in,” Charlie encourages, shutting the doors the second I’m across the threshold.

I gaze about, thinking this is the only place in the house that resembles him. It’s a combination of old and new in style and machismo. Matte gray papered walls, and a stark, brass chandelier hanging down the center of the pitched ceiling. A large canopy bed crafted from dark wood dominates the space, dripping in gray blankets and huge plush pillows. It’s on a risen floor base surrounded by soft mood lighting, set between bedside cabinets and twin balcony doors framed in heavy, dark red drapes. The view over the backyard is breathtaking: a never-ending stream of green grass surrounded by tall, thick trees blooming in white flowers.

Warmer now, I slip off the shawl, pass it to Charlie, and walk into the seating area. He hangs it on a hook on the wall, standing back to observe me.

There's a big, open fireplace in the left corner of the room, on a curve in the wall. It's next to a floor to ceiling bookcase inundated with books, where a flat screen television hangs in the center. An open archway governs the other wall between grand dressers housing glass decanters of liquor. Above the dressers, there are gigantic pictures in sleek black frames, one of them boasting the words, *You Don't Even Know You're Dead*. I frown, thinking that's a weird statement. The open archway leads to a walk-in closet, and then to a tiled en-suite bathroom with a central roll top bathtub.

"I like your room," I say to Charlie, holding his sharp gaze as he strolls up to me. "Will I stay in here with you from now on?"

"Course you will." His smile dazzles with dark possibilities. When we're toe to toe, he leans down to kiss the edge of my mouth, and my stomach tightens with fluttering desire, a sensation of power I almost forgot.

"I'm glad you like it in here," he says, standing up straight. "I've wanted you in my personal space for a long, long time."

"What does that mean?" I point past him at the statement on the picture.

"Well, people walk this earth thinking they're gonna live forever." Watching me, he hooks lengths of hair behind my ear, deliberately stroking the area near my eye. "Life is more beautiful when we know we're gonna die one day. Call that picture a reminder."

I raise my eyebrows, moved by his metaphor. I knew Charlie had depth but to me, that picture is a whole other level of intense.

Reaching back over his head, he pulls off his sweater in one clean motion, undressing for whatever reason. I catch a glimpse of his bronze, sculptured stomach before he fixes the hem of his t-shirt, dark hair trailing from his chest to his pubic line. It makes me feel all hot and bothered. It makes me think about the times I felt his heavy, powerful body on mine, crushing me into the mattress when he would kiss me.

I suspect we'll have sex soon, and it makes me nervous. I wonder how anyone—any woman—knows what to do with him. I mean, Charlie has the talent of touching, kissing, and seduction, down to a fine art. It's all second nature to him whereas I know nothing but what Maksim has taught me—and that isn't a lot. Even when I went down on Charlie, he ended up leading. He always took control.

"What are you thinking about, hmm?" Charlie asks, bending at the knees

to meet me at eye level. He kisses my cheek and then my nose, creating a globe of intimacy around us.

I flash a stupid, bashful smile, scratching a spot on my neck. “Nothing.” I’m not going to tell him that I’m thinking about his sexual talents or what Maksim taught me. That’s private.

Charlie frowns and smiles at once, then he playfully swats my butt and nods for the archway. “Let’s go shower. The sooner you’re feeling fresh, the sooner I can get some food inside you.”

*We’re taking a shower together?*

Weirdly anxious, I walk with him through the closet where it’s wall to wall clothes. The left half is female attire: tracksuits, jeans, trousers, strappy tops, and sweaters. Trainers and flat shoes line the bottom shelf under a stretch of drawers. None of my old stuff is here. It’s like every essence of who I was is gone.

Charlie’s scrutinizing me from the archway, leaning against the frame on his shoulder. “What is it, Blaire?”

“Are all my things in my old room?” I ask. I’m confused, since he said he brought it all in here.

He shakes his head, telling me pretty much anything I had from before is in the trash. “I even made Tatiana take back the money you had. But if there’s anything you want or need, you tell me and I’ll get it for you, all right?”

I blink at him in disbelief, a little hacked-off he made Tatiana take back the money I earned—James could have had it.

“All right?” Charlie says, raising his eyebrows.

I lift my shoulders, shrugging at a loss. It’s not all right, but I don’t want to argue with him. I’m not sure how long we have together, so I must make every second count.

I pivot around as a distraction, taking in the rest of the closet. There’s a vanity set up in the heart of the space, an oval seating area with a ceiling high mirror surrounded in lights. My eyes reluctantly wander back to the clothes, noticing there’s no sportswear. I ask why there isn’t any sportswear, and Charlie says I don’t need to train right now.

“What do you mean, I don’t need to train?” My focus snaps in to place. “Maksim used to say—”

“Maksim isn’t here, baby,” Charlie shuts me down from speaking, wandering past me for the bathroom. “Hair ties and the dryer are in there”—

he gestures at the vanity unit on his way—“I’m not sure if you used things like hair straighteners or makeup before I met you, but I don’t want you using any of it now because you don’t need it.”

“I never used stuff like that,” I say with obvious resentment, entering the bathroom with him. It’s gigantic, tiled from floor to ceiling in sandstone with gray flecks; smells like musky soap and a hint of aromatic spice. Covering the left wall, the walk-in shower is also mammoth, built over a floor to ceiling frosted window.

Charlie leans in to flick on the shower faucet, filling our silence with a light sprinkling sound of rain. He crosses the room to drop his sweater in the hamper next to the vanity sinks and grips the front hem of my sweater. I snatch for his hands but immediately stop myself, holding heavy fists at my sides.

“Just relax,” he whispers, and he doesn’t hesitate to peel off my sweater, regardless of my palpable unease. He tugs in places where it’s sticking to my skin and pulls it up over my head, smoothing my hair back after. I fold my hands behind my back, not wanting him to see the needle track marks again. He squats at my feet to help me out of the horrid trainers, gripping my ankles one by one.

“I have to say”—he arches a brow, smirking up at me—“I never, ever thought I’d see you in pink.”

I snort. “Me either.”

My stomach tenses when he grips the waist of my sports trousers, toes curling as he slides them down my legs with my underwear. Half-naked, I stand here in my bra, warmth misting my skin from the shower. Charlie gets up and walks around me. I mimic his motions, not wanting him to see my back.

“Turn around,” he says, chuckling in confusion as he grips my arm to keep me still. “I’ll unclasp your bra.”

“I can take it off. Stop, Charlie!” My pulse soars, and I can hardly breathe I’m so wired. “I-I can take it off.”

“Blaire,” he sighs my name, assuming to know what I’m doing, “you don’t need to hide anything from me. I’ve seen every inch of you from your mind to your body, including all your scars.”

“I’m not hiding! I just—”

“Stop,” he insists, leveling his eyes at me. “I bathed you every day while you were in the coma. Getting you ready for a shower is nothing.”

I glare at him. I don't know why, I just don't want him looking at my back. It's hideous.

He walks up behind me and pushes my hair out the way, draping the thick length down my front. He unclasps my bra, causing the cups to loosen at my breasts, making me feel less and less protected—or less hidden.

“I think every single inch of you is beautiful,” he whispers in my ear, making the spot tickle. A single finger traces some of the whip marks, from the nape of my neck, down my bumpy spine, to the base of my back where the skin is smooth. I shiver and recoil under his touch, sharp chills cascading down my arms. “Including your scars,” he adds, his breath touching my naked shoulder.

I turn up my head to look back at him—scowling at him. “Why did you get the branding removed?”

His eyes search mine, burning in the promise of devotion. “I didn't think you'd want it on you forever.”

No, I didn't. That marked me as Maksim's. He said so.

Charlie tells me that he could have had all the scars removed, too, but that would have taken months of preparation and operations. “Skin grafting is a delicate procedure that requires a high amount of healthy white cells in the body, something you were lacking since you had blood poisoning. So, I was waiting till you were awake to discuss it with you, to see if that's what you wanted.”

“Is...is that what you want?”

He shakes his head, eyes dancing between mine. “I don't want you suffering anymore, Blaire. I love you just the way you are.”

I stare up at the ceiling with a million things going around in my head. So much has happened since I last saw him. So many things have changed. But not him. How can that be?

“While you were in the hospital, I didn't leave your side,” he says as if he needs to. “I was there day and night bathing you, keeping an eye on you. The only time I left was to come back and make sure the house was ready for you to come home. And I had that meeting with your brother...”

“You don't have to explain.” I wipe my nose to rid the spidery itches. “I know you were there.” *I was dreaming of you.*

Silence engulfs us. I glance back at him to see if there's something wrong. A deep frown falls over his eyes as he stares at me in obvious guilt.

“Don't do that, Charlie.”

“Do what, Blaire?”

“Blame yourself for all that’s happened.” I turn in to him, flicking the bra off my arms. “Blame is a heavy burden to bear.”

“If I didn’t send you home, you’d be safely in Mexico. You wouldn’t have nearly died. James wouldn’t have been able to take you.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” I say, shaking my head at him. “I was always going to go home. Maksim was always going to do whatever he wanted to do. James was always going to try and take me because he believed he was keeping me safe.”

Charlie’s nostrils flare as the muscles in his jaw work overtime. Reaching for my arm, he concentrates on peeling the cotton wool off my inner elbow, secretly looking at all the puncture marks there. He’s distracting himself, I know because I do that.

“I’m sorry I left,” I whisper, refusing to let him paint over our cracks. “I’m sorry I went back to Maksim. I’m sorry I didn’t read or reply to your text message. If I had, then maybe I would have come back, and this wouldn’t have happened.” My head throbs with all the tension, but I must apologize. I never should have gone home to my master when Charlie gave me the option to stay. He’s the only person in the world who has ever given me options, and I walked away. I fucking walked away. What was I thinking?

Without answering me, Charlie scoops up all my clothes and dumps them in the hamper. “Go get in the shower, baby.”

“Are you okay? Charlie, I’m really sorry.”

“I’m fine.” He winks, forcing a placid mood. “And you have nothing to be sorry for, ever. Nothing you’ve done was your fault. You didn’t know any better.”

He said that before when I was trying to convince him I’m a monster. I didn’t believe him then, and I don’t believe him now.

Defeated for what else to say, I step into the shower and stand under the tepid flow. My hair heavies, hanging down my spine, while I close my eyes to enjoy the water spraying across my face. Large hands slip around my waist from behind, Charlie’s muscular body coming up flush against my back. His embrace binds me tight, huge arms enveloping my body. I let out a content breath and rest on him, sheltered in his affections. This is all I want, to be right here with Charlie. Why do we have to fight so hard to be together?

“I’m so glad you’re home,” he whispers in my ear and kisses me there, causing the hairs on the nape of my neck to stand up. “Not a single second

has gone by where I haven't thought about you. Not a single second has gone by where I haven't missed you." He kisses my ear again, driving me crazy inside with sensations—anxiety, flutters, confusion. I still don't completely understand the way he makes me feel. All I know is, it's good.

He grabs a bottle of shampoo, squirts a healthy amount in his hand, and lathers my hair, kneading my skull. I shut my eyes again to lose myself in his attention. He warns before he washes my body, massaging soap into my shoulders, arms, and then my center. My stomach quivers like mad as his fingers trace my pubic line, toes bunching against the shower tray. He grips my wrists one by one and lifts to shave under my arms before rinsing me off.

I blink about when I can't feel him touching me, to see what he's doing. Something super sleek and cold glides up my legs, from my ankles to my knees. He's kneeling at my feet like he's worshiping me, giving my legs a shave. He looks like a Godly creature, glistening under the shower.

This is what I miss the most about being with Charlie, feeling like I'm someone. I'm not a pet or a soldier ordered to attack and murder. I'm just a girl and Charlie wants me unbiasedly because I am.

In a moment of pure gratification, I drop to my knees and take the razor from his hand, putting it down on the edge. I cup his stubbly face in both hands and look at him, really look at him.

"Hey, what's wrong?" he asks, shifting to stop the water from spraying me in the face.

I shake my head, lips opening to speak, but it takes so long just to voice, "Thank you, Charlie."

He frowns, folding his hands over mine on his face to hold me as I'm holding him.

"Thank you for coming for me when I needed you the most. Thank you for respecting me and showing me happiness when I lived with you." I swallow past the weird lump in my throat, blinking away the sting in my eyes so I don't miss a single second of seeing him. "Because of you, Charlie, I know what it feels like to be loved."

"Oh, Blaire..." His arms wrap around me before I can breathe another word, enveloping me in the powerful protection of his affections. I curl up between his legs, clinging to him so desperately. "No matter where you are or what trouble you're in," he says, and promises, "I'll always come for you."

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## 9

After our intense shower, Charlie rubs me dry with a huge towel, patting my hair to a damp state before brushing it out with a comb.

He's very delicate, starting from the bottom to work his way up. I watch his towering, vague reflection in the frosted window, engrossed by his ominous beauty. He's stark naked with his thick cock hanging low, and his powerful body is dripping in water. It's hard to look at him, but it's also hard not to. The toned muscles in his ass tighten as he moves about attending to me, buttering me up in cocoa moisturizer and some seriously potent ointment. He spreads it on the low of my back where I had the skin graft. I ask what it's for. He says I need to use it for up to four months after the operation, to help the healing process. It burns initially but then it's tingly and cool on my skin.

When he's done, he wraps me up in a fluffy white dressing gown and rolls out the collar, so it doesn't cover my face.

"Feel better now that you've had a shower, hmm?" he asks. His blue eyes don't leave mine for a second, waiting on my answer.

I nod, feeling more than better. I nearly feel like my old-self. The weight of the past few weeks is adrift while a sense of peace lingers in me. I don't know if it's because I'm super tired or nostalgic by what I said to him, thanking him for always being there for me, but I like the way I'm feeling.

"Does this mean you're going to have sex with me now?"

"Steady on," he laughs, whipping a towel off the heated wrack to tie around his muscular waist. "How about we get some food in you first, yeah? As per our little deal?"

"Oh! Sure." I shrug, surprised and confused. His cock is bulging at the seams, and he just spent ages getting me ready. Why would he do that if he doesn't want to fuck? "If that's what you want." I walk past him to brush my teeth at the vanity sinks as he exits the bathroom, I assume to dress.

I rattle around searching for a spare toothbrush but there's only one sitting on an electric stand, so I use it. After, I wander into the closet for some clothes but find, through the archway, Charlie is sitting half naked on the

edge of the bed. He's wearing a pair of gray joggers, feet crossed at the ankles. Our eyes align, and he smiles at me. He pats the space next to him. "Come sit down, baby."

He sounds ominous. Maybe he does want to have sex with me?

Tightening my dressing gown belt, I patter out to him. I sit at his side, sinking into the mattress.

"Do you remember Dr. Shyam?" he asks, while the blueness in his eyes flitters back and forth between mine.

I don't answer, just look at him. How could I forget the doctor? He saved my life.

"He's here"—Charlie nods in the direction of the door—"I'd like him to check you over, if that's okay?"

"But, you took my blood."

"I know." He reaches for a damp lock of my hair and swirls it around his finger, tickling my scalp. "Your results came back good. You're not carrying any diseases."

My eyes widen. That was quick.

"Told you everything would be all right, didn't I?"

"Yes," I whisper, still stunned. "I guess you did."

Hunching at the neck, he kisses my cheek and nuzzles his nose there. My stomach whirls. I can't tell what mood is hanging over him. One minute I think he wants to fuck, and the next...

"You are borderline anemic," he professes, sitting back to stare at me. "Might be why you're suffering with headaches. So I'd just like Shyam to check your blood pressure, weight, and give you a physical examination. Nothing extreme."

"He doesn't need to take any more blood though, right?"

"No, he doesn't. He won't ask you any questions, either. You just need to sit here. Within ten minutes, he'll be done, okay?"

I shrug, itching a spot on my neck. If I don't have to talk to him or give any blood, I guess I could let him check me over.

"You're staying, aren't you, Charlie?"

"Course I am." He pushes to his feet, pinching my chin as he does, and crosses the bedroom to open the door.

I tuck into myself, pulling up the collar of my dressing gown. My attention narrows when the white coat walks in. He strolls up to me without making eye contact, peeling open a large medical bag on the bedside cabinet.

His skin is warm brown, matching his wide eyes, and he smells like medical gauze; the horrid, clinical stench that loiters in hospitals. I study every instrument he divulges from the medical bag and lays out, to make sure he doesn't spring a syringe on me.

"Blood pressure first. Don't touch her," Charlie warns as he leans over to roll up my sleeve, bundling it around my shoulder. He stretches out my arm for the doctor, with his large hands making my limb look impossibly small and thin.

Shyam's professional eyes scan the aging-green puncture marks on my inner elbow and wrist before he straps up my bicep in a tight pressure reader. It pinches my skin when it expands, causing the discomfort of swelling to resonate all the way down to my fingers. It beeps when it's done.

"Now her heartbeat," Charlie says.

It's all very technical. Charlie wasn't joking when he said I didn't have to talk. The doctor places the stethoscope on my chest without touching me, listening for the low, even **ba-boom** of my heart. Then he lays out a squishy gray mat on the floor. I have to stand on it until another beep goes off.

Finally, Dr. Shyam scribbles notes on a tiny pad and passes it to Charlie, packs up his medical bag, and leaves the room. Charlie disappears into the closet with the notepad, then I hear buttons **bleep, bleep, bleep**, several times. He emerges with something hanging on his finger, causing me to squint to see what it is.

My bracelet!

I snatch it without asking, gawking like an idiot. "I wondered what happened to this! I-I thought I lost it!"

"No, you didn't lose it," he says, lowering onto the bed at my side. "As I mentioned before, you were in a medically induced coma, and the doctor did regular brain scans to check you were all right, so I took it for safe keeping."

I smile to myself, gazing in amazement at the bracelet. The silver band is tough, just as I remember, with a single row of sparkly crystals. I slip it over my right hand instead of my left, so that every time I look at it I won't see Maksim's bite mark. I click the clasp shut, feeling the metal is warm on my skin from where Charlie was holding it.

"Glad you got it back, yeah?"

"Sure I am." I beam up at him, melting from within. He has no idea what I went through to keep this. "Thanks, Charlie."

"Wow, three *thank yous* in one day?" he teases, crossing his arms. "I'm

on a roll.”

He is on a roll. I get an urge to kiss him, a heavy tingly feeling right in the pit of my belly, so I do. I press into the bed to gain height, pecking his mouth with a gentle kiss. His skin is still a little damp, cool on my lips. He blinks at me, stupefied, but he doesn't look happy. He looks...guilty.

“What is it?”

“The doctor had some questions,” he says, scratching his mouth, “and since I knew you wouldn't talk to him...”

“About my examination?”

His eyebrows arch. “Do you want to know the results?”

I nod, so he openly tells me that I'm very underweight and malnourished. “But it's nothing a healthy diet can't fix, and I'm gonna make sure of it, all right?”

“Okay...so, what questions?”

He tips his head, giving me a tender, apologetic look. “He wants to know how you feel since you came off the heroin, and I do, too.”

My entire body goes rigid, mood dropping to an all-time low.

Charlie reaches over to caress a tickly spot on the inside of my wrist, as if to distract me. “Can you tell me how you feel, hmm? Do you have any stomach cramps or feel sick, or do you crave anything?”

“I'm fine.” I pull away to stop him from distracting me with his touch, shrinking into my shoulders. “I-I don't want to talk about that.”

“Why not?” He tries to take my hand, but I yank back and stuff it in the dressing gown pockets. “Hey, Blaire, don't do that.”

“Do what?”

“Pull away like that,” he warns, his face hardening like stone. “I'm asking you a question. I expect you to answer me, not put distance between us.”

I narrow my eyes. “I pulled away because you always distract me by touching me. And I just said I don't want to talk about this.”

“Why?” He shrugs. “It's nothing to be ashamed of. My brother Andres is a recovering heroin addict.”

My eyes widen to the size of saucers.

“Yeah.” Charlie nods a couple of times. “He can't handle the stuff we do. He turns to drugs for relief.”

My mouth opens to a huge O. “I didn't willingly take drugs, you know?”

“I'm not saying you did.”

“Then what are you saying, Charlie? Because it sounds like you're saying

I'm weak"—I jab a finger at his hairy chest—"and if you insult me again, you can be dead certain I won't talk to you."

"Baby, I'm not insulting you. I'm not saying you're weak. What I'm trying to say is..." He searches my face in a moment of silence, before confessing, "Even I struggle, Blaire."

I don't believe him. I huff in disagreement, shaking my head.

"I'm not tricking you," he says. "Sometimes, I have dark moments and need mental space away from certain...innocent people. Everyone copes in their own way. Andres turns to drugs—that's why I'm telling you this. I know how dark it can get. When my sister-in-law, Luna, told me what was going on, I locked my brother in a room so he couldn't escape for a fix. He was ill for two weeks. He was skittish and paranoid, constantly vomiting. They say everyone withdrawing from heroin reacts the same way."

"Well, I just said I'm fine." I kick my feet up to shift back on the bed, perching up against the headboard. I pull up my knees to my chest and cover my entire body in the dressing gown, hiding my nakedness.

"Look at me," Charlie demands, but I ignore him, eyes trained on a spot on the bed. "I mean it. I said look at me."

"No," I hiss through clenched teeth, and his hand clamps down on my jaw. "Ugh!" I practically growl, pouncing forward to shove him. "What do you want from me, Charlie?"

"I want to know how you feel. I want to know what it was like coming off \_\_\_"

"It was hell coming off that stuff!" I blow up on him, shoving him harder. "I was so sick I couldn't stop puking! So tired yet I couldn't sleep! I begged for more drugs, anything to relieve the pain! I would have done anything to relieve the pain!" I want to stop shouting but I can't. I'm crazy with madness. "I felt abandoned by you, Charlie, even though it wasn't your fault! I felt so alone! I was so fucking alone!" I scream hard enough to make my eyes bulge, face burning red with shame. "Are you happy now? Did you hear all you wanted to hear?"

"Blaire..." my name rolls off his tongue with sympathy.

"No, Charlie." I push him away and cross my legs to sit there in the middle of the bed, staring at my hands in my lap. "What the hell do you want from me, a dossier on how I recovered?"

"Do you still crave it?"

My mouth drops open as my blazing eyes dart up to his. I'm on the verge

of punching him in the face for asking such an offensive question.

“What I mean to say is,” he rubs his forehead, frowning and blinking with reflection, “if you do still crave it, the doctor can give you something to relieve the symptoms.”

I realize that was his objective in asking about the heroin. It’s to make sure I’m not still suffering from craving it.

Why couldn’t he just get to the point?

“I’m not mocking you, Blaire.” He shifts closer to me, gently touching my hand. “I’m letting you know that, the drugs are nothing to be ashamed of, and if you still crave it—”

“I. Told. You,” I announce each word, “I. Am. Fine.”

“Will you give me a damn break?!” he shouts, making me flinch. “I’m trying here too, you know? I’m trying to make sure you’re all right, mentally and physically. I’m trying to find your brother and handle my own affairs at the same time—don’t look at me like that, ay Dios mío! Will you drop this stinking attitude until we’re a little more in control of our own lives?”

“I will stop when you stop questioning me,” I speak through clenched teeth, determined not to give in. “I don’t want to take that crap ever again, Charlie. And I don’t want to talk about it. It’s nasty. I hate the thought of you seeing me like that, don’t you get it?”

“Why do you think the things you’ve done will make me see you differently, hmm?”

I roll my eyes, snorting, “You’re a guy.”

His eyebrows shoot up.

“I know you like me because you think I’m innocent or whatever—you’ve basically said it plenty of times—so what happens when you know that’s not real? What happens when you realize I’m just another murderer? And now I’m an ex-heroin...whatever it’s called.”

“You are *not* an ex-heroin addict.” He points in my face. “I don’t see you like that. And you are innocent in some ways, regardless of what you assume.”

“That opinion,” I flick his hand away, “is why I don’t want to talk to you about the horrid things that have happened to me or what I’ve done.” I glance away for a second to find the right words to tell him, “I’m not innocent, no matter how much you want me to be.”

“I know I make you feel innocent,” he says, his voice coming out softer, more hypnotic. “The things I make you feel confuse you. You can’t lie to me.”

I've seen it in your eyes." He pauses to gaze for too long, making me burn under his scrutiny. "When I first kissed you, I'll never forget the way you looked at me in *his* kitchen, like you wanted to ask why your stomach was fluttering or maybe your heart was beating a little faster."

Sharp hairs sprint down my arms, and I can't seem to look away from him, trapped under his confessions.

"When I first made you cum," his eyes dazzle like blue diamonds, "the expression of liberty on your face was enough to tell me you'd never felt affection or euphoria before."

I hate that he saw it in me back then when I was masterful at deception. But if there's one thing I've learned since meeting Charlie, it's that one cannot hide the power of desire.

"You're innocent to emotions," he says, "and that makes you innocent."

"What about the rest of me?"

"I know you're dark." His eyebrows draw in, like he's emotionally coming to terms with it or something. "But that's okay. I fancy that about you—you know I do."

"Why though?" I ask for the hundredth time, rubbing my face to sooth the headache coming on fast. It's always baffled me why he fancies me. I'm no one special.

"Why does there have to be a reason?"

"Because," I say, losing my voice for a moment. "I need reason, Charlie. There is reason for everything."

"Well, I initially fancied you because you were young and pretty, off-limits, and haunting. I could feel your energy in the room like it was a living thing. Still can." He strokes the space between us like he can feel my soul. It's creepy. "And the more I got to know you, I guess I just liked who you really are. You're different. I told you that before."

"No one likes who I really am." I can't help sounding sarcastic. "I'm moody, arrogant, and I know I annoy you."

"You do not annoy me." He chuckles, and a gorgeous smile reaches the mischievous sparkle in his eyes. "You press my buttons sometimes, but I love how you challenge me."

"I don't understand that, either." I sigh, so baffled. "You could have any woman you want, and you know it—a woman who would bow to your every request."

"I've had every woman I want," he says. "It got boring very quickly. I

hungered for a challenge, and when I met you”—his hand lifts to my face, tracing the outline of my mouth—“you delivered a challenge and more.”

“I’m not beautiful like your ex, Celine, or the woman at Maksim’s house you were drooling over.” I feel insignificant compared to everything in the world when I tell him that, a confession from the soul.

“Celine was beautiful, yeah.” He smirks at me and playfully tugs on a length of my hair. “You are very, very pretty, charismatic, dangerous, magical. You are many things, Blaire. You’ve taught me a lot, in fact. I don’t look at women the same anymore, not since I first kissed you.”

*I’ve taught him a lot?* I nearly laugh with sarcasm. The only thing I must’ve taught him is patience.

“Since I first kissed you,” he says, curling my hair around his finger, “I’ve learned, with women, it’s not just about being pretty or beautiful. Every woman has some form of beauty in them, like my housekeeper, for example.”

“That old woman?” I say, revolted and confused beyond words.

“Yeah.” His eyes crinkle with amusement. “You might see her as an old woman, but I see life in her eyes, wisdom, and culture. There’s something enchanting in every woman. You just have to look hard enough to find it.”

There’s something mysterious in his words, how he sees females. It interests me.

“Why did you just tell me all that?” I ask in a whisper. “You could have just brushed me off, you know?”

“Firstly,” he says, staring right at me, “I would never just brush you off. And as for why I just told you *all that*,” he mimics my husky accent to say *all that*, “I remember you questioning me over why I wanted you before, kinda like how you did just now.” He tickles his own nose with my lock of hair, inhaling the fragrance. “I won’t have you wondering all the time, Blaire. I’ll never hide my emotions from you. I’ll always be honest about how I feel because, for this to work, we must be open and candid with each other. We must trust each other. And”—he smiles, searching the gulf in my eyes—“above all that, I think you need to know that there’s only you, so you feel safe and secure with me. I want that more than anything in the world.”

“I do feel like that with you, Charlie.”

“Good,” he whispers, still playing with the piece of my hair. “So, you gonna be honest in telling me how you feel now, off the heroin, I mean?”

“I feel okay,” I say, glancing down at my fingers to pick a fray on the dressing gown. “The thought of eating makes me want to puke, and the



headaches are uncomfortable, but apart from that, I really am fine. I don't want to take drugs, I promise."

"All right," he says softly.

My head snaps up, astonished. "You believe me?"

"Course I do," he insists. "I asked if you still crave the heroin because I trusted you'd tell me the truth. You say you don't, and I believe you."

We look at each other, prisoners to our own darkness. I hope he does believe me. I am many things but a liar isn't one of them.

Well, I lied to Maksim twice, but does that count?

I frown to myself, about to ask Charlie if it counts, but someone knocks on the bedroom door. I jump in my skin, whipping my head around in that direction. "Who is that?"

"Relax." Charlie gets up and saunters across the room. "Tis' probably just Nic or the housekeeper. I texted her to make you some soup."

*Soup, now?* I can't eat after that conversation. I still have questions.

Charlie pulls open the door, grabs a tray of food from the frail housekeeper, and kicks the door shut. He motions with his thumb for me to sit up properly, so I shimmy back and rest against the headboard.

"Take one of these"—Charlie gestures with the tray, and I notice a pill pot—"they're anti-nausea pills. I figured you were feeling off when you couldn't eat your lunch, so I told Shyam to fill a prescription."

"Will they work?" I ask. "Will they stop the nausea?"

"Hope so, or Shyam and I are gonna have a problem." He sets the tray on my lap and fixes me up with a pill, telling me to chase it down with water. I do as I'm told, reaching for the glass on the tray. I wouldn't normally take drugs, but I trust Charlie's word that it will make me feel better—and above that, I *want* to feel better.

After, I look at the food, breathing in the creaminess of chicken soup dusted in herbs. My cheeks bloat to heave. There are a few crackers on the tray. I break one apart, swallowing down my sudden watery mouth. Never in my life has food made me feel so sick. I hate it.

Charlie sits next to me on the bed, leaning forward with elbows on his knees, watching me from the side. "You'll like this soup, I hope. I taught the *old woman* how to make it," he teases, reciting what I said about his housekeeper, Eliza.

Smirking, I ask if he'd like some soup but he says no, that he wants me to eat it all if I can. "We'll have something heavier to eat later. I'll make you

dinner.”

My eyes thin, interest to know more of him peaking. We seem to be on a level today, and he is answering all my questions...

“What is it, baby?”

“Where did you learn to cook, Charlie?” It’s the one thing I’ve never thought to ask before. Men like Charlie don’t need to know how to cook, yet he does, and with excellence.

“My mamá.”

My eyes enlarge. I remember when he told me that he cut out her heart and burned it. Maksim burned roses and put them on his parents’ graves as a symbol to how sinister they were because they raped and abused his childhood. Charlie burned the heart of the woman who gave him life because she sold his sister.

They’re not so different if I really think about it. Charlie just knows how to control the monster within.

“She wasn’t completely useless,” he says, following my train of thought. “Before she took Gina from me, she was a good woman with many qualities—like you.”

*Me?* My nose wrinkles. I don’t have any qualities like that.

“The buttery chicken I make,” he says, “the one you like, it was her recipe.”

“Don’t you think that’s odd?” I can’t stop myself, speaking between bites. “How you killed her, and yet you use her recipes, don’t you think that’s odd?”

He grins, expression darkening with mysterious certainty. “Ohhh, I think odder things have happened.”

I look away and continue eating the crackers, wondering if he means me. Am I the odder thing? Or does he mean us as one entity?

# 10

Eating and talking to Charlie wipes me out, and I fall asleep sitting against the headboard.

Strong hands slip off my dressing gown and set me down in bed properly, pulling up the blanket to my chin. I cuddle up to a pillow, curling over on my side, and moan in contentment when warm lips kiss my cheek.

I don't know if it's because my comfort level is at one hundred percent, but I'm certain a tsunami couldn't wake me. My time of rest is long and tranquil, blissful when I feel a large, hot body press up behind me.

The paradise doesn't last, though.

When I open my eyes, my head is pounding. My throat is dry like the Sahara, and my limbs ache like I've been working out, hard.

Grumbling, I lift my head off the pillow and immediately notice I'm alone. The day is still, no presence in the bedroom. Birds chirp through the open balcony doors while electric pink sunshine peeks through cracks in the curtains. It feels like morning, but I must be wrong. I could not have slept an entire day away.

"Charlie?" I attempt to call but cough in the pillow, croaky and raw. Turning up my head, I see on the bedside cabinet—next to a plate of chocolate muffins and a bowl of chopped fruit—there's a fresh glass of water. I shift to sit up and have a drink, chugging past the dryness in my throat. I try a muffin, too, knowing food can only make me feel better. When James and I used to train, particularly with Demetrius, we would test ourselves in extreme circumstances. Starvation was one of them. It often caused headaches to come on strong.

The muffin is still warm in the center with a creamy burst of caramel, so moist my mouth waters. For a moment, I forget about everything and live on the high of chocolate, moaning in delight. But then I swallow and my mouth rushes with acidic, watery saliva. I heave, folding the muffin in the paper cup to put it back on the plate. Pushing the blanket aside, I slug my ass across the bedroom, entering the bathroom to use the toilet. I also brush my teeth and

splash my face with cold water, grimacing at my pale, withdrawn reflection in the ceiling high mirror. There are deep, gray circles under my sunken eyes, evidence of my malnourishment. Leaning over the sink edge, I stare up close. I look rough. My red hair is wiry and hanging heavy around my freckly face. I almost want to cut it off to reduce the weight on my head, to help with the headaches.

“Blaire?” Charlie calls from the bedroom as the main door clicks shut after him. “I’ll ring you back,” he says to someone else, and I assume he’s on the phone. “Blaire?!”

“I’m in here,” I say, patting my face dry with a towel. “I’m just coming.” I wander out to him, swamped in my hair to hide my nakedness. The curtains are pulled open now, half-blinding me. I hold a hand shielded over my eyes.

Charlie’s standing near one of the balcony doors in a pair of gray joggers, dominating the view. The sun burns pink on his tan, muscled torso, darkening the hair there. It also catches the glass face of his silver watch, making my eyes sting.

“You not feeling good?” he asks as I crawl back in bed, moaning with discomfort.

I shake my head, shutting my eyes. I sigh when he touches my forehead, using the backs of his fingers. “Hmm, you are a little warm. Do you have a headache again?”

“A little,” I say, covering my eyes with one arm. “It’s super bright in here.”

The second I mention the light, I hear the scraping sound of the curtains being drawn, then I hear the rustling of a paper bag. I spy over my arm to see Charlie emptying a prescription bag, subconsciously scanning for needles. That’s when I spot two steaming cups on the bedside cabinet.

Coffee. I could use a coffee.

“The prescriptions came yesterday,” Charlie states, popping open lids, “but you were asleep, and the doctor said not to wake you. You’ll start taking the medications today, every day, until—”

“I’ve slept a whole day away?” My voice hits ceiling high, making me wince under the pounding in my skull.

“You did,” Charlie nods. “But you need to recover. Sleeping is good, baby.”

“Have you got any news on James?” He’s the first thing on my mind when I realize a whole fucking day has passed.

Charlie shakes his head, causing my stomach to sink with dread. My entire body sinks when he doesn't elaborate, forcing me to accept that I will likely be returning to Robert soon. If Charlie can't find and retrieve James in time, there's nothing I can do to change that.

I suddenly feel so miserable.

"Don't worry about James. That's my job," Charlie says softly, reading my depression. "All you need to concern yourself with is getting better."

I nearly snort at him.

"I can't just do nothing," I say while rubbing my eyes, wishing away this motherfucking headache. "Perhaps I should get out there and track him, too. I could call Tatiana and some of Maksim's old—"

"No way in hell!" Charlie slams the pill pots down on the side, making me shudder against the sound. "If something was to happen to you, James would be the least of my concerns." He waves for me to sit up and take the pills. "I'll find your brother, and I want you to trust that I will."

I want to trust that he will, too, but I think sitting about on my ass waiting for things to happen is a waste of reserves. I should be doing something since I know who has my brother. I should be hacking anything online even remotely related to Robert. Then I should be setting up meetings with allies to do more digging, forming a proper plan.

"Hey, stop that!" Charlie seizes my hand, twisting it around to check my wrist. Thin, red lines streak my skin, and I realize I've been itching the bite mark.

"I'm fine," I say, pulling out of his hold as I shimmy to sit up in bed. Extending a hesitant hand, I take the mountain of pills he gives me. On no level do I want to take any more drugs, but I can't deny I'm dying to feel half-alive again. Even if the medication will only get rid of the headaches, I'll be happy with that.

"What are these?" I ask, rolling the pills about in my palm.

"Vitamins, Folate, that kinda thing."

*Folate?* What's that for?

"I am gonna find him, Blaire," Charlie promises, highly aware of my doubts that he'll rescue my brother. "You know that, don't you?"

I shrug while tossing the pills down my throat, swallowing double hard on the larger ones.

A light vibrating sound goes off in his jogger pocket, and he checks his watch, giving off the impression he's meant to be somewhere. I tell him to

leave if he needs to leave, unable to hide the sarcasm in my voice. “It’s not like I’m going anywhere.”

“I’m only downstairs having a meeting with my men,” he says, ignoring my mockery, and he notes where his office is in the house. “I brought you up some scrambled eggs for lunch”—he nods in the direction of the coffee table—“so eat, take a shower, and if you’re feeling up to it, come down. Otherwise, I’ll be back for dinner.”

“Charlie,” I look up at him, pleading, clasping the blanket to my naked chest, “I want to help with tracking James. I don’t want to sit around doing nothing. If Maksim were here—”

Charlie’s eyes flash, turning dark the second I mention my old master’s name. He crosses his arms, causing the muscles in his chest to bunch. “If you would just tell me who’s commanding you, *I* could find James a lot easier. But you won’t, so I suggest you stay here where I know you’re safe, otherwise my mind will be solely on you, and James will be royally fucked.”

I try to protest, sick of his determination to keep me safe or whatever, but he swoops down on me. His prickly mouth smothers mine, turning my body inside out with a deeply passionate kiss that I didn’t see coming for a mile. His large hands grip my jawline and turn back my head, giving him all the access he needs. I watch him, stunned, unsure of how to react. I fist handfuls of the sheets on either side of my waist as his tongue massages savagely across mine, tasting me with long, dirty licks. I feel it everywhere, especially between my legs, a heavy throb of desire.

More. I want more.

“Please do as I ask,” he rasps in my mouth, pupils dilating to the shade of black onyx. “The last thing we need is to be fighting with each other over issues that are currently out of our control.”

I nod, casted under his spell. Right now, with his lips on mine, I’d possibly do anything he wanted.

And I hate it.

---

Being so powerless to save the people I care about isn’t a position I’m comfortable sitting in.

Once Charlie leaves the room, once I come down from that hot rush of lust, I lie in bed for a few hours to let my headache fade to black. I try to doze

off and forget about what's happening, but find I'm fidgety and agitated, constantly thinking of James. *Is he hurt? Has Robert punished him for my disobedience?* The fact that I don't know either bothers me on another level.

As a distraction, I get up to take a shower, moisturize with that seriously potent ointment, then I dress in baggy, green joggers and a matching hoodie. I go downstairs without eating the scrambled eggs, partly because I'm not hungry, and partly to defy Charlie. It infuriates me that he's aware of what I can do—he knows I could help find James—yet he'd rather I do nothing? He'd rather subdue my strength with his wicked charm and have me lounge around in his bed like some dumb bimbo?

I can't even dare to mull over the way he thwarted my will. It makes me angry. A single kiss, a single touch, and I'm putty in his hands? How stupid am I?

Coming down the sweeping staircase, I notice the house is a fortress of quiet. I poke my head in the living room, seeing it's empty. Kitchen. Empty. The back doors are open, allowing the inside to pour out to the backyard. I can smell the lawns have recently been cut, leaving a damp, earthy fragrance of fresh grass to linger in the air. I take a stroll out to the patio and stand with crossed arms, watching a group of Los Zetas jogging around the land boundaries. They're a butch bunch, each one as big as the next. I wonder if Charlie's recruitment requirement is that his men must pack as much meat as they punch.

I'd like to train with them, get myself back in shape and ready for war. Because war is coming. I can sense it.

“¿Estás bien, Blaire?”

I jump a clear mile at the sound of someone asking if I'm all right, swinging around and coming face to face with Nic Decena. He's dripping in sweat, trails of it snaking down his muscled, tattooed neck. The paleness in his eyes is brooding and heavy as he searches every inch of my face.

I don't know what to say. My lips part to speak but nothing comes out. He makes me feel...naked to the bone, just like Charlie did when I first met him.

Turning on my heel, I walk back inside the kitchen, leaving him out there on the porch. He watches me leave, gripping each end of a towel hanging around his large shoulders.

He's so...creepy. I wish he wouldn't talk to me when Charlie isn't around. Charlie's office is across the entrance hall, through an ID controlled,

reinforced door. On a whim, I press my thumb on the glass scanner and it pops open, letting out a gust of cool air as if the room is temperature controlled. Charlie's inside on the phone, sitting behind a huge, central desk. It's piled high in paperwork and a military style laptop—the one he let me use before when I lived with him.

“Come in, baby,” he says, gesturing for me. He then continues his phone call, talking Mexican taxes and politics with God knows who.

I stroll in gazing around, fiddling with the strings on my hoodie while Charlie observes me.

The office is huge with high, ashen colored paneled walls, and the ceiling is covered in bright down-lighters. No windows. It feels like a large, secret bunker. It smells like musky male bodies and tangy gunpowder, which I assume is due to the wooden crates with CAUTION written in red on the sides, stacked up in the far, left corner behind the desk. One crate is open, overflowing with guns, bullet cases, and hand grenades. The dark wooden floors are old and scuffed with curving scratches that make me think those crates were dragged in. There's a red rug in the middle and for some reason, I imagine there's a hatch under it. If Charlie got cornered in here by an unexpected attack, how else would he get out?

“What did Nic want?” Charlie's voice cuts through my silence. I shrug. *How should I know?*

I wonder how he's aware I even saw Nic until I spot his CCTV setup. Directly opposite a massive, black leather couch, a section in the paneled walls is slid open, revealing a partition of cameras. They're flickering between rooms in this house and another, full color and high definition. There's a big flat screen in the center, focused on Charlie's bed—where I was resting. I don't see my old bedroom on any of the screens, so I assume Charlie wasn't watching me when I was living with him before.

“Blaire”—Charlie presses the phone speaker to his shoulder, nodding at the couch—“some of your books are there, and I got you a bunch of crosswords and some chocolate. Take a load off.”

I search about for my books, finding a whole stack of them on a side table next to a brass lamp. There's also a stack of crossword magazines, and a blue carrier bag overflowing in chocolate.

I lower onto the couch, pull a checkered blanket across my legs, and blatantly listen in on Charlie's phone call. Over the week, I do this a lot. I also sit in on all the meetings he has with his men and his brother—twenty in



total. Nearly all of them have a different agenda. In fact, he handles so much business that I start to wonder how he has any time to find James. At the end of the week, when we're taking a shower before bed, I ask if he has the time, and he insists my brother is top priority. I want to believe him. I really do. But I have my doubts. James kidnapped me, causing all this trouble, so I would understand if Charlie confessed he's no longer looking for him. I wouldn't be very happy, but I would understand.

My doubts increase tenfold when I discover they had a physical fight. It's by luck I even figure it out.

Charlie's scrubbing from head to toe under a steamy shower, and I'm watching him with obvious longing, fiddling with a silly blue sponge to hide my staring. I notice tiny, pinkish scars on his lower abdomen, in the rough hair there. I bend at the knees to get a better look, prodding the muscled flesh even while he laughs, wondering what I'm doing. They're definitely scars.

Standing up straight, I demand to know where they came from, scowling at him in concern and curiosity.

"Tis' nothing, Blaire," he says, still laughing all nonchalant while lifting his arms to clean his sides.

"It is something." I point at him, at the area of concern. "They weren't there before. I remember seeing your body, and I know they were not there, so how did you get them?"

"Blaire..." he sighs my name.

My eyes taper as I hiss, "Tell me, Charlie, or I'll think you're hiding something from me."

That does the trick. He doesn't hold back this time. Blasé, he reminds me of the video I watched when he and James were fighting over me. "After I head-butted him, we brawled, and he came at me with a weapon."

I go cold on the spot, gawking at him in a state of disbelief. He continues washing as if this isn't a big deal, and I grab his wrist to stop him. I stutter to speak, but my brain is scrambling in a million different directions of defense. If Charlie was Maksim, I'd kill James, no thought needed. But James is my brother and my teammate. *Does that matter, though?* I'm not sure. Charlie is my lover...I care about him, so I should defend him, shouldn't I?

*But I can't hurt James, can I?*

I'm so fucking confused with the two voices in my head going at each other.

"Hey, s'all right." Charlie leans down to meet me at eye level, glittering

in diamonds of water. “Was just men fighting because we’re both in love with you. Nothing to worry about, silly chica.”

*Nothing to worry about?* I glare at him, decisive. I swear to myself that if James ever comes at him again, *he* will have something serious to worry about. I will hurt him, badly. How dare he attack Charlie when Charlie saved us—he fought for us when no one else would—and my brother paid him back by attacking him?

I finally let go of Charlie’s wrist, and the sight of his blood under my nails causes a weird tightness to form in my chest. My vision gets fuzzy. I gulp down mouthfuls of air but I can’t seem to breathe properly.

“Blaire?”

“I...I’m sorry,” I wheeze. I shove my hands under the shower flow and scrub, picking and scratching at my nails. “I-I didn’t mean to grab you like that. I-I don’t know what happened!” I snatch for the soap and scour my nails, tearing the bar to shreds. “James shouldn’t have done that... I-I shouldn’t have grabbed you...”

“Whoa, calm down.” Charlie reaches around either side of my waist to take my trembling hands. He gently lathers them with soap, washing away his blood. I watch it swirling down the drain at my feet, engrossed by his slow motions and his warm breath on my shoulder.

“That’s it. Just relax,” he says, running his fingers through mine. “Everything’s all right.”

I take deep, easy breaths, still focused on his touch. I look up over my shoulder at him through wet, scraps of my hair, wordless but desperate to apologize for hurting him. Desperate to apologize for what James did.

“S’all right,” he says again, glancing between my eyes. He wraps around me and squeezes me in an intense hug, his unshaven cheek pressed to mine. “You’re gonna have moments like this, but you’ll get through them. I’ll help you get through them.”

“But, James...” I practically gulp his name. An unwelcomed feeling of anxiety is sitting heavy in my tummy. “He attacked you... I grabbed you, Charlie... What if something bad happens?” I don’t even know what I’m asking, making no sense. I fist my hands at my sides, so I don’t grab him again, desperate to find myself.

“Nothing bad is gonna happen,” Charlie whispers promises in my ear, kissing me there. “I won’t let it.”

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# 11

When I go to bed, my anxious, strange mood plays out in a nightmare. I dream I'm in Maksim's office.

His presence chills my fucking bones as he sits there like the king of the Western World in his big office chair. His golden eyes observe me, expression dead of emotion. He lifts a hand, gesturing for me to come inside. I'm standing in the doorway, holding the frame, wrecked with nerves to see him after so long.

Reluctantly, I walk inside and lower onto the chair opposite the desk, touching my hair when he points out that it's down. I forgot to tie it up because Charlie likes my hair down.

Maksim tells me to leave it down, too, saying it looks nice. I do as I'm told, sitting here trying to relax in his company, but it's nearly impossible. He's the muse of my fear. He works at one hundred miles per hour quizzing me over my time of living with *Decena*.

*"How did he make you feel? Did he go down on you more than once? Masturbate you with his hands? Did he fuck your pussy with his tongue? Tell me everything, Blaire."* His cold, Russian voice is deep and unnerving, and I'm like a deer in headlights struggling to answer. He reiterates that he wants every last detail. He wants every fucking crumb. I don't want to tell him, but I must. He is my master.

I'm just about to spill my guts as he grabs my hair and yanks me out of his office, dragging me up the staircase. When he kicks open his bedroom door, I know what's coming. I know he's going to fuck my ass so bad I bleed for a week, then he'll whip me, and do it all over again until his appetite for my pain is satisfied.

But I don't even realize how wrong I am.

My dream shifts, transforming into something else, a metaphor of my past reality. Maksim shoves me to my knees and tells me to open my mouth, eyes blazing with corrupt desire. Tipping my head, I look up at him and open my mouth as wide as I can. He's going to make me suck him off. Big surprise.

He grabs my bottom jaw, hooking his fingers in to clamp down on my tongue. Then his other fist draws back.

My heart drops like a boulder.

He clouts me in the face, and my nose bursts open. My head whips back on impact, but he wrenches me into position on my knees. He does it again, **SMACK**, and again, **SMACK**, and again, every strike demolishing my face. My bones crack. My eyes sting and swell to the point where I cannot see anything other than shapes and colors. I gargle for breath, drowning on the copper-flavored blood clotting in the back of my throat.

“You will not think about Charlie!” Maksim shouts over his grunting strikes, and I remember what’s happening, why he’s saying this. “You will not think about Charlie!”

*No. No. No!* I won’t let this happen again. I won’t let him keep me from Charlie. I won’t let anyone keep me from Charlie. I’m his now.

“Aargh!” I scream at the top of my lungs, voice ringing off into the distance.

The dream shatters, scattering down my vision in a million pieces until I appear in my bed at Charlie’s house.

It’s silent, bar my heart roaring in my ears. I panic to touch my jaw, nose, and my eyes, to be sure nothing is broken. I’m intact. There is no blood. There is no pain.

Blowing out a deep breath, I remind myself that this is just a nightmare. It isn’t real.

*It isn’t real.*

“Morning, baby,” Charlie’s voice penetrates the silence, and my head darts down in that direction, between my legs. I’m stunned to find he’s there, half naked, crouched between my thighs. He’s kissing his way down my body, over my night vest, my chest, around the curves of my ribs, and across my hips one by one. It tickles, and my stomach quivers like a rattlesnake when he licks my navel, leaving a tepid, damp spot. He pulls off my shorts and my underwear, tossing them on the floor, and spreads my legs wide by gripping my inner thighs. His warm, wet tongue touches my clit, and I melt under him in a state of sensations, moaning, letting him drive me nuts before I’ve even opened my eyes properly. My back arches, toes bunching in the sheets, and he’s groaning like he’s never tasted anything so good.

“Blaire,” he whispers in my ear, and my head whips around scanning the room, confused by his position.

His tongue teases my swollen bud in leisurely circles, and I lose myself once more on the verge of a climax. My hips rock to ride the waves of ecstasy, grinding on Charlie's mouth. Pressure forms low in my belly, tingling. I shut my eyes, morphing into the moment, thrusting harder and harder on his tongue. I'm desperate to cum.

A gentle hand touches my face, confusing my senses. I shake it away. It touches me again.

"Baby," Charlie whispers, and I think he's chuckling. "You're dreaming."  
*Dreaming?*

Snapping out of it, I open my eyes to a slit. I'm panting like a wild dog. Everything is still, calm like the night. A haunting, silver moon streams through the splits in the drawn curtains, across the matte gray walls. I'm in Charlie's bedroom. Lamps burn on side tables, isolating the shadows. I turn up my head to squint at Charlie, trying to figure out why I feel...enraptured. Definitely enraptured. He gazes down on me, expression scorching in lust. He's stretched out across the bed on his side with his head resting in his palm, naked from the waist up. He's surveying me.

I croak his name, frowning.

He nods, smirking at me.

It takes a while to gather my bearings. I slowly recognize I'm lying on my back under the blankets, skin flushed with little orbs of sweat gathering in the dip of my throat. My heart is hammering so hard against my ribcage I'm sure Charlie can hear. And my hands are between my legs, soaking wet.

I'm pleasuring myself.

And he's been watching me.

"Nice dream?" he says, flicking up his eyebrows.

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I pant quietly through my nose, nodding to answer Charlie's question.

From what I remember, it was a nice dream. I can still feel his lips tasting the flesh between my hungry legs.

"Who were you dreaming about, hmm?" He pinches the blanket and flings it back, causing coldness to cascade all over my skin. He stares right at me, the blackness of his unruly hair and the shade of his stubble making him look darker in this light. Darker and more dangerous.

"I was dreaming about you, Charlie," I say in a dry, husky voice,

shrinking into myself for warmth.

“That’s good,” he whispers, making my nipples peak under his warm breath. “You’re only allowed to have wet dreams about me, baby.” He trains his attention on my naked body: my heavy gasping chest, breasts, and stomach. Using a single finger, he strokes some of the goose pimples on my arm, just barely touching the fine hairs there. It tickles, and not only on my arm.

I sneakily peek at his masculine frame, at the thick hair on his chest and sculpted navel, at the way those joggers rest on his narrow hips. His hair is down, the silky, black strands framing the exquisite handsomeness of his face. He looks exactly as he did in my dream: a wicked, exotic, capable man. I want to put my hands all over him, feel the fine hardness of his muscles and taste his skin on my lips.

“How are you feeling, Blaire?” he asks, catching me ogling him.

*Is that a trick question?*

He seems to read my mind, questioning if I have a headache. I shake like an amateur to motion no. For the first time in a week, I feel great.

“Perfect timing,” he says, reaching between my legs. He gently pulls one of my hands off my sex. Arousal strings across the space between us; my desire personified. He puts my fingers in his luscious mouth, groaning low and deep from the depth of his chest.

I cannot believe how turned on he looks when *I* had the wet dream. I should have them more often.

He shuts his eyes, but I can’t look away. I watch, hypnotized as he sucks all my fingers at once before paying them individual attention, swirling his sopping tongue up the sides. My stomach reels with flutters, and I twitch convulsively, unable to stay still. He chuckles under his breath, eyes flittering up to mine, burning like blue flames. “Why don’t you tell me what happened in this dream, hmm?” He kisses my palm. “Did you enjoy it?”

“It-it was a nice dream.” That’s all I’m capable of saying right now. It was mind-blowing, I think. I’m so aroused it’s crazy, but I can’t verbally pull that sentence together, not while he’s making mouth-love to my hand.

“I’ll bet it was. Your beautiful little pussy is soaked.” He lets go of my hand to grip under my left knee, fingers brushing sensitive spots on my skin. He puts my foot flat on the bed and bends my other knee so my heels are touching. I try to close my legs, but he asks me to keep them open, so I do, resting my hands on my thighs. I’ll do anything he wants right now.

“Buena niña,” he whispers, *good girl*, in Spanish, the abyss of his eyes hooding. He strokes from my knee, down my inner thigh to my groin, making my insides tingle. “Can I touch you here?”

I nod, wishing I could tell him that he doesn’t need to ask for permission. I want to be his without permission. No rules.

His fingers snake around my sex, getting closer and closer, grazing the new pubic hair. The anticipation is electric. Pressure forms low in my belly while my mouth opens to account for viscous, wild breaths. He finally peels my lips apart, splaying them open like a butterfly, and glances up at my face to see my reaction. I can’t hide it. I’ve always fancied Charlie, and he’s always known. I look at him with fierce hankering, at the ocean blueness in his eyes, incapable of breaking our connection. It’s too intense.

“Are you cold?” he asks softly, reaching for the blanket to cover my feet.

“No, I-I’m fine. I promise!” I grab his hand and put it between my legs again, urging, “Touch me.” I don’t sound like myself, but I’m not myself. When he does things like this, I become another entity. Another Blaire.

“You sure you’re up for this?” he asks, eyes fluttering through mine. “We can wait if you’re not ready, Blaire. There’s nothing to rush with us.”

I smirk and shake my head. “I want this. I want you, Charlie.”

The smile that spreads across his face...if there’s ever been a look of triumph, that’s it.

He returns to playing with me, rubbing my wet entrance with his fingers. It turns me on to such extremes I can barely hold back moaning and groaning. He removes his hand to massage the moisture on my nipple, leans down and leisurely licks it off, tonguing the peaked bud. “Hmmm, you taste so fucking good.”

“It feels so good.” I writhe about, feet arching with need.

“I’m sure it does, chica.” He catches my hazy stare, holding it as he gathers more juice from my sex and rubs it on my other nipple. His expression smolders with lust as he licks it off and tweaks my bud in his teeth. He cups under my breast and squeezes, pointing it out like a pyramid so it fits perfectly in his mouth.

I whine for more, all but begging him to make me cum. Just a little more, and I’ll tumble over the edge.

“Be patient, baby,” he whispers. His voice is rough and utterly seductive, driving my hormones crazy. He blows on my nipple, sending chills throughout every nerve ending in my body.



“Kiss me,” I say in bated breaths. Without delay, he bends to crush my mouth under his, forcing my lips apart. His sodden tongue explores my depths, massaging all over mine. His flavor is hedonistic, a blend of spicy brandy and my liquid muskiness.

High on desire, I arch into him. He cups my pussy and kneads me there, smearing in my arousal. My hips grind, turning up the heat. I reach up his muscled arms and around the backs of his solid shoulders to thrust my fingers in his thick, silky hair. I grip and pull, steering him to my satisfaction. My eyes roll when he focuses to rub my clit, long circled motions. He nuzzles across my face to my neck, near my ear. It’s a sensitive spot. I squirm about giggling because of how weird it makes me feel.

“That is the sweetest sound in the world,” he whispers, lifting his head. “Look at me, Blaire.”

I do as he asks, meeting him nose to nose, all starry-eyed. His cheeks are flushed, eyes blazing in a look of pure, inhumane want.

“You know,” he says, tipping his head, “you sound so young when you laugh. So sweet and innocent.”

I shrug, awkwardly smiling at him, stroking glossy strands of his hair out of his face. I don’t laugh much, but I also don’t pay attention to when I do.

“Smile again for me, baby,” he whispers, so I turn up my lips, forcing it. “So pretty.” He pecks my lips as if rewarding me for doing as he asked. Then his hot mouth journeys all over my body, brushing my skin with his stubble. He kisses and sucks my jawline first, then my throat, between my breasts, and down the center of my stomach to my hips, leaving tepid, wet trails. I hiss when he sucks too hard, sucking my flesh into his mouth, making areas throb. He pecks the spots after, soothing the pain, and whispers, “Perfection.”

I don’t know what he’s talking about at first. A large, rough hand sweeps up the heart of my figure, caressing his kiss trail. I gain height on my elbows to see what he sees, squeeze-blinking away the shiny spots in my vision. There’s a blotchy purple roadmap, from my neck to my pelvic line, thick bruises discoloring my pale skin.

“I’ve always wanted to bruise your skin,” he says, sounding adrift in his own mind. It gives me the chills. I try not to react, keeping my expression level. *Why would he want to bruise me?*

“Turn over.” He signals with a finger, but I hesitate, asking why. “Just turn over.” He chuckles, winking at me. “You’ll see why.”

I roll into him, mashed up in the pillows at the headboard. I get up on all

fours, intertwined in my long red hair. My legs rub together, and I feel the excessive moisture there. I'm so wet it's crazy.

"If you're uncomfortable at all, tell me," Charlie says before bending me up like a pretzel. He grabs my waist and tugs me up to elevate my hips, putting me on my elbows and knees, face buried in the pillows. "Arch your hips forward, so your sexy ass is poking right out at me." I do, and he says, "Now, spread your knees as wide as you can."

"Huh?" I turn my head to look back at him. "Why?"

"I'm gonna kiss your pussy," he says, licking his lips, "and I want lots of room."

My pulse skyrockets.

He doesn't need to ask twice. I scramble to stretch out my knees, to the point where my thighs pinch. Like this, face down, ass up, chest and face suppressed in the bed, I'm completely on display for him.

"Que aturde," he whispers, *stunning*. The bed dips when he crawls up behind, sprawling out on his front with his face direct at my decadence. Warm breaths puff on my asshole as he looks at me, taking in the view, and I'm so excited and nervous at once that I have to force myself to tense, to be still rather than wriggling involuntarily.

I flinch when he touches me, when he strokes up the backs of my thighs to massage each of my ass cheeks. It feels nice, and I notice my body relaxing. He must, too, because he strokes back down my thighs and across the backs of my knees, using the tips of his fingers. It tickles. I squeeze inside and out, desperate to hold back giggling and wiggling, but then a little finger dips in my wet opening and my control shatters. Charlie presses down on a spot inside that sends me spiraling in reaction. I squeal, feet bowing in a mixture of discomfort and rapture. A sharp nail drags down the sole of my left foot, and my toes curl to the point of cramping. I squeal again, not sure I can handle so many mysterious sensations at once.

Charlie eventually pulls out, and my arousal drips down my thighs. I hear him sucking, moaning as he does. "Your pussy is so fucking beautiful, and you taste, *hmmm*, so fucking delicious." He licks up over my clit, across my asshole, and my entire body bows now, humming in the power of euphoria.

He plays with me there using his tongue, circling my ass ring. I feel it in the core of my belly, the itchy, tickly sensation. I feel how dirty an act it is, but I like it. I want more. And he gives me more. His sopping tongue slides back down, spreading my folds, nudging my opening.

I grab my head stuffed in the pillows, fighting to deal.

“Fuck, baby, I wish you could see how pretty you are down here,” he groans in a muffled voice, spearing me a few times more before licking his way to my clit, slavering over me. Gripping my ass in both hands, he spreads me open and works my clit with his tongue, teasing me, turning me into a skittish mess of sensations. The heaviness in my stomach builds, magnifying, and I whimper in the pillows desperate to cum. That’s when Charlie molds his mouth around my entire pussy and sucks on my clit, flicking it with his tongue.

My world erupts.

I explode supernova, vision flashing silver. My senses go black, and every muscle and limb in my body spasms. I don’t even feel the pressure of his finger slipping down my channel again, too lost in my orgasm. It’s fuzzy and decadent. My head is swimming in a sea of endorphins. And then Charlie sends me flying through another worldly portal by touching that button deep inside my body. I buck forward, scrambling because it’s so intense. I turn over on my side, screaming, everything in me curling: toes, knees, hands... My legs kick out, panicking. “Oh. My. God!”

Charlie steps off the bed to continue finger-fucking me, forcing me to ride the waves of elation so hard I’m sure I pee myself. It squirts out everywhere, all over the sheets.

“Yeah, you like that, don’t you?” He bends over from standing at the edge of the bed and slams his lips on mine, consuming me in a wicked, filthy kiss. My legs wrap around him, forcing proximity. His fingers pull out of my orgasm-throbbing pussy, and I grind like a cat in heat. I kick his joggers down, toeing them at his knees to get them off. His cock juts free, landing on my sensitive clit. I moan and shudder under the soft impact, rubbing my soaking sex on him, on every bulging vein.

“You want this, don’t you, baby?” he says, grabbing my face in both hands to make me look at him. We steal this second, eye to eye, both panting like wild animals. Sweat beads above his eyebrows, and his temples are throbbing. He’s holding onto his self-control by a thread.

“I want you.” I tie my arms around his neck and pull him even closer, so he’s crushing me in the mattress with his chest hair chafing my nipples. I kiss his mouth so hard I draw blood, basking in the copper flavor.

“This will hurt,” he says softly, gasping between words, “but we’ll go slowly. I don’t want to hurt you more than necessary.”

I've heard him say that before.

A weird ringing sets off in my ears as I drift in my mind, hovering between memories. *"Don't think too much. I'm not in a rush. We'll go slowly."* He said that when he took me from Maksim and fucked my ass. When he didn't care about me. When he was using me.

"Blaire?" My name echoes somewhere from above as fingers caress my cheeks. "Blaire, baby, you with me?"

"Yes." My voice comes out breathless and lost. I blink a few times to find myself. "I...I'm here."

He lets go of my face to grip my calves and bends my legs so my knees are to my chest. He reaches between us to fist his vein swollen cock, positioning it at my entrance. I hold his formidable, blue gaze as he smears himself in my orgasm, creating a warm, connecting sensation only skin against skin can create.

Then, he pushes in.

And something in my brain flips.

# 12

“No!” I yell, and shove at Charlie’s chest with my fists, teeth clenched using all my inner strength. “Stop, Charlie! Stop!”

“Blaire, calm down.” He snatches for my wrists and manages to grab them, tensing his grip as I struggle. Our bodies rub against each other in a tussle, slipping and sliding in sweat. He grunts with the effort to pin my hands on the bed above my head, the muscles in his shoulders contracting. “What’s—agh, calm down! What’s wrong?”

“Just stop!” I try to kick him away now, preventing him from entering me, but his body is a powerful mountain of muscle. “Please, don’t do this!”

“**No one is allowed your virginity.**” Maksim said Charlie could do anything but this. Maksim said Charlie is not allowed to take my virginity.

“I-I don’t want this,” I say, stuffing my face in the pillow to the side so I can’t see him. “Stop! Just stop! Stop! Stop! Stop!”

I drift into the distance of my mind where it’s safe, zoning out of reality. Emotionless and detached, I stand before my master, fold my hands behind my back, and remain silent with respect.

“Blaire, baby, talk to me! What’s going on?”

Maksim is dressed in a gray suit against a white shirt, looking at me through those terrifying, golden eyes. He wanders back and forth in quiet muse, until he says, “**You are my little pet.**”

“Yes,” I whisper.

“Yes? Yes, what? Can you hear me, Blaire? Blaire, look at me!”

“**You’re mine. We are each other’s.**” Maksim walks up to me with virile poise, his shoes clinking on the buffed floors. “**Don’t let anyone come between us, My Little Pet.**”

“I won’t,” I say.

“**Who do you belong to?**”

“You. I’ve always belonged to you.”

“Belonged? Blaire, tell me what the fuck is happening!”

My master smiles in a rarity of affection, and in this moment, a sense of

dark tranquility comes over me. I must have been good because he is pleased.  
I smile back.

“Fuck, if you don’t fucking focus—Dios te ayude, Blaire! Look at me!”

“***You are to fulfill Charlie’s needs without ruining your virtue,***” my master says. His friend and I can do everything else, but we can’t fuck. Not properly.

“I understand,” I say.

I hear my name being yelled from above. Directing my eyes, I stare vacantly at Charlie, at his mouth moving in slow motion. A vein in his forehead pulses while the muscles in his neck swell and tick.

He shattered the world as I knew it out of pure revenge. Nothing more. He didn’t care.

“I…I’m not allowed to do this.”

“You are.” Charlie rests his forehead on mine so we’re eye to eye. I can feel his warm breath on my lips; sense the desperate urgency in his body. “Just focus on me. I’m here.”

“*I love you, Blaire.*”

“*I love you, Blaire.*”

He repeats his declaration, causing a little spot in my chest to squeeze. My chin quivers, and a lump forms in my throat. I battle to block him out. The way he makes me feel…it isn’t real.

“***He’s been using you, you stupid girl. Whatever you feel for him isn’t real, and he doesn’t care about you either. He’s been using you to get back at me.***”

“Don’t think about him, baby. Think about us and what we have. That’s it, look at me.”

I blink at Charlie, cold and numb from within.

“That’s it,” he whispers, pecking my lips. His grip on my wrists loosens as he reaches to hold my jawline, to caress me there with his thumbs. “Just train your mind on us.”

“You can’t have me like this.” My Russian accent comes out thick and distant. “You can do anything else, just not this.”

“No!” His face tightens, eyes tapering with loss of control. “Get him out of your fucking head!”

“You can hurt me if you want,” I say, placing my hands on his forearms. “You can hit me, whip me, fuck my ass again—you can make me bleed if that’s what you desire—but you can’t have anything else.”

The hairs on Charlie's arms stand up razor sharp.

I smile at him, eyes gleaming with a foreign entity. "You want to hurt me, don't you? Everyone wants to hurt me for pleasure." I frown, reflecting. "Do it. You have permission, Charlie Decena."

"What's happening inside you?" he asks, eyes flaring in despair. "Tell me. Tell me and I can help you."

"No one can help me." I shut my eyes to whisper, "It's too late."

***"You would tell me if he tries anything with you, wouldn't you, My Little Pet?"***

My stomach twists, disloyalty and shame scolding my soul. I didn't tell him. I lied to my master—because of Charlie.

My senses narrow, Maksim's conditioning coming to life. I feel it in my every essence, burning, bubbling. It's the black switch flicking on.

"You, ruined everything!" I swipe for Charlie's face, and he hisses, squinting to protect his eyes. "Get off me!" I slap out at him, screaming at the top of my lungs, "Khuy tebe! Khuy tebe!" *Fuck you! Fuck you!* Wrapping my legs around his waist, I squeeze him between my thighs, determined to suppress him, but I can't. He's too strong.

So, I punch him.

I clock his jaw, whipping his head to the left. He scuffles to catch my wild hands, groaning with frustration. "Stop this, Blaire! Stop!"

"Aargh!" I pull up my knees between us and push, straining with all my might. My skin slides against his where we're both covered in a veil of sweat, but I keep pushing. "Let me go! I am not yours!" I manage to slip out of his hold on my wrists and punch him in the mouth again.

"Fuck!" Charlie maneuvers to hook his strong arms under my legs, behind my knees, and he folds me over. I gasp, winded with my knees crushed to my chest. He cuffs a hand around my throat and wrings, draining the air from my lungs.

"Stop this, now," he warns, buzzing on anger. Blood slithers down his mouth, snaking around the stubbly curve of his chin.

My heart speeds up, panic pumping oxygen through my body. I claw at Charlie's hand for breath, gaping with dread.

"You're mine," he says through gritted teeth, and that's when I feel him nudge at my entrance. He thrusts his powerful hips, and my sex stretches, burning with friction.

"No"—I choke—"stop it!" I whack his shoulders, back and forth

grabbing his hand on my throat. “Stop, please! Please, don’t do this to me!”

“I’ll never stop when it comes to you.” There is fire in his eyes as he takes what he’s been craving for so long. The thick column of his cock opens me up to new depths, and I cry out in agony, barely audible because he’s crushing my windpipe.

“Just relax your body.” He moans every word while his eyes glitter under sapphire lust. “Focus on one thing. Focus. Just fucking focus!” I think he’s talking to himself. He sounds adrift.

“Charlie, please don’t,” I hiss in pain. My lower belly pangs like a whole fist is being shoved up me. I turn my hips from left to right, but he goes deeper. “No! I said stop!”

Halfway in, he pauses moving, radiating heat like a furnace. The muscles in his temples beat, evidence of his own struggle. “It’s done.” He puffs out, sweat gliding down the sides of his face and his veiny neck. “Eres mío. Everything you are is mine now.”

I feel numb, searching my mind for *his* voice—I don’t know what to do—but he’s gone.

He’s been abandoned.

He’s dead.

I. Killed. Him.

“No!” I break into hiccupping sobs. “I’m sorry!”

Charlie lets go of my throat and slips both arms under me, one around my back, the other behind my head. He squeezes me in a tight embrace, cramming my face in his neck. Skin to skin, there’s only sweat between us. I feel it all, the power of his need and affection for me. It seeps in my cracks, threatening to break me.

“No! I-I can’t take this!”

“I love you,” he says in my ear, making the spot tickle with his warm breath. “I love every fucking inch of you from the scars on your back, down to the last strand of hair on your head.” His endearments chip away at my mental wall, splaying my heart open.

My eyes burn, throat swelling so much it hurts. Everything he’s ever made me feel rushes in like a tsunami, smashing down my barrier.

“Do you understand that, hmm?” He kisses the side of my face, holding his lips there for a while. “I love you...I love you so much, Blaire,” he repeats himself, programming me to believe him. “Your darkness...your light...I love it all.”



“No one loves me.” My voice crackles deeper as I whimper, “Not really. No one wants me for me.”

“I do love you, Blaire,” he says on my skin, and swears, “I want all of you.”

I turn my head to look at Charlie, touching his nose with mine. I hunt through his eyes for myself, certain I’m in there somewhere. I’m lost in there somewhere.

“Who do you belong to?” he asks the depth of my soul, looking right at me without blinking. “Hmm? Me, that’s who. You belong to me, baby. And I’m gonna take care of you, love you, and keep you safe. That’s my job and my promise.”

Past moments flash in my mind; when I first met him in Maksim’s office; when he first kissed me, touched me, fucked my ass; when he said he couldn’t imagine a single day without me in it; when he first told me that he loved me.

“You stole me from everything I knew.”

“That’s right.” He pauses between words, adding to the effect. “I stole you because I wanted you. I’m keeping you because I love you.”

Lips quivering, I shake my head.

“Yes,” he says. “I do, Blaire.”

Tears seep out the corners of my eyes, streaking down my cheeks. I stare at Charlie, the last shred of my numb control snapping.

“Who do you belong to, Blaire?”

“I-I belong to you now?” I snivel between words. “And, you’ll keep me? You won’t let me go, will you? I don’t want to be on my own, Charlie.”

“You’ll never be alone, no matter what. I’ll never let you go.” He tips his head, consuming my everything with that starving look in his eyes. “Where is *he*, Blaire? Where is Maksim?”

I glance away, then back at him, away and back at him. He kisses my damp eyes one by one, then my nose and then my mouth, coating my lips in his metallic flavored blood. “Where is Maksim, hmm? Tell me, baby.”

“Maksim is dead.”

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I belong to Charlie Decena now, forever.

He broke everything I believed in.

He will take care of me, love me, adore me, and keep me safe. He swears

it as he pumps his powerful hips, working his way in my burning, narrow passage. He will find my brother and keep him safe. He promises that, too. “I will do anything and everything for you, you’ll see.”

Knees to my chest, crushed under him in the mattress, I hold onto his muscled waist like I’m holding on for my life, protected in his arms. It hurts—my body and my soul—and I sob through the whole experience. I’m not sad. I’m anew, and I don’t know if I can handle it.

“No matter what you hear or feel from *him*, it’s not real,” Charlie says. He pulls out nearly all the way and thrusts back in another inch, slowly filling me up.

I scream so hard my throat tears, fighting to deal with the raw burning. It’s such a snug fit. I’m not sure I can take all of him.

“Relax.” He cups my face in both hands and holds us mouth to mouth, so I’m looking up at him in pure desperation. “Just relax, baby.”

“It hurts,” I sob on his mouth, my face soaked in tears.

“I know,” he rasps softly. “But it’ll get better, I promise.” Sealing his lips completely over mine, he swallows my sobs.

I kiss him back through my whimpering, anchoring myself to him. He gazes at me in a moment of connection with a storm of emotions brewing in his eyes. I wrap my fingers around his veiny wrists to hold on, and that’s when he pushes in all the way, making me gasp in anguish. His pubic bone hits mine, balls crushed against my asshole. The burning in my channel turns into a full-on, sore blaze. I bury my face in the crook of Charlie’s neck and bite down on his shoulder muscle, shaking from the pain.

“The worst is over,” he says in my ear, kissing me there. “Just breathe.”

I do breathe. It’s all I can focus on. In through my nose, out through my mouth. I can smell Charlie’s musky, aromatic fragrance, and the sweet tint of sex in the air. It’s heady, making me feel floaty and high in the aftermath of breaking.

Charlie begins to ripple his muscled hips, so his pubic bone stimulates my clit. I tie my feet around his ankles, readying for the agony.

But it doesn’t come.

What does come is powerful beyond words and feelings. Heat, and heavy tingles deep in my belly. My breaths start to come harder, heart rate climbing. I blink up at the ceiling through damp lashes, morphing into bodily sensations.

“Charlie,” I gasp. “Charlie, what-what’s happening?”

“That’s it, baby, let go.” He notices the change in me and gradually picks up the pace, watching me as he does. He grunts with every pump, soft and slow at first, getting faster and faster, and faster, until I’m bouncing between the mattress and his solid body. Skin smacks skin. Every propel forces me to meet his magic. When the first gale hits me, I wrench my eyes shut, screaming and clawing down his waist. My vision blasts with stars, blissful agony rushing like a hurricane. I squeal and squirm, trying to figure out what’s happening. This is unlike anything else he’s made me feel before.

And just when I think it’s too powerful, I realize it’s nothing compared to what’s about to happen.

His cock somehow thickens, enlarging in my channel. The muscles in his body tense, throbbing with tension. He buries balls deep, so hard it takes my breath, and curls his hips in wide circles. It sends me crazy with spasms, a blast—a wave of power gushing out of me. I try to buck away, but I can’t move. I’m small and helpless, pinned under Charlie. Suffocating, I scream his name, begging him to let me go. “Charlie! I-I can’t breathe!”

His weight lifts, and I panic-roll to the side gasping for my life, forcing him to pull out of me. I can’t see anything for a second. It’s pitch dark. I reach out for something to steady the ceaseless buzzing, grabbing a clump full of the sheets. My hand is trembling. My heart is beating too hard. My head is rushing.

Charlie’s voice is in the distance repeating my name. It comes closer and closer, and then I feel him panting on my cheek. “*Maldita sea*, will you answer me?”

“I-I’m all right,” I wheeze, holding out a shaky hand to keep him at bay. I’m burning up, and he’s scorching with heat.

I brush his chest hair as I withdraw my hand to clutch my own chest, sprawled across the bed with one foot hanging off the edge, numb from feeling. Well, everything is numb except for the buzzing. It’s like...the ecstasy of heroin multiplied ten times. It’s so...exhilarating.

Charlie grips the back of my neck and pulls me upright, man-handling my limp body. My head whirls. A cold glass presses to my lips. Water. *Hmmm*. It tastes divine, fresh and cool on my tongue.

“Slow sips,” Charlie says, but I can’t resist. I gulp greedily, escaping the dangerous sex coma he nearly put me in. It seeps out the corners of my mouth, dripping off my chin and onto my chest, snaking down my belly. When I’ve had enough, I push the glass away. Charlie puts it on the side

cabinet, eyes trained on me the entire time.

I plonk back on the bed for space but grimace as my elbow sinks in a warm puddle on the mattress. “Ewww, what is that?”

“Don’t worry about that.” Charlie pinches my chin between his finger and thumb, studying my face with a frown. “Are you all right? Do you feel sick? Lightheaded?”

“No. I-I told you...” I tug out of his grasp, struggling to get my words out.

He presses fistful hands into the mattress on either side of my waist so we’re nearly face to face.

“Charlie, I am all right. It was intense, and you’re just so...big, you-you were crushing me. I couldn’t breathe.”

He kneels at my feet, head turned up staring at me with palpable concern. “I thought I really hurt you. I thought it was too soon.”

“Nearly killing me with suffocation isn’t exactly hurting me, but”—I gulp—“it crosses a line.” I recoil as I remember what happened, how I freaked with Maksim’s conditioning setting in.

“What’s wrong?” Charlie asks, lifting a hand to touch my face.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper for attacking him, just like James did. I don’t know what else to tell him other than apologize. Because of my darkness, he had to force me to break through.

“What are you sorry for, hmm?”

My head hangs. I look at the needle marks on my inner elbow, shrugging. “I don’t know what happened.”

“Hey”—he turns up my face, so I can see he’s smiling softly at me—“you’ve nothing to be sorry for. I always knew this might be hard, but s’all right. I told you, didn’t I, I love you, Blaire. All of you. Even your darkness.”

The squeeze sensation in my chest aches. I search his face for truth, holding onto the silence for as long as I can. Charlie doesn’t always need to speak to me. Sometimes, when he looks at me, his silence is all I need.

“You promise?” My voice comes out fragile and scared because I am scared. What happens when he realizes I’m a vile person?

“I promise. I swear on everything.” He takes my hands and curls them in his, as if hiding an essence of me from myself. “Do you want to tell me what happened exactly?”

My shoulders arch forward, clamming up. I should tell him. We can’t hide things from each other if we’re going to be together. But I don’t want him to know that side of me.

“Can we lie down?” I ask, retreating from the topic of conversation.

He sighs in a state of defeat, but stands without pressuring me. “Sure we can.”

“We should change the sheets,” I say, peering back. “They’re all wet, Charlie.”

He slips a hand behind my knees, the other around my shoulders, and lifts to bundle me in his arms. “We’ll sleep on my side.”

“Are...are you mad at me?”

“Course not,” he says, rounding the bed. He stares onward, never meeting my eyes. “You’ll open up to me when you feel ready—I hope.”

I don’t share his hope. I doubt I’ll ever be ready to bare my soul to him. *That* side of me is too dark and empty, no matter how innocent he believes I am. And I don’t want to be *her* anymore. I don’t want to talk about *her*. I don’t want to think about *her*. I want to forget *My Little Pet* ever existed. And I can. With Charlie, I can be whoever I want to be.

# 13

When I open my eyes, it's morning.

Blushing sunshine streams in through the gaps in the curtains, across the polished wooden floors. My cheek itches, pressed to Charlie's chest. We're in bed. I'm sprawled out on top of his warm body as if we haven't moved an inch from last night, but I know we have moved. The sheets feel different. The blanket draped over my waist is rougher with a square cotton pattern. He smells freshly showered, too, with his natural musk toning a soapy fragrance.

He's playing with lengths of my hair, making my scalp tickle. His other hand is tucked under the blanket, fingers tracing a few scars on my back. Strangely, it doesn't bother me that he's touching my scars. That's when I notice I feel different. More...relaxed and easy.

I croak to clear my raw throat, lifting my head to look at him through squinting, puffy eyes. Dawn glows on his handsome, bronze face, scorching in his blue eyes. His stubble is shorter, shading his square jawline.

So, he's had a shower, a mild shave, and changed the bedding, all without stirring me last night?

It's crazy how comfortable I am in his presence.

"Morning, baby." His raspy, Latino voice breaks the serene silence, and my eyes drop to his mouth, watching him speak. "Feeling better?"

I nod with embarrassment. I can't believe he nearly suffocated me while screwing me.

"What time is it?" I untie my feet from around his, internally wincing. I'm sore and swollen between my legs.

He stops playing with my hair and reaches over for his big silver watch on the side cabinet. "Just past six," he says, dropping his watch. "Why?"

I need to call Robert, that's why. It's D-day. James is still missing, so I will have to go back soon.

The thought turns my stomach inside out with dread.

"No reason." I lie back down, sighing, hating that I might have to leave today. I really, really don't want to go. I like being with Charlie. "How long

have I been asleep?”

“You slept the whole night away. But that’s okay.” His warm lips press to my forehead. “You obviously needed it. You are still recovering.”

“Hmmm,” I hum, blinking sleepily. A few moments longer really won’t matter. I’ll get up soon to call Robert.

“Are you sore, Blaire?”

“Sore?”

“Yeah. Does your pussy hurt?”

My eyes enlarge with last night vividly flashing in my mind: the seizure of orgasms he forced me to endure. I open to speak but words don’t form on my tongue.

“Blaire?”

“Erm...yes, I’m a little sore,” I say.

“I’m not surprised, chica. Your pussy is as tight as your perfect little ass.”

“Have you been asleep all night, too?” I say in a rush, to steer the conversation away from my humiliation. My cheeks are baking.

“No, I haven’t been asleep all night.” He chuckles, amused by my embarrassment. “I had supper, took a shower, changed the sheets, and watched you sleep.”

*He watched me sleep?* That’s weird.

“How did you change the sheets while I was in bed?” I’m curious about how he moved me without waking me.

“Hmm, well, you’re very tiny and easy to move,” he teases, tickling my nose with a piece of my hair. “I set you up on the couch so you were near me while I ate.”

“You should have woken me, Charlie.”

“You looked so young and sweet, I couldn’t.”

I arch a brow, looking up at him. “You say that like it’s a facade, me looking young and sweet.”

“It is, isn’t it?” He grins, reaching under the blanket with both hands to tickle me like crazy. “It’s a little trick of yours, *tramposa*.”

“Charlie!” I squeal and giggle, wiggling about to escape his fingers digging in my ribs. “Charlie! No, stop!” Tears of pleasurable pain swim in my eyes, and moving about so rigorously hurts my sex. But it feels good to laugh.

My bladder screams for release. I panic to unfold myself from around Charlie before I pee myself. I stand off the bed, noticing there’s something

dry and sticky between my legs, matted in the fine pubic hair.

Charlie leans up on one elbow, dark locks dripping over his eyes. He frowns at me. “Where are you going?”

“I need the toilet,” I say, hugging my naked breasts as I jog into the bathroom. I feel him watching me, eyes boring into my scarred, naked back as my hair flicks from side to side. I pull the sliding doors closed for some privacy, flip the latch, and lower onto the toilet.

When I’m done, I snag some tissue paper to wipe myself dry, stomach churning at the sight of blood soaking through. I know there’s nothing wrong. Whenever Maksim used to fuck virgins, they all bled. But still, it’s gross.

I try not to look at it.

I flush and wash up at the vanity sinks, splashing my face and under my arms—until I see my reflection in the mirror. It’s...extremely savage. My freckles are in place, skin still ghostly white. But I’m covered in circular bruises from the heart of my throat, through my breasts, over my navel to my pubic line. There are dark fingerprint marks on my neck from where Charlie strangled me, too, and my breasts are so sensitive, covered in purple blotches. I touch them one by one, pressing the soft flesh with my fingers to feel how tender every mark is.

Charlie said he’s always wanted to bruise my skin. I want to know why, but at the same time, I’m too nervous to ask.

Trying to ignore the state of my body, I wash Charlie’s cum from between my legs, splashing water and soap all over the place. My sex lips are thicker, and my entrance is burning like a motherfucker. I hold my hands under the icy flow, recoiling as his seed swirls down the plughole with streaks of red. My virginity.

That’s probably why I feel so different today. My virginity is finally gone. All those months of Charlie and Maksim battling for it, and now it’s just gone.

I couldn’t be happier.

“Blair, shall we get dressed and go down for breakfast? After, we’ll take a bath, yeah?”

A bath with Charlie? *Yes, please.*

“Sure,” I say aloud so he can hear me. I can hold off on asking to call Robert for a while longer. If I must leave today, at least I’ll know I made every moment with Charlie count. “I’m coming.”

“I have an email I need you to translate for me, too, if you will? Nic



needs it done urgently.” The sliding doors shake on their hinges as Charlie tugs on the handles. “Why have you locked the doors?”

“I’m just cleaning up,” I say, flicking my hands dry. “And sure, I’ll translate the—”

“Unlock the doors, now,” Charlie cuts me off, whacking the pane.

I twist the squeaky faucet to shut off the water flow and unlock the sliding doors. Charlie yanks them open and casts a wary glance around the bathroom, focusing for too long on the mirrored cabinet above the sink. His eyes land on me, and he frowns, studying my face.

He’s wearing a pair of well-fitted jeans, tanned boots, and a red, v-neck sweater, plus a silver watch clasped around his left wrist. Red is his color. It stands out well against his bronze skin, and the contrast of his inky hair pulled back in a messy ponytail.

“What are you doing?” I say, wrapping my arms around myself. I feel exposed being naked when he’s fully dressed.

“Why did you lock the doors?”

I scowl. “I just told you, I was washing up.”

“You’ve been here a week and have never locked the doors before.” He strolls in past me, checking in the bath tub and near the toilet. I follow him with my eyes, wondering what the fuck he’s doing. His back muscles bunch under his sweater, evidence of his suddenly edgy mood.

He comes back up to me, scrutinizing my face again.

“What are you looking for?”

“Don’t lock the doors anymore, Blaire,” he points in my face, “and I mean it.”

“Why?”

“Because...” he says. “I just told you so.”

He just told me so, huh?

I cross my arms and tilt my head, squaring up to him. “Maksim used to let me have the privacy of locking the door when I peed, you know?”

His jaw twitches, as do the muscles in his chest. He’s annoyed, but I don’t care. I won’t have this, him dominating his control over me.

“What do you think I’m doing, Charlie? Raiding your medicine cabinet for drugs?”

He doesn’t confirm or deny my mockery, and my eyes flash with madness.

“You do think that?!”

“No, I just...after Andres...”

“I am not your damn brother! I would never willingly take drugs!” I narrow a finger at the space between us, angry that my hand is shaking. “I’m not that kind of person. I don’t even like drinking alcohol because it impairs the mind, so how dare you accuse me of...”

He doesn’t say anything, and it pisses me off royally, like he doesn’t believe me or something.

“Fuck you,” I hiss. “Go eat breakfast and have a bath by yourself, and find someone else to translate your damn email.” I shoulder him out of the way, knocking him back a step. He snatches at my wrist, but I spin around and shove him up against the tiled wall, one arm anchored over his chest. “Stop with the dominance, Charlie. I won’t stand for it,” I warn with head tipped back, so we’re staring right at each other. “I’m not your toy at your disposal to control. You can’t stop me from locking doors, and you definitely can’t grab me up, so just stop.”

He starts to argue but pauses, the vein in his forehead pumping. I won’t back down from this. I’m not one of his past passives. And the only person who could ever control me was Maksim, and he’s dead.

Governing the tension, a loud buzzing comes from the closet and both our heads whip in that direction. Charlie grunts, evidently recognizing what it is. I step back, examining him. He touches his mouth and flexes his fingers as if trying to hide his physical reaction to the noise.

“What is that?”

He doesn’t reply to my question and steam practically blows out of my ears.

“Charlie, answer me. What the hell is that?”

He side-glances me, sighing to say, “It’s the cell phone you had in the bag.”

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Dread consumes me like an abyss, swallowing me whole without mercy. I panic telling Charlie to get me that mobile phone while my head whizzes between him and the closet.

He tries to calm my nerves by swearing it’s okay, sidestepping me every time I try to go around him. “You’ll call them back, say Maksim’s body will be here in five days, and everything will be all right, Blaire. Just relax before

you make yourself sick.”

“It won’t be all right!” I yell, storming around to pace the bathroom. I rake my fingers through my hair and pull at the strands, horrified. “I-I was told to call in a week. They never said they’d call me! Something must’ve happened. Has the phone buzzed before today? Has it been more than a week since I came back?”

“No, baby, it’s a week to the day.” Charlie grabs my arm and pulls me close, ignoring my resistance. “Hush now. Just calm down.” His strong arms wrap around me, using one of his hands to stroke up and down my back, soothing my anxiety. It’s working. The tension drains away, and I lean into his warmth with my forehead on his chest, melting against his body.

But then the buzzing rings out again and I feel sick, stomach churning to heave.

“Something bad has happened. They’re going to hurt James...I know it!”

“They won’t,” Charlie insists, giving me a gentle squeeze. “Believe me, they won’t harm him beyond what he can handle. He’s all the leverage they have on you.”

I frown in his chest, thinking he could be right. If Robert kills James, there’s nothing to stop me from going after him. And I will go after him. I will hammer that motherfucker to the wall before taking him apart with a meat cleaver.

Charlie lets me go and disappears into the closet, leaving me standing here cold and exposed by myself, drowning in dark ideas of what Robert could be doing to James right now: whipping him or raping him, just like Maksim used to. It is unlikely Robert would kill him. But torturing someone is worse than killing them. I know. It lasts longer, and the after effects are dramatic.

I cover my face with both hands, out of my element. I don’t panic. Maksim conditioned the emotion out of me.

*Charlie conditioned it back into you.*

The fact makes me angry. Charlie makes me angry—sometimes. Before him, situations like this were child’s play to me. Now, they’re my living hell.

From in the closet, I again hear numerous electronic **beeps**. I figure it’s a vault or something, where Charlie had my bracelet and where he’s been hiding the phone Robert gave me. I’m just about to stalk up behind him to see for sure, but he returns, clothes in hand. He rushes to dress me in a black suede outfit: saggy joggers that he double ties at the waist so they don’t fall

down, a matching oversized hoodie, and new trainers.

“Right, listen to me, Blaire”—standing up straight, he cups my face in large hands and makes me look up at him, at the severity of his eyes—“you will call and tell *them* I’ve only just agreed to lift the sanctions. You couldn’t ask for Maksim’s body before today because I’ve been proving difficult on the sanctions alone.” I nod with everything he says, barely registering. I just need the phone. I just need to make sure James is okay.

Charlie has me reiterate the plan, and I do—or, I try to. I can’t help stuttering.

“Focus!” he bites out, trying to mentor me, shaking my head in his hold to command my resolve. “Focus, and tell me what you have to say.”

I grip his wrists, battling with my composure to slow down. My words come out clearer, in order. I go over it all, adding, “And it’s going to take five days to fly Maksim’s body back from Mexico, right?”

“That’s it. Good girl.” He forces a smile, preserving his worry. “Now, stay calm, make the call, and then it’s done, all right? Don’t get yourself worked up.”

I nod a couple of times, taking the phone he passes. It weighs a ton in my hand; the pivotal factor of everything. I dash out of the bathroom, through the bedroom, and out onto the balcony top. I can’t risk Charlie listening in, so I yank the doors shut, catching a glimpse of him exiting the room.

My composure evaporates the second he’s gone. I fiddle with my mouth, picking at my lips.

*Don’t panic.*

I tell myself it’s okay, looking out over the balcony railing to train my thoughts. The only thing that makes me happy and calm is Charlie, so I conjure up phantom images of us sitting out here, arm in arm lounging on the rattan couch. *It’s a chilly spring morning, white mist hovering above the grass. We’re sipping coffee, enjoying each other’s silence.*

My heart hurts at the idea. I let my head hang. This is all I want, easy happiness and Charlie. How hard must I fight to get it and keep it?

The phone buzzes in my hand, and I nearly drop it, fumbling to swipe the screen to answer. Exotic music beats in the background when I put the speaker to my ear, tangled with eastern European accents.

“Sekret,” I whisper, frowning to listen.

“Blaire?” Robert drawls over the background music.

“Yes.”

“Oh, good. I was wondering when you were going to call and explain why Charlie Decena butchered my men.”

*How does he know that?*

As if reading my mind, Robert confesses Charlie called to gloat about skinning his minions. “Lucky I had a secret password attached to this number, isn’t it? Lucky I have ensured your loyalty, isn’t it?”

I’m not surprised Charlie called to torment him. If the tables were turned, I would have done the same.

“He took the phone upon my arrival,” I say, glancing in the bedroom through the balcony doors. Empty. “He must’ve chanced calling to see if you’d speak.” I don’t bother offering an explanation as to why his men are dead, or an apology. What did he expect when his lackeys delivered me to the leader of the Los Zetas house? Coffee and cake? They know Charlie is armed up to the eyeballs with men and weapons. They must’ve known they were as good as dead.

“Hmmm, sounds plausible.” Robert grumbles, waffling on about his men and how sad he is that they’re gone. “No matter. I’ll just add the treachery to the list of reasons why Charlie Decena deserves to die.”

A channel of darkness comes over me, lips coiling against my teeth. He can try to kill Charlie, but he’ll need to go through me first.

“Your week is up, girl, so fill me in. I don’t have long, so make it quick.”

*Suits me.*

I repeat all Charlie told me to say, including the fact that Maksim’s body will be here in five days. “He’s being flown back from Mexico.” The thought suddenly petrifies me. I wonder if I’ll see him. I wonder how I’ll feel if I see him.

Ashamed, probably. Anxious. Scared.

“Ahhh, you work quickly. Good—no, amazing work!” The background music fades like he’s covering the speaker. “What about the sanctions?”

“He’s going to lift them.”

“Perfect!” he shouts with glee, gobbling up our bullshit. “Ohhh, I should send you out on missions more often. You’re more efficient than half of my men.”

His arrogant stupidity surprises me. Doesn’t he realize my mission has only been accomplished because Charlie loves me? If he were anyone else, I’d have had to battle to get the sanctions lifted and retrieve Maksim’s body. It wouldn’t have been this easy.

Robert is chuckling to no ends, buttering himself in endearments. “I am happy. Very, very happy, Blaire. See what happens when one has a good leader, yes?”

I snort. *Mudak.*

“Now, run along and tell Decena you are leaving, that you will return in five days to collect Maksim’s body.”

“What?!” I gasp down the speaker, irrationally angry and terrified simultaneously. “But, why can’t I stay here until—”

“Do you want me to tell *James* why you can’t stay there until Maksim’s body arrives? I’m certain you understand how the message will be translated.”

I shut my eyes in defeat, heart breaking at the mere thought of leaving Charlie again. I already suspected this might happen, but hearing it...

“Didn’t think so,” Robert says, ordering me to meet his men at an address in the London Docks at four o’clock this afternoon. “Do you know the place?”

“I’m certain I can find it.”

“Excellent! Ohhh, this girl is just brilliant,” he says to someone in his company, adding that he will introduce us when I’ve returned. “I will see you shortly thereafter four o’clock, to welcome my most esteemed operative.”

“Sure,” I say, sounding conquered. “Whatever.”

# 14

I hang up on Robert and lower onto the outdoor rattan couch, bested by defeat. I watch the cool, autumn sun touch the tree branches that surround Charlie's house, thinking about James and all he's been through.

In my mind's eye, I see the scars on his back that mirror my own. I hear his cries of agony echoing around my head. I feel his desperation for Maksim to *stop*. Now, he's probably begging Robert and his men to *stop*. He's probably begging for me to save him before it's too late.

I don't want to reflect on this, but I must. If I don't focus on James, I'm not sure I will commit to doing Robert's bidding anymore. I really, really don't want to leave Charlie. The need to stay is so strong. Almost stronger than the need to save my brother.

How can I put an end to this? How the fuck can I ensure my brother's safety and my life with Charlie without returning to Robert?

I fling the mobile on the couch and knead my temples just as the balcony doors open. The purpose of my life walks across the creaking decking, holding a steaming cup. "All done?" he says, sitting next to me.

I nod, even though I am not nearly done. I have to go. We have to say goodbye—again.

"I made you a coffee, baby." He gestures with it. "Breakfast is nearly ready, too, so I hope you're hungry. Eliza is cooking up a feast."

The fresh morning breeze carries the bitter scent of coffee, reigniting the memory I had of us a moment ago, out here arm in arm on a frosty morning. I look up at Charlie, devastation in my eyes. I feel like all our moments are stolen, nothing long-lasting. It hurts.

He puts the cup down on the table in front of us. "What is it?"

"I have to go back." My voice comes out choked and obviously frightened, but I am frightened of being without him. While I'm one of the strongest people even I know, the idea of being without Charlie terrifies me. I grip my throat to rub away the growing ache, whispering, "He-he said I have to go back today by four o'clock this afternoon."

Charlie's arm slips around my shoulders as he leans in to kiss the side of my head, to comfort me. I sink into him with one hand on his chest, practically hiding in his large body.

I don't want to go. It's the most crushing feeling of dread, just like when he sent me home before.

“You’re not going back.” He kisses me again, on my temple this time. “So, stop worrying.”

Inclining my head, I look up at him. “I have to, Charlie. Trying to buy time didn’t work.”

He shakes his head, but I insist his plan failed. We go back and forth for a while, lightly countering each other before my hackles come up, and I snap that I am leaving. I don’t want to do this; I don’t want to argue, and I certainly don’t want to spend my last morning with Charlie bickering over that fat motherfucker, Robert. So I try to shut him down, but fail miserably.

“You’re not leaving,” he says. “Not today and not in five days’ time.” He pauses for a second, raising his eyebrows before adding in a measured capacity, “You’re. Not. Going. Anywhere.”

“Don’t speak to me like I’m a moron.” I whack his chest to shove him back and stand from the couch in defense. “I wouldn’t speak to you like that, so how fucking dare you?!”

“I’m sorry you feel I’m mocking you.” He meets me on my feet as if to dominate my anger, folding the hem of his red sweater over the waist of his jeans. “I don’t mean to offend you. I’m just making it clear.” He reaches out for a length of my hair, but I smack his hand away. “Blaire, c’mon, don’t do this. Tis’ my job to look after you, not the other way around—and I certainly won’t have you fighting other people’s battles.”

“Other people’s battles?” I ask, enraged. “He’s not just other people. He’s. My. Brother!” My lips twist in offence as I growl, “I’m not one of your incapable harlots, you know? I don’t need you to wrap me up in cotton wool. Maksim taught me to—”

“Enough!” he yells, and I step back in shock. “¡Dios! I won’t have this! You’re already unwell and suffering with serious Post Traumatic Stress Disorder...”

*Post Traumatic, what?*

“I won’t have you thinking about trouble when you’re ill, Blaire, let alone handling it.” He points at me, his hand steady. “The only thing you should be stressed about right now is getting well.”

“You can’t stop this,” I say, squaring up to him. “I will never leave James to suffer. Never!”

He lifts a finger to shush me, whispering that he will find my brother.

“No, Charlie, you can’t—”

“Shhh,” he hushes, blinking at me, and the mood between us changes. His



eyes darken like they do when he's touching me in all the right places, and it makes me feel...strange. Weak and vulnerable. I cuddle myself, shrinking away, wondering what he's doing. He curves both hands around my cheeks, half covering my face, and I can't stop myself from thawing under his touch. Everything in me—the anger and the frustration—it all fades away.

“You're not going anywhere,” he says softly, knowing I'm under his spell. “You can either stay of your own free will, or I'll tag you so I know where you are at all times. Those are your options.”

“Tag me?” I lean back out of his touch.

“Yeah, tag you.” He walks past me for the doors but stops on the threshold to say, “Andres will be here in three days, *gracias a Dios*. We'll meet him at the airport, and if you keep resisting my orders, I'll put you on the plane for Mexico.”

“What the...I am not going to Mexico!” My hands fist at my sides. “And I'm not staying here for three fucking days! I have to go back!”

Charlie wanders off into the bedroom. I chase after him, yelling at him to stop. “I'm not kidding! We can part on good terms, or like this, but I don't fucking want to leave things like this—Charlie! Listen to me!”

He pivots to me, cocking his head, and gestures to outside. “You can't leave. There are no cars on the estate, and I've doubled security with an order to shoot you on sight should you try to escape.”

“Shoot me?” I can't believe what I'm hearing.

“With a tranquilizer.”

Steam simmers out of my ears, and I'm all but ready to punch his lights out.

“You know”—he crosses his arms—“you could speed up the process of finding James by telling me who had you.”

“Your brother said that wasn't a safe idea!” I tense from head to toe, squeezing out every word. Nic was right. If Charlie knows Robert is pulling my strings, he will go after him all guns blazing, regardless of any consequences to James. He doesn't really care about my brother. He's just pacifying me.

“Nic was being cautious in your company,” Charlie says, disputing my assumption. “He knew as well as I did that if we spoke of forcing information out of you or restraining you, there was a high chance of you trying to escape. Now, there's no chance you can. So, you might as well tell me who our enemy is, Blaire—or should I work it out for myself, hmm?” He flicks up his

eyebrows, maliciously amused. “I’ve had all the time I need to put the pieces together.”

“You have, huh?” I say with sarcasm.

“Course I have, baby. For a start, I know it’s a man pulling your strings.”

*How does he know that?*

“The cell phone you came with has a French telephone number. The clothes you were wearing were bought from a store in France a week before you returned to me. So, I’m pretty certain our adversary is either French or resides there.” His eyes thin in question. “Now, the only society I know brave enough to traffic girls in France are the Albanians—their entire human trafficking set up is there. But they sell girls. They don’t buy them, unless they have reason.”

“Traffic girls?” I question. “Why would you think *he* traffics girls?”

“You asked me to lift the sanctions.” He stops talking for a split second. Then adds, “Both. Sanctions.”

*Fuck.*

“Ohhh...” Charlie nods a couple of times, realization hitting him. “Robert knows I’ve got the Albanian girl, doesn’t he?”

My heart is pounding, and my throat is so dry I can’t fucking swallow.

“You can poker face me all you like. Eyes don’t lie, chica.” Lifting a hand out of his crossed arms, he gestures at my face. “I’m kinda insulted by your surprise. Men like myself don’t run multibillion-dollar syndicates for no good reason, Blaire. I was groomed from a child to fight in wars, and I was groomed from a teenager to lead this cause because neither of my brothers were up for the challenge. Tracking enemies is my forte.”

Still, I don’t confirm his suspicion. I gulp past the dry restriction in my throat, feeling like the world around me is decreasing in size.

“It is Robert, isn’t it? Agh, that motherfucker!” Charlie turns to punch the doorframe, every muscle in his arm pumping. “I’m gonna kill him with my bare hands for even daring to touch you!”

“If you don’t let me go now,” I walk up to him, grabbing his arm to make him listen, “and if James gets hurt, you can forget there ever being an us. I’ll never forgive you if he gets hurt. Do you understand that, Charlie?”

He tips his head, staring down on me like I’m tiny and harmless. “Keeping you safe is all that matters to me, so if it means you’ll hate me, then hate me. I’m sure I’ll get over it.”

“Aargh!” I scream, hard enough to make him step back in caution. I wish

I measured up to his height instead of his chest, so I could scream in his face. “You’re going to keep me against my will, are you?!”

He shrugs. “I already am, it seems.”

I gasp, astonished by how hypocritical he’s being. “You sent me back to Maksim because you wouldn’t do that.”

He leans into my face, to say with guilt, “And it was the biggest mistake of my life.”

“Liar!” I scream, and he flinches back a second time. “You’re selfish! You’re the reason I almost died, you bastard! No”—I look at my trembling hands like I have blood on them—“I-I didn’t mean to say that.”

“You think I don’t know what I did, hmm? You think I haven’t spent every day since punishing myself for what happened to you?”

“I’m sorry.” I gaze up at him in pity. “I didn’t mean to say that.”

“Course you meant to say it. And you’re right to be mad at me, soy un hijo de puta.” *I’m a son of a bitch.* “I know exactly what I did. I oversaw your operation. I bathed you every day, cleaned every wound on your body...you want to see what I did, huh?”

Before I can answer him, he storms into the walk-in closet. I hear that beeping sound again, electronic button pads. He returns with a thick brown file, throws it at me, and the papers fly everywhere, scattering about the floor.

“Look!” His eyes burn with abrupt rage, the veins in his neck bulging. “A bullet wound to the stomach! Blood poisoning! So many lashes across your back the doctor couldn’t tell the old from the new!” He gestures at my body parts as he lists them. “We’re lucky you can still bear children...do you understand that?!”

I stand here in shock at his sudden outburst, feeling it all: his pain and his guilt.

“I know *how* he raped you—the surgeon had to stitch you up from within, Blaire. And I questioned the underage girl he was abusing in your absence... She saw Maksim drag you into his room, and when he was done with you, he did the same to her, telling her that if you could take it, she could, too.” I cover my mouth with a hand as he reels off everything that happened like he watched it himself. He knows Maksim beat me with a sjambok whip until I bled. He knows Maksim punched me in the face. He knows Maksim fucked my ass raw. “And, do you know what, Blaire? It. Is. My. Fault.” Stepping up to me, he touches my face, stroking down my cheek with a single finger. My eyes burn with tears, lips quivering to cry. “You, are the only thing I care

about,” he says. “You, are the only thing that registers in my heart. So, if keeping you safe means you’ll hate me, then do it with all your passion.”

I crumble, sobbing, “I know you hate James—he set the wheels in motion to all this trouble—but he’s my brother, Charlie. He spent ten years letting Maksim hurt him to spare me of...” I can’t say it. I hold pride for my brother, one thing no man can take away from him. “How can you ensure Robert doesn’t hurt James? How can you ensure—”

“I will personally go capture Robert’s entire family as collateral, but *por favor*, I can’t do that if I’m worrying that you’re gonna try to escape.” He bends at the knees so we’re eye to eye, catching my tears with his thumbs. “I also need you to tell me what you know, Blaire, where you were and what you heard. Otherwise, we have no chance of finding James.”

I glance down at my feet in a moment of deliberation, knowing my betrayal could cost James his life. I glance back up at Charlie, certain that whether I agree to his demands or not, he’s not going to let me go without a fight. And he’s going to hunt Robert down irrespective of James.

“Do you promise...promise you’ll get James first before you go after Robert?”

He nods, but the power in his silence speaks to me.

“All right,” I say, dashing away my tears. “I’ll tell you what I know.”

# 15

Charlie makes me sit on the foot of the bed while he stands there like a full-length mirror in front of me, reserving himself for as long as humanly possible.

Hands in my lap, immersed in my line of vision, I divulge the whole truth. I speak about what happened, how James' plan to kidnap me was hijacked by Arabs—who in turn, sold me at an auction to Robert. I don't know why or how the Arabs took me, so I can't elaborate. I focus to explain the prison-like-cell Robert kept me in, his agenda to partner up with Tatiana, and the mayflies, convinced they were a metaphor for something. I remember wanting to die so badly it consumed my mentality, and seeing the piling mayflies screwed with my thoughts.

Charlie comes to the conclusion that Robert used the flies to reveal how many days were passing. He's possibly right. Robert wasn't torturing me, so it makes perfect sense he was disclosing the timeframe rather than tricking me with it.

"His personal touches confused me," I say in a croaky voice from crying, expanding on the daily housekeeping someone undertook when I slept and the incense stick. "He also brought regular food and water."

"Maybe he thought if he treated you well, if I ever found out what he did, I'd go easy on him."

I hum, musing over the fact. "I guess... He was fuming when he found out you had pulled sanctions on everyone—came barging into the cell screaming about to keel over—but still, he didn't hit me or anything."

Charlie looks up at the ceiling when I say that, his jaw twitching, but he doesn't voice his obvious anger. He doesn't need to. I can feel it dangling cold and heavy in the space between us.

I carry on, telling him about the moment Robert's man revealed a syringe and the panic I felt, how I thought they were going to drug me again and take me somewhere Charlie couldn't find me.

"Hey, fear is sometimes good, Blaire," Charlie says, turning down his

face to watch me, protesting that it's nothing to be ashamed of. "People who fear nothing usually have nothing. People who fear for something usually have everything."

I don't counter his philosophy; it's probably true. I've never been more fearful of anything in my entire life than I am now—and was, when I thought I might never see Charlie again.

We get to the point on how I know for sure Robert is holding James captive. Charlie needs to be certain he's on the right track, so I tell him about the audio of James getting beat up, how I heard Robert's voice on it. "He was taunting James to confess something to me—now, I imagine it was the fact that he kidnapped me from you—but the audio didn't get that far." I pause for a second, curious about something. "Do you know why Robert bought me in the first place?" Charlie came to the conclusion earlier, after losing his shit. I assume he still holds merit to the idea.

His eyes thin, waiting on my theory.

"You were right. It's all down to the Albanian girl you took, Arjana."

He grunts, truly affronted that Robert would dare defend the girl he owned. "If Maksim had just paid Robert like we agreed he would, none of this would be happening. That Albanian *puta* would be happy with full pockets, and the issue of that *la zorra* girl would have blown over."

"I don't think it would have blown over," I say, rubbing the dried tears on my cheeks. "She wasn't just worth her weight in gold because of her purity and beauty. Robert emphasized she has royal, Palestinian blood. I think that's why he's still sour over losing her."

"Royal blood, huh?" Charlie asks, crossing his arms with interest.

I nod a couple of times, exhausted by this already. "She's obviously someone of importance, and Robert wanted her for himself. But, since you took her and lied about it"—I gesture up at Charlie—"and since you tried to make it look like it was Maksim who took her, nearly causing a war between the Russians and the Albanians...you're now his target for vengeance." I don't bother asking why he tried to frame Maksim. He was seeking retribution for himself, and turning other syndicates on my master was obviously part of his plan.

In Charlie's quiet musing, I continue pouring out information, anything I can remember: the auction room with its vivid circling lights, the potent stench of bleach, the voices I heard and that one of them spoke in Spanish. "*Idiota*, is what he said. I know it means *idiot* in a few languages, but I

recognized his accent. It was definitely Spanish. There was a lady there, too, and she sounded Hispanic.”

Charlie mentally notes it all down, and then he wants me to go back to the Arabs, picking up on the plural aspect of them.

I say they were a man and a woman.

“Were they married?”

“I don’t know.”

“Roughly how old were they? And how tall? How much did they weigh?” he speaks in a rush of words, using his hands to measure up sizes against himself. “Did they have any distinguishable marks or tattoos? Did anyone mention names?”

“No...I-I don’t know, Charlie”—I wave out at a loss, besting his optimism —“I was high the whole time.”

His eyes melt with pity, filling my chest with a powerful sense of remorse. I glance away to pick at a piece of frayed material on the joggers I’m wearing, hating the way he’s making me feel.

“Tell me what happened with them, baby.” He stops between words, speaking in a tender voice. “How often were they injecting you?”

*Weren’t the stab marks on my arms and legs evidence enough?*

Without making eye contact, I say, “They medicated me to exist in an endless haze until they sold me at the auction to Robert.” The memory of the needles piercing my skin and the high of heroin are the hardest parts to divulge—because I liked it. The abyss of ecstasy was euphoric.

I don’t tell Charlie. It’s a secret of shame I will take to the grave.

“They wouldn’t let you have a moment of lucidity?” he asks, barely a whisper. Hooking a finger under my chin, he lifts my face to look at him, at the bizarre amount of respect in his eyes. “When you came around from feeling high, would they dose you right up again?”

I nod, and the lump in his throat contracts.

I pull out of his gentle hold, shrinking into myself. I don’t want to talk about the heroin. I hate it. And I hate seeing him so weak to the guilt he feels for me. He doesn’t deserve it. This isn’t his fault.

A moment of quiet cocoons us, Charlie hesitating to ask, “Did anyone touch you, Blaire?”

I’m not nearly prepared for his question. Humiliation washes over me in tenfold, but I shake to say no. I don’t think anyone touched me, but even if they did, I wouldn’t tell him. I can’t say things like that to Charlie. It feels

so...dirty.

He sighs, insisting it's okay. "You don't need to feel shame with me, Blaire. You've done nothing to be ashamed of."

I bite my lips closed, refusing to speak about the matter. That's when he centers his questions on crucial intelligence that could lead to a breakthrough rather than intimate details on what happened to me. He knows I won't talk about myself anymore. Charlie is learning to read me like a book.

"Do you recognize the name, Asad?"

"No," I whisper, glancing at him, at his open stare of adoration. "I told you, I didn't hear any names."

"Okay," he says softly, flashing his sweetest smile.

We go over it all a few times more, filling in the blanks. I wipe my running nose with the sleeve of my hoodie, and he disappears into the bathroom. I watch in that direction, wondering what he's doing. He comes back with a cold washcloth and wipes my face.

"Charlie"—I blink at him, squinting when he almost rubs my eyeball—"I'm supposed to go back by four o'clock this evening. Robert is waiting for me at a location in the London Docks." I give him precise details, so he can surprise our enemy.

"Don't worry about what you're supposed to do." Charlie winks at me, confidence in his smile. "By four o'clock, I'll have solid collateral on Robert. By four o'clock, I'll have ensured James' life. I promise you that, Blaire."

I believe him with every essence of me, striving to remain calm when he says he's *gonna* go have a meeting now. "Nic and I have a few things to iron out before we make a move. So, in the meantime, why don't you take your medication, freshen up, and go have breakfast, hmm? When I'm done, I'll come fill you in."

"You will tell me the whole plan, right? Because I want to know exactly what's going on, Charlie. I won't accept you dithering around the finer details."

"I'll tell you the whole plan, I promise." He bends to kiss my mouth, adding the right amount of pressure to silently tell me it's all going to be okay.

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Charlie clears up the papers he threw at me, ensures I'm *all right*, and he



exits the bedroom to rendezvous with Nic.

I sit here waiting...and waiting...and waiting...clock watching to nine thirty. Ten o'clock. He doesn't come back. I know he said I should freshen up and eat, but I'm too nervous to eat right now, stressing about what's going to happen with James when Robert discovers I've betrayed him. We have until four o'clock to grasp control of the situation, and even by my standards, that's not a lot of time.

It's nearing eleven o'clock when my tummy grumbles. I turn over to crawl across the bed for the medication Charlie has me taking. I also decide to hop in the shower, to freshen up and kill some more time. Sure, I had a wash this morning but last night's sweat still clings to my skin.

When I'm done, I towel dry myself and search through the walk-in-closet for my moisturizer and the ointment I'm supposed to use on the skin grafts. I find them in the cabinet above the vanity sinks in the bathroom plus a whole shelf of orange pill pots. Not just any old pill pots. Medication. Olanzapine, Quetiapine, and Risperidone. I have no idea what the first two are, but I'm certain Risperidone is used to treat psychiatric conditions like bipolar disorder. Maksim used it on me when I was younger until I was certified as no longer responsive to fear or mental outbursts.

I wonder why Charlie has it.

I grab a few pots and give them a rattling shake. They're half full. Checking the dates, I see they were prescribed long before he even knew me, and his full name—Charlie Guzmán Decena, plus his date of birth indicating that he's twenty-nine now—is listed as the patient.

How strange.

Skin creams and colognes line the middle shelf in the cabinet, more products than I'd ever assume Charlie would wear. Putting the pill pots back, I grab a gold bottle of cologne, pop off the lid, and spray the air. *Hmmm*. It's a fusion of male spice and musk, real man scent. It's the same cologne he wore when we were meant to go out for dinner.

I jiggle the product bottles around to find my cocoa butter moisturizer and the ointment, finishing up getting ready. When I'm done, I put everything back as I found it, brush my teeth, and dress in another baggy tracksuit. I go downstairs, chasing the scent of smoked bacon and eggs into the kitchen. The housekeeper is laying placements at the dining table, practically drowning in another dirty apron. I stop by the refrigerator, unsure of what to do in her company.

“Buenos días,” she croaks when she sees me, gesturing at the table. “Would...erm...food... Lo siento.” She touches her chest, apologizing for not speaking English. “No hablo inglés.”

“Sin problema,” I tell her, *no problem*, casting a glance around the kitchen. It looks like she’s cooked breakfast twice over. The sink is bubbling and overflowing with pans.

She carefully reaches for a plate on the table with raised eyebrows, as if to suggest that she serve my food. “El Señor insistiría.” *The Señor would insist.*

I shrug and go to pull up a chair facing the main door, so I can see when Charlie is done in his office, assuming he’s in there. I allow the housekeeper to load my plate with a healthy portion of everything, and dig in. It’s a delicious meal with crunchy toast dripping in butter and evenly smoked bacon. I sip the creamy coffee she pours, forcing a smile when she wanders off to clear up the mess she’s created in the cooking space.

By the time I’ve nearly finished eating, and Eliza has long gone to fulfill other housekeeping duties, Charlie enters the kitchen. I frown while watching him walk in, scrutinizing his appearance. The red sweater he’s wearing is crumpled, sleeves rolled up his thick forearms, exposing the big silver watch on his left wrist. His hair is ruffled from where he’s been running his fingers through the strands and his face is grim with his lips set in a line. When we look at each other, he forces a smile, eyes crinkling in the corners. It doesn’t work on me. I can see beyond his facade. I can sense his mood is off.

“Hungry, baby?” he says, lowering onto the chair at my left. He kisses my cheek, inhaling my scent as he does. “Hmm, you smell like cocoa butter.”

“I moisturized after taking a shower,” I say, stomach tingling as he nuzzles my neck with his nose. I lean away so I don’t lose myself in his sexual attention, searching his eyes for information while licking my lips clean of food. “What’s happening?”

He explains he had a meeting with his brother, Nic, to tell him everything about Robert, and what they’re going to do to resolve the matter of James. “Nic’s gearing up to leave for France, to retrieve all three of Robert’s daughters.” He reaches for the coffee pot to pour himself a cup. “Andres is holding off on flying in for now. Since I’m not leaving you alone—because Robert knows where this house is—I don’t need his wife, Luna, here to wait on you.”

“You’re kidnapping Robert’s daughters?” I ask, not giving a shit about

his brothers or this Luna woman. His strategy sounds unassailable. Robert won't hurt James if we have his daughters.

If only I knew last week that he had daughters...

"I am." Charlie nods once, confident of his scheme. "That motherfucker will pay for what he's done to you, one way or the other." He turns up the cup to have a sip of coffee and tells me—until we get him back—he's going to ensure James' safety by demanding regular video footage of him. "If Robert doesn't agree, then I'll send regular footage of his eldest daughter suffering a little Los Zetas attention."

"That's a good idea." I wrap my arms around one of his, to cuddle him. "And you'll return the favor, right? If Robert agrees on regular footage of James, you'll send him regular footage of his daughters to show they're safe and unharmed?"

"I will." Charlie bends to kiss my fingers on his forearm. "We can't go after Robert yet, so his girls are the next best thing to use to control him."

I lift my head off his arm, scowling. "Why can't you go after him?"

"Until we know where James is, Robert must remain free. He'll know when we have him prisoner, he's gonna die, so why would he tell us where James is, hmm?" Charlie looks at me from the side, searching my face. "He'll let your brother rot wherever he is just to spite us one last time."

That makes sense.

I rest my head on Charlie's arm again, sighing. "So, what now?"

"I have a hacker who's gonna try to access Robert's online Dark Web profile. If he can, he'll track Robert's past conversations and movements to see if there is a pattern, so I can find him. I also want to know if there's any mention of you or James. Till we know more"—he shrugs—"we wait."

I scowl, offended and confused. "I could hack his profile."

"You're not well enough for that kinda work," he says. "And not only that, I don't want you worrying over this. Tis' my job."

"But Maksim would—"

"Blaire..." he stops me off from protesting, raising his eyebrows at me. "Maksim isn't here, baby."

Taken aback, I look at him looking at me, unsure of how to respond.

"I know you're still adjusting to this new life," he says, studying my reaction, "I understand how your mind works—Maksim taught you all you know; it's natural for you to question things, to want to help—but I'm trying desperately to minimize any chance of causing you additional stress. I don't

want you involved in anything unless it's absolutely essential."

"But, Charlie—"

"Please, Blaire," he says, stooping to pleading.

"I'm sorry." I look down at my hands on his arm, burning with remorse. "I...I'm not deliberately questioning you."

"I know," he whispers. "Just let me handle things. The guilt of what happened to you is...bothering me"—he practically shudders on the word *bothering* like it's poison—"I need you to be okay. I need to fix everything for you, without worrying you."

I sit here for a while in total quietness, fiddling with his watch on his wrist, wondering why I interrogate everything he says and does. It's not purposeful. I don't think he's up to no good. He does something and I subconsciously analyze it. That's how I work. That's how Maksim conditioned me to work.

Charlie is right, though. Maksim isn't here. *I killed him*. But does that change my thought process? I can hack and I can fight for us—fight for James. I shouldn't just do nothing.

"I can sense you're even questioning yourself now," Charlie says. "Please, don't do that. Forget Maksim. Forget about what's going on. The only thing I want you concerning yourself with is yourself." He pulls out of my hold and drapes one arm around my shoulders, drawing me in against his side. "As long as I know you're all right, I can handle everything else, okay?"

I bite my tongue to hold back disputing with him. He's quite clearly not in a good headspace, and I should be supporting him in all his endeavors to save James, not making his life harder.

"Okay," I whisper, nestling in his side. "I'll try not to worry."

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Throughout the rest of the day, things move with speed, and the situation with Robert progresses in our favor.

Nic and his Los Zetas detail gun down the Albanian daughters' security outside a fancy mall in Paris, bag them, and make plans to bring them back to England where Charlie will hold them captive in a place he calls the guardhouse. We're in Charlie's office when we get the news. A live broadcast flashes across the big television screen in the partition of cameras, informing nations about a *supposed* terrorist attack on Paris. It's fake, of

course, like most of the bullshit in the news.

Charlie gets a call a few hours later informing him ‘the cargo’ has been loaded, but there’s a process to get it in the country: flight plans and border control passes. Apparently, whenever Charlie and his men fly, he has to get it signed off by the respective government. He has personal contacts within the Western World, so it’s not usually a problem. It’s usually resolved by sending a simple message.

After he’s done securing our cargo’s safe delivery—meaning the girls—he urges me to sit at the desk with him, so we can discuss potential issues. I don’t like it when he specifically uses the word *issues*. The plan sounded invulnerable when we spoke of it earlier.

“It won’t be long before Robert knows we have his daughters,” Charlie says, holding eye contact from across the desk. “So, now it’s on us to ensure the result we want—and it’s very important that you understand and agree to the plan I have in place, Blaire. Nic’s gone back to Mexico for a few weeks to handle some business matters, so I’m dealing with everything else solo—”

“Will you get to the point?” I interrupt, sitting on pins and needles for his big revelation.

“Before we negotiate James’ freedom,” he says, speaking with his hands, “examples need to be made and lessons need to be taught.”

“Okay...what examples and lessons?”

Apparently, to make Robert feel what Charlie felt during my disappearance, there will be no negotiations for four weeks—double the length of time Robert had me. In the process, the girls will remain our hostages, and James will remain Robert’s.

“You can’t be serious?”

Charlie nods, slouching back in his chair. I wait for him to say something of value but words don’t pass his arrogant lips.

I lean over his desk on my fists and speak through clenched teeth, hissing, “You can’t expect James to—”

“Your brother also needs to be taught a lesson.” Charlie stops me from talking by lifting a hand. “When we get him back, he must know he cannot risk trying to take you again. Everyone—specifically my enemies—knows I’m in love with you...do you understand the severity of that? Do you understand the weak position that puts you in?”

I don’t care to understand. I want to hit him and scream that I will not accept this plan. It’s madness!

“Robert’ll know I’m not playing games,” Charlie says, “since we managed to kidnap one of his brothers, too. Should the situation call for it, I’ll be sending him back in pieces.”

I search my lover’s wicked eyes, in that moment sensing his bloodlust. I realize he wants this. He wants Robert’s resistance. He wants to murder the brother. The girls are off limits since two of them are underage and Charlie doesn’t believe in hurting kids. But Robert’s brother is fair game.

“You are playing with fire,” I say, whacking the desk. “Do you really think Robert is going to take this sitting down? If you kill his brother...” I have no words.

Charlie doesn’t answer my concern. He reiterates that once the four weeks are up, negotiations will begin, and he will guarantee James is returned alive and well. “Anything other than that shouldn’t concern you, Blaire.”

My eyes flash, insulted now more than ever before. Having Robert’s daughters and brother will guarantee James’ safety, yes, but still, I can’t agree to this plan. We should call for a meeting, commit to straight swaps—James for the girls—and be done with it. Torturing Robert can happen later.

“You’re going to offer Robert a chance to safeguard his daughters, aren’t you?”

“Course I am. I told you already”—he gestures up at me—“for Robert to ensure they remain unscathed, he must send regular footage of James.”

I nod, though I still think his plan is lunacy. I understand people need to learn a lesson on what they can or cannot do, but how am I meant to be okay with James being caught up in the middle of all this?

“I don’t get a say in this, no?” I cross my arms, battling for deep, inner strength to keep my cool. “I’m supposed to just let you leave my brother helpless at the hands of our enemy for four whole weeks, so you can teach Robert a lesson?” There’s something more I want to say, but I know I shouldn’t. Yet I also can’t help myself. “Would you do this to your brothers?”

Charlie stands up to me and hisses from across the desk, “If my brothers dared to take you for their own desires—or any other reason—I wouldn’t try to save them.”

My mouth opens to protest but closes when I realize he’s serious. He would actually leave his own brothers if they pulled a stunt like James did. I can’t believe it.

“The only reason I’m employing strategies to get James back, is for you.”

He points at me with a hint of bitterness. “The sooner you realize that, the better.”

His laptop pings with new mail. Both our heads drop to it. He opens the message, reads it, and tells me it’s Robert. “He’s demanding we give his daughters back, obviously.”

I lower onto the chair as Charlie’s fingers whiz across the keyboard typing a reply, blooming with an odd sense of sadistic pleasure. It feels good to torment that Albanian *mudak* for once. I don’t know who he thinks he is, emailing demands when we have most of the leverage.

Another email pings on the laptop. I listen closely as Charlie reads the message aloud, saying Robert has agreed to send regular footage of James over the next four weeks in exchange for a public promise that his daughters will remain unharmed. Charlie won’t agree to it. He’s concerned that if he cannot adhere to his promise, it’ll make him look bad for business. He won’t commit to anything other than what he’s already brought to the table, choosing to force Robert’s hand by a no-nonsense approach. I momentarily wonder why anyone deals with him. He’s cold, ruthless, and he doesn’t budge on a deal. It’s either his way or the highway.

“So, what are you going to say now, Charlie?” I ask, lifting my shoulders in an arrogant shrug.

He rubs his bristly jaw, unsure of how to reply to Robert’s email. “I don’t want to murder his brother yet or the eldest daughter, and I can’t threaten to hurt the underage girls because he’ll know I’m bluffing. Everyone knows I won’t handle underage girls.”

“Tell him I’ll handle the girls,” I say, and Charlie’s eyes lift from the laptop to mine. “Tell him he’s got one hour to send the footage of my brother before I get to work—and I will. I don’t give a shit if they’re underage or not.”

There’s a second of edgy silence between Charlie and I, where he watches me under a wary frown, where he watches the real me. He knows I’m not bluffing, as does Robert, it seems. Thirty minutes later, after Charlie has sent my warning, the laptop pings with another new message. Charlie attaches a set of headphones and watches a video for fifteen minutes, while a mixture of expressions race across his face: surprise, awe, arousal...

“Is that of James?” I ask, and he nods. I then ask if I can see, to know my brother is well.

Charlie extends a steady hand, gesturing at the laptop. I spin it around on

the desk and stare wide eyed at the sight of James, bone thin and stark naked. He's strapped to a chair by his wrists and ankles, dark red hair all floppy over his face. The camera is recording from a high corner in the room, so it's hard to see him properly. I scan his body, the withdrawn bones in his chest and hips. I can't be sure, but I think his inner arms are bruised. Long, streaky shadows mar his skin there, exactly like the puncture marks that disfigured my body before they faded to nothing. I clock the messy, round scars on his left shoulder—from where Maksim shot him—and it's then I know it is definitely James.

On the recording, a raven-haired beauty appears in the doorway, covered in a floaty black cape. She crosses the room and crouches to her knees between James' legs, rubbing his twitchy thighs. Her head starts bobbing up and down. My brother yanks back and forth in the chair in a sloppy state, as if to stop her.

I turn the laptop back to Charlie, face coiling with revulsion that Robert is making people do *that* to my brother.

“At least Robert isn't hurting him,” Charlie says, half amused.

“Make him stop!” I punch the desk again, feeling anger come off me in waves. I won't let this happen. I won't allow Robert to sexually abuse my brother against his will. “Warn that if he doesn't, I will do unspeakable things to his girls—hell, I will pay a crackhead to rape all three of those girls if this disgusting abuse on my brother continues!”

“Dios mío, don't speak like that, Blaire,” Charlie snaps, slapping the laptop shut. “We, Los Zetas, have a rule: we do not harm children.”

“I am not a Los Zetas.” I get up and walk around the desk to Charlie, lean down, and say in his face, “You don't know me, not really. You don't know how far I will go to keep James safe...how far I'd go to keep *you* safe if the tables were turned.”

His face hardens, but he doesn't speak over my authority, just observes me.

I point at the laptop, maintaining eye contact with him as I do. “Either warn Robert, or I will, Charlie—and believe me, your plan to remove all the cars from your house and arm your men with tranquilizer guns will not stop me.”



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# 16

I accept that the four weeks of no negotiations must happen.

Charlie is annoyingly right. James cannot go about trying to kidnap me—not that he'd have much luck doing so while I'm conscious—and we need to make an example of Robert so others know not to fuck with us.

My threat to violate his daughters works like a treat. The following day, we receive footage of my brother, and he's no longer strapped to a chair with a whore blowing his horn. But he's not exactly thriving, either. While the recording only lasts thirty-minutes, it's long enough to see him slugging about the gloomy cell in a weird, lethargic state. He struggles to the shadowed bathroom clutching at his stomach, then crawls back into the flimsy, single bed. I can't figure out why he's ailing. There's a basket of food in the cell near the main door, so I know he's not being starved, and he's got plenty of water.

Before I go crazy analyzing James' state, knowing I cannot change his situation, I try to keep busy. I focus on myself to grow in strength and spirit, taking the medication Dr. Shyam prescribed plus iron pills to battle my anemia. The anti-nausea pills are rendered unnecessary as I don't feel sick at the thought of food anymore.

This is the first real step to recovery for me. No more unnecessary drugs.

To aid my health, I mention to Charlie that we *could* start training again as we used to. I'm aware he might say no, so I ensure I'm gazing at him when I bring up the topic of conversation. I ensure I'm touching him and smiling at him, aware that he can rarely resist me when I'm like this.

My plan of allure works.

He is more than ecstatic to pacify me. He explains he has some calls to make first, then he'll go out late this afternoon and buy workout attire that will actually fit me.

It's not what I was expecting.

The following morning, I find he's invested in shorts and stretchy sports bras, nothing that even remotely resembles my old wardrobe. I blink to

process while he unpacks the shopping bags and hangs it all in my side of the closet, telling me something about a job his men are on. I suspect the new exercise attire is to adjust how I associate working out. Before, it was all about keeping fit to protect Maksim. Now, it's all about remaining healthy—as Charlie says.

I don't share his opinion.

Though resistant, I strip out of my baggy tracksuit. I pull on figure hugging, butt high shorts, and a matching crossed-back-bra with blue trim. I slip on the new trainers, yanking to tie the laces, and I fasten my hair in a long ponytail. The strands brush my extra sensitive skin, causing my stomach to tighten and my palms gather with perspiration. I want to say something about how uncomfortable I am, exposed to anyone who looks, but words don't form on my tongue. And I don't want to argue with Charlie over clothes. But I also don't want to walk the house with my scars on display. They're private.

My lover has foreseen my reaction, it seems, because he reveals a whole bunch of loose-fitting vests to wear over the top of the bras. "I like these," he says, studying the fabric with his fingers. "Lycra is my favorite material on women—on you."

My relief to the vests is evident as I exhale, shutting my eyes.

"Oh, Blaire, you didn't actually think I'd be all right with you walking around half naked for all my men to see, did you?" he teases, and I smirk at him. He lifts the loose-fitting vest over my head, kisses my cheek, and chaperones me downstairs to the gym.

My nerves over the clothes becomes a distant memory. In fact, everything beyond him becomes a distant memory. Charlie has the power to do that to a girl.

Initially, our workout sessions aren't heavy. I walk the treadmill while Charlie watches closely, standing at my side to monitor my heart rate on a silly watch he makes me wear. After, I lift tiny weights, and Charlie crouches in front of me to cup my elbows one by one, counting every rep.

I eventually take to meditating again, knowing it will help regain strength in my muscles and my soul. I commit to the usual workout session with Charlie, then I tell him I'm going outside. I setup by the pool to draw its energy, lift my hands high above my head, and stand in a relaxing state of concentration. Apart from worrying about my brother, my thought process is clear and free flowing, and my body is overly tranquil. My breath catches as

the day's breeze rushes through my thighs and across my waist, blowing through the thin material of the vest I'm wearing. I feel like someone's watching me, amplifying the earth's elements. I feel like eyes are on my face and on my body.

"Are you gonna teach me how to do this or what?" Charlie's voice makes me jump a clear mile.

I snap to ask what he's doing, creeping up on me. "You can't just interrupt someone who's meditating, Charlie!"

He looks at me all wide-eyed, pleading his innocence. He swears he didn't mean to startle me.

I put my hands on my hips, sure he's teasing me about learning how to meditate. I playfully tell him to fuck off and walk on a few paces, but he insists he wants to learn, trailing my shadow. I still don't believe him. To test the water, I tell him to copy my pose, squinting against the sun to look at him. He steps up beside me, facing the glittery pool, and spreads his legs so his feet are level with his wide shoulders. Frowning, I tell him to shut his mouth and only breathe through his nose, focusing on the muscles in the back of his throat. He does. Still skeptical, I tell him to lift his hands high above his head like he's praying to the sun, sure this is where he'll crack. The muscles down his ribs contract with his motions as he stretches to the sky, towering over everything in the garden.

I'm *still* waiting for him to laugh at me or leave while confessing he's joking, but he doesn't. Before I even tell him to close his eyes, he does. His mobile buzzes in his shorts pocket, and he ignores it.

I have his full, undying attention. What a treat.

I squint again to peek up at him from the side, at the concentrated expression on his face. His unshaven, square jaw is relaxed, nostrils flaring with deep intakes of breath. His skin looks almost golden under the afternoon rays.

It's enchanting to see him like this, at his deepest level of concentration. I want to kiss him because he looks so good, but I won't. I won't interrupt this moment.

"Now, you just let your thoughts flow, Charlie, rather than controlling them."

"Already there, baby," he rasps, and I smile to myself, mimicking his position.

He doesn't know it yet, but I'm teaching him a standard technique of

Ujjayi: meditation through breath control. He's a surprisingly good student. We maintain a stance like this for what barely feels like thirty minutes but over two hours pass. I'm certain Charlie is going to freak out at the loss of time, though he simply asks if I'll *chill* with him in the gym while he works out. I do, of course. We become true partners in training—true partners in everything. He joins me for every meditation session now, and after, I go back inside the gym to wait for him.

Not that I mind. These are the best parts of my days.

I settle on one of the weight benches, clasp bottles of cool water, ready to watch him train. He only ever wears sports shorts and trainers, with his disobedient hair pulled away from his sculpted face in a messy ponytail. I swear he does it on purpose, having me visually slaver over every taut, formidable muscle in his body, every lick of sweat snaking around his hard curves when he's been going at it for a few hours.

He enters the gym from the garden, and I shift on the bench in anticipation to get comfortable. He first gets in position on a blue mat, resting on his palms and trainer toes to accomplish at least one-hundred push-ups. His muscles contract all over, easing into the motions. He grunts with measured breaths, switching hands on every pump, getting faster and faster and faster—until I realize I've squeezed my water bottle half to death.

I shove the bottle aside, desperate to see him pump heavy weights and run a few miles on the treadmill. Then he lies upside down on a vertical leg press before using up the gym space to flip a huge rubber wheel, groaning heavily with every push, every thrust.

By now, hours into watching him, my head is spinning. My blood pressure is off the radar and the little pulse in my sex has throbbled off the charts. Today, I'm particularly horny. I want to fight him. I bite my lips as I think about it. There's something sexual about fighting Charlie without us actually having sex. Foreplay.

But Charlie won't spar with me. It's a heavy blow. I ask as sweetly as I can, but he still thinks I'm too weak. "When you're stronger, we will fight, baby, I promise."

I'm slighted, bored, and rebellious—tormented by the sexual visuals I've been watching for the past days. He doesn't even notice my frustration. He carries on flipping the big rubber wheel, so I wander across the gym with intention.

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Charlie's eyes follow my prowling, and I sense he's frowning.

I pull the boxing ring ropes apart, climb in, and stand there on the bouncy surface with crossed arms, holding his blue gaze from across the distance.

"What are you doing?" he asks, dropping the rubbery wheel. In one fluent motion, he yanks a towel off the hook on the wall and wipes his sweaty face, coming up to me.

"I'm bored with the dull workouts," I confess, glancing down his strapping frame. All I do is worry about my brother—who in fact caused this mess and could have cost me my life—recovering, and lusting after Charlie. "I want to fight," I say, and his eyebrows shoot up.

He seems to forget that fighting was my life before him. I enjoyed it. I miss the rush of action. And I miss the rush I get from him.

"Are you going to come in?" I glance about the ring. "Or am I coming out to you?"

He shakes his head, expression edgy with reservation. "I'm not fighting you, Blaire. You're not strong enough."

"You see," I point at him, beginning to pace around the ring, "you keep insulting me with your opinion on what I can or cannot do, like I cannot think for myself, and you keep saying I'm weak..." I stop to look at him, tipping my head in curiosity. "Are you worried a weak girl really is going to kick your ass?"

The muscles in his chest bunch. He looks insulted. *Good.*

"Come on, Charlie," I coax him on, keeping my voice low and husky. "Come play, please? What's the worst that can happen?"

He flings the towel on the floor and slips into the ring, stepping up to loom over me. "If you get hurt, it's not my—"

Before he finishes speaking, I kick behind his ankle. He drops back on his ass, and the surface under us bounces against his weight. I smirk at him, walking backward. He glares up at me, playfully shaking his head. "No cheating, Blaire."

I wiggle my finger. "There's no such thing as cheating in battle, Charlie."

"No?" He grins at me, eyes glittering with desire. "So, when you lay down rules that I'm not allowed to touch you with purpose, and you kiss me to beat me, that's not cheating?"

I purse my lips, musing. "It's called tactics, I believe. Not cheating."

He unfolds himself from the boxing ring floor and turns his back on me, saying, “I’m not doing this. When you’re better, we can fight to our hearts content. Until then—”

“If you don’t fight me and try to beat me, I won’t let you fuck me again.”

That gets his attention.

“Ohhh”—he pivots, a sly smirk reaching the filthy gleam in his eyes —“c’mon, Blaire, you must know by now that I don’t mind forcing you?”

I smirk back at him, flicking up my eyebrows like he usually does. “I can handle your *force*, with ease.”

“You reckon, hmm?” He walks into me, stooping to put us nose to nose, and whispers in his raspy, Latino accent, “Refuse to let me fuck you, and you’ll see just how aggressive and forceful I can get.”

I touch his nose with mine. “No puedo esperar,” I say, *I can’t wait*, in Spanish, and his eyes blaze with zeal.

He grabs my throat, grips behind my knee, and slams me back on the ring surface. I kick at his hips and use his action to flip him over me, sending him tumbling across the ring. Then I stand, slowly, laughing at him. I crack my neck from left to right, a twinge of pain in my spine. It’ll pass. I just need to get used to being so physical again. I haven’t even been able to build up my stamina in the bedroom. Charlie hasn’t made a move to fuck me since he took my virginity, for whatever reason.

My lover lies there on his back rubbing his unkempt face, his muscled, hairy chest rising and falling under deep intakes of breath.

“If you think I’ll make the same mistake as before,” I say, referring to the time I hit him in the balls and crouched at his side in sympathy, “you’re sorely mistaken.”

He bolts to his feet and runs at me, snatching at me in every direction. I dodge his assault by ducking and weaving, dancing around to use up all the ring space. I’m exhilarated with adrenaline. I laugh so hard I’m sure I’m going to pee my pants as we playfully block each other, forearms whacking against forearms and feet kicking at feet. But then the muscles in my legs start to pinch, catching my steps. I go at him but it hurts to move. My face screws in discomfort.

Charlie pauses in the middle of the ring with his hands hovering about me in a state of protection. “Blaire?”

“What are you doing?” I say with gasps, circling him while he’s circling me.

He's frowning, eyes penetrating up and down my body. "You all right? You in pain?"

"I'm fine." I spring at him, but he jumps out the way, and I fall flat on my face.

"Oh, shit!" he curses, squatting to my side. "Blaire, baby—"

"What the hell...?" I growl, glaring up at him from under my eyebrows. "Why are you not trying?" I climb to my feet, as he does, and point out in sudden anger. "Don't fight like I'm made of glass, Charlie. I won't break."

"Are your legs hurting?" he asks, ignoring my irritation. I swipe for his face, but he uses his forearms to thwart my strike, stepping back once more.

"My legs are fine!" I shout hard enough to turn my face red. My hands dart out like snakes to slap sections on his body, making him twitch about in protection. "Fight, Charlie! Stop worrying about me!"

Countering my attack, he lunges to hook a foot behind mine and swipes my legs out from under me. I land on my back with a hefty thud and a shrieking, *ow!* My face wrinkles in discomfort. I roll over to catch a breath, gasping through the pain.

Charlie watches me, telling me to stop this before it goes too far. It makes my blood boil. I don't want him mollicoddling me. I want him to treat me as he used to, like the strong girl he knows I am. I want him to make me feel like the strong girl he knows I am.

Regardless of my breathlessness and the pain, I sprint to my feet and meet his shielding punts, pounding at his punches. But I stumble again and fall on the ropes in the corner of the ring. That's when Charlie catches my wrist and spins me around so fast my head whirls. He pulls my back flush to his front, bending one of my hands up my spine.

"Ouch, Charlie!" I stomp on his foot to no avail, tensing my face in agony. "My arm!"

"Is this trying enough, hmm? Is this what you wanted?"

"You're going to break my damn arm!"

"Stop, then I'll stop," he says, puffs of hot air chasing down my neck.

I nod in a panic with my arm feeling as though it's going to pop out of its socket, and his grip loosens, but not completely. His free arm cuffs around my throat, holding me prisoner against him. My stomach flips when I feel his apparent erection pressing into my spine; the lethal hardness mashed between our bodies. I'm stunned he's horny, and I can suddenly sense it, pheromones of desire only a man can bleed into the atmosphere.



My body slackens in his hold. I close my eyes to focus on breathing in his dirty, musky fragrance, getting high on Charlie. In my mind, he's everywhere with extra effect, all over my skin where he's soaking through my sports vest with sweat—but I like it. I could easily get out of his hold, but I don't want to. I let my head roll back on his naked chest and blow out a long, husky breath.

"You all right, baby?" he whispers in my ear, kneading his nose there. "Are you finished *trying* to kick my ass, hmm?"

I shake my head with a smirk, luxuriating in the tingly power forming low in my belly. He leans over to kiss the corner of my mouth, turning up the heat. As he does, his arm around my throat relaxes, and then his hand travels down my body, through my breasts and over my stomach. He attempts to lift the hem of my vest, tickling my navel with his fingers. It makes me quiver. I'm nearly lost in him.

But I haven't won yet.

I drop to my knees and throw him over my shoulder, groaning with inner strength where he's so damn heavy. He tumbles onto his back and lands there with a groan, sprawled out like a starfish. I don't let him lie there alone for long. I'm quick to crawl across him on all fours until we're face to face, bending to peck his stubbly mouth as a mischievous apology. His eyes burst into flames as I do, stunned by my affections.

"Now I'm done *trying* to kick your ass," I whisper, glowing with blatant hunger.

"Thank *my Dios* for that." He reaches up to stroke a spot on my face, flicking loose lengths of hair out of the way. "That's one of the few times you've freely kissed me, you know that?"

I shrug, grinning like an idiot. "I like kissing you—especially after beating you in a fight."

"Beating me?" He snorts, laughing to himself. "About that...you need to relax when we're training. It's gonna take time for you to get back to normal, but it's time we've got, you know?"

I nod, pecking his mouth again to maintain the mood.

"Until you're at onehundred percent," he says on my lips, "at least let me lap up the easiness of being able to beat you for once."

I giggle, playfully nudging his groin with my knee. He doesn't even attempt to protect himself, trusting I won't actually hit him *there* again. His large arms fold around me, pulling me in for a long, lush kiss. It buckles me,

turning my entire body to mush. My knees slide against the ring surface, spreading out, and I lie on him like this, melting with my ankles bowing.

“Guess I should’ve kissed you properly in the first place,” Charlie jokes, realizing he’s my weakness.

I nod in a state of passion, arching my hips to shamelessly stimulate my clit on his cock. It’s bulging through the material of his shorts, begging to come out, making the little pulse in my pussy throb out of control.

“I want you, Charlie,” I husk, nipping at his bottom lip while rubbing my clothed breasts on his chest, feeling his heart is beating like crazy.

My sexual admission is all the incentive he needs. One of his hands curves under my ass, forcing my hips to rock harder on him. It renders me breathless. My pulse climbs, eyes flashing with euphoric stars. I clutch his face to deepen the kiss with savage, endless licks, indulging in the salty flavor of his skin blended with his natural body chemistry.

This is so fucking hot. Nothing tops making out with Charlie—especially after play-fighting.

Before we can get anywhere near fucking though, the gym doors crash open. Our heads snap to the left where his Los Zetas are piling in. They are loud and boisterous, shoving each other while laughing in their Latino accents. They stop dead as a group when they see us and glance at each other, then at us.

“I said one o’clock!” Charlie shouts, whacking his head back on the ring floor.

“Hey, don’t stop on our account,” one of his Los Zetas teases. “Can we watch your girl patear el culo?” *Kick ass.*

I laugh, biting my lips closed.

Charlie playfully swats my butt, saying we should let them have the gym. I glare wolfishly at him, flushed with want, wanting more kisses and...

He chuckles, knowing exactly what I’m craving. “You get off on besting me”—he flicks up his eyebrows with daring—“I get off on forcing you to endure delayed gratification.” Leaning up, he whispers in my ear, “Welcome to my world, baby.”

# 17

For a while, things with Charlie are somewhat platonic, like in the gym when he wouldn't fuck me. We kiss and stuff, and I get so turned on I rub my body on his—especially after a hot workout session—but he won't screw me.

I find his restraint weird, given he forced himself on me to steal my virginity. I suspect he feels guilty for the way he first took me. Or maybe Dr. Shyam told him to leave me alone and indulge in other ways until I'm well again? The latter is a plausible explanation, since all Charlie wants to do is talk, train, play fight, read books, or watch movies.

Movies are a new addition to our relationship.

One night when he comes back from a meeting, I spot he's holding a few DVDs—plus a royal blue, oval jewelry box. I'm a little pouty that he didn't ask me to go with him, hiding in the kitchen doorway as he enters the house. He's clad in one of those fancy businesslike coats Maksim used to wear, expensive black material hanging to just below his knees. Beneath it, he's wearing a tidy black shirt unbuttoned to his dusty chest, tucked into dark blue fitted jeans and shiny oxford shoes. I watch him strip out of the coat as he mutters something in Spanish to one of his men. The Los Zetas replies to say *she's* been relaxing. "Very quiet and intriguing that one," he adds, as if he's been analyzing me. I haven't even noticed him around. I've been anxiously shifting from room to room, waiting on Charlie's impending return.

"Hmm, Blaire is an enigmatic creature, yes," Charlie says, stepping up to look down on his man. "I hope you haven't been lingering around her? I told you all to stay away from her, didn't I?"

The Los Zetas guy nods, maintaining eye contact with his *Señor* as a display of truth and loyalty. It's then Charlie spots me prying in the kitchen doorway. He walks up to greet me with a deep kiss, lifting me clean off my feet with his arms bound around my body.

I'm mortified he's doing this in front of people, but he's just happy to see me.

I ask where he's been once we settle at the dining table for dinner, and he

explains that he closed a *big* deal today at a meeting in London, while tucking into his food.

“A big deal, huh?” I say, reaching for the jug of water, but he takes it before I can and pours me a drink. “How was it in the city?”

He shrugs, unbothered by the day’s events. “Nothing changes there.”

I try to hide the fact that I’m still offended, switching off emotionally by *yes’ing* and *no’ing* on autopilot to all his questions: *am I all right, did I miss him, blah, blah, blah*. He asks if I want to watch a movie, and my head snaps up from my plate, eyes alight with curiosity. We haven’t done that before.

“You can cut the nonchalant act, baby,” he teases, grinning from ear to ear. “I know you’re upset with me.”

My expression morphs into a scowl. “I am not upset with you.”

“Don’t lie, Blaire. It doesn’t suit you.”

I snort at his mockery, but his features soften. He watches me for a second in silence, creating a sphere of intimacy around us.

“I didn’t want you to come today because of all that’s going on with Robert,” he says eventually. “You should know I wouldn’t give anyone a chance to get their grubby hands on you.”

“You don’t have to explain yourself to me, Charlie.”

“I know I don’t, but I will. I respect you enough to offer an explanation.” His head turns to the frail housekeeper who’s passing the royal blue jewelry box Charlie arrived with. “Obviously, this is for you,” he says to me.

I take the box and click it open, frowning at a string of sparkly crystals wrapped around a suede cushion inlay. I don’t know what to say. I force a smile and put the box on the empty chair next to me, now feeling stupid for being annoyed with him over something so trivial. I cannot fathom why it bothered me that he went out without me, but it did.

“When we’re in Mexico,” he says, knotting his fingers under his chin, “I’ll take you everywhere, Blaire: restaurants, dancing, late evening barbeques by the ocean...”

“You have restaurants at your Site?”

He nods. “It’s a built-up community, completely self-contained, except for a few things we need to source from the mainland—like pretty diamonds for pretty girls.” He smiles when he says that, making me feel hot all over, and I realize that must be a string of diamonds in the jewelry box. Not crystals.

Charlie’s charm charges on full beam as he goes in to practically selling

his homeland to me, adding little details about a boat he owns, so he can travel between Cuba and the Bahamas.

I'm enveloped under his spell, smiling and nodding without restraint when he asks again if I want to watch a movie with him. He goes up to change in to more comfortable attire, then we nestle in each other on the couch in the living room to watch *The Great Gatsby*, a classic in literature and television. Charlie is lying on his side, spooning me from behind with one arm under my neck, wrapped around my chest. I use his bicep as a cushion, shoving my feet between his thighs for warmth.

I'm surprised by how engrossing the movie is, content silence hanging between Charlie and me for hours while he fiddles with the bracelet on my wrist. But then Gatsby and his lover are reunited after five years of separation, and it sparks untold questions in me. They say they're certainly glad to see each other, standing in a room inundated in beautiful, colorful flowers—courtesy of Gatsby. The music is perfect, a lady with a voice so deep yet melodic, enchanting. The visuals are second to none.

"This isn't a real story, is it?" I glance back at Charlie, arching my neck to see his face.

"Some say it's a true story." He smiles down on me, gazing with wholesome affection.

I don't believe it for a second. No one is *that* in love.

"But, a man wouldn't get all those flowers for a girl," I say, blinking at him in a state of processing. "It's too much hassle, no?"

He touches my face, picking lengths of hair off my forehead. "Do you like flowers?"

I shrug, turning back to the television. "I guess they're beautiful to look at. They're really beautiful in this movie."

Charlie's ex—or whatever she was—Celine, mocked the idea of us watching movies together. I'm not sure why. I turn right around to Charlie this time, curl up in his middle, and tell him what she said, evidently confused. "Why would Celine say that with sarcasm?"

He smirks, glancing between my eyes and my mouth while tucking lengths of hair behind my ear. "She's just jealous of us spending quality time together, is all."

"By watching movies, like now?"

He nods and bends to give me a soft yet full peck on the mouth. "Couples do things like watching movies, going out to dinner, and dancing, baby."

I sigh. I really don't understand. I never did any of those things with Maksim—not that we were a couple or anything.

I ask Charlie if he's ever watched movies like this with anyone else other than me, ready to catalogue names just in case I need to get rid of them. But he insists he hasn't, and I believe him.

“That's...good...” I say with a frown, trailing off in my thoughts. The idea of Charlie being intimate with another woman bothers me. It makes my stomach twist with the strangest, angriest emotion. When Maksim used to fuck about with other girls, I didn't care. But I don't want to share Charlie—and I won't.

“Did you ever do things like this with Maksim?” Charlie questions. I turn away, telling him a flat *no*. He doesn't press me, just sighs. He never presses me anymore. The only thing Charlie seems interested in is ensuring my happiness.

The next day, he wakes me before dawn. I initially think something is wrong as Charlie never wakes me up anymore. My thoughts hamper on James. *He's in trouble. He's dead. Robert is here!* But the mood in the bedroom is serene, flickering candles dotted about on shelves and side tables. A rich, woody scent lingers in the air from the burning fireplace in the corner. It's spitting with wild, ginger flames, glowing orange over Charlie's large frame bent over me in the bed.

“What's going on?” I ask, croaking to clear my throat. I rub my eyes, trying to wake up because I'm sure I'm dreaming.

“Nothing's going on,” Charlie whispers and taps the bed. “I got you something.”

I turn my head, and my jaw drops at the sight of a huge bunch of white flowers on his pillow, decorated with wild leaves. The silver packaging crumples in my hands as I lift the heavy bouquet to my nose, to feel the cool, silky petals on my skin. I snag my cheek on a card with a note reading, *You deserve these, baby. X*

I'm so stunned by them that I can't even thank him. How did he get these so early? The sun hasn't even come up yet.

He kisses my mouth, chuckling while trying to tell me he's also run a hot bubble bath for me. “When you're done, there's a vase on the coffee table for the flowers.”

Still, I'm stumped for words. My mouth doesn't even close when he kisses me one last time before disappearing for work.

I wake the day after to another bunch of flowers, and the following day to another...it becomes a diurnal treat. The cards become the muses of my days, tender, handwritten notes that are different every time. I ask what his infamous X means over dinner one night, beyond curious. "Google says it denotes a kiss."

"You actually Googled what does an X mean?" he says through a mouthful of rice, staring at me from the side with wide, interested eyes.

I tell him that I did. "When I lived with you before, when you gave me your laptop to use, I Googled it then."

His expression thaws, and he tilts his head to gaze at me with longing affection. "You're so damn sweet sometimes, Blaire. It does denote a kiss, yeah." He beams, glancing up and down between my eyes and my mouth. "And you're the only girl I've ever written kisses to because you're the only girl I've ever been in love with."

A power of pride takes over me, and I stare at him so he can see it scorching in my eyes and in my smile. *He's. All. Mine.* It's still so hard to believe we're solely each other's. I'm nervous for the day we mingle with other people—specifically other women. But I guess I'll deal with that when the time comes.

Eliza clears the table when Charlie vanishes to make a phone call in his office, and I go upstairs to hide all the cards under my pillow, so no one can take them from me. That's when I find a lighter on the floor near the bed, like it fell out of someone's pocket by mistake. It's a clear case nearly full to the brim of gas. Glancing around, I check for evidence of an intruder. Charlie and I don't smoke. Maybe he used it to light the candles the other morning?

That makes sense.

I scoop it up off the floor and flick it on to watch the angry, auburn flame flicker with its tango. I don't know why, but I burn one of the flowers Charlie bought today. I hold the stalk and set the silky petals alight, bewitched by the black smoke and the strange, metallic scent. My eyes divert to Maksim's bite mark on my wrist, the silvery-white scars fading day by day. I think about how neither James nor I have mourned our master. No one even speaks of him anymore. It's as if he never existed. It's as if his death didn't really happen. It's as if I dreamed the whole thing and somehow awoke from the nightmare in an alternative universe. An almost perfect universe.

Most would think my master doesn't deserve James' or my respect of mourning him since he did unspeakable things to us, but we spent ten years

of our lives with him. To me, that warrants mourning him in the proper fashion. In Russia when one dies, mirrors are covered so the soul doesn't get trapped between worlds, and we drink vodka to say goodbye.

Perhaps James and I will do just that once he's home.

I flick the lighter again and hold the flame under the bite mark, hissing as it boils my flesh from the outside in. As odd as it sounds, the pain brings back reality. Life with Charlie is a big coast of serenity. He rarely makes me angry or unhappy, and if he does it's fleeting. To feel the scorch of the flame reminds me that this isn't reality. This is a dream. A wonderful dream I never want to wake from.

Reality is being on all fours under Maksim about to take a bloody beating.

"What the hell are you doing?!" Charlie yells from the doorway, and I flinch in astonishment. I drop the flower and the lighter on the floor at my feet, gawking at him in a state of white shock.

He storms in before I can catalogue his expression, snatches my wrist, and glares at the hot, angry red patch marring the scar. It pulses with pain, amplifying when I curl my fingers, pulling at the flesh.

Charlie's dark mood sets off like an erupting volcano, and he isn't even speaking.

"Let me go," I whisper while yanking at my hand, wanting to put a mile between us. "I-I want to go. Let me go, Charlie."

"Why would you do this, Blaire?" he growls with his features narrowed, eyes blazing under pure wrath. He tugs on my arm, demanding an answer. "Why the fuck would you burn yourself?"

"I-I don't know." I blink at the floor, unsure of what to say. My shoulders arch, breaths coming deeper. There was no reason for burning myself. It just happened.

He drags me to the bathroom off his bedroom and heaves me over to the sinks. Flicking on the faucet, he stretches my arm under the icy flow. I wince through gritted teeth when the water hits my skin. It heightens the burn, making my hand tremor with pain.

"Does that feel fucking good, hmm?"

I shake my head to answer him, and he glares at me.

"Stupid girl..." he spits, turning up the flow so it's gushing and spitting about all over the place. "Stay there while I get a bandage, and I fucking mean it. Don't you dare move."



Charlie rushes out of the room, leaving me with the isolation of what I've just done. I look around, nervous, while the sink fills up to nearly overflowing, but I don't move to undo the plug. I just let it run. He told me not to move.

When Charlie comes back he pulls the plug, causing a rowdy, gulping sound in the pipes. He's holding a bottle of gel and a whole stack of bandages, laying them out on the vanity unit. He doesn't say anything, and neither do I. With steady hands, he smears gel on the hot wound, using his thumb in gentle, circling strokes. It tingles and burns with a particular coldness. It throbs as he wraps the bandage around several times before tucking it in the edge.

"Now, Blaire"—he bows at the knees, putting us eye to eye—"why would you burn yourself?"

"I don't know, Charlie," I say. I try to walk past him but he extends an arm, refusing to let me leave.

"You can go once you've answered my question."

I shutdown royally, cuddling my sore arm. I keep my eyes on the floor, regardless of how hard he stares at me.

"I want to know why you burned yourself, Blaire. This is fucked up!"

I slowly lift my face to his. "I'm, fucked up?"

He huffs while lifting his hands in a shrug, at a loss.

My hackles come up raw, starting as a spidery prickle on the back of my neck and spreading throughout my body.

"You're fucked up!" I scream in his face at the top of my lungs, and he steps back with surprise. "Don't you dare stand there holier than thou when you're the one who's taking meds for psychotic episodes! You're fucked up! You are! It-it's not just me!"

Words don't pass his lips. He crosses his arms, surveying me with intense interest.

It riles me to new depths.

Fists clenched, I really give it to him, shrieking that he's a bastard. He slaps a hand over my mouth and rams me up against the wall, one knee pressing into my middle. I groan on impact, so stunned my thoughts blank. He shoves his other hand into my pants, and my stomach flips with a muddle of panic and strange violation. My eyes dash away from his, squeezing shut as he fingers his way into my tight hole.

"Well, it doesn't feel like pain gets you off," he says, pulling out of my

dry channel. Letting go of my mouth, he steps back to observe me again.

I melt to the floor on all fours, hugging my head in my arms to hide from his scrutiny. I don't even know what's happening. Not half an hour ago, we were having a nice dinner, enjoying each other, and now...

"Why did you do that, Blaire? Why did you burn yourself?"

"I don't know!" I shout, tensing to get it out.

"Why did you burn the flower?"

"I don't know...Maksim used to burn flowers," I say honestly, hoping it's enough to shut him up. But it's not. He asks why, and I tell him, "He used to burn them and put them on his parents' graves because he hated them."

"Whoa...so, you hate me?"

"What? No!" I hug my head tighter, wishing he'd let this go. "I just...I just burned it because—I don't know why!"

"Why did you burn yourself?"

"I! Don't! Know!" My throat tears, screeching so hard my eyes nearly pop out of my skull. "I said I don't know! I don't fucking know!"

The sound of metal **clanging** on metal makes my stomach drop. I know what it is. I don't need to see to know. He's fumbling to unbuckle his belt.

My entire body sinks with nerves. *I'm sorry*. I try to say it, but I'm paralyzed.

"Is it the pain, hmm?" Charlie's breaths expel, rugged and tense. "Does it turn you on? Do you want my belt across your fucking ass to get you wet? Answer me!" I cower under his yelling, nearly shattering to cry, *no, I don't!*

"There are rules to indulging in things like this, Blaire, and for a good fucking reason," he snaps. "You're not some *puta* I picked up in a club. I fucking love you! Safety is priority!" I flinch every time he shouts, mentally begging him to stop. "Is this what you want, yeah, to indulge in pain play? By my Dios, if you don't answer me..."

Panicking, I shake my head in my arms to signal *no* because I definitely don't want to indulge in pain play if it means he's going to hit me.

"Then tell me why you burned yourself, baby?"

"I said I don't know, Charlie," I whisper, calming under his tone of voice. I gulp a few deep breaths, tongue weighing heavy in my mouth. "I just did it. I saw the lighter, and I just...I just burned the flower, and then I just burned my arm."

Charlie doesn't say anything now, and formidable silence encases us. I can feel his stare boring into me, but I don't dare look up. I lie here curled up

waiting for his hands to pull down my trousers and my underwear. I lie here waiting for him to belt me. But then I hear a deft **clang** on the floor near my head. I flinch. Then I hear heavy thuds getting further and further away, flinching with every one. Removing my arms, I peer up and ahead to see Charlie's tanned boots rounding the corner out of the closet, into the bedroom, until he disappears out of sight.

My heart roars in my ears as I listen for the bedroom door to shut. When it does, I take the opportunity to get up and hide in the only place in this house I know isn't under his Big Brother watchful eye—my old bedroom.

# 18

I shut down mentally and physically, and I sleep better than I should tonight in my old bed, wrapped up in the darkness of my old room.

The door is wedged shut with a chair, and Charlie's silent threat to belt me feels a million miles away.

I am safe in here.

Of all things, I dream of erotic sensations, warm oils splattering all over my body. Strong, rough hands rub the oils into my feet between my toes, and it tickles so much I giggle in a sleepy state, squirming about with my head shoved in the pillows. A sharp nail rakes down my left sole, and I sob with want, grinding at the waist. It makes my belly tingle.

I hum in delight as those strong hands drift up my slender neck to my mouth, circling the edge of my lips. My tongue slips out, seeking my masseur. I want to taste him. But he begins gifting my body the same attention. He massages my legs and my thighs, stomach and chest, rounding the curves of my tiny breasts.

"Ow!" I hiss, as a form of heat drips on my curling toes. It trickles down the front of my left ankle, snaking around the curves. It *drip, drip, drips*, up my shin and over my knee, getting messy as it streams down my inner thigh in a trail of fire. *Double fucking, ow!* It really does burn. It's ruining my sensual dream.

When the heated droplets near my groin, electric zaps at my brain, screaming, *wake up! Wake up!*

My eyes bolt open to the sight of Charlie crouched between my open legs on his knees, holding a blazing candle in one of his hands. I freeze, unable to speak at first. Inky hair frames his savage face, framing those intense, piercing blue eyes narrowed in on mine. He's naked, and the candle shimmers ginger against his bronze skin, blackening the rough hair on his chest and his tense stomach.

"Wha-what's going on, Charlie?" I croak to ask, meekly sitting up on my elbows. That's when I notice I'm not wearing my nightclothes anymore. My

skin is moist and slippery, with certain areas on my body beyond sore.

I realize it wasn't a dream, that Charlie must've undressed me while I was sleeping. I think he was the masseur of my reverie.

"Charlie, what are you doing?"

"You want to play with fire," he says in his raspy, Latino accent, his usual look of desire for me replaced with anger and aversion, "then you'll do it in a safe manner with me."

Aware of its purpose, I glance at the candle, then I glance back up at him, obviously wary. "Charlie, put that down."

Silence.

My eyes dart around the room searching for an escape, should I need it. The single, curtainless window is now shut, and the chair I wedged up against the door handle is gone.

"I don't want to do this," Charlie says, pulling my full attention. The large apple in his throat bops up and down as he confesses, "I don't want to do anything that causes you harm. But I realize now, this is how you function."

*What?*

"Rewards for being good and punishments for being bad, or there are no boundaries, are there? You could cause yourself harm. You *did* cause yourself harm." His words ricochet around my head, an echo of Maksim and James.

"You don't know what you're talking about." I wet my dry lips. "Just put that down and let's—"

He lifts a hand and I flinch, but he merely touches my face, his movement robotic and controlled. "You, are my queen"—my eyes widen with disbelief as he says that—"guilt has tormented me for the way I took your virginity. But I can't have you thinking you can get away with burning yourself."

I look at him from under my eyebrows, cautious. He continues touching my face, brushing his fingers under my eye and around my cheek to my jawline.

"Lie down," he whispers.

"Charlie—"

"I said lie down!" he yells abruptly, and I cringe, elbows buckling under me.

I don't know what's going on. I squeeze-blink to wake up, sure I'm still dreaming.

Charlie gains height on his knees to lean over me, so he's speaking in my face. "You'll stay very still and learn a lesson. You understand?"

Swallowing past the dry lump in my throat, I nod. I sink into the mattress under him with obedience, square at the shoulders and tense in the legs.

*Is he really going to burn me?*

I remember the first time he fucked my ass, when he lit a candle to ignite those oils he used to help me relax. I thought he was going to burn me then—but he didn't.

He crawls down the bed between my legs and tips the candle with a steady hand, causing the flame to dance like crazy against the paneled walls, disrupting the darkness in the room. My eyes flash with fear as I watch the nightmare unfold without being able to stop it. If I do, it means a fight. And I don't want to fight Charlie for real if I can avoid it. I don't want to hurt him.

Wax spills over the rim, and a hot stream slithers down my groin, burning me. I hiss like a snake, confused by the sensation. My legs tremble to shut, but he's between them.

He turns the candle upright to let the wax cool and stick to me. The areas are tender and overly warm, though it's a pain I can handle. I think the shock of what's happening hurts more.

I chance a glance at Charlie, and he glances at me with his eyes glowing red from the flame. He shakes his head in disgust, and my eyes flicker away, just as the heat trails up over my navel and through my breasts, clinging to my skin.

"Ouch! Fucking ouch!" I yelp when a thick piece of melted wax lands on one of my nipples, and again when it lands on the other.

My hands fly up to protect myself, but Charlie warns, "Don't, or I'll start all over again."

I shut my eyes and bite my lips closed, clawing at my sides to keep my hands down.

*It'll be over soon. Torture cannot last forever.*

To add to the intensity, Charlie turns up my chin with a single finger, so I'm staring up at the wooden bedframe. I'm unable to see it coming when wax pools in the dip of my throat. My breath hitches, mouth opening wide for air. The wax slithers down the curves of my neck and dries in a line, turning hard on the pulsing vein there. I open my eyes as wide as I can, blinking in a state of anxiety.

"Charlie—"

“Hush, chica,” he whispers as he pours hot paths across my shoulders, collarbones, and around the boundaries of my arms.

I feel the bed dipping when he makes his way down to my feet. I screech as a thick layer of heat streams down the edge of my pussy, molding in the seam.

“Stop!” I scream, rolling onto my side with one of my legs buckled around him. That’s too far. That’s too much. My eyes screw shut in discomfort as the wax turns cold and solid in my groin, amplifying the abnormal heat down there. “Just stop! I-I don’t want to play this game anymore! It’s too intense!”

“Fire isn’t so much fun after all, is it?” Charlie says, and I glare at him from the side, cuddling my breasts.

Leaning over me, he puts the candle on the bedside cabinet, and I practically gasp in relief. But then he presses fists into the mattress on either side of my face, meeting me eye to eye. I cower into my shoulders. “Don’t *EVER* burn yourself again, and I mean it, Blaire.” His breath warms my cheeks where he’s so close, anger flashing in his eyes. “Or next time, I’ll tie you down and do this for hours—far past what you can handle. Do you understand me?”

I nod because I don’t want to do that again. Well, I don’t want him to pour it near my pussy again. That fucking hurt.

“I know you’re a little fucked up. I accept it. I like it. But”—he shakes his head, emphasizing on what’s disturbing him—“I don’t like it when you either threaten to or actually hurt yourself.” He punches his own chest, and I flinch in reaction. “It. Hurts. Me.”

Little hairs all over my body prick while my heart aches beyond guilt. I search his face, breathing his name, but it comes out choked.

Charlie curls his finger around a lock of my hair near my eye. “Do you remember when you put a gun to your head?”

I nod, jittery and awkward.

“Well, while I already suspected my affections for you, that’s when I knew for sure I was in love with you.”

The revelation renders me verbally stupid. The aching in my chest twists constrictor tight.

“I could have actually died inside when I saw you click back the hammer.” He lifts the piece of my hair to his nose and smells it, humming as he does. “I thought you were gonna pull the trigger.”

I would have if he didn't answer my question. Death doesn't frighten me. People do. He does.

"Don't try to hurt yourself anymore," he says softly, more like Charlie, "because in doing so, you're hurting me."

"I won't," I whisper, a painful sting rushing to the surface of my eyes. "I'm sorry. I don't know why I did it, Charlie."

As if to apologize for what he's done, he swoops down and takes my mouth, kissing me fiercely. I hold my eyes open, watching him to see if he's going to do anything else. The candles' flame has settled, burning evenly, but I don't like it.

"What is it?" Charlie searches my eyes, pecking my bottom lip.

It takes superhuman strength to swallow and ask, "Are you keeping the candle alight to burn me again?"

Turning his head, he blows out the flame, and the room casts over in darkness. Silver moonlight streams in through the single, curtainless window, but it's barely luminous.

Charlie clutches my arm and makes me roll onto my back, sealing his lips over mine a second time. Calmer now, I cup his bristly face in both palms and arch up to kiss him back, pulling him down on top of me so we're body to body. His thick, veiny shaft rubs through my folds, sliding up over my clit. It sends shockwaves of sensations through my system, making me moan out of control in his mouth.

"I love you, Blaire."

"I know you do," I whisper, intensifying the kiss with hungry, ceaseless licks. His tongue is a saccharine dance, spicy with liquor. It adds to the high, driving me wild with want.

Charlie's hands slip under my back to engulf my body in his arms, crushing me in the mattress under his powerful weight. He smells all clean and soapy with a hint of musky, aromatic shampoo. It's so hot. I grind on his cock, stimulating my pulsing bud. I don't want him inside me yet. I just want to bask in this skin on skin sensation. But Charlie draws back as he kisses across my jaw, down the wax trail on my neck and between my breasts. He sucks the underneath plumpness of my breasts while his fingers tweak my nipples, causing the wax to crumble from my flesh bit by bit. It hurts, but still, my every sense ignites. I stuff my head back in the pillows to relish in his attention, entwined in sensations.

His tongue licks one of my sore, peaked buds and I whimper, an upsurge



of extraordinary pleasure tearing through me. His saliva is cold, heightening the burning. He licks the other nipple, and my whimpers come out choked and desperate. I think I like the pain first and the pleasure later. I don't know. I'm so confused.

"Isn't this so much better, baby, hmm?" he whispers in the darkness of my mind.

"Yes," I breathe the word and reach out to tangle my fingers in his glossy hair, squirming as he kisses down my stomach, nearing my sex. My deeper muscles tense with anticipation as his warm, damp tongue lines my pussy where he burned me with the wax. I'm a squealing mess when he licks across my swollen clit, flicking it once on his way to pecking my inner thigh. *Go back. Go back!* I roll at the waist, mentally begging him to lick me *there* again. Cool puffs of breath come from his nose, chasing down my groin after his tongue, folding me inside out with need.

*Please! Go back!*

I gaze down at him with desire, panting passionately. At the same time, his eyes flicker up from between my legs, creating a moment of electric power around us. He's flushed. Hungry too. He looks darkly beautiful.

"Why haven't you touched me like this in so long?" My voice comes out husky, heavy with longing.

"It can't be like *that* with us," he whispers, his full lips shiny with moisture. "Dark, twisted...it's not what you want."

"You don't even know what I want," I say, because he doesn't. I don't even know what I want anymore. I mean, I don't want him to belt me, but the rest...I'm not sure. I'm not sure of anything. The wax did hurt, but if this is the end result of his torment, then I'm not holding back. I feel...rapturous, out of my element yet in the heart of my domain simultaneously.

"Control is my philosophy, Blaire," he says, raspy and almost silent. "When I'm lacking in it, I find refraining from temptation and letting time heal works wonders."

My eyebrows crease as I whisper, "What does that even mean?"

"I felt guilty for forcing you. Now I don't. So, I'm gonna fuck you." Before I can beg for him to elaborate on what he's saying, his rough hands glide up the undersides of my thighs until they're hooked behind my knees. He arches them up to my chest, splaying me wide open, and bows his head to taste me. His tongue parts my slick folds to tease and brutalize me, turning every sensation in my body into a full-on inferno of melted desire.

“Oh, fuck,” I sob, spiraling as he laps up all my juices, spearing my entrance before swirling his tongue on my sensitive bud. I wriggle about to escape the intensity, but at the same time, I want more. Orgasms—especially impending ones—are fucking mystifying.

“Put your hands on your shoulders, Blaire, and don’t reach out for anything,” Charlie says in a muffled voice, separating my tender lips with his tongue again, all the way up until he’s beating and working my clit.

I groan, biting and licking my lips. I do as I’m told, clawing at my own shoulders while squirming to cum. I’m almost at the crown of release. So close.

Charlie grabs my hips and lifts me clean off the bed, making me yelp with shock. My head rushes as my vision turns upright in the darkness of the room, and I realize he’s standing. My legs wrapped around his neck, he holds me here, mouth-fucking my pussy with his tongue and his lips.

The heat increases, tingles burning all over. My toes cramp, curled so tight it hurts where I’m trying desperately not to tense his head between my legs. But then he sucks my clit into his mouth, and my thighs break into tremors—and an orgasm-vault hits me so hard I fold over him, screaming at the top of my lungs.

Charlie steps back from the bed and throws me off his shoulders.

Adrenaline whips at me, pulse rocketing sky high. I land on the mattress with heavy bounces and wild, girly moans, legs trembling out of control. I curl over on my side, whimpering, clenching my thighs together. I hide my face in the sheets while my body wrings dry with an orgasm so fierce I can’t see nor feel anything else.

Charlie stands there at the bedside dominating his eyes over me, under the moonlight. It seems to heighten the ecstasy, him enjoying the visual while I’m enjoying the actual. I cup my drenched sex and knead it with my fingers, drawing out the high. That’s when I feel the mattress sloping around me, and Charlie’s lips stroke up my wax inundated arm to my shoulder with tender kisses. He nuzzles the spot between my ear and neck, whispering that he loves me. I lift a hand to hold his face near mine, fingers dripping in arousal. I want to tell him that he means everything to me, too, but I’m certified mute.

“Do you understand why I burned you, Blaire?”

I nod, too high to verbally respond.

“Good,” he whispers in my ear. “You want to find an unnatural high, then you’ll find it with me. Never alone where you can hurt yourself, all right?”

“Yes,” I husk. “Wha-whatever you want.”

His thick cock slips between my soaked folds, nudging at my snug entrance, and my stomach somersaults. “You ready for me, baby?”

Hazy and starry-eyed, I nod again. I think I was made ready for him.

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# 19

James' return is looming close, and it's making me anxious. While I desperately want him freed from Robert's evil grasp, I'm not sure there is space in my life for him anymore. I don't even watch the footage we receive of him now because I know it will upset me. I am just too absorbed in Charlie, as our deepest and darkest desires manifest in each other.

Something has happened between us—something has happened to me—a new kind of knowing. He's tapped in to a hidden part of me I never knew existed.

Our friendship is close and constant while our fucking is wild and it's everywhere: the kitchen table, all over the gym from the boxing ring to the filthy mats on the floor, his office, the living room, his bedroom, and the shower.

I am breathless just thinking about it.

Sex with him is atmospheric, always different with strange levels of danger and simultaneous tenderness that I find addictive. I now seek the familiarity of pain before pleasure, a desire I never knew I craved, and Charlie seems to enjoy being the master of it. He pinches me and strums my clit concurrently to interweave my senses. He sucks my flesh into his mouth, leaving dark, dirty bruises to mark me as his. He even strangles me, often to the border of a starry abyss. Sometimes, I let him strangle me until an orgasm hits like a tidal wave, and sometimes I pass out. I wake to a mad Charlie shouting that I should have stopped him, but he doesn't understand—I never want him to stop. I want to dance on the edge of death with him.

I've never felt more alive.

But he always ruins my moments by rambling on about rules *this* and rules *that*, safe words, hard limits—I laugh when he drops that one on me. Apart from belts and beatings—and burning my pussy—I have no hard limits. I don't tell him though. I don't want him anchoring his reasons and rules to my fears. He once promised he'd never hit me—and he hasn't—and that's enough to ease my concerns.

No matter how blasé I act to his angry outbursts though, he makes me listen as if I don't understand. But I do understand. The rules are there to form limitations and cement trust, *blah, blah, blah*, but I already trust Charlie with my body, so what does it matter? I just want to freely relish in the unknown that is him. Without rules.

Instead of being a heroin addict, I have become a Charlie addict. Perhaps I always have been. Perhaps that was the magnetic pull between us when we first met.

Nothing other than him really registers on my radar anymore, not even when he tells me his brothers are flying in tomorrow. I should be nervous, but I'm not. While we're lying in bed, glowing in the orange shadows of the roaring fireplace, I'm too busy furiously mulling over last night. Charlie screwed me four times in a row without mercy. He was steely and ruthless, getting hard in quick succession while I felt dry and raw after round two. He had to spit on me to moist me up again, but it was no use to me. I still felt shaky and exhausted, desperate to stop and go to sleep.

This happens a lot. It's fucking frustrating. I'm back on form physically and mentally, yet I can't keep up with him when we fuck?

"Charlie..." I say, turning up my head to look at him.

"Hmm?" He peers left at me, propped up against the headboard eating an orange.

Curious, I pose my burning question, wanting to know how he can get hard so quickly after cumming when I'm usually bested.

He doesn't answer at first, just blinks at me.

"You being serious, baby?"

I pull a funny face at him. "Well, sure I am."

"Oh." His animated blinking continues as he tries to explain that his fast replenishing desire is because he has stamina, though he does need a moment after fucking to gather himself. "But you're like a flaming red aphrodisiac, Blaire. Trying not to have a hard-on is the task." He laughs to himself like he cannot believe it, shaking his head in a state of bafflement.

"I can't be that much of an allure," I say, insulted. "You didn't touch me for ages after you stole my virginity."

Smiling with evident affection, he lets me in on a confession: after he *took* my virginity, he felt extremely guilty for how it happened and refused to touch me in order to punish himself.

"What?"

“Yeah,” he says. “It was one of the most testing times of my life. I would watch you sleep sometimes, entangled in my sheets with your beautiful, red hair splayed out on the pillow. I wanted to ravish you, but I wouldn’t. I couldn’t, not after what I did.”

“Why though, Charlie? I wasn’t mad at you, you know?”

“I told you, baby,” he winks at me, “control is my philosophy, and now, you’re my muse.”

My chest explodes with emotions, the power of his honesty and charm pulling me under, holding me prisoner in his spell. When he’s like this, he makes me feel so special to him.

Seizing the moment of intimacy, I decide to bombard him with questions about sex and everything in-between. I need to talk to Charlie about all this stuff since I don’t have anyone else—and it’s driving me insane trying to figure things out in my own head.

I tell him I’m mostly curious about how the body works on such levels, how it becomes so overwhelmed with desire and orgasms. I profess what it’s like when I detonate, that I’m deemed useless until I float back down, particularly after a long session.

“That’s the whole point of orgasms,” he says, grinning from ear to ear. “The process of making children had to be pleasurable and satisfyingly exhausting, otherwise humans would cease to exist.”

That makes perfect sense. Who’d want to have sex if it was painful?

“You know not every woman can orgasm, right?” he says, shocking the hell out of me. “Some poor *chicas* spend a lifetime without ever feeling the high.”

“How is that even possible?” I ask with my mouth practically hanging open.

He laughs, struggling to say I cum so well because I’m very in tune with my body. “You meditate. You’ve trained with Wing Chun. You know yourself inside out.”

I still can’t believe it. I’m like a moth to a flame as he resumes telling me he thinks women who struggle to orgasm should at the very least try Yoga, to get in touch with their deeper selves. I agree without argument. Imagine not being able to orgasm. That’s misery embodied.

“Charlie, you know the lying on the back position...?”

“Missionary?” He hands me a piece of orange, and I take it.

“Yes, missionary. Why does it take longer to...you know...?”

His eyes sparkle like blue diamonds as he says it takes longer to cum because it's harder to hit my G-spot, and my face lights up. I realize it must be the little button deep inside my body that reacts differently to every sexual position. On my back, orgasms definitely take longer to hit, but they're dangerously intense and long. When Charlie takes me from behind or lying on our sides with him spooning me, the upsurge of ecstasy is so fucking quick it blows my mind out of its skull.

That's my favorite position, on our sides. He can touch me all over my breasts and my clit. He can kiss my back and neck while breathing in my ear, "*Te amo.*" Fuck, when he says that.

"Is that what you meant?" Charlie interrupts my warped thoughts, tapping my arm to obtain my attention.

My head lifts to his, blinking with hazy confusion. I got lost there for a second.

"Why does it take longer to cum when lying on your back, is that what you meant?" he repeats himself, smirking. "You didn't know it was because of your G-spot?"

"Oh. No, I didn't," I reply, continuing to pepper him in questions about sex.

He's still smirking at me.

I shift my head on the pillow, squinting up at him. "What's so funny?"

"I adore you when you're like this. It's like when you have your period. You're full of curiosity."

"You made me like this," I say, wanting to know if he thinks how much he wants to do *it* is normal. It wasn't that long ago when we first did *it*, and he's fucked me so many times I've lost count—not that I'm complaining or anything. "I mean, if all men are like this, then how is anyone ever alone?" I blink at Charlie, frowning too. I bite half the orange he gave me, pulling a funny face because it's so sour. "Wouldn't desire alone drive people to each other?"

"Well, not all men are lucky enough to have a nice girl like you, Blaire, who's dutiful and willing. So they've no choice but to hold out for the occasional one-nighter. Or they date and marry someone who's all for fucking like rabbits in the honeymoon period and when it's over, so is the fucking."

"When what's over, Charlie?"

He cocks his head, smiling at me with fondness. "The honeymoon period,

baby.”

“Ohhh...” I take another slice of orange he proffers. “Will that happen to us?”

“Absolutely not,” he says with insult, pulling a ghastly face. “I wouldn’t let you turn me down—as I’m sure you already know—unless you have your period, and that’s only because I’ll worry you’ll get a stomach ache if I take you too hard.”

I’m glad to hear it. I feel decadently desired because he wants me all the time, like I want him.

“Talking of your period,” Charlie’s voice comes out thick with unshed questions, “have you noticed how irregular or even nonexistent it is?”

I nod, mouthing a whole slice of orange he passes.

“Has it always been like that, Blaire? When I had you at the house for those three months, I noted you only had one cycle.”

“Yes, it has always been like that,” I say between chewing. Then I wonder, “You’d have sex with me while I’m on my period?”

“Course I’d fuck you while you have your period.” He chuckles, eyes crinkling at the edges. “Tis’ just a little blood, baby. Nothing to be scared of.”

“Like, when we fight in the gym, get bloody, and then fuck?”

He snorts on a laugh, covering his mouth with one hand. “Yeah, something like that.”

I don’t know why he’s so amused. It happens a lot lately. Charlie’s been getting rougher and rougher, throwing me around the ring to beat me. Not that he’s had much luck. I’m thriving, back to my old self.

“Does it feel the same?” I ask, subconsciously agreeing when he interrupts to ask if I’ll let a gynecologist doctor check me over.

“Does what feel the same, baby?”

“Like, when I’m lying on my back,” I say. “If I’m on my period, will it feel the same?”

He finishes up eating his orange, giving me his last piece, and puts the peel on the bedside cabinet. He turns on his side to face me, braced up on one elbow. “I imagine it’s more intense. But we’ll be extra careful if you want to fuck when you’re on your period. You’ll be more...tender...delicate.”

“Okay.” I smile at him, believing he will be extra careful. I know he hurts me a lot during sex, but Charlie doesn’t lie. If he promises to be gentle, then he’ll be gentle. He follows all those lackluster rules, anyway.

“When you’re lying on your back,” he says, piquing my curiosity again,



“that position is for lengthy love making, and so I can see the powerful reaction on your pretty face.” He touches my face in that moment, his expression blazing in some emotion.

“Yes,” I say, hypnotized by him. “I think it’s more intense, too.”

He leans down to kiss my smile, tasting unholy of tangy orange juice. At the same time, he reaches for one of my hands, fondles with my fingers so my middle one is sticking up, then he sucks it dry of juice. The warmth of his sodden mouth sets my veins on fire, and my stomach quivers like a rattlesnake when he forces me to reach under the blanket, brushing across my belly. My eyes enlarge as he puts my hand between my legs, fingering through the pubic hair to my opening.

“Charlie...”

“Relax,” he whispers, holding my stare the entire time. “I want to show you something.” He urges the tip of my finger in my body, making my toes bend in embarrassment. I am tight, hot, and a little wet. I guess talking about sex turns me on, too.

When a teeny ball on my upper wall rubs against the pad of my finger, Charlie says, “That’s your G-spot. That’s where the magic happens.”

I laugh in a mixture of awkwardness and amusement as he bends again to kiss my mouth. “Now, curl your finger gently. Don’t scratch with your nail.”

“Are you going to hurt me tonight?” I say in anticipation, glancing between his eyes. “Or make me hurt myself?”

“No,” he whispers on my lips. “Not if you don’t want to play like that. I’ll be soft.”

I maintain our visual connection and do as he orders, certain that if I want it rough, all I need to do is say so. I tenderly curl my finger inside my tight channel, shuddering as I do. He is right again. It is that spot. Pleasure sprays through my body every time I touch it, but it’s not nearly as extreme as when he does this.

He closes his lips over mine with a deep moan and consumes me in a red-hot kiss, letting go of my hand. His voice is deep and gravelly as he tells me to keep playing with myself, and I do. I can’t stop now that I’ve started. He reaches under the blanket again, smudges his fingers in my dampness, and touches my clit with the pads of his fingers, leisurely circling the peaked bud. My hips start moving as heat begins to build. It charges in my center, expanding outward, morphing into a fierce surge so fucking powerful it turns my body inside out with a light, skittish orgasm.

In the aftermath, I'm all hot and tender, panting through the shockwaves. Charlie pinches my chin to arch my head back, so we're gazing heavily at each other, so the world outside of our eyes doesn't exist.

"Charlie," I say his name in a deep, bated breath.

"Hmm?" He glances back and forth between my foggy gaze, enjoying the frazzled state I'm in. "What is it, baby?"

"I want to be called Blaire Decena from now on"—his expression scorches as I tell him that—"I don't want anyone to call me Blaire-Markov anymore. She's gone."

## 20

I'm meeting the entire Decena family today, and I'm shitting bricks.

They're regrouping in preparation of the four weeks of no negotiations being over—but before that happens, before discussions with Robert begin, Charlie wants his brothers, Andres' wife Luna, and I, to be properly acquainted. He tells me over breakfast in bed like this is totally normal to me and not nerve-wracking, briefly mentioning he's set up a coffee date for us all and hopes I'll make an effort.

I wish he would elaborate on what he means by effort. Smile more? Say yes rather than nod? Shake hands?

I have a mouthful of eggs but struggle to swallow. I'm so nervous. My throat is bone dry.

We take our morning shower, wrap up in towels, and stand at the vanity sinks brushing our teeth. He's explaining something about a safe house that's a klick down the road, saying if shit ever hits the fan, we all meet there. I'm not listening. I'm miles away, wondering if the Decenas will like me. My nerves are stupid and irrelevant given all that's happening with James. Something so mundane shouldn't bother me. But I know Charlie is close with his family, and I know he wants me to make an effort. What if I do try my hardest, and they still don't like me? What will happen? Will he send me away? Will he change his mind about wanting me to live with him in Mexico?

If he does, he's got a problem because I'm not sure I'll ever be ready to let him go.

“Hey”—he gently touches my arm, rolling the towel at his muscular waist with his other hand—“you all right?”

The toothbrush sticking out of my mouth, I force a smile and ask if we'll ever have any privacy now that so many people are going to be around. It's a diversion, of course, for him and for myself.

“Course we will, silly chica.” He chuckles, flicking on the sink faucet. “This is our house, not theirs.”

I don't see what is so silly about my question. Throughout the three months I'd lived here with him, when he'd bought me from Maksim, this place had been so empty. No housekeepers. No gardeners. It was just us. And I liked it when it was just us. Now, the lawnmower rumbles every Sunday morning, Eliza potters about everywhere keeping the house shipshape, and he's dripping in Los Zetas guards and his family. I'm certain we'll never have alone time—especially when he explains what his sister-in-law is like: intrusive, nosey, and extremely verbose.

“Luna is very eccentric, too, but she's a lovely *dama*. I hope you'll like her or at least try to—since she'll be around to look after you if I'm ever away.”

*Great.*

Not only must I grow accustomed to two more Charlies, but I must accommodate his brother's wife.

“...Though the gym will be accessible to you before midday, all right?”

“Huh?” I blink up at Charlie, still brushing my teeth.

“The gym”—he grabs the sink edge while looking down on me, frowning—“the men use it after midday, but I don't want you in there with them if I'm ever away, so you'll have full access before they use it, okay?”

“If you're ever away?”

“Yeah.” His frown deepens, giving me the once over to study my body language. “I just told you I might need to leave for France any day now. You know things are getting tense with Robert, so if I must, I will go over his head. I'll meet with his associates to try and demand James' return before he gets caught up in a bloody war.”

*Things are getting tense with Robert? Did I miss something?*

My stomach suddenly hangs at the thought of Charlie going anywhere dangerous without me, and Robert and James evaporate from my mind.

“How long will you be gone for?”

“I don't know.” His expression softens, eyes flittering between mine. “Not too long though, I hope.”

“Oh,” I say, obviously glum. “Sure. I understand.” I spit out the paste, rinse my mouth, and turn for the closet to get dressed.

Charlie catches my elbow and says he wants to have a shave. “Sit with me, baby.”

I lower onto the wooden hamper next to the vanity sinks and snuggle in my fluffy towel, half listening to how his personal security detail will watch

over me *if* he goes away. “I trained another detail before I went to jail a few years back. They’ll come with me if I go to France.”

“Where were all your men before, Charlie?”

“Before?”

“Yes, when I stayed with you for those three months.”

“There’s a guardhouse half a klick away into the fields, but you can’t see it because of the trees.” He turns up his chin to shave underneath. “When you lived with me before, everyone on duty maintained a status there.” He stresses that I’m not allowed to go there. Ever. “And I mean it, Blaire. I’m never in a good frame of mind over there, so the guardhouse is off limits.”

I shrug, unbothered. Why would I ever want to go to the guardhouse anyhow?

“What about inside the house?” I ask. “You never had men in here before.”

“That’s because I wanted to connect with you.” He glances down at me, bestowing his full attention. “Having my men around would have put you on edge, I was certain of it. I even removed the cameras in your old room so you’d trust that I respected your privacy.”

I raise my eyebrows, astonished he said that out loud.

He smirks at me, blinking lazily. “C’mon, I’ve always had some level of respect for you, but I think you knew that already.” Bending, he splashes his face to wash off the foam and pulls out the sink plug.

I pick up a towel hanging on the nearby rack, passing it to him. He says thanks by leaning down to kiss my lips, his skin smooth and cool, wet from the water. Heat gushes between my legs, and I pull away before I can’t.

The level of arousal I feel for this man isn’t normal, I’m sure of it.

He chaperones me into the walk-in closet and rubs the prescribed ointment into my lower back like he does every day, burning my skin with the odd sense of cold. He then dresses me in a plain black underwear set, an emerald green girly tracksuit with a hoodie, and a pair of trainers. Coming up behind, he lets down my hair to brush it out, paying extra attention to the length.

In our silence, my thoughts revert to his family, and my stomach knots tighter than it did this morning. The feeling radiates all over, making me feel lightheaded and queasy.

I can’t fucking wait for this stupid coffee date to be over.

When Charlie is done petting me, he shrugs into white boxer briefs, a

black round-neck t-shirt, and a pair of light blue fitted jeans, slipping the silver watch over his left wrist. Lastly, he steps into his tanned boots and combs his own hair, pulling the disorderly strands into a ponytail.

“You look nice, Charlie,” I voice a rare compliment, picking at the strings of my hoodie.

“You know”—he side-glances at me—“if you don’t tell me what’s bothering you, I can’t fix it.”

My nerves over his family disliking me spill out before I can stop myself from speaking, and I become a rambling mess. I tell him I know I’m not likable, that I’ll probably offend them...

“They will like you.” He chuckles, reaching out to pinch my chin. “In fact, they’re gonna love you, Blaire. Stop worrying.”

“But, what happens if they don’t, Charlie? Are you going to send me away?”

“¿Estas loco?” *Are you crazy?* He laughs harder, fondly amused by my insecurity. “If they don’t like you, then they can hit the road. They know where the door is. And I’d be more than happy to help them on their way.”

“You wouldn’t do that.” I cross my arms to hug myself, feeling more insecure now than ever before. “I wouldn’t make James leave if he didn’t like you.”

“That’s because you’re not in love with me.”

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Charlie and I descent the staircase hand in hand.

I’m a bag of nerves. My legs are like Jell-O, my tongue is bone dry, and I can’t stop fidgeting for the life of me.

I can’t believe I’m mere seconds away from meeting his family, and I’m agitated with guilt by the fact that he just so carelessly said I’m not in love with him.

He didn’t noticed my remorse. While I was gaping like a horrified idiot, he carried on getting ready, moisturizing his face and spritzing himself with cologne.

I could actually be sick I’m so...equally anxious and guilty. I want to be sick. My stomach is knotting and churning, bubbling to puke.

“I’m looking forward to you meeting everyone,” Charlie says while lifting my hand to his mouth, kissing me there without a care in the world.

“It’s been a long time coming.”

I gulp down an uneasy heave. I can’t go in there like this. Not yet. I need a minute with Charlie, to explain how I feel. I can’t coast through the morning in this manic state of apprehension.

Nearing the bottom few steps, I pause, overwhelmed with the need to say something. *Anything!* I pull Charlie back and look up at him from the side, opening and closing my mouth to speak. The expression on his face is one of extraordinary innocence as he tips his head, gazing at me unblinkingly. He doesn’t have a clue what’s going on inside my mind.

*Fuck*, imagine knowing the person you love beyond words doesn’t love you in return. That’s got to hurt. It’d kill me.

“What is it, Blaire?” he asks, stepping down the staircase so we’re at eye level. He reaches for my other hand and holds both of mine in his, strumming his thumbs across my knuckles. “Baby, you’re worrying me. What’s wrong?”

“I would die for you without thinking, Charlie,” I manage to say, my husky voice barely a whisper. I glance down at our hands, squeezing his fingers to physically show that I care. “I-I know I must confuse you because I only really know what Maksim taught me, but...I-I do really, really care about you. I don’t know if what I feel for you is love,” I shrug, “but...”

“Hey, s’all right.” He lets go of my left hand to turn up my chin and tucks strands of my hair behind my ear. “I didn’t say that back there in hopes you were gonna start singing that you’re in love with me.” We search each other’s eyes, letting a moment of honesty charge between us. “As long as you’re mine, I am a happy man.”

“Really?”

“Really,” he says, winking at me.

My hemorrhaging nerves reduce until he asks if I’m ready. *Do I fucking look ready?*

“My family is dying to meet you,” he says, nodding to the right, “and I’m dying for you to meet them. C’mon.”

“I’m really nervous,” I confess, squeezing his hand.

“Just be yourself,” he says softly. Then teases, “Well, don’t attack anyone.”

I don’t laugh. I nod, feeling my heart drumming in my chest. Even my hands are trembling.

This is so stupid.

We come off the staircase and stop on the living room threshold, still

hand in hand. I stare through the open door, scanning every moving body in my line of vision.

Nic and Andres are standing around the coffee table, laughing and playfully shoving each other. They're clad in thick, black combat trousers with lots of pockets, tight muscle vests marked in their red Zs, and heavy black boots; guns and knives shoved in their waist holster belts. Their presence is powerfully boisterous, changing the mood in the house. It smells different in here today, too, a rich cocktail of masculine cologne and spicy perfume.

A beautiful *Señorita* with sleek, golden-brown hair is resting on the couch with her toned legs crossed, sipping a coffee. She's wearing a thigh-high red dress and strappy silver sandals. Her bronze skin looks personally kissed by the sun, smooth and shimmery. Her sharp cheeks are tinted pink, and her lips are plush and glossy. There are necklaces wrapped around her slender throat in a stream of gold, and a honking diamond on her left ring finger.

"Andres, Nic—" Charlie starts, and heads turn to look at us. "I'm glad you're here, Luna. Estas guapa." *You look nice.*

"Gracias, Señor Charlie," she husks, blushing over his compliment.

Hairs on the nape of my neck prick when Andres' blue eyes fixate on me from across the room. He's studying me, reserving his expression. Tattoos span his solid arms, elaborate writing drifting about pictures of a woman with her hands pressed together, and other less religious artifacts. His black hair is cut short all over, sharpening the hard features of his square-jawed face. He looks very young compared to Charlie and Nic. No stubble. No scars. Really wide eyes. But he's equally muscular with broad shoulders and a puffy chest.

He strolls up to us, relaxed yet confident.

I grip Charlie's wrist with my free hand, nerves shooting through the roof.

*Shake his hand. Make sure you shake his hand if he offers.*

"It's nice to see you again, Blaire," he says in Spanish peppered English, but then he falls silent. I realize why. He's frowning at the thick, purple bruises on my throat where Charlie strangled me a few nights ago. "You look...well," he struggles to add, his eyes darting up to Charlie's. "¿Ella's un poco joven para eso?"

I glance away and press my forehead on Charlie's arm, knowing exactly what he said. *I wish to be anywhere but here. I wish to be anywhere but here.*

Charlie warns Andres to be careful with what he says, causing tension in



the room. The youngest Decena falls in line, folding both hands behind his back while nodding once to show compliance.

“Say hello, baby,” Charlie whispers down at me.

I do as I’m told, accent coming out thick and blatantly foreign with a meek, “Hello.”

Everyone smiles.

I exhale through my nose. *The first step of acceptance.*

Charlie calls Luna over next like this is a meet and greet. She gets up from the couch on command, puts down her coffee, and sways across the room with her huge breasts wobbling in her red dress. Her perfume is so powerful up close, a recipe of something floral and spicy. It tickles my nose.

She head-bows and brushes her mane back when she stands up straighter. Her almost black eyes are elongated, feathered in sweeping lashes. They widen a little when she also notices the bruises on my throat.

“I’ve been looking forward to meeting the...woman, who has stolen the Señor’s heart.”

I don’t say anything. Just stare.

Nic remains by the coffee table. He bids me *hola* with a casual wave, noting in raspy English, “Andres is right. You do look well.” He doesn’t seem bothered by my bruises. It’s then I calculate that he must be sadistic like his brother.

I turn up my head to look at Charlie, who winks at me. He ushers me over to the couch, and I pull him down with me, so I’m sitting in the corner, so no one can come near me.

Nic and Andres slouch in the armchairs directly opposite. Luna serves coffee, causing the canister sets to clatter on the silver tray.

“Did the ship dock?” Charlie asks under his breath, leaning forward with elbows on his knees. I lean forward with him, cuddling his right arm.

Nic nods. “The buyers are collecting their gear today and tomorrow.”

*The gear?* He must mean drugs. Charlie must’ve lifted the sanction for his friends and associates now that he knows who stole me.

“And the cell phone?” Charlie questions.

“I understand Señor Charlie has told you about The Site?” Luna interrupts, dunking five sugars in one coffee.

*Fuck*, I hope that’s not for me.

She thankfully passes that one to Andres, another to Nic, and then another to Charlie. He nods to acknowledge her kindness, pours out one last cup of

coffee, and gives it to me. I let go of his arm to hold the warm cup in my palms.

“You gonna answer Luna, baby?” he whispers.

I didn’t even know she was talking to me.

“About your Site?”

He nods with a smile.

“Oh, Eh...” I shrug. It’s all I’ve got.

“It’s nice there, Blaire, with unprecedented sunshine and crystal-clear waters.” Luna motions about with a manicured hand, holding her coffee in her other. “Your house—Señor Charlie’s place—has its own private beach.”

Charlie never said anything about a private beach.

She tells me The Site is a hidden string of islands in the Gulf of Mexico. The main island is where the Decenas live in big, Mexican villas, surrounded by a village of Los Zetas soldiers. The Village is surrounded by a fifteen-foot-high wall and private Navy vessels on the ocean. Connected via bascule bridges, the other islands consist of La Placer—which I’m certain means *The Pleasure* in Spanish—The Course, and The Docks, all of them also guarded by walls and ships.

“It’s completely safe. Even the government cannot see it on the satellite way up there”—Luna thumb gestures at the ceiling—“because Señor Charlie has signal scramblers set up.”

“You never told me your Site was a string of islands,” I whisper to Charlie, who’s watching me closely.

“Well, we’ll be there soon enough, and you’ll see it all, baby.”

“Does that woman, Celine, still live there?”

Nic and Andres go all rigid and silent while Luna whispers bitch curses in her language, branding Celine a whore.

Charlie inclines to kiss my face, whispering that she hasn’t been there since confronting me. “And even if she was, I would have gotten rid of her before bringing you home.”

I want to soak up my relief that she’s gone, but my cheeks are burning with embarrassment at his public display of affection. My eyes flicker ahead, catching everyone staring at us. His sister-in-law is staring, too, but not with intention. She waffles on about The Site and all its amenities, like The Docks where things are shipped in. I scowl at her, wondering why she’s exposing all their secrets to me. And this isn’t even the start of it. She confesses where the armory is, where panic supplies are kept, and a whole bunch of other stuff

I'm sure she's not supposed to know.

When she sits on the arm of the chair Andres is relaxing in, I'm half expecting her to catch a breath and drink her coffee before it goes cold, but she carries on. She diverts from The Site and tells me all about her sunbathing hobby and her children—children Charlie never told me about—amongst complaining over how their home lacks in shopping.

“I hope you won't miss the mainland, Blaire? It's a hard reality to adjust to.”

I blink to show I'm processing as I don't want to be deliberately rude.

“Señor Charlie told me you like to exercise,” she's states before saying she's certain I will enjoy The Course. “Though, it's not really for women.” Her perfect eyebrows wrinkle. “I can't make it past the pits. What else do you like, Blaire?”

Apart from Charlie, nothing, so I just shrug at her.

I cast a wide glance around the room and notice Andres is smirking, cupping his mouth trying to hide it. When I look up at Charlie, he's smirking too, as is Nic. *What's so funny?*

“When was the last email you received?” Andres asks in Spanish, still hiding his smirk.

“A few days ago,” Charlie says. “So, after coffee, we need to get to work.”

Curious over what they're talking about, I look between the brothers with thin eyes. I look back at Luna when she calls my name, to tell me about everything else she likes: clothes and all that fancy shit. “Your bracelet is very nice. Very expensive.” Standing from the chair arm, she comes over and reaches out for my wrist, but I snatch away from her on instinct, wondering what she's doing. She flinches in shock, and Andres sits forward on alert.

Charlie lengthens a hand between us, shaking his head. “Sit back, hermano. You too, Luna.”

They do as they're told, Luna frowning as she does.

My heart is beating a little too fast, and my hands are clammy. I can't believe she was going to touch me, and I can't believe I might've attacked her for it.

I turn up my coffee to have a sip, focusing on how nice and bitter-sweet it is, so I can control how awkward I feel. Charlie asks if I'm okay. I'm not, but I tell him I'm fine. I can do this for him, meet his family without doing a runner.

Because I do want to do a runner.

“...It would look lovely sitting on your shoulders, framing your bonita, oval face.”

I glance over at Luna, assuming she’s talking to me. Apparently, she has a *Señorita* here in England who is very quick and very good at cutting hair.

*Does she mean my hair?*

“No one is touching Blaire’s hair,” Charlie interrupts before turning his attention back on his brothers to discuss more business.

“Oh, but, Señor, if you saw what my stylist can do!” Luna slants forward and tries to touch a lock of my hair, but I snatch away a second time, glaring at her.

“Hey”—Charlie’s voice cuts through us all—“stop, Luna, right now.”

“Ohhh, I’m sorry!” she squeals, and I jump in my skin with surprise. Coffee topples out of my cup, scolding my wrist.

“Fuck!” Charlie catches the cup and shoves it on the coffee table, at the same time grabbing for the napkins in a panic. He pats me down, checking to see if it burned my skin. “Does it hurt, Blaire? Are you okay?”

Before I can answer him, Luna squeaks something in Spanish that I don’t understand, and her dark eyes water, turning red.

*No...is she going to cry?*

I stare at her like she’s got two heads, certifiably speechless.

“Hey, no, no *estés triste*,” Charlie says, *do not be sad*, but more tears pour down her cheeks. “Ay Dios mío, Luna, don’t cry. Blaire’s overwhelmed, and I just...” For once, he loses his voice. He hunches, cupping his forehead.

I’m stunned on every account.

She bawls her eyes out, sobbing a rush of Spanish words. “¡Lo siento! ¡No lo dije en serio! ¡Lo siento!”

Charlie sighs, professing, “This is fucked.”

Andres and Nic agree.

I think my heart just stopped working.

“We need to break the ice properly.” My bemused lover waves out a dismissive hand, emphasizing us all. “This white person coffee morning set up is a bust.”

“I arranged this for you!” Luna sobs harder, and I glare at Charlie for fueling her fire. “I wanted to help! I wanted to meet Blaire in a nice setting!”

I glare at Charlie a second time.

“Coffee was a great idea, *cariño*,” Andres battles to hush his wife. “But

it's too formal, and you need to relax. You knew Blaire would be extremely nervous. Charlie told us she doesn't like to be touched, yet you're trying to touch her jewelry and invade her personal space."

"I'm just trying to make Blaire feel welcome!" She shakily puts her coffee on the table and weeps in her hands. "I'm just being nice!"

I have no idea what's going on with her. Isn't she worried about dehydration?

Everyone comforts her through her meltdown, begging her to stop crying. Nic gets up and walks around to her, rubbing her back. Andres is cuddling her side.

"Told you she was eccentric," Charlie says under his breath to me.

I pinch my bottom lip to conceal my smirk, side-glancing at him. He flicks up his eyebrows and has a sip of his coffee.

"I just want Blaire to know that we all love her!" Luna is still crying like a baby. "I just want her to know that we are all here for her!"

"Blaire will know those things in time," Andres croons, reasoning with his crazy wife. "We're all staying until Blaire's brother is back safe. Then we're all going home together. We have plenty of time to get to know one another." He orders her to stop crying, his voice coming out deeper with authority. "You will be patient with Blaire, and you will not overwhelm her, okay? You will not touch her."

"Sí, sí," she snivels. "O-okay."

"If this is what normal women are like, no wonder you fell in love with me," I whisper to myself in a state of understanding, sensing Charlie's abrupt stare.

"How does that sound, Blaire?" Andres asks, and my ears come to attention. "If we agree to give you space, will you try with us, too?"

That sounds like a plan. I'll do anything if Luna will stop crying and if they stop addressing me directly.

"We know you don't like intimate gatherings, and we know you don't talk much," Andres continues reasoning with me, "but that's okay. You're family."

*Family?* That makes me feel funny.

"Well, if we really are going to break the ice," Nic pipes up, his pale eyes gleaming with amusement, "my wife and I are estranged," he shrugs, pointing between his siblings as he lists them. "As you already know, Luna is sensitive to everything. Andres is too soft. And Charlie is...well, Charlie is

Charlie.” He breaks out chuckling, and Charlie laughs too, unable to contain his amusement now. “Welcome to the family, Blaire.”

I lean against Charlie, trying not to laugh, but it’s so hard. Nic is charming like his brother.

Someone knocks on the open door, interrupting our moment, and all our heads snap in that direction. There’s a Los Zetas guard standing just across the threshold, dressed in black combat gear—like Nic and Andres—plus a heavy bulletproof vest strapped around his large body.

“What?” Charlie says, his face hardening with curiosity.

“Señor,” the guy says in Spanish, hesitating for a second, “the attack we were warned about happened. Objetivo uno y dos, atrapado.” *Target one and two, captive.*

# 21

The attack?

*What attack?*

And who the fuck are target one and two?

I jump to my feet with attention, Charlie, Nic, and Andres following suit. We're all narrowed in on the Los Zetas guy standing in the doorway, mentally beckoning him to speak. He shifts from foot to foot, lips parting but closing on instinct to withhold information. He glances at me through dead, brown eyes, then at Charlie. Me. Charlie. Me. Charlie.

The tension in the room is lung-squeezingly-tight.

"Spit it out, man," Nic insists, shrugging with anticipation.

"Violating footage has come to our attention, Señor." The guy turns down his head, speaking to his feet. "We found it on a laptop in Robert's eldest daughter's dorm in France."

"What violating footage?" Andres asks.

The guy looks up at me, and my stomach drops.

"Don't say another word." Charlie lifts a finger to hush him and orders his brothers to get all of the Rank Fives in his office immediately. His body language is confident but robotic as he talks with his hands to highlight things. "Ranks Three and Four are to guard the lane at both ends, just in case anyone else attempts another attack. I want the Rank Twos on all major doors to the house plus two in the entrance hall and two in the kitchen. Tell the Bloc crew to get to the guardhouse. Rico"—Charlie addresses the shifty guy in the doorway, making my face kink with hatred at the mention of *his* name—"keep the captives quiet until I'm there, comprender?"

"Sí, Señor." He salutes, pivots on his heel, and leaves to fulfill his duties.

He's the mudak who texted Charlie and told him to just *fuck the redhead with or without permission*, and now he's found violating footage of me?

I know it's of me. I just saw the way he looked at me. I'm not stupid.

"Luna"—Charlie turns to her, working at a million miles per hour—"you'll hang around here with Blaire until I'm back. Anything she wants or

needs, get it for her.”

My face lights up with surprise—and outrage because if he thinks for a second I’m going to stay here while he disappears doing God knows what, then he’s insane.

Luna agrees, wiping under her wet eyes with a single finger. “Por supuesto, Señor.”

“I’ll gather all of the Rank Fives.” Nic gulps to finish off his coffee and starts out of the living room. “Give me five minutes, hermano.”

Charlie tells me to do as I wish around the house, that he will fill me in as soon as he knows something more solid, then he exits the room, too. I chase him out because there’s no way in hell I’m staying here alone.

“Charlie, what’s happening?” I ask, grabbing his arm to stop him in his tracks. “Is it James? Who are target one and two? And what the hell is the violating footage?”

He cocks his head, looking down at me. “You can speak Spanish, then?”

I pull a funny face at him. Who gives a crap if I can speak Spanish right now?

“Don’t divert.” I study him with caution as he glances between his office and me. “Is the violating footage of me?”

“What?” His head whips back to me. “No, of course not—and before you ask, I don’t know what it is. I haven’t even seen it.”

Baffled, I scowl at him, thinking maybe I misread Rico’s signals. It is possible. He didn’t actually say anything.

I reiterate my other questions, demanding to know what’s happening.

Charlie sighs, shutting his eyes in a moment of reluctance. “Robert warned he would attack if I refuse to give back one of his girls.”

“Robert attacked you?” My voice shoots pitch high, and I step back in defense. “But, I-I thought negotiations were starting?”

“That, was this morning.” He points at the space between us. “This, is now. The game can always change. You know that.”

Red flashes in my eyes—red-hot rage! That motherfucker has been warned, yet he still had the balls to attack us?

“So, what about my brother? We’re supposed to be getting him back today. What’s happening—”

The front doors swing open, and a dozen combat-suited men pile into the entrance hall with Nic, each nodding at Charlie and me with respect. Two of them steal past us and spread out in the kitchen, clasping heavy guns.



Another two man the main entrance, staring ahead in a blank manner.

“Blaire,” Charlie grips my shoulder, reasoning with me on a level, “I need to go, baby. When I know more, I’ll fill you in, I promise.”

“Charlie, I want in on that meeting!” I call out, but he ignores me. He wanders off into his office with his pack trailing his shadow and shuts me out.

---

I stand here gaping at Charlie’s office door, stupefied, processing everything from what the violating footage could be to who the targets possibly are.

A hand brushes mine and I flinch, spinning around to face Luna.

“Would you like more coffee?” she asks with a smile, eyes glittering in her teary aftermath.

“Eh...no.” I force a smile and edge past her for the staircase, stuttering to say I’ll be in Charlie’s room if she needs me or anything. I sound like a stammering idiot, but I don’t know what else to tell her. I don’t want to be rude, but I also don’t want to stand around chitchatting.

Her smile loads on full beam, and she offers a minute head-bow before swaying off in the direction of the kitchen.

I grip the banister rail and turn to sprint upstairs, acting before thinking. I rummage through all of Charlie’s bedroom drawers looking for intelligence, certain I’ll find something naming who target one and two are. I do trust Charlie will fill me in, but at the same time, my instincts are screaming that he will withhold any intelligence that could cause me *unnecessary stress*.

I find nothing in the cabinets on either side of the closet archway. Nothing in the bookcase shelves. I hunt through my bedside cabinet next, then Charlie’s, finding a few heavy guns, silencers, bullet cases—and a bunch of pictures of me.

They knock the air right out of my lungs, rendering everything else irrelevant.

I rest on the edge of the bed, pull the bundle from the drawer, and flicker through them with slow concentration, paying each one individual attention. It’s the three months I spent with Charlie catalogued in imagery, when I was meditating in the rain; when I was standing at the kitchen back doors staring out over the same rainy day; when I was laughing at Charlie bested on the

gym floor after I kicked his feet out from under him; when I was high on desire, rub-fucking his cock at the dining table. All of those times and so many more are here on film, a promise of a better life—a life we had.

*If only you never left to go back to Maksim.* It aches my heart to know I fucked it all up. If I hadn't left, none of this trouble with James would be happening.

I put the photos back in the drawer in a neat pile, with a huge lump in my throat, and an even bigger lump in my stomach. *Don't think about what ifs. Think about now.*

Training my focus, I remind myself that I'm here snooping for intelligence. I get up from the bed and hunt through the walk-in closet, certain there's a vault in here. I dig through the vanity unit, wardrobe drawers, and pull racks of clothes aside.

*Bingo.*

There in the wall on Charlie's side is a huge black vault, mounted in brickwork. Crouching on my hands and knees, I punch in Decena In Numbers on the alphabet keypad, and the door beeps and clicks open.

My belly goes all funny, flipping like crazy. I feel like I'm intruding. But this is Charlie...he won't mind if I snoop around, will he?

He should have let me in on that meeting, then I wouldn't have had to do this.

Cool air touches my hand as I feel about inside the suede lined vault. It's temperature controlled, like his office. I grab at a small, square box and pull it out, sitting back with crossed legs. It fits nicely in the palm of my hand. **De Beer** is written in silver across the top, against royal blue leather. Flipping up the lid, I find a giant, solitaire diamond ring inside with a delicate platinum band, sparkling with blues and pinks against the lights in the closet. Tossing it aside, I feel about inside the vault again. Stacks of files. I pull them out, flicking through each one.

WAR STRATEGIES.

I toss that aside.

UPCOMING ELECTION: AMERICAN PRESIDENT AND FIXED POLING. Charlie and I were talking about this the other night, how one of the men running for president wants Charlie on his side, so he's been flattering my lover as business men do when they want something.

I toss it aside.

TARGETS. Relief swamps me. I split the pages searching for targets one

and two, but it's a political list of leaders Charlie has been hired to assassinate. Total bust.

I toss it aside.

MAKSIM-MARKOV.

Blood freezes in my veins. Seeing his name so vivid is...chilling.

I glance into the bedroom to be sure I'm alone, then I peel open the first page. There's a blueprint layout of Maksim's house, underneath photos of the living room, kitchen, his bedroom, and other rooms in his house. A shiver runs through me when I see my old cell, where Maksim raised me. The single bed is a flimsy metal frame with a blanket and a dirty pillow. The toilet is a rusty can hidden in the shadows. The shots focus mostly on the concrete walls, all the codes I wrote out in white chalk. There's a report from the Irish government stating that the codes were for encrypted bank accounts spread across the world.

How odd. I told Maksim this, but he said I was wrong.

I keep reading the report.

Tatiana somehow found out about the accounts and hijacked them. Then she kidnapped me for the same reason the Irish government *BOUGHT ME FROM MY PARENTS!*

My jaw drops.

I re-read that line, flabbergasted, but my eyes haven't deceived me. It says here in black and white, when I was seven years old I completed a bunch of cryptic puzzles—which I knew, since Maksim told me—and I became the only person in the world able to decipher the codes. The Irish government submitted an offer to buy me, and my parents sold me for a measly three-hundred-thousand Irish pounds, signing over my guardianship. My parents even signed a medical certificate deeming me a legitimate sociopath, testifying that someone should govern me at all times.

I can't fucking believe it. I mean, I don't really know how to feel about my parents selling me off, but deeming me crazy? I'm offended. And I don't even understand why I'm offended.

I try not to think about it because it doesn't matter anymore. Charlie wants me, and I know I'll always have him. That's what is important.

I go back to the file on Maksim's house, learning that Charlie had an analysis done on the cell, and my DNA was found throughout. Must be from my blood or something from when Maksim used to whip me. It must've splattered about on the walls.

Moving on, I glance over the information on Maksim's daily routine—or, lack of. He never did the same thing twice. *A young redhead girl always accompanies the subject.* There's a list of Maksim's close acquaintances, too. I turn another page and the corner of a photo catches my eye. I instantly recognize *his* shoulder length, golden-brown hair, and I slap the file shut.

*I don't want to see his eyes. I do NOT want to see his eyes.*

I squeeze my own eyes shut a few times, centering my mind.

*Don't think about him.*

I ram the folder back inside the vault to avoid looking at it some more and focus on the other files to level my emotions, searching for intelligence on my brother or Robert—any-fucking-thing at this point.

There's a file on Arjana, the Albanian girl Charlie saved from the Prince's party. I glance over it but find nothing other than where she's from, so I toss it.

Something dark—yet curious—comes over me when I spot a file that reads, BLAIRE-MARKOV. I flip open the first page, finding more photos of me. I pick them up and trickle them out of my hands, visually snapping shots as they pool in my lap. They're all taken from afar. None capture my face. I always knew to stay hidden. In one picture, I'm helping Maksim out of his car at the club. Another is of me jogging across the road, heading into the club.

Maksim had likely summoned me for work.

There's a full, handwritten report on who I am underneath all the pictures. It doesn't read much: *fighter, blah, blah, blah. Doesn't talk. Doesn't physically respond to direct questions.*

Under the file, I spot the medical report Charlie threw at me a few weeks back. I peel it open, and my eyes immediately zero in on a blood match: *Charlie Guzmán Decena and Blaire-Markov.*

I scan every word, eyes zooming back and forth. When I had the operation to fix up the bullet wound in my stomach and the lashes on my back, Charlie donated his blood to me, more than was medically suggested. His doctor used a practice called, Apheresis. It separates certain components from blood. Those components are filtered back into the host, so their recovery is rapid, and then they can donate again mere hours after their initial donation, if necessary. A few days after my operation, Charlie donated more because the septicemia I had wasn't improving with antibiotics alone. A week later, after another operation, more blood. He was hospitalized for it.

He was fighting to save my life.

I stare ahead at the open vault, hairs pricking all over my body.

He actually risked his life to save me, and I'm here snooping for intelligence, unable to trust that he will fill me in when he knows more?

What the hell is wrong with me?

*Maksim. Maksim, Maksim, Maksim.* A voice in my head torments me with his name. The voice is right. Maksim's influence over me is causing me to question all the wrong things. *Trust no one. Trust no word.* Maksim's influence is wrong. Charlie might've had an alternate agenda with me at the beginning, but it's different now. He's different. He loves me. And he wouldn't sell me for any amount of money, unlike my parents. Even Maksim had a price: fifty duffle bags full of cash and my virginity.

I knead my temples, knowing I can't live like this anymore. If Charlie and I are going to stand united, I must trust him explicitly, more than I trusted my master. And I will. I have to.

I shove everything back in the vault, the ring box and then the files, convincing myself I can do this. I can trust Charlie. He hasn't let me down yet.

"Blaire?" he calls out from in the bedroom and I cringe, clicking the vault door shut in hope that he doesn't hear.

I must tell him I've been rummaging through his stuff but, *fuck*, I'm so nervous. I hope he doesn't get mad. I don't want to fight with him.

He pokes his head around the closet archway, scanning my position as I stand.

"You all right, baby?"

"Sure I am." I force a smile, folding my hands behind my back. "Did the meeting go okay?"

Without answering, he strolls in, projecting shifty glances. He reaches around my body to unfold my hands, tugging them at my sides. "What you doing in here, hmm?"

"Erm..." My eyes cast a wide berth of the place. "I was sort of snooping through your stuff." I don't bother trying to lie or butter up my actions. I don't want to lie to him, ever.

He flicks up his eyebrows. "I know you were snooping. Saw you on the CCTV cameras."

*Shit.*

My cheeks are scorching, but I plaster on my best, apologetic smile.

“How did you get in it?” Charlie nods at the vault.

“The Decena In Numbers code you gave me when I lived with you before, to use your laptop, it worked.”

“My, my,” he teases, crossing his arms, “you don’t forget a thing, do you?”

I know he’s toying with me, but I still feel ashamed. Maksim would have beat my ass black and blue if I hunted through his things.

“You saw the ring,” Charlie says, like it means something.

I lift my shoulders in an innocent shrug. “I put it back. I wasn’t looking for jewelry or anything,” I explain, in case he thinks I was scavenging for money. “I wanted to check your files—I mean, I didn’t know you had files or anything. I was just searching for intelligence.” I’m rambling, but I’m nervous. He’s not really giving anything away.

“Did you like the ring? Did you see the inscription?”

I shake my head and focus on my hands knotted over my lap, to confess, “I know you donated your blood to me, far beyond what you should have.”

I feel his eyes on my downturned face, but I can’t sense what he’s thinking.

“You shouldn’t risk your life for me, Charlie.”

“I love you, Blaire”—I glance up at him as he says that, at the devotion glowing in his eyes—“you’re my family now. I will always ensure your life, even above my own.”

“Why though?”

Tipping his head, he whispers to me, “Tis’ what love is, baby.”

*It is?*

We gaze at each other in our own silence, oddly on the same page. Charlie would die for me as I would die for him. Does that mean I’m in love with him, too?

I blink away to break his spell, to divert my thought process. I can’t think about my emotions right now. Too much stuff is happening.

“Blaire, listen”—I immediately prepare myself for the worst, heeding to the sympathizing undertone of Charlie’s voice—“I need something from you,” he says, chewing the corner of his mouth, “something I know you’re gonna struggle with, but I need it.”

“Okay,” I say with a frown.

“I need you to give me two weeks.”

“Two weeks?” I cross my arms with curiosity, mirroring his pose. “Two

weeks of what?”

“No questions asked.” He leans against the wall on his shoulder, watching me. “No questions about James or Robert. Can you do that for me?”

I almost laugh at the irony of his request. If there was ever a time to test my trust in him, it’s now.

“Is James still alive?” I have to know for sure before I commit to such a promise.

“He is,” Charlie says, sounding certain. “I’ve seen it for myself.”

That’s good enough for me.

*Here goes nothing.*

“Well, all right then.” I nod, proving that I can trust him wholeheartedly. Otherwise, what’s the point in us? With Maksim, it was about loyalty. With Charlie, it’s about trust. “I can do that,” I whisper. “I trust you more than anyone.”

He shuts his eyes, exhaling a long, relieved breath. “Gracias,” he says, like I’m doing him a favor.

“Charlie, I won’t go back on my word—I won’t question you—but, if you need help with anything, you know I’m here, right?” Reaching out, I touch his arm in a state of affection. “I know you’re working extra hard on many endeavors, so if you need any help with hacking or translating, anything, I can help.”

He opens his eyes to look at me, a soft smile tracing his lips. “Well, I need to go to Dover if you want to come with me?”

“Dover?”

He nods. “I need to collect a package. Nic wants to come”—he lifts a hand for a length of my hair and plays with it, curling it around his finger—“but I’d rather you did.”

I shrug, telling him, “Sure.” And I’m surprised by how easily not forcing information out of him is.

I guess I really do trust him.

## 22

Charlie and I wait for his man to call, informing us he's at the drop-off zone in Dover. Then we get ready to leave at just past midday.

He makes me wear jeans and a snug, black leather jacket, rather peculiar attire for traveling. I get the feeling we're not going by car. After, he fits his belt with an assortment of knives, comes up behind to plait my hair into a long braid hanging down my spine, and then he shrugs into a matching black leather jacket. We head downstairs side by side, while I perform a few mid-walk squats to loosen the jeans at my crotch, fucking hating jeans all over again. Charlie is laughing at me, swearing he's not even going to dare ask what I'm doing.

He disappears into his office for something, then returns ready to go.

On the front porch, I spot two black motorcycle helmets. When I glance out at the front yard, I spot a sleek, red motorcycle slanted on its stand.

Suspicious confirmed.

"So, we're riding, huh?" I ask with amusement, as Charlie bends to pick up the helmets and a backpack near the front door.

"Sure are. You all right with that, chica?" He smirks, nodding for me to follow him across the stony driveway.

I grab the heavy helmet he passes, more than *all right* with riding a bike. I'm excited. Charlie and I have only been out twice before: when we visited Robert, and when he took me to the spa. I'm surprised he's letting me out now, if I'm honest. Since I returned, he's come and gone on business matters, but I haven't been allowed to leave the house.

Charlie pulls on his helmet but leaves the visor up, so all I can see are his dreamy, blue eyes. I pull on my own, tightening the buckle under my chin. He double checks I've fastened it properly, telling me while we're riding on the bike, I'm to move where he moves.

"When you lean about?"

"Yeah. If I lean to the side, you lean, too," he says, using his hands to gesture maneuvers.



His voice is too foggy behind the helmet. I squint to listen, feeling squished inside the protective padding.

“Just be relaxed though, okay?” His eyes crinkle with a smile. “You’re safe with me.”

I laugh and flip down the visor, turning the world into shades of black and gray. “I’ve been on a bike before, Charlie.”

“You have?” he sounds surprised, fixing the backpack on his chest, so it’s firmly attached to his body.

I nod. How does he think James and I used to execute jobs that required a swift getaway?

“I can hold that if you want?” I say, pointing at the bag on his chest.

“No way in hell.” He lifts a leg to straddle the bike, kicking back the stand, then he kick-starts the roaring engine.

The ground under my feet vibrates with a bizarrely sexy sound. As I come to think of it, Charlie looks sexy on a bike, hunched forward holding the handles, his face hidden behind the blacked-out visor as he flips it down. Wild strands of inky hair peek out the bottom of his helmet, curling around his muscular neck, and his shoulders seem bigger, broader in his pose.

“Blaire!” he calls my name over the humming bike, breaking me out of my moment of admiring him.

I climb on behind him and shift my pelvis forward, so I’m flush against his body. “Charlie!” I shout so he can hear me. “Where is your security detail?”

“We’re not taking anyone with us!” He touches my hands as I wrap them around his waist. “Hold on tight!”

I nod, even though he cannot see me. I’m stunned he’s not bringing a security detail. What happens if he needs back up?

He tugs on the throttle, making the bike growl, and picks up his feet as we gain speed across the graveled driveway.

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It takes an hour to get to the Port of Dover.

The ride through Tunbridge Wells would be hell if we were in a car, but Charlie cheats the traffic by weaving in and out of it, turning the world into a whizz of images. I lean where he leans, sometimes so low I’m actually worried my knees are going to graze the ground. When we hit the highway,

we nail speeds of over one-hundred and fifty miles per hour, and my entire body rushes with odd, erotic adrenaline.

We come off the highway at Dover and cruise down a dual carriage road separated in two lanes, nearing the ferry port. Charlie revs the engine just enough to curb crawl as we pass a stationary police van with electric blue and yellow stripes. He then reaches into the backpack, tosses something in the van's driver side window, and a hand waves us on.

Bribe. He just paid the police a bribe. I'm almost certain of it.

After, Charlie steers into the bustling port, down a steep roadway, and through a parking lot. The view across the English Channel steals my attention for a second, miles of freedom across dark seas glistening under the afternoon sun. But then Charlie guns for speed, making me jerk because I'm not paying attention. I panic to grip his jacket with my nails, shouting that I'm all right when he calls out. He pulls up to a suspicious looking black car, reaches in the backpack for something else, and tosses a large, square package inside the open driver window. That's when a hand reaches out with a thin, laptop sized package, and Charlie grabs it to shove in the backpack. He kicks up a gear and speeds out of the port, over a tiny roundabout, almost turning us on our side. We prowl through a residential, seaside town where sky-scraping, chalky cliffs hang over the narrow houses, dripping in green vegetation. The road is lined with families and children running amuck, flying colorful kites through the sky.

We eventually steer onto a sidewalk to park. I pull off my helmet, relieving my cheeks of pressure, and a gust of sound goes through my ears. I poke myself there to ease the pressure, breathing in the freshness of cool, salty air.

Charlie kicks out the bike stand and kills the engine, pulling off his own helmet. "You all right, Blaire?" he asks louder than necessary, but my ears are ringing, so I imagine his are, too.

"Yes, I'm good," I say, stepping off the bike, my legs all floaty and wobbly. He takes my helmet and hooks it on the handlebars with his.

"Do your legs feel funny?" he asks like he knows, looking back at me with a grin. "All tingly?"

I step up so I can see his face, nodding and smirking at once. They feel exactly the same as they do when he's fucked me for hours, when I'm numb from head to toe.

He brushes his hair back from his face, causing the sun to hit the black

strands in deep, electric blues. I watch him for a moment, struck by his masculine beauty.

“Watcha looking at, hmm?” he teases.

“Is that why you had to come all this way, Charlie, just to hand over a package and pick up another?” I have so many more questions but I bite them back.

He nods, bending to kiss me, and beads of salty flavored sweat on his upper lip smear on my mouth.

“Why didn’t you want to bring a security detail?”

“There’s no need.” Charlie shrugs. “No one knows where we are.”

No one ever knows where someone is. They find them.

“You hungry, baby?” he asks, totally relaxed in the day.

The chip shop across the road—crammed between narrow houses with colorful doors and tiny, bricked off front yards—suddenly smells so good. My stomach grumbles on cue, appetized by the creamy scent of potatoes and fish.

“Yes, I guess I am a little hungry.”

“C’mon then.” He nods to the left, digging in his jeans pocket for some cash. “Let’s get some food. And then maybe we’ll take a walk down the sea front before we head back.”

“That sounds like a good idea,” I say, grinning up at him, and he winks at me.

Now I know why he asked me to come today: freedom with each other. It’s the ultimate victory for us, something money can’t buy.

I wish we could do things like this more often, just be out in the world together. *Maybe one day.*

Charlie leaves the helmets on the bike, wraps one arm around my shoulders, and walks me across the road over to the shop. Inside, it reeks of greasy fat, but the fresh fish really does smell amazing.

There are a few young guys in line, laughing while tossing cans of beer across the shop at each other, to shake them up. They’re served their food and make way to leave, but one smiles too blatantly at me, looking me up and down with lazy eyes. He even takes off his baseball cap in a flirtatious gesture.

Maksim would order me to kill him for his daring, but I look away, not wanting to ruin today. Still, Charlie backhands the guy across the face, smacking him into the wall. “¡Tonto del culo!” he yells, warning him to

watch who he's eyeing. I jump back when he kicks the guy in the ass—who somehow manages to scam to his feet and out of the shop with his cheek scorching red from taking a blow.

His friends follow swiftly, chips flying about all over the place as they drop their food and bolt out. Charlie whacks the door shut behind them, seething at the lack of respect. “¡Idiota maricóns!”

“Sorry,” the blonde behind the counter says, shrugging with innocence, “they're assholes. Always in here causing trouble.”

I shrug back at her, not sure of what to say.

Charlie pulls me under his arm and kisses the top of my head, tension radiating throughout his body. He ignores the girl's apology and orders two cod and chips, both with salt and extra vinegar, plus two bottles of water.

“Sure,” she says, reaching over to take his money. “You two from around here?”

“No,” Charlie says.

“I figured. You sound Spanish.” She punches numbers into the till, constantly glancing up at him. “Here on holiday?”

“No,” Charlie says.

“Ohhh. So, you're local?”

“No. Do you have a restroom?”

She gestures at the corner of the shop. “You can use the staff bathroom. It's through there.”

He steers me into the large single cubicle and relieves himself first before washing his hands in the tiny basin. “Do you need to pee, Blaire?” He side-glances me. “It's a few hours until we stop again, unless you get desperate.”

I guess I should go before we hit the road.

I wait and wait...Charlie uses the pump hand wash to clean the toilet rim, wiping it down with tissue. I screw up my face, wondering what he's doing.

“You gonna pee?” He raises his eyebrows, pointing out. “It's clean for you to sit on.”

I stare at him like he's grown a second head. “I'm not going while you're in here!”

He bursts out laughing, eyes lighting up in amusement. “I've seen every inch of you, silly chica.” He reaches for the waist of my jeans and tugs down the zipper. “Go to the toilet. The sooner you do, the sooner we can eat.”

I'm still staring at him, arching my eyebrows. “At least turn around! Iisus Khristos, Charlie!”

He faces the wall and crosses his arms, still laughing. I squeeze out an uncomfortable pee, tensing every time I think he's going to sneak a peek.

There's something about going to the toilet...it's a time of solitude.

I wipe myself dry, pull up my pants, wash my hands, and elbow Charlie in the side. "There's no privacy around you, is there?"

He shakes his head, grinning from ear to ear. "If you ever tell me to look away again, I'll make you pee on me."

---

Charlie and I sit next to each other on a bench outside the chip shop, under the warm, beaming sunshine. We're overlooking a grassy area across the road from the beach, where waves beat the shore and pattering, naked feet.

Lifting a slice of fish to my mouth, I hum. It's so delicious, flaky and moist, wrapped in crunchy, golden batter. My fingers are covered in grease and vinegar. The sour flavor makes my face go funny with the first few mouthfuls, but after that the food goes down like a treat.

"Hey, I want to ask you something," Charlie breaks the peaceful silence that is us, giving me a rare, innocuous look as he rests the backpack on the ground near his feet.

"What?" I ask, squinting up at him.

"What you said to me last night, that you want my name," he points at me with a chip, "did you mean it, or were you just high from your orgasm?"

I arch my eyebrows at him. "I rarely say things I don't mean, Charlie."

He swallows his mouthful, nodding a couple of times like he's mentally processing. "Just making sure before I proceed with getting the paperwork sorted. I don't want to freak you out over change of name forms and certificates. I know what you're like."

I nod back at him, wondering what paperwork he's talking about. I only meant I want people to know me as Blaire Decena instead of Blaire-Markov. But if he wants to make it legal...

"Do you know," he says, gesturing out with another chip, "my Site is just over four and a half thousand miles from here?"

"It is?" I squint out at the glittery, blue sea, then up at him. "Do you miss home?"

"I do."

“When will you go back?”

“We, will go back once all this bother is over with.” He emphasizes on *we*. “Maybe I’ll marry you there to legitimize your name.”

*Marry?*

My stomach breaks out in an insane flutter. It’s so powerful I’m almost convinced the world around me can feel it.

“Has it always been like that?” I ask, steering away from the topic of marriage to control my emotions, before I can’t. Twisting at the waist to face him, I rest one leg up on the bench and lay the bag of fish and chips on my lap.

His face contorts with confusion. “Marriage at my Site, do you mean?”

“No.” I playfully elbow him. “I mean, you staying away from home for so long. Has it always been like that?”

“Hmm, I guess so.” He lifts a slice of fish to his mouth. “I was in jail for a long time and when I got out, I was pursuing Maksim and you. So, yeah, it’s been a while since I’ve spent even a week at home.”

I glance down, flicking bits of batter off the fish. I hate what Maksim did to him, costing him so many years of his life behind bars.

“Charlie...”

“Hmm?”

I squint up at him again, at the concentrated stare on his face as he looks across the sea, eating his food. “Who else did the Russian bank job with you? The one you did with Maksim.”

“My Bloc team and Nic.” He glances down at me. “Why?”

“Was it just you who went to jail?”

“Yeah. I took the fall so my men and my brother could go back home. Nic had a wife. He especially needed to get home.”

“That was...nice of you,” I say. *And stupid*. Why should he take the fall alone? He’s their leader. “What was it like in a Russian jail?”

“Hell,” he scoffs the word. “I loitered in a half-way jail until they took me to another in Siberia, where I finished my sentence.”

“What’s a half-way jail?”

He smirks down at me, at my curiosity. “Where criminals go to wait for a space in the real jail. Russian jails are very overcrowded.”

My eyes enlarge.

“Yeah.” He laughs, popping a chip in his mouth. “The half-way jail was disgusting. The food they served was borderline vomit. Then, in Siberia, it

was so cold it burrowed in my bones.”

I get the shivers just thinking about it.

“I certainly won’t be doing that again,” he says. “The next time I commit to a job, I will do it with my team only. No outsiders.”

“Good.” I rub my eyes using the backs of my fingers because they’re stinging under the sunshine. “You shouldn’t team up with outsiders anyhow.”

Charlie gets up to grab the parasol covering the other bench, setting it up so I’m in the shade. “Better?” he asks, and I nod.

“What did you do to pass the time in jail?” I say as he settles next to me on the bench. “I know you’re always busy, and you never get tired. So, were you bored out of your mind?”

“No, I wasn’t bored,” he says, chuckling fondly. He worked in a laundry room, had to shovel snow before sunrise every day, load and unload crates from vans, scrub floors, and cook for the other inmates, all because he was foreign. “It was physically taxing since I didn’t get much sleep.”

“Why?”

“Well, I was locked up with lunatics who would scream throughout the night.” He motions at his head in circles, as he says, “It drove me crazy.”

“Did you have to work even when you were tired?”

“Yeah, baby. Everyone had to work.” He smirks at me again, laughing under his breath. “If we didn’t, the Russian guards would kick the fuck out of us.” He crumples his chip bag, tosses it in a nearby trash can, and sucks his fingers clean of fat and vinegar. He’s polished off everything with zest, while I’m only halfway through eating.

“Did anyone try to come for you?” I ask between bites. “To get you out, I mean.”

“No. It was too risky.”

“Risky?” I choke on a chip, coughing so hard my eyes water. He pats my back, panic-asking if I’m all right.

“No one came for you at all?” *I can’t believe this!* I gulp down the water he passes, nearly spitting it out as I snap, “If you were there now, I’d come for you!”

He doesn’t say anything right away, just looks at me with heavy, interested eyes.

“You’d come for me, yeah? Across the Russian border”—he points out at the sea—“and break me out of a high-security jail in the middle of Siberia?”

“Of course I would!” I scowl at him in affront, slamming down the bottle

on the bench. “I wouldn’t just leave you. How dare your men leave you there alone!”

“It’s not easy to escape that jail, Blaire. And not only that, I couldn’t afford going to war against Russia. Back then, their illegal military nearly doubled my private army—and as you know all too well, Russians are ruthless motherfuckers. It would have been a dirty war for money, which isn’t what I fight for. If it had been for family or benefits to my country, we would have fought.”

“So, your country wouldn’t fight on your behalf, no?” I can’t hide the sarcasm in my voice, certain they would have. Charlie’s criminal syndicate is one of the largest, most profitable organizations in the whole world, and for that he has America and Mexico in his pocket. The US cashes in on him and his talents, and they return any favor he wants. He told me so.

“Both Mexico and America would have fought for me, yeah,” he says, not reacting to my outburst, “but it would have been a pointless battle, Blaire. If something doesn’t benefit my people or my country, then I’m not interested. America did come to my aid”—he interrupts my bitching—“they bargained years off my sentence with prestige software, and that meant I only served four years. The Russians saved face, and it meant peace all around.”

“Peace? What is peace?” I practically growl. “A time of silence until something else crops up? Because something else will crop up, you know? Peace doesn’t last. And I’d much rather have you than amity between countries.” My voice softens as I say that because I would rather have him, more than anything.

Charlie sits forward with elbows on the table, looking at me from the side. “Do you know one of the biggest reasons why I fell in love with you, Blaire?”

I pause angrily eating some fish, searching his eyes while he’s searching mine.

“I sense your devotion to me,” he says, virtually purring at me. “I know you don’t love me, but”—his eyebrows crease—“I know you feel something. I see it in the way you look at me sometimes. Even before...you looked at me like that.”

I smile at him, to mentally tell him that I definitely do feel something for him. My affection and devotion is obvious. I don’t bother trying to hide it anymore. I want Charlie to know it’s only him.

“Amid all the chaos in life,” he says tenderly, “no matter what happens or



how dark things are, I feel like it's you and me against everything. A team." Charlie wipes something from my mouth, curving the edge of my lips. "I never realized that's what I wanted in a woman until I found you."

My heart squeezes to the point of blissful agony, and we stare at each other in a time of silence, otherworldly power charging between us. I ask so often for answers as to why he wants me, and he just told me without wavering. And I believe him.

"You'd come for me too, wouldn't you, Charlie?"

"Don't ask such a stupid question." He scoffs. "I'd tear down countries to keep you safe. Nothing else matters to me anymore, Blaire."

**BOOM!**

The sound of a bomb shakes the ground under our feet. I scramble to grab Charlie as he grabs me, shoving my face in his chest. And a bluster of chaos breaks out in Dover.

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## 23

My heartbeat missiles, adrenaline pounding to the point where I could actually vomit.

Screams wreck the peaceful silence of Dover, with feet scrambling to safety and cars screeching to a stop.

“Charlie, what the hell was that?” I demand to know, looking up at him through his arms.

His face is like stone, eyes tapering in on something. I glance back to see what he’s seeing, with my head bobbing between the masses running around like headless chickens. A thick, black smog is coming from the Dover Port area, misting the blue sky.

My expression drops with dread. Did an actual bomb go off?

“Fuck—” Charlie pulls a mobile from his jacket pocket and stands, yanking me to my feet by my arm. “I paid the authorities to ensure a bomb crosses the English Channel, but it looks like something’s gone wrong. We need to go, now.”

*A bomb?* Why would he need to send a bomb across the English Channel?

“You are not going anywhere,” an accented man says from behind.

I freeze for a second, cataloguing that he’s Middle Eastern. There’s a coarse undertone to his accent.

Charlie and I slyly glance at each other before pivoting slowly, coming face to face with ten opponents. They are wearing all-in-one combat uniforms with the legs tucked into black boots, decked out in handguns and army knives clasped to their holster belts. Turbans mount their tan heads, and an elaborate half-moon encircling a star marks each of their hands near their thumbs, tattooed symbols of their organization. They stand in a perfect line, shortest to tallest, with proud chins lifted in confidence. Soldiers. I can tell by the way they’re standing. They’re religious soldiers.

The first thing that comes to mind is, *do not let them hurt Charlie*. He half steps in front of me, holding a hand out over me, but I step up to his side,

gripping his fingers with my nails.

No one says anything right away, silent as the world around us melts down in a panic from the explosion. Then the lankiest Easterner smiles at Charlie and I with narrow features. “The rumors are true then,” he husks, gesturing at us. “It’s powerful to see between you both.”

*What is he talking about?*

“Who the fuck are you, and what do you want?” Charlie asks with obvious loathing. “Don’t take all fucking day to explain.”

The Easterner smirks at me and cocks a brow, and a violent tremor rips through Charlie. “Over my dead body.”

“If you insist.” Our enemy shrugs, walking out of line to pace before his men. “We have been ordered to *try* and keep you alive, Decena, so we will refrain from using armed force—unless you pull a gun on us.”

“Since you know who I am,” Charlie says, nodding with understanding, “your death will be your own fault. In fact,” he points out, “when I’m done killing you all, I will lure out your wives to show them the same attention, and that will be your fault, too.”

The Easterner levels a finger at Charlie, counseling, “I would watch what you say to us.”

Steam practically blows out of my ears at his audacity.

My lover laughs, shifting on his feet to a more comfortable pose, relaxed in their presence. He catches my hand as I move forward with intent, tugging me back in line. It riles me, and I hiss at him to let me go, but he won’t.

“How dare you come at us speaking of sparing people,” I say, my Russian accent coming out thick over theirs. “Do you think this pathetic excuse of a takedown will end in your favor?”

“My girl has a good question,” Charlie teases, giving my hand a reassuring squeeze. “Do you think this will end in your favor?”

“We have you outnumbered.”

I glare at our enemy, half hoping this does come to a bloody fight just so I can teach him a lesson. “Do your worst, and I wish you good luck. I’ll take out all you *mudaks* on my own.”

He rubs his hands together, warming them for battle, and nods with the oddest sense of respect. “I’ve heard about you, Blaire,” he husks, looking at me from under bushy eyebrows. “Demetrius speaks highly of you—even trains his new student to inspire to be like you. I’m glad to have a chance at fighting you.”

*He knows Demetrius, my old trainer?*

The hairs on the underside of my arms prick.

“The only chance you have is to walk away, now,” Charlie warns, “before you can’t.”

Our enemy snorts. “Decena, please, give me some credit. We can’t walk away after your threat to hurt my wife—*our*, wives.”

“I will do more than hurt *your* wife.” Charlie gestures between them with a steady hand. “I will torture all your wives. Or perhaps I’ll let Blaire have at them.” He glances down on me, smirking. “She’s very vicious.”

Our enemy spits on the ground, snapping a rush of Arabic words. Profanities. I can hear them in his voice.

“You are a brave man,” Charlie says, cool as ice.

“Comes with the territory.” The Easterner nods at his allies, and they spread out circling us.

Charlie and I signal at each other, then he lets go of my hand. We turn, so we’re back to back forming a barrier of defense and protection. It’s now I realize we’re lucky to have trained with each other. We know each other’s habits. We can fight as a team.

I grab my stomach as it pangs, awareness hitting me like a thunderbolt. Charlie could get hurt. Charlie could die.

*No!*

We can’t do this as a team. I will not let him. I won’t let anyone hurt him.

I refuse my emotions, blocking everything out. I focus, digging deep within to let my darkness emerge, bloom, and expand like fire in my belly.

*Kill them.* Maksim’s voice overtakes me. I squeeze to blink, accepting him in my mind. *Kill them all.*

“Blaire,” Charlie whispers my name, tapping my arm, “you listening to me?”

I reach back to snatch a knife from his belt and fling it at the lead Eastern guy so fast no one sees it coming. It plummets in his skull between his eyes, whipping his head back. His men jump a clear mile, as does Charlie, pulling out his gun ready to fire. He orders me to stay close, but that’s never going to happen. I won’t let him fight. I won’t let anyone hurt him.

“I’m sorry,” I say, looking up at him with guilt. He frowns, and I shove him out of harm’s way before bolting onward.

“Blaire, no!”

---

My attack is fast and fierce, one thought process in my head: *protect Charlie.*

I race at our enemies bursting with adrenaline, screaming for strength as I boot one guy in the stomach. He tumbles back on his ass, skidding across the concrete. A hand cuffs around my throat from behind, so I drop to my knees, strike up my shoulders and flip him over me, slamming him down. I battle to my feet and snatch for another's collar, throwing him across the road. Then I pivot in a clean, circle cross-whacking in defense against punches and kicks coming at me in every direction, grunting with measured breaths.

Charlie flashes in the corner of my eye, sparking my panic. He pounds and head-butts anyone he can get his hands on, ignoring my pleas for him to stay back.

I see a spark of silver, a knife. I lunge to grab it from the curb edge and swipe upward while pushing to my feet, slicing a man's throat. He panic-clutches at the gushing wound, staggering past me. I slice another, opening his cheek from his mouth to his ear. He roars in pain as blood sprays across my face, turning my vision red. I kick him out of the way and spin around jabbing with the blade, tearing through as many as possible to keep them from Charlie—who's going wild squeezing throats and smashing faces into walls.

Someone strikes at me with a double ended dagger. I block his attack with my forearm and twist my wrist around his to control his motions. I kick up my knee under his elbow to shove the blade into his chin, burying it deep by thrusting my hand on his.

"I warned you!" I shout in his face, yanking out the knife. He stumbles back and buckles to his knees, hand flapping about at his pocket for something.

***Bang!***

I flinch, grabbing my head as a gunshot echoes through my ears, making them ring. It's so close I feel it fly past my face, and I watch it pinch the assailant's neck who is in front of me. His carotid artery punctures, spitting with claret. It all happens so fast I can't even blink to process.

"Blaire!" Charlie fists my plait from behind and drags me from the attack, back over to the shop near the houses. The gun in his other hand shoots on overload, firing at anyone left alive. Our enemies' heads whip back, the space

between their eyes exploding with blood. One by one, they pile up in a hectic, wounded pile.

*We won.*

I sink into Charlie when we stop by the bench outside the chip shop, relieved he's okay.

*Charlie is okay.*

*Charlie is safe.*

*And we won.*

My emotions flood like a rainstorm. I'm practically trembling they're so powerful, and I swear I could puke. A formidable heave comes from the pit of me, burning the back of my throat.

"You stupid girl!" Charlie yells, and my head jolts up with surprise. "You don't bolt into an outnumbered attack! Are you fucking crazy?! They could've—"

***Pa-ting!*** ricochets off the shop wall, and we duck on instinct. Charlie fists the collar of my jacket and heaves me into someone's front yard to crouch behind a brick wall. I take stock that someone else just shot at us, since we killed the group of ten who tried to take us down.

*What the fuck is happening? How do these people know where we are?*

Charlie extends an arm and holds it out over me while dialing someone on his mobile.

A car skids to a stop, and a gargling, Arabic accented voice yells, "Decena!"

My cheeks drain of color. I recognize his voice.

"Nic?" Charlie says down the telephone speaker, head whipping back and forth between me and our new enemies. "We're under attack."

"Come out, Decena!"

"Who the hell is that?" I say, trying to place where I've heard his voice.

"I don't know." Charlie hangs up his call and shoves his mobile in his jacket. "Blair, pay attention," he says, clamping my jaw to make me look at him, at the crazy fire in his eyes, "however your mind worked before, let it go."

"What?"

"You no longer fight to protect," he points in my face, "you fight to live. Do you understand?"

Our eyes glance back and forth between each other's, and I know what he's saying.

“I won’t let them hurt you,” I hiss through gritted teeth, wrapping my fingers around his wrist. “I’d rather die myself.”

His expression melts with some emotion as he tilts his head, reasoning with me. “I love you too, Blaire, but listen, if we work as a team, if we fight to live, neither of us will get hurt.” His grip on my jaw loosens, and he strokes a spot near my cheek, thawing my will. “If we work as a team, neither of us will get hurt. Let it sink in.”

*If we work as a team, neither of us will get hurt. If we work as a team, neither of us will get hurt.*

I nod a few times, digesting his orders, and Charlie smiles proudly, hunching to kiss my face. “We fight as a team to live. You and me as one.”

“As a team,” I say, holding his gaze the entire time.

“You need to come out now, Decena!” I recoil at the sound of the Arabic man shouting again. “Or I’m going to turn this place to dust!”

**Bratatatat!** hammers at the house, creating a sandy mist. Charlie and I cringe, leaning into each other for protection.

“There’s no need for you to die, too!”

“No one’s gonna die,” Charlie says in my ear, as if to assure me. “Nic and my men are already on their way in the choppers. We just need to hold off the attack until they get here.”

“How are we going to do that?” I ask. “We have one gun.”

“Decena!” the Arabic voice barks again. “There is nowhere to fucking go! We have you outnumbered by ten to two! We brought reinforcements, as you killed the first ten!”

*Where have I heard his voice?*

“Like fuck do you have us outnumbered,” Charlie says to himself. He digs a hand grenade out of his inside jacket pocket, pulls the pin, and lobs it over the brick wall. He wraps his arms around me again, hiding me in his large body.

**BA-BOOM!**

“Aargh!” I groan as the ground under us rumbles. My ears buzz; the pressure in my skull so powerful it’s agony.

The next thing I know, Charlie’s kicking in someone’s bright blue front door with all his might. He draws back and kicks. Draws back and kicks! The door flies open and crashes against the inside wall. Charlie snatches for my arm, yanks me to my feet, and throws me inside the house as bullets blaze all around us.

***Pa-ting!***

***BANG!***

***Bratatatat!***

I run cowering, gasping so hard my vision blurs. *If we work as a team, neither of us will get hurt.* Charlie forces me to dash through the narrow house, past a lounge covered in photos, a dining room laid for supper, into a bright yellow kitchen at the back. I pant and pant, scanning every fucking corner for an escape. There's a central island countertop in the middle of the kitchen. Windows stretch across the farthest wall on either side of a single door.

We can get out through there.

Before I can tell Charlie about the door, my stomach turns and I double over with hands on my knees, thinking I'm going to puke. My eyes widen, baffled as to why I need to be sick.

"Blaire"—Charlie bends to me—"calm down, baby. Just breathe."

"I can't," I wheeze, as he rubs my back and tells me it's okay. "I'm going to be sick."

"If you're going to vomit, then vomit," he says, turning his attention to someone else in the kitchen. "Where does your backyard lead to?"

A frightened blonde girl cowering in the corner under the window ledge stutters, "No-nowhere. It-it backs onto the cliffs."

"Fuck!" Charlie snaps, whacking another door open. It leads to a utility room that's wall to wall countertops. No windows.

"Decena?" the Arabic voice echoes through the house from the living room.

Charlie tugs me down beside the door, pulls me between his legs, and puts a hand flat on my chest, whispering in my ear, "Just breathe, baby. Slowly."

I shut my eyes to focus my body. My heart is pounding out of control, lungs still struggling to pull in a single breath. I feel white and shaky, and my mouth is watering with acidic saliva.

"That was a good shot with the grenade," the Arabic says, followed by heavy feet stomping the house. "But you only managed to take out one car."

Five men per car... One car gone... That means there are five of them left.

Charlie extends a hand in front of my eyes, motions down, then gestures out. Understanding his order, I get on my elbows and shimmy across the kitchen, behind the island countertop. He crawls over me on his knees, acting



as a shield. My leather jacket creaks with my motions, so I try not to move about too much, stiff and robotic.

When we're behind the island counter, I sit back on my butt, shutting my eyes again. *Let your thoughts flow like water. Let the sickness float away.* Charlie is crouched on his feet at the edge of the island countertop looking out. He's holding the gun up near his face, prepared to shoot, with his other arm held out over me.

"Can you see them?" I ask, and he shakes his head.

"Check upstairs!" the Arabic shouts, and Charlie grips my hand. "All these houses are blocked in by the cliffs, so the Mexican wouldn't run to the yard—you hear that, Decena? We're coming. I will agree to spare you if you hand over the girl, since she's the target. Robert wants her and his daughters."

*Robert sent them?*

Charlie and I glance at each other, and for the second time ever, I see raw fear in his eyes. "They won't take you," he says under his breath, nodding to convince me. "I won't let them—and after today, they have no reason."

*They have no reason? What does that mean?*

He creeps up on his feet, peers over the countertop, and snatches for something: a skewer stick. He uses it to open the sim card tray on his mobile and tells me to swallow the sim card. "If worse comes to worst—which it won't, but if it does, I can track you."

Lifting my wrist I show him my bracelet, but he's concerned they might take it. "This sim card ensures we have your location for a few days at the very least. And if something happens to me, Nic and Andres will come for you. They've already been briefed on what to do if someone ever tries to take you or—"

"What?" I gasp with horror, a powerful prickle submerging the surface of my eyes. "No...don't say that, Charlie." I grab at his arm, clinging to him. "Don't you fucking say that."

"Open your mouth, Blaire."

I shake my head, chin quivering with the need to cry. I'm not taking his safety net. And I'm not going anywhere without him.

"Blaire, we haven't got time for this."

"That's a phone sim card." I point at it with anger. "It doesn't work without a host, so just put it back in your mobile."

"This one works without a host." He grabs my jaw, squeezes my cheeks,

and pops it in my forced-open mouth. “Swallow, now. I’m not kidding, Blaire.” His eyes blaze at me as his other hand slaps over my mouth, forcing it shut.

I gulp down the sim, grimacing in discomfort as the jagged edges tear through the lump in my throat and down my insides. Charlie lets me go to pull a knife from his belt, light catching its blade in flashes of silver.

“What’s that for?” I scowl at him, smacking tears from my eyes. “Use your damn gun and just shoot them.”

He shakes his head, and his thick eyebrows droop in pity. “We need to be quiet and take them out one by one. I can’t risk a shootout because if they find us before my crew shows up, and if they get their hands on you...” He pauses, and it’s bone chilling. “We need to be quiet, baby.”

## 24

Police sirens hum in the distance of Dover beyond the house, ringing out through the silence—until squelching boots come through the kitchen door.

They cross the stone floors, prowling closer, and closer, and closer. My heart skips with every step our enemy takes, every minute second ticking past.

Charlie jumps up like a snake in attack and jabs a knife in the man's temple, cutting through like butter. Our enemy falls slack with a powerful spasm, and Charlie catches him, groaning under the weight. He drags the body around behind the island and lies him down on the floor to fester in a pool of his own blood. It deluges like a red gulf, forming near my feet. I pull up my knees and stare ahead at the kitchen units, wishing for this nightmare to be over.

I can't stop thinking about what Charlie said: *If something happens to me... If something happens to me...* I'm fucking terrified. There, I admitted it to myself. To know I might not be able to keep him safe is gut-wrenching. I scour my mind in a million different directions for a plan to ensure his life, certain the only way is to hand myself over to the Arab.

And I will if it means saving Charlie.

I won't let him die for me. I can't.

A creaking sound draws our attention, and my head darts to the right. Charlie ducks to crouch beside me and extends a bloody arm over my middle, then we listen, and listen, and listen.

"Gotcha!" someone says, grabbing me from above.

Anger explodes throughout my body. I clutch at his arms, using his grip on me to kick up my legs and tie them around his neck. Charlie springs up and wrestles the man's hands out of my hair, snatching for his throat. He yanks him over the countertop, slams him on top of the other body, and slits his throat in one clean slash. Blood squirts out across my face and the kitchen cupboards. I grimace in reaction, blinking the warm fluids over my lashes.

The man panics to grab the wound, to stop the gushing of blood, rasping

something I don't understand. That's when Charlie slaps a hand over his mouth and pinches his nose, helping him on his way to death. I watch the life drain from his brown eyes, dilating his pupils to the size of coins. I can't even put it in words how satisfying his death feels.

Exhilarating.

I want to kill every last one of these motherfuckers for threatening my lover.

"You okay, baby?" Charlie whispers to me when the man goes limp, snagging a towel from the kitchen unit to wipe me down.

"Yes, I'm fine," I lie, swallowing past the drought in my throat. "Charlie, with the car of assailants wasted"—I squint to shield my eyes as he rounds them with the towel—"and now these two dead, that means there should only be around three left, right?"

"Right," Charlie agrees, flinging the towel aside. Then he goes about snagging the assault rifles from the dead. "Don't shoot unless you absolutely must," he says, hooking one strap over my head while hooking the other over his own.

I practically cuddle the gun in my lap, relieved that the odds are turning in our favor. Three men is nothing. Now that I'm armed, I can take them out on my own.

Charlie kicks the bodies away and rests next to me against the counter to listen out for more enemies, one arm moored out over me. I catch a heavy waft of coppery, spiced blood, and my stomach rolls again with a ball of acid gathering in the back of my throat. I don't understand what's wrong with me; why I continuously feel green.

My eyes stream up and down Charlie's clothes, where dark claret paints his jeans and his boots, and my cheeks swell to heave.

It's the blood. It's making me queasy.

"We're doing good," Charlie says, and I look up at him. He forces a smile, more confident now. "I promise, we're gonna be all right."

I rest my head on his arm with a sigh and nod again, gulping down more heaves. I hope he's right. I can't bear to think about the alternative.

The house falls quiet for a while, creating a false sense of tranquility. I cannot hear any footsteps or voices. I briefly wonder what the Arabs could possibly be doing. This place is tiny. It wouldn't take ten minutes to search through. Then the little girl in the corner hiding under the window ledge breaks a sob, shattering the peace. I forgot she was there. I look at her, at her

teary green eyes. She's so young, dressed in a pink pajama set with little blue bears, and her golden hair is separated in plaited ponytails. She must only be around twelve years old.

"Help me," she weeps, trembling from head to toe. "Please...help me."

"Shut up!" Charlie hisses, waving like a maniac. "Or I'll put a fucking knife in you, too. Shut the fuck up."

She cowers, nodding at him, and my heart twists with guilt. There's something about innocent women—or in her case, innocent girls—that gets me right where it shouldn't.

"Blaire," Charlie taps my arm, "we can't stay here while she's crying. Someone might hear."

I slide out from behind the kitchen island with him, and we steal up to the open door. He dashes across to man the other side, and we plaster ourselves against the walls. In that moment, I see the sleek end of a rifle sneaking through the doorway. Before I can attack, Charlie wraps his fingers around the barrel and forces it up, growling for strength.

***P-taff! P-taff!***

The ceiling crumbles, spitting down on us. I grip the doorframe for balance and boot the man in the stomach, knocking him back in to the dining room. Charlie pounces on him, tackling him to the ground. He squeezes the man's throat and yanks him up to smash his head back down on the floor, over and over, ***whack! whack! whack!*** Then he rises to steady feet, draws back, and stomps on the man's face. His skull cracks under Charlie's powerful kick, blood and brains spewing out all over the place.

My stomach reels in every direction. I swear, if I see one more drop of blood, I'm going to projectile puke.

"They're in the kitchen!" the Arab yells, and my attention tunnels.

"Blaire!" Charlie shouts, and I sprint up to stand at his side, aiming my rifle at the doorway as he aims his. "Shoot everyone," he says, eyes locked on the main doorway. "Don't stop until all your bullets are gone. Even if something happens to me, keep fucking shooting."

I nod, more than ready for this. *Nothing is going to happen to him. Nothing is going to happen to him.*

Heavy feet trample through the house coming toward us, more than three people, and I realize the Arab was waiting for backup. That's why it was quiet for so long.

*Shit.*

My heart pulses with adrenaline, grip on the gun tightening. The first man appears, and I click the trigger at the same time Charlie clicks his, sending the body flying back out of the doorway.

Another man.

**BANG!**

Another man.

**BANG!**

The more that come, the quicker I click until I'm holding down the trigger and the rifle screams with endless shells, back-hammering in my hands.

***Ting, ting, ting, ting, ting!***

It creates a smog of blood and smoke, bodies convulsing against our attack while wild orange flashes spark through the room.

Someone fires back, and I duck on reflex, raising my gun higher to blow through their heads.

Only when Charlie lowers his gun do I let off my trigger, coughing and choking on the smog. It clears enough to reveal a mountain of men in the battered doorway, some wheezing while others are lain dead to the world.

“Motherfucking suicidal putas.” Charlie spits on the ground, warbling a mantra of Spanish expletives.

The aftermath of silence amplifies my pumping adrenaline, the raucous beat of my heart, and my ears are ringing off the hook. I poke a finger in one and give it a good shake, gripping the rifle under my arm.

Charlie is smirking at me, shoulders rising and falling with heavy breaths.

“What’s so funny?”

He flicks up his eyebrows, face covered in specks of claret. “We make a good team.”

I snort, insulted. “Says the man who mocked me for running into an *outnumbered* attack.”

“Hey, you ran into an attack of ten men, what did you expect me to say?”

“Maybe I should stop playing light with you in the ring, Charlie”—I wander over to one man who’s coughing and click my trigger to put another bullet in him—“maybe I should give you a real good beating, so you know what happens when people try to ambush me.”

Lightening the mood between us, Charlie playfully shoves my shoulder. I stumble off balance, shoving him back, laughing in an odd state of bliss. He

is right. We do make a good team. I guess we always have.

“Shouldn’t your crew be here by now?” I ask, rubbing my stomach as I still feel a little queasy.

He drops his rifle to hang on his body and flicks out his wrist to check his watch. “Any minute now.”

“Okay. We should search this lot in the meantime,” I say, nodding at the pile of dead bodies. “Figure out who they are exactly, and why Robert is working with them. No one would usually team up with Arabs. They’re deceitful rats.”

“I have a theory.” Charlie looks at me like he’s expecting me to follow his train of thought, but before I can speak, a shallow voice cuts through.

“I am not working with Robert.”

We hitch into the wall, shoulder to shoulder, and Charlie grips my forearm to keep me near.

“I am only here because news of your war with my client has spread, a war over one of my girls, and I need to return her before people brand my business as inadequate.”

Charlie wrinkles his eyebrows, reeling with speculation, and my eyes enlarge. “*The boy comes as a freebie.*”

“It’s him!” I shrill, cracking open my rifle to check the magazine bullet count, but it’s empty. “He-he sold me at the auction!” And he’s the *mudak* who constantly injected me with heroin. That’s where I know his damn voice.

“Asad...” Charlie snatches the Desert Eagle handgun from the back of his jeans and aims it at the wall. “Don’t move, Asad. I can hear where you are.”

My heart is racing, screaming in my ears. I never even thought about what I’d do to that man if I ever got my hands on him. Now that he’s within my grasp, I want to rip his fucking face off.

“I’m going to fucking kill you!” I scream through the wall. I try to dash past Charlie, but he grabs my waist, warning me to stay here. “How did you know it was Asad who stole me?” I grunt, wrenching myself out of his hold. “This is news to me, Charlie.”

“The auction room you described,” he whispers, eyes flittering between me and the wall where he’s aiming his gun, “it matched the one we blew up in Jordan a week ago. Intelligence confirmed it was Asad’s setup.”

My jaw drops, and I gape at him. I cannot believe this. Why didn’t he tell me?

“I, can confirm it was my setup,” Asad says, hearing us through the wall.

“I will pardon what you did if you let me go. Forget today ever happened and just let me go.”

“El hijo de puta,” Charlie hisses, and he begins to rage, threatening to skin Asad’s wife before hanging her on his wall. “You have a daughter, too...Alya. Old enough to bleed and definitely old enough to be butchered. Your entire family will die because you fucked with mine.”

“I didn’t touch her!” Asad cries, collapsing with confessions. “It wasn’t my idea to kidnap her! The Albanian contacted me and hired me to hijack James-Markov’s plot—he was originally planning to kidnap the girl from you. It’s Robert’s and James-Markov’s mistake! They’re both traitorous; that’s why I double-crossed Robert and sold her off rather than handing her over for the agreed price of the job! I didn’t trust the deal Robert and I made!”

I’m gray with shock, rendered speechless by the fact that he double-crossed Robert on a deal.

Charlie’s face is colorless, too, but he manages to question our enemy, wanting to know how Robert knew of James’ plan to kidnap me.

“I don’t know,” Asad admits. “I didn’t care to know. I just wanted to make some serious money off the girl, but we didn’t touch her! I swear! We just subdued her because she’s dangerous, that’s all!”

A formidable tremor rips through Charlie’s body, anger on another level. I tap his arm, mouthing at him to keep his cool. I want to know where Robert is, and since Asad is crumbling at the seams, he might tell us.

“How did you know where we were today?” Charlie asks, heeding to my advice to stay calm. “Tell me, and I *might* spare your children. *Might*, if you get to the point.”

“I’ve been watching your house for weeks,” he says, informing us that Robert gave up Charlie’s location. “I saw you both leave today on a motorcycle, so I followed you with my detail.”

“You’re a dumb motherfucker,” Charlie growls, grip on the gun trembling. “I know where you live...I know where your children go to school...”

Asad rambles, weakening further in his position, petrified that the Los Zetas are coming for him. He begs for a truce in exchange for information on Tatiana’s latest schemes, beseeching Charlie to leave his family alone—specifically his daughters. “As a ruthless business man yourself, you must understand the allure of money? Blaire is one of the most valuable girls



we've ever come across"—his voice gives Charlie a clear location to where he is in the living room, and he shifts the barrel end of his gun on the wall—"I'm sorry for taking her, okay? I knew kidnapping her and selling her was a bad move. I admit that now. Okay? I'm sorry."

"Relieved to know you're sorry. It takes away the hell Blaire endured, doesn't it, Asad?"

"What else can I say, Decena? You tell me, and I'll say it—Ro-Robert went missing today!"

My face flashes with surprise. I squint to listen vigilantly, wondering if it's true, wondering where James is if it's true.

"People think you have him," Asad says. "Word is spreading...people are angry! If you spare me, I'll be on your side—I-I'll make up for what I did to Blaire!"

"Not good enough," Charlie spits, his voice coming out cold and detached. "You cannot say or do anything to help your plight, Asad. You harmed my family, so now, you die." He clicks back the hammer on his gun and blows the plaster through the wall, shooting Asad's brains out. A heavy wallop hits the living room floor as the sound of hiatus comes over the house in a loud **whup! whup! whup!** It's helicopter blades, cutting through the air.

A horrible feeling of dread comes over me, as I assume it's more of Asad's men. But before I can process a thought, Charlie cuffs a hand around mine and drags me to run through the house, staggering to climb the mountain of bodies in the doorway.

The second we're outside, the sea air hits me and my insides turn. I try to stay alert for danger, taking in the uncanny sight of the beachfront. The sun is blinding, so bright it stings my eyes. I squint, seeing police cars flashing blue, the electric color bouncing off every surface. Four choppers are sitting on the grassy bank across the road, dominating the sea view. There are bloody bodies painted on the sidewalks, a big SUV smoking in the middle of the road, and combat-suited men everywhere, yelling things I don't register. They're Los Zetas, clad in Charlie's signature combat attire with the red Zs printed on their chests. I watch their mouths moving, deafened by the helicopter and numbed by the queasy need to puke.

"What's wrong?" Charlie asks, patting me down. His raspy words come out in slow motion, and though I watch his lips to see what he's saying, I can't figure it out. "Blaire, baby, are you hurt anywhere? What's wrong?"

I shake my head, feeling unnaturally off-color, and I double over to vomit

on the sidewalk.

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## 25

The deafening helicopter hovers high in the sky, breaking to land in Charlie's front yard.

The house looks like an ant's nest from way up here, crammed between miles of rolling green hills. It's a stunning vista, beneath the late afternoon sun flashing gold against the windows, I just wish it didn't make me want to puke.

As the helicopter makes its descent, my stomach lurches and I break to heave. Everyone in the cabin juts from left to right, grabbing onto something to steady themselves, then we land on safe ground. Charlie jumps out of the cabin and reaches back in for me. His dark hair flaps about in the manmade wind, face painted in bloody specks. Fighting the urge to spew, I kneel to him, squinting under the thunderous sound of the helicopter blades. He grabs my waist and effortlessly lifts me out, shouting to ask if I'm all right. "You still feeling sick?"

I shrug since the seesawing in my tummy has somewhat leveled out. I do still feel sick, but that's the least of my troubles.

Robert is allegedly missing which could mean James is in deeper jeopardy. When I had finally stopped vomiting in Dover—after Charlie had squared things with the British police—I questioned to see if he thought it was true about Robert. I had hoped he would agree that *missing* actually meant our enemy has gone in to hiding. But Charlie point-blank refused to answer me; didn't even offer up an excuse to pacify my obvious concerns.

My suspicions went wild, calculating feasible reasons. *Does he know what's happened to Robert exactly? Doesn't he? Maybe he's holding Robert captive? Maybe Robert is either of target one and two, but if that's so, then why not just tell me?*

I get the feeling Charlie is holding back on any form of an explanation, so he isn't forced to lie to me. I think that's why he implemented our little deal of *two weeks no questions asked*. He knows something, and he doesn't want to tell.

Cautious of his behavior, I study him with extra attention. I stand here watching him yell at his men over the roaring helicopter, ordering them to get to their stations. He doesn't want an inch of the estate unmanned, with double security inside the house. It sends my suspicious mind in to overdrive again. It makes me consider the possibility that maybe he doesn't know where Robert is—otherwise, why would he need so much security? But at the same time, why did he take me out today without a security detail? For weeks now, he hasn't let me step a foot out of the house, then the house got attacked, target one and two—whoever the hell they are—were captured, and he wanted to take me to Dover for lunch and a seaside stroll?

I'm going mad with theories, but something feels very, very off.

Nic and Andres jog up to us from another chopper, shouldering their way through the mass of Los Zetas in the yard gathered around us. They visually scan me from head to toe, speaking over each other in a haste to ask if I'm all right. I nod and shrug simultaneously, unsure of what to tell them. I am fine, but the way they're carrying on someone would think I'm dying.

"A team was dispatched to go fetch Asad's family from Jordan," Nic says, passing Charlie the backpack concealing the laptop sized package we collected from Dover.

"Good," Charlie hisses, pointing out in anger while snatching the backpack. "Fly those *hijo de putas* straight to Mexico. I'll show them a little Los Zetas attention when I get home."

It's a relief to hear. I have a feeling the Arab woman who was dosing me up on heroin was Asad's wife, and if that's the case, she deserves to die. They all do. I won't be satisfied until everyone who screwed with my life is dead.

When Charlie's finished conversing with his men and his brothers, he draws me under his arm and breathes in my ear that Dr. Shyam is here to see me. "Nic told him you were unwell"—he kisses my face between words—"so he's in the office waiting to check you over."

I arch back to see his face, frowning as I say, "But I'm fine."

"You were sick."

"Were, being the operative word."

He raises his eyebrows, silently setting me straight in front of everyone.

I take in a long, deep breath, and nod in agreement. The last thing I want is a doctor prodding and poking me, but I doubt Charlie will let this go, and I don't have the mental strength to argue with him over something so trifling. I

need to reserve my efforts for the real battle. I need to know what the hell is happening with Robert and James.

The Los Zetas spread out to man their stations, and with Nic and Andres hot on our asses, Charlie chaperones me across the stony driveway and into the house.

Luna is a blubbering mess in the entrance hall, sobbing that she thought we were going to come back half dead or worse. “I’m so glad you’re both okay!” she cries, dashing tears from her smudged eyes. “Oh, *my Dios*, if you were not...if you came back hurt...!”

I don’t know what to say to her, so I just shrug and carry on into the office with Charlie.

I smell the silver cleanliness of Dr. Shyam before I see him standing there at the office desk in his gleaming white, knee-length coat, briefcase open on a side table. There’s no fucking around. It’s straight to business. He first wants to know everything I have eaten today, cataloguing a list on his notepad as Charlie divulges what I’ve consumed from food to drink. I’m shocked he knows I had a sip of milk from the refrigerator and picked at the colorful cookies Eliza baked. He wasn’t even in the kitchen.

“Apart from cod and chips,” he says, emphasizing on our lunch today, “her diet has been the same since she returned. She puts food away like a fully-grown man, so I don’t think consumption has made her ill.”

I try not to take offence to his statement, knowing he isn’t insulting me. He’s just making it known that I eat relatively well on average.

When it’s all noted, Charlie makes me sit at the couch, helps me out of my jacket, and the doctor goes about his work. He takes my blood pressure and then my temperature by shoving a glass stick in my mouth. All the while, beady Latino eyes are on me, Nic and Andres squashed in the doorway. Charlie’s standing barely two feet away with crossed arms, watching me like a hawk.

“You are a little warm”—the doctor logs my medical credentials—“blood pressure is somewhat high, too. Your brother said you’ve just undergone an attack, Mr. Decena?” He glances over at Charlie, who paces about like a caged animal explaining what happened in detail regarding the physical fight I executed before our enemies were shooting at us.

“It was intense, bloody...you know how it is.” He waves about, motioning between things. “But Blaire can hold her own. That’s not the issue. I want to know why she was sick, so figure *that* out.”

Nic butts in to say Charlie fed me a trackable sim card, but it's been tested on a dozen patients and has never made anyone sick before.

"She did spew it up on the sidewalk..." Charlie sounds curious in his observation, eyes thinning at me. "Maybe it did make her sick?"

Dr. Shyam muses with pursed lips, implying it *could* be what made me sick, but he isn't convinced. "If it's been tested on numerous subjects and has been medically approved—and if it was sold to you, Mr. Decena—I highly doubt it's the reason for Blaire's affliction." He reels through endless possibilities for why I vomited, from my body rejecting certain rich foods, like the fish—as I'm supposedly still recovering from the blood poisoning, and my organs will be working extra hard—to probable dormant viruses that I could've picked up when my immune system was at its lowest. "High blood pressure can also make us feel poorly, and Blaire's is at a peak. Could she be pregnant?"

I do a double take on him, certain I heard him wrong.

"I doubt it," Charlie says, a strange sense of regret toning his voice, "she hasn't had a menstrual cycle since she came back."

"Not even one?" Dr. Shyam blinks at Charlie, baffled, and scribbles on his notepad. "That is odd."

"I said it was odd, too," Andres pipes up, and I realize Charlie has spoken to his brother about my period cycle. How embarrassing.

"I can have a gynecologist see to Blaire about it," Shyam says, still scribbling down notes. "It should definitely be checked out."

"If she was pregnant, she wouldn't show signs yet anyhow, would she?" Nic's voice comes over us, and I'm mortified by these questions. I am not pregnant.

"Women carrying twins can show signs as early as the first two weeks. But if Blaire hasn't had a menstrual cycle, I highly doubt she's pregnant. The gynecologist will know more. Until then, how about I take some blood? I'd like to run some tests for potential infections, which is the likely cause. I can rule things out that way."

"All right," Charlie agrees, stepping forward to assist in any way he can. "Get to it then. Roll up your sleeve, Blaire."

That's my cue to get the fuck out of here. No one is stabbing me with a needle.

I stand from the couch, insisting that I'm going up to take a shower, and I'm out of here before anyone can argue with me, shouldering my way

through Nic and Andres hovering in the doorway.

Charlie shadows me out across the entrance hall, ordering me to stop. “This isn’t a debate, Blaire. Get back in there right now and let Shyam conduct his tests.”

With a sigh, I step up a few on the staircase to meet him at eye level, gripping the banister rail. “That wasn’t a request to leave, Charlie. I’m *telling* you we’re done—the medical examination is over. I want to go take a shower and lie down, rest after today. I’m tired.”

His face casts over with anger, jaw ticking with limitation. I don’t look away. I hold my own, nearly warning that if I don’t get out of here right now, I’m going to in-fucking-terrogate him about the issue of Robert being missing.

“You’re mad at me,” he says, rather than asks, and I scowl at him absolutely confused. “Fuck...I get it now.”

*He does?*

“I shouldn’t have taken you out today without a security detail.” He rubs his forehead, certain he’s figured me out. “I’m sorry, baby. It was stupid.”

“What? No, Charlie, it’s not—”

“No, Blaire, it was stupid. I just wanted some time alone with you outside of the house, to treat you, have lunch, and...” He trails off grunting in frustration, patting his chest where his heart is. “I’m really, really sorry, baby.”

His guilt makes me feel like absolute crap. I don’t know where to look, glancing out at anything but him. I’m not at all mad at him about today, and I don’t care about his lack of security. These things happen in our game, security or no security. It’s no one’s fault. I just wish I knew what was going on with James.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers again, shrugging with his hands. “Baby, c’mon, you know I would never deliberately put you in harm’s way. I love you, Blaire.”

“I’m not mad at you, Charlie. I’m just”—I scratch my face—“a little tired, and I’d appreciate it if you didn’t force me to see doctors and have blood tests.”

“I want to make sure you’re all right.” He crosses his arms, shifting from foot to foot. “You were violently sick. What do you expect me to do, hmm? Leave you be and hope for the best?”

“I know you care,” I say softly, circling a grain of wood on the banister as

a distraction. “But I’m all right now. I’m more worried about...” *Don’t say it. Don’t say it.*

My eyes flicker up to his, and he levels a concentrated, narrowing stare over me. It makes me feel prickly, lingering for long seconds. Then his steady hand lifts to outline my left eye, tickling the spot there. A touch of inquisitiveness.

“Two weeks, Blaire. You promised.”

I did. I know I did. But it doesn’t make this any easier. If anything, it makes it harder. What idiot agrees to refrain from questions when their brother is in trouble?

Holding on to my restraint, I force a smile and pivot up the staircase. “I’m going to get cleaned up. Do you want to join me for a shower?”

“Course I do, but I can’t,” he says, sounding glum. “Matters are pressing.”

My lips twist. It actually annoys me that he says no to taking a shower with me. He’s never said no to me before.

“Guess I’ll see you at dinner then?”

“I don’t know,” he says, and I whip around on the staircase. “I’m not certain how long...it’s, gonna take.”

*It’s?*

“What do you mean, you don’t know? You can’t take a shower with me and now you’re not here for dinner?”

“I need to get some stuff sorted, Blaire. I have footage to observe, calls to make...” He looks miserable as hell, lifting his hands in another shrug. “I’ll be back when I can though, all right?”

*When he can?*

“Tonight?” I ask, but he doesn’t reply. His lips arch in a smile, but the gleam doesn’t meet his eyes. He looks totally gutted over something.

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*“I need to get some stuff sorted... I’ll come back when I can...”* Charlie’s statements ricochet around my brain like a broken record, driving me crazy with speculation. In fact, the sum of today is driving me crazy. Period.

I wonder who he’s with, where he’s going, and what exactly he’s doing. But I can’t even come to a conclusion because I have no i-fucking-dea what’s going on nowadays.



I'm in the dark on every account, and it's not a place I'm comfortable with.

Trying my best to block it all out, I strip from my bloody clothes and step into the shower. I stand under the warm flow with my hands on the tiled wall, watching thick, red streaks slide down my naked body, swirling around my feet down the drain. After, I towel dry, pull on a red tracksuit with a large hoodie, and snuggle in Charlie's side of the bed.

I'm asleep before I realize, and it's surprisingly undisturbed, protracted, and peaceful. I stir at some point thinking I can smell the scent of burning wood over the crackle of the fireplace, and then soft, full lips press to my face.

I sigh in satisfaction.

When I wake all puffy eyed and lethargic, I'm feeling relatively well. The coiling need to vomit has passed, though it's replaced with nervous knots. A gut instinct.

Lifting my head off the pillow, I squint to gaze around the room, searching for Charlie. He's not here. I sense it before I can see it.

It's nightfall, moonlight scorching silver against the matte gray walls. The fireplace is roaring, dancing on full power. The balcony doors are ajar with a coast of cool air tinting the warmth in the room.

I've slept hours away, and he still isn't back. Someone's been in here though, and while I like to assume it was him, I don't think it was.

I have a horrible feeling something bad is going down, but I can't put my finger on what. That's what is inflaming my level of stress: not knowing.

I roll over in bed, onto a gift bag and a huge bunch of wild, blue flowers wrapped up in clear packaging. There's a note. I pick it out of the bouquet and lift it to my eyes, analyzing every word.

Hope you feel better, baby. Eliza is making dinner. Come down when you're ready.

Te amo, Charlie. X

He's downstairs waiting for me to come have dinner. It's a relief to know. I emit a heavy breath, exhausted by my emotions already, and I've barely been awake five minutes.

I wish the drama would end. I wish James was here, safe. And I wish Charlie and I could go back to how things were when I lived with him before.

I hate the whole suspense thing we've got going on between us now. It makes me uneasy. And uneasy lies the head that wears the crown. I might've slept peacefully this evening, but if this suspense carries on much longer, I'm going to keel over.

I hide the note under my pillow with the rest of his cards and reach into the gift bag. A small, heavy box. Scowling in curiosity, I pull it out, finding it's a new iPhone. I tackle to lift the lid, and a black screen blinks with a text message.

I was supposed to give this to you earlier today. Thought it's about time I got you a cell phone so we can communicate when apart.

Charlie. X

I re-read the text several times to understand its purpose, and now I don't think Charlie is downstairs. I'm absolutely convinced he won't be coming back tonight, either. He's left for the day to go on business before and has never gifted me with a mobile.

This is a means of distant communication.

The knots in my tummy intensify, and I scramble out of bed to go find out what the heck is going on. My vow of silence has nothing to do with Charlie's plans. It was specifically Robert and James related. So, Charlie *can* tell me where he's going and what he's doing. I won't accept anything less.

I slip on a pair of trainers, pocket my new phone, and rush out of the bedroom.

From the landing top, I can see there are Los Zetas on every door—even the living room—standing about clasp guns while visually scrutinizing the night for trouble. Two are speaking in whispers about erasing 'the enemy' from France, how they wish they were in on the action. I slow my pace to sneakily listen in, to hide in the shadows on the staircase, but they must sense my presence because they immediately stop talking. They each head-bow as I wander past, impassive behind their eyes. I give them funny looks and carry on through the house, chasing a warm scent of hazelnut. My stomach howls. I'm starving, though I'm not sure I can handle food right now.

Coming through the kitchen doors, I spot Eliza slaving over a hot stove, sweat gathering on her wrinkly forehead. She greets me in Spanish as I walk up to her, meekly asking after Charlie. Her dark eyes flicker to mine, then away to focus on the pot she's stirring. I wait and wait. I repeat my question

thinking she's deaf, but she completely ignores me.

An angry frown crosses my face. I hold out waiting on her response, but then our silence goes beyond uncomfortable—even for me.

“Te hice una pregunta,” I say through gritted teeth, *I asked you a question*, trying to force the housekeeper's hand. “Dónde está Charlie?”

“Charlie will be back when he's finished with work.” Nic's gruff voice comes over us, and I spin around to face him. “Andres, Luna, and I have been waiting for you to come down and have dinner with us.”

*They have?*

“Feeling better after taking a nap, chica?”

I blink at him, and my mouth opens to speak but nothing comes out. He makes me feel so...uncomfortable. There's no other way to explain it.

He leans against the refrigerator on his shoulder, smiling at me—just like Charlie does. Dark with intent. Brooding. He's dressed in lazy, gray joggers and a baggy, black sweater, though I can still see his hard, defined muscles visible under the soft material.

I spot blood in the edges of his nails, and he notices my attention to detail, crossing his arms to hide the evidence.

“Have you been with Charlie?” I ask, paying acute attention to the way he brushes me off like a politician. He counters my question with another question, wanting to know if I got the cell phone.

I nod, thinking maybe he came into Charlie's room, lit the fireplace, and gave me the flowers and the phone.

“Oh, good.” He smiles again. “You should drop Charlie a message. I'm sure he's expecting to hear from you.” He motions at Eliza, to emphasize the food while asking me, “Are you hungry?”

I shrug, still examining him. But then my head whips to the right as Andres and Luna enter the kitchen arm in arm, mauling each other's faces off. It's a dirty, wet kiss, slurpy and fucking awkward. I don't know where to look. I fiddle with the string of my hoodie, blinking about in a fluster. Nic grins at me, amused by my embarrassment. He's so much like Charlie it's uncanny.

“You're here!” Luna cheers, shooing away her lust hungry husband. He's dressed down in comfy, gray clothes, while she's glowing in a floaty, white dress.

“Señor Charlie won't be joining us for dinner,” she adds to my apprehension, assuring me *it's okay though*. “We're all here to keep you

company while he works. Eliza made your favorite meal.”

“Come, Blaire”—Nic extends a hand—“let’s get you settled at the table.”

“No,” I say, lifting a hand to stop his insistence. “I’m not hungry.”

I walk past him and exit the kitchen before he can muster up another word. I make for Charlie’s office, hoping he hasn’t left the house yet.

The door is ajar, which is weird given it’s usually locked and requires a fingerprint ID passcode. I poke my head in, and I’m relieved to see Charlie is here. He’s draped back in his big, office chair half-facing the wall, one leg crossed over his knee. I peer over the desk to see he’s still dressed in the bloody jeans, tanned boots, and his leather jacket, cradling a glass of brandy in one hand. There’s a new laptop resting on his crossed leg, and he’s watching something on it. Footage. The screen glows against the claret patches on his hands, neck, and face. It’s not dry and crispy like I was expecting. It’s fresh, droplets trickling off his clean shaven chin onto the keyboard—as if he’d just barely finished butchering someone.

My eyes stream down the hard floors at the bloody footprint trails going off in two directions around the desk—more evidence of brutality. And that’s just the beginning of it. Near the coffee table in front of the couch, there’s a cardboard box sitting in a pool of blood. It’s encasing someone’s head that has been stabbed skull deep in syringes. They’re fanned out like hedgehog spikes, like something out of Hellraiser.

I don’t know if I’m shocked or pleased by the sight, given the head is bald and podgy, like Robert’s. But it’s peppered in gray streaked hair, so I know it’s not him. A family member, maybe? His brother? Charlie said he’d kidnapped one of Robert’s brothers.

Whoever it is, I don’t really care. Things with Charlie begin to make sense, why he had to leave earlier today and why he was so shift about it. It was to torture that man in the box. And I know why he wasn’t sure whether he was coming back this evening, too. He once told me when he’s in a dark frame of mind, he needs mental space away from certain innocent people—translation: he needs mental space away from me. Perhaps his mind darkens when he’s been butchering people?

Yes, things finally make sense.

I take a step inside the office, feeling a little better with knowing something. Now I can probe for information on my brother and make sure Charlie is okay. Because he doesn’t look okay.

“Hey, Charlie,” I start softly, but he jolts with surprise. The glass in his

hand shatters across the hard floors, malt spluttering everywhere as he leaps to his feet. I rush up to him apologizing, aware it's not like him to flinch with surprise. "I-I didn't mean to startle you!"

"What the fuck...?" he hisses, slamming the laptop down on his desk. "Nic told you to stay away from the office."

"What?" I pull in my chin, confused. "No, he didn't." I thumb-point at the door from over my shoulder. "He didn't say anything like that. Luna mentioned you weren't having dinner with us, but that's—"

He glares at me, eyes flashing with uncontrolled savagery, and I shut my mouth. I step back behind the desk without looking away, chills cascading all over my body. He feels...different. Dark and different.

Even Maksim never felt like this.

"I asked you if anyone had touched you," he says, confusing me beyond words, "I asked, and you said no."

I breathe his name, baffled, but he doesn't reply. He rests in the office chair and stares at a spot on the wall, clutching the chair arms so tight his knuckles turn white.

"Charlie, what do you mean, you asked if anyone had touched me? What's happened?"

He doesn't speak, just lets a heavy moment of uncertainty hang between us. I glance at the laptop, assuming he saw something on it, and then I glance back at him. His jaw is twitching out of control. I sense he wants to say something but isn't sure how, and it's bizarre. Charlie never hesitates.

Studying his station, I spot a duffle bag behind the desk near his feet, overflowing with his clothes.

My heart sinks.

He did come into the bedroom while I was asleep earlier tonight. He came to pack some of his things because he's leaving, and judging by the clothes, for more than one night.

I try to break the ice once more to connect with him. Keeping my voice low and measured, I question to see if James is okay, emphasizing on the head in the box, but Charlie goes nuts. He leaps to his feet a second time and swipes a hand across the desk, clearing it of things. I stumble back, getting out of the line of fire. Ornaments and the liquor decanter crash into the wall, scattering across the floor in a chaotic pile.

"Get out, Blaire!" Charlie roars, reeling in Spanish that he knew *he'd* be my main concern. He knew *James* would be my priority over him. "You

can't be here for me, so just get the fuck out!"

I blink at him in shock, standing here gawking like an idiot. "What are you talking about? Why can't I be here?"

He shakes his head, silent in his anger. The vein in his forehead throbs while his fists tremor at his sides, hemorrhaging desperate restraint.

I don't know what to say. Charlie has never told me to go away before, and he's never been mad at me like this.

He points past me with a trembling hand, hissing, "Leave. I'll come find you when I'm...just go, Blaire. I don't want you here."

*He doesn't want me here?*

My heart aches with rejection, and a sharp prick comes to my eyes so fast I can't stop it.

"Why?" My question chokes on a sob. "What's with the bag of clothes, Charlie? Are you leaving because of me?"

"Get! Out!" he storms around the desk and yells in my face, making me cringe. "Stop crying and just get the fuck out of my office!"

His second dose of rejection is agony, splaying me open. Tears burst from my eyes and flood my cheeks, for he's never been so cruel to me before. He's never shouted at me like this before. If anything, he usually tries to coax out this vulnerable side of me.

*"Stop crying and just get the fuck out of my office!"*

The realization that he's leaving—probably because of me—hits hard, my worst fear personified. I drop to my knees at his feet begging him to talk to me. "Please, tell me what's wrong," I say between sobs, holding my hands out in the space between us in a subconscious state of defense. "Whatever I've done, I'm sorry, okay? I won't do it again. I swear I won't do it again!" I turn up my head and gaze at him through tear soaked eyes, pleading with desperation, but it doesn't work. He sneers down at me like he hates me.

"Don't go, Charlie," I beg. "Please?" The thought of being without him scares the living daylights out of me. At this stage, I'll do anything to stop him. And I do try. I bury my face in his boots and hiccup sob, apologizing. But it's no use. I yelp in surprise as he seizes my arm and drags me to my feet, warning me to stay away until he calls.

"What do you mean, *until you call*?" I grab at his jacket, clinging for my life, refusing to let go. "Charlie"—I whimper his name—"where are you going?"

"To hell," he says. "And I don't want you there."

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## 26

Charlie disappears for seven days. Seven whole fucking days, and I go mad with depression and suppositions.

One minute I think he's left for good—and after the way he shouted at me to get the fuck out of his office, how could I not? But then he texts to ask if I'm *all right*, and I'm left wondering in his gray abyss of the unknown. I reply desperate to speak with him, to apologize for whatever, begging for him to come back, but he doesn't respond.

He never responds.

I receive flowers and chocolates like this shit will actually soothe my anxiety rather than fuel it, but that's the extent of our communication.

I start to wonder if all men do this to soften the blow of separation. I start to wonder if the breakup process is always so drawn out and heartbreaking like this. And it really is heartbreaking, more than I could have ever anticipated.

I cry for no reason. I puke every day because I'm wound so tight with nerves. I can't eat. I can't sleep. I don't even know what's happening with my brother. Is Charlie still chasing leads? Has he given up now that he's given up on me?

I don't know. But I need to find out, somehow.

With a plan in mind, I make a daily effort to venture downstairs for breakfast and dinner with the Decenas, *minus one*, knowing they will be loitering in Charlie's shadow. I don't know what I'm expecting from them, but repetitive tête-à-tête on sports isn't it. I want to steer the topic in my favor, but I don't really know how. Maksim never trained me to be a conversationalist. The only person I've ever freely spoken to outside of my clan unit is Charlie, though he always took the lead.

I frown at Luna's green vest, at the plunging v-neck boasting a curvaceous cleavage. Women like compliments. They get all mushy and blushy—I've seen it—but does that mean they fall in line spilling with secrets? Platitudes can't have that much power, surely?



*Here goes nothing...*

My lips part to speak, but Luna cuts in.

“Want some?” She lifts a steaming bowl to offer up a second serving of food, and I know my time to try and probe her has passed. I accept the food, and she turns her attention to indulge her husband in talk of their children. Nic maintains his silence, blitzing messages on his mobile, or he’ll take sly calls he leaves the room for. The housekeeper mutters about clearing up the kitchen without ever noticing I’m here.

I’m so miserable I could cry right here in front of them all. I feel isolated, and it heightens the fact that Charlie really is gone. He’s probably moved on by now with a real beautiful woman who’s bowing to his every need. I’ll bet she’s easy to read, easy to love, and easy to be with. Unlike me, a chasm of darkness.

*No wonder he left.* I agree with my deeper-self. I’m damaged goods, and men like Charlie do not want damaged goods.

Hot tears come to the surface of my eyes, soaking my lashes, and a huge, painful lump forms in my throat. I gulp down a mouthful of food, forcing it past the swell of my throat, but I can’t seem to stow the need to weep in pity for myself.

“Hey, are you okay, cariño?” Luna says softly, reaching across the table to touch my hand.

I don’t flinch away. I let her touch me, soaking up her warmth, surprised by how much I miss human contact.

“Cariño?” she whispers, urging me to speak. “What is it?”

Eyes full of need, I want to tell her that I’m not okay, that my world is falling apart and there’s nothing I can do to stop it. But I can’t. So, I just cry in to my closed mouth, tears falling from my eyes. No one says a thing. Luna draws away from me at her husband’s beckoning, and I’m right back to being alone again.

The next day isn’t any better. I’ve cried all night. My eyes are red-raw, and the aching hole in my chest feels like it’s getting bigger, expanding beyond size.

Over breakfast, lacking in any form of self-respect, I ask Luna if she’s heard from Charlie. Waiting for her response is gut-wrenching. I fiddle to cover my mouth with the collar of my sweater, sure she’s going to ignore me. But then her deep, brown eyes flash to mine, and I sense she wants to ease my obvious misery. I smile to wheedle her on. I perk up in my chair, gazing,

pleading...but Andres lifts a single finger, silencing his wife.

“Eat your food, Blaire,” Nic butts in, informing me that Charlie will come back when he’s ready. He apparently has another sim card, and I’m welcome to try and call. Same number.

I’m aware he’s got another sim card—he’s been texting me every fucking day. But I’m too nervous to call. *He told me to go away.*

“Don’t worry, cariño.” Luna beams with compassion from across the table, digging into her food. “I’m certain Señor Charlie misses you. And he will be okay.”

*Be okay?* From what?

Her subconscious nuance bugs me, and I can’t concentrate on our meal. I’m right back to thinking Charlie hasn’t left me at all. He’s just in a dark frame of mind and taking some timeout to battle his demons, like he told me he does.

But, he yelled at me. He practically told me to fuck off.

I glance at Nic with despair boiling in my eyes, hoping he’ll elaborate on Luna’s statement. He looks over at Andres, sighing on a shrug. “What harm is it going to do by telling her where he is, huh? Look at her, hermano...look how sad she is.”

My heart jumps. I glance through all three of them in a panic, expectant.

“Charlie is in France,” Andres confesses, shocking the hell out of me. “I’m sure you know why.”

*James.* He must still be chasing clues on James.

“Time’s getting on now,” he adds, speaking around a fork full of food, “so it won’t be long before he returns, I’m sure.”

“He’s coming home?” I gasp on every word, blinking a million times to process. For the first time in days, I feel alive.

“Of course he’s coming home.” The youngest Decena’s face screws with bafflement. “He misses you like crazy. I spoke to him yesterday. He told me himself.”

“Oh, for sure,” Luna croons in melody with her husband. “Charlie will be missing you, cariño. How could he not?”

My mood lifts sky high. I leave the table in haste, accidentally flinging my fork across the kitchen in the process. I dive to pick it up, but Nic tells me between chuckling, “Just leave it, Señorita. Go, do what you were planning on doing.”

With a genuine smile, I leave the kitchen and rush up to Charlie’s

bedroom. I muster up the guts to call his mobile, to tell him that I miss him and that I want him to come home now. I don't like this anymore. He'll take pity on me. He'll walk through that door within hours, sling his arms around me, and kiss me deeply, passionately. I just know it.

My mood drops beyond a gulf when I dial his number as it isn't a foreign ringtone that sets in. He's still in England.

Hanging up the phone, I lower onto the edge of the bed on the verge of more tears, worried Andres doesn't seem to know Charlie is still in the country. Or maybe he does know. Maybe he knows exactly where Charlie is but he's hiding it from me.

Maybe because he's with another woman.

The thought makes me puke.

By sunset, I come to the conclusion that I should probably leave before Charlie revokes my residence, but the mere idea of being without him petrifies me. Maksim is dead. James is God knows where, suffering God knows what, with God knows who. If I leave, I'll be completely and utterly alone. And I've never really been alone before.

As a last resort, I try to communicate with some old acquaintances to see if they know where Charlie is. At least if I can find him, I can confront him, and then if we really are over, I'll go. I'll find a way to piece my life back together. I'm certain I'm not the only woman in the world whose life has dissolved at the power of a man.

Locking myself in Charlie's bedroom, I let my mission consume me. First off, I hack the mobile he gave me, but it takes forever. The software currently imbedded is genius, layer after layer of codes and more codes tracking where I am and what I'm doing. When I manage to disable the features, the camera light beams red as if recording. I stick a lick of paper over it and carry on in my endeavor, connecting to an illegal Wi-Fi system so I can bypass the iTunes plugin feature. This allows me to jailbreak the device and implement a twenty-character password. Then I download my Dark Web applications and the application to my profile. I log in with anticipation, ignoring Tatiana's string of capital-letter-subject-headed messages, and all the other messages offering jobs now that I'm free from Maksim's hold, including Kratos—a squad of assassins led by Demetrius. I contact the most estranged people, being careful with how I ask if they've seen or heard from Charlie, Robert, or even James. I don't want to make any of them easy targets.

Over the course of the evening, I get the same generic responses: Robert

is missing. James has been AWOL for months now. Charlie Decena is never on the radar. There is a rumor the Los Zetas are wiping out Albanians nested in France, though I don't know how true it is, and it doesn't help my plight either way.

It's gutting to know my last-ditch effort is an epic fail. At this point, I'm certain I should just leave of my own free will, but I can't. I don't want to go.

Another message comes through from Oliver, the guy who held a security post with James for Maksim. He insists I need to find James before it's too late, that he'll help me if I need him, and my stress levels amplify. He says seeking out Robert—not Charlie—should be my priority. I either need to find and kill the Albanian, or secure insurance and trade for my brother.

I knew this already, but what can I do without intelligence, allies, and funds to track him myself? Charlie made Tatiana take back all my cash.

I could go back to London and ransack Maksim's place in Dartford for funds, but that means leaving, and I really, really don't want to leave without seeing Charlie one last time.

Someone knocks on the bedroom door, and I dart out of bed to answer, subconsciously thinking it's him.

It's not.

It's Luna, demanding I come down for dinner. "You've been locked away for days now, cariño. It isn't healthy to be alone for such long periods of time." She waves out in a manner of no-nonsense, holding my gaze the entire time. "Please, Blaire, or I'll go fetch our plates and come eat with you."

This confuses me most, why Charlie's family linger around me. Surely, if he wants me gone, they would too? I can't imagine Nic or Andres enjoy babysitting me.

I do as Luna asks before she invades my personal space. I grab my phone from the bed and follow her downstairs, though I immediately wish I hadn't. Forty-eight hours of no sleep hits me hard, and I'm all twitchy and exhausted at the table. I nearly doze off in my starter salad, but my head whips up at the cackling sound of Luna laughing at her husband.

Kneading my temples, I try to level my mind. It's hard though. I'm suddenly so tired, and my head is all over the place.

At some point, Eliza takes my untouched salad and serves my main course. I pick at the chicken but barely taste a lick of meat. I glance over my shoulder at the coffee machine thinking I should make one, but the housekeeper is there now.

Nic gently nudges my arm to see how I'm feeling, and I register he's sitting next to me, spritzed in spicy cologne.

I don't answer him. I let the evening wear thin, but my thoughts take a turn for the worst. By the time Eliza serves desert, I'm meditating on the memory of the heroin: the empty, floaty feeling of reverie and the sensation of the floor hugging me with its magic.

Nothing hurt when I was high. There was no painful rejection or depression of hope. There was only the moment. I miss it, and the more I think about it, the more my craving turns into a full-on blaze of starvation, just like before.

*Heroin. Heroin, heroin, heroin.*

Sitting forward in my chair, I cup my face in front of my audience, taking deep, calming breaths. I know where I could score some. Maksim used to buy drugs from the Yardy men in London, not a ten-minute walk from my old apartment. If I can just get out of this house, I'll be on my merry way to reverie. I'll be so numb that even James won't matter anymore, and by the time I learn he's dead...well, I'll likely be dead, too.

We might as well both die. What else is there?

"Blair?" Luna's husky voice comes out sharp with apprehension. "Blair, are you okay? Have a sip of water, cariño. Nic, get her some water."

He tries to pass me a glass. I shift away shrinking into myself, telling him to leave me alone. But he won't. While Andres gets up to make a call, Nic and Luna fuss over me thinking I feel sick. I don't feel sick. I feel blank for a second. My head is totally empty. And then I recollect where my mind went.

*Heroin.*

I wonder what I would do if a syringe loaded with heroin was right there on the table. Would I take a hit? Wouldn't I?

I think I would, and if I'm being honest with myself, I hate that I would. I hate what my mind has turned to. I hate what Charlie has done to me.

I think I'm disgusting.

"Iisus Khristos," I say, rubbing my eyes.

I can't do this anymore. My brother is in trouble, and I'm hankering for drugs while waiting for Charlie to come home—when it's quite clear that he isn't going to come home.

In a moment of clarity, before I lose myself a little more, I get up and storm out of the kitchen. Luna jumps to her feet, knocking her chair back so quick it slams on the floor, and yells at Andres to do something. It amazes me

that it took seven days and total ruin for anyone to notice my state of hell.

Ignoring the Los Zetas on guard, I grab a set of keys from the cupboard near the front door, preparing to go find my brother. At least if my mind is on him, it's not on Charlie, and it's not on drugs. Oliver was right: James should be my focus.

"Hey, what are you doing, *Señorita*?" Nic jogs up after me, but I don't pay him any attention. I'm typing Charlie's number in to my mobile tracking system, so I can disconnect him from his Los Zetas tracking system and attach his number to mine. I'll be able to find him then, and ask for all and any intelligence he has on James. I could have done this at the beginning of the week, but it's risky. If Charlie were to go missing, the Los Zetas won't be able to find him. Only I'll have information on his location.

It's not easy to disable his tracker, given someone—on his behalf—has implemented advanced software to his number that scrambles his location signal and blocks outside access. I go about trying to embed my codes in theirs, which will create a new gateway that I can link to my software.

A hand touches my shoulder, but I whack it away and shove Nic up against the wall.

"Whoa, *lo siento!*" *I'm sorry.* He lifts defensive, tattooed hands, promising not to touch me again. The Los Zetas guards spread out around me, but Nic orders them to leave the house *right now*, and they do. "Blaire, tell me what you're doing," he says.

I wrench my arm off his chest and return to my phone, thumbs whizzing all over the glass screen. "I'm going to find Charlie."

A wave of panic jolts through Nic's powerful body, and he reaches into his joggers back pocket, I presume for his mobile.

"Call him," I say with a miserable shrug, jealous Charlie might actually answer his brother's call. "He'll speak to you, won't he?"

"Ohhh, Blaire"—the way Nic says my name...it makes my heart ache more than ever before—"he's not intentionally ignoring you, *chica*. Charlie is just..." His voice disappears on a note. I lift my eyes to his and gaze for ages, pleading him to just tell me the truth. But as per usual, I get nothing. His shapely lips don't move an inch.

"I'm leaving," I say in his silence. "I need to go find my brother. You can try to stop me, but I must warn that it won't end well for you."

"I can't just let you leave." He sidesteps me, the paleness in his eyes flashing between mine. "Please, Blaire, I know you're anxious—I know

you're worried about James and Charlie—but you shouldn't be. Charlie is handling everything.”

“And how do you know that?” I ask with sarcasm.

He opens to speak, tumbling over his own words. I try to duck past him again, but he blurts out, “Before Charlie left, he asked me personally to keep you here and make sure you're okay!”

“Well, I'm not okay!” I scream at the top of my lungs, losing my minuscule shred of cool. “I want to know where Charlie is!” I jab a finger in Nic's face. “I want to know where the fuck my brother is!”

He mirrors my steps all over the place, begging me to stop. “Chica, please, will you just calm down.”

“Don't you *chica* me!” My anger hits a peak, and I kick out at a sideboard, sending it skidding back a few feet. When Nic doesn't move from his position, standing there like a wall of muscle blocking my exit to the front doors, I go crazy. I yank the key cupboard off the wall and toss it across the entrance hall at him. I tear at the side tables, whacking and punching, chipping skin off my knuckles. “I want to know where Charlie is!” I spin around to screech in Nic's face, sure I'm crimson with madness. I'm shaking with adrenaline, too, pulse reaching an all-time high. “I want to know where James is!”

“You need to calm down.” Nic's hands hover about me in a battle to compose my rage. “I promise, James is okay, and Charlie is okay, too. He isn't far away.”

*Isn't far away?* My hackles spark, steam blowing out of my ears.

“You either tell me his location, Nic,” I say his name for the first time ever, speaking through clenched teeth, “and save me the trouble of disabling your tracker blocker, or get out of my way.”

“You can't do that.” Andres appears, dominating the kitchen doorway.

“Why, are you going to stop me, huh?” I challenge, and Nic steps in my line of vision, blocking Andres from sight.

“That's not what he meant,” Nic says, head snapping back and forth between his brother and me. “If you disable the scrambler or the blocker connected to our numbers, we're fair game to anyone who's able to track.”

“I will attach his number to my server and re-block outside access,” I say, hating myself the second I do. I don't have to explain myself. They don't give a fuck about me, so why should I give a fuck about them?

“What if something happens to him, Blaire, and our men can't track his

location?”

This was my initial concern—why I didn’t do it in the first place—but I’m running out of time to find James, so I have no other choice. Once I find Charlie, I’ll re-connect his server to the Los Zetas tracking system, putting things back as they were.

Nic grabs the front door as I yank it open. “Blaire, stop. You’re acting reckless, and you’re putting Charlie in danger.”

I shove him up against the wall again, gaining height on my tippy toes to grab his thick, tattooed throat with my nails. “I want to know where he is!” I scream in his chest, quaking from the frustration. “It’s been seven days! I want to know where he is! I want to know where my brother is! If he were Charlie or Andres, would you just leave him?”

“Blaire”—Nic grunts as I shove him harder, pinning him to the wall—“I shouldn’t even be telling you this, goddammit!”

“Tell me what?”

“Charlie’s all fucked up!” he yells, the sound ricocheting around the house, and a wave of dread comes over me. “When he butchers people, it screws with his mindset, and he doesn’t want to be around you! He fucking left for space, which he won’t have if *you* go after him!”

“You’re lying,” I say, unsure of myself. “He-he left because of me. I know he did. I’m not stupid. He told me to—”

“¿Estás loco?” Nic scoffs, shaking his head in disbelief. “You really are insane... My brother loves every inch of you—he’ll marry you, you silly girl! He would never leave you indefinitely!”

*Marry me.* Charlie mentioned marrying me when we were in Dover. He said he might marry me when we get to Mexico. The memory hurts, cutting through my soul like razors. I wanted that so fucking badly I’d have murdered for it.

I don’t want to believe Nic. I can’t stomach the pain. I look away from him, then back at him, away and back at him. He’s still shaking his head, holding my scrutinizing stare, and a sense of cold fear goes through me. I realize he could be telling the truth. Charlie might’ve been in hell for the past seven days and I haven’t been there to help him.

“Where is he?” I demand to know, stepping up to Nic for a fight. “You have three seconds to tell me before I—”

“Nic,” Andres murmurs from the kitchen doorway, edging toward us, “you can’t let her go on her own.”



“Don’t you think I fucking know that?” Nic shoots a glare at Andres, then swipes the keys from my hand. “Charlie won’t be fucking happy about this.”

I shove past him for the front doors, tossing over my shoulder, “I won’t be happy until I see him.”

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## 27

The tiredness and the craving for drugs evaporate from my system as I pace toward a heavily tinted, black car flashing to signal it's open.

Nic tails me out of the house in his comfy attire: black joggers and a slack tank boasting all his tattoos and macho muscles. He's wearing a big, gold watch on his left wrist, passively checking the time as if in a rush to be somewhere.

Once I'm settled in the passenger seat of the car, he jumps in behind the wheel, fires up the engine, and speeds off the estate to take me to Charlie.

I try not to think about what's going to happen when I see him, assuring myself it will be okay. Now that I know what's wrong—and I'm certain he hasn't left me—I can try to help him. I can get Charlie back on track and everything else will follow suit. We'll find James, hopefully locate and butcher Robert, and our world's axis will level out.

Nic pulls onto a shadowed country lane while sending numerous messages from his phone, I imagine warning his brother of my looming presence. He slows the pace when the lane becomes narrow, overgrown in sky clawing trees. A full moon peeks through the branches, hitting the blacked-out windshield in electric white rays. The road surface is uneven, bumpy with potholes. I hold the handle above the passenger door to steady my bouncing, mentally taking note of where we're heading. It can't be more than a mile from Charlie's house when we come to a mammoth, brick wall covered in prickly metal fencing. It stretches far beyond what I can see on either side of tall, iron gates. A fortress.

"This is the safe house," Nic says, glancing left over his shoulder at me. "Charlie won't be pleased that I've brought you here when we're not even under attack."

I stare out the window, ignoring him before I hit him. He and his brother lied. They insisted that Charlie was either in France or acted like they didn't know of his location. They could have spared me a week of hell, but chose not to, so I choose to keep my fucking mouth shut.

“Do you know what this place is, Blaire?” He yanks up the squeaky handbrake just as the iron gates buzz open. “This is where our most dangerous men reside in England—men Charlie won’t have at the house because you’re there. They’re murderers and psychos, all living on top of each other, hungrily anticipating battle.” His voice is deep and gravelly, blackening as he tries to move my emotions by telling me this isn’t the place for me. “As you’ll soon see, the men overindulge in captive whores and drugs, something I’m sure you detest.”

*Why would he think that?*

I sneer at an image of Charlie spilling all my secrets to his family.

“Some bring their pet wives to keep them company, Blaire. The minute you walk through the door, you’ll see it all. You shouldn’t fucking be here.”

I look right at him, eyes lazy and unfazed. “I’ve been with Maksim-Markov since I was eight years old.” I don’t need to elaborate on that. He knows damn well what I mean. “Are you going to drive in or shall I get out and walk?”

He kisses his teeth in irritation, lets down the handbrake, and steers through the gates. I notice the veins in his tattooed hands are pulsing, evidence of his frustration, but he shouldn’t be frustrated about bringing me here. I am familiar with hell.

The redbrick building is as wide as it is tall, appearing to touch the black sky with its pitched roof. It’s lacking in windows, surrounded by more prickly fencing. Los Zetas guard every shadow, each one loftier and larger than the next. Nic rolls down his window, drapes an arm out over the frame, and nods at a few of them.

“¿Vienes a jugar?” someone asks Nic if he’s come to play, but Nic shakes his head.

“This is Blaire”—he thumb-points at me—“is Charlie here? I’ve texted, but he hasn’t replied.”

“Wow,” the dark eyed man ducks to say hello, “tis’ nice to meet you, Señorita Blaire. Damn, if we’d have known you were coming, we’d have prepared.”

*Prepared?*

I pull the collar of my hoodie up and around my mouth, unsure of how to respond.

“She doesn’t say much”—Nic cocks a shrug—“Charlie in there or what?”

“Yeah, Señor Charlie is inside. Want me to shut things down before you

go in? Tis' getting pretty wild.”

“I’ll bet.” Nic huffs, shooting me an ironic glance. “You don’t need to shut things down, man. My brother won’t keep her here long.”

My nerves peak at the idea that he’s going to send me packing before I’ve barely crossed the threshold—but I won’t let him. He’s going to hear me out, even if I have to fight to the fucking death.

We pull up next to Charlie’s black Range Rover, and I’m out of the car before Nic kills the engine, kicking my door shut. The ground under my feet pounds from the hardcore, Latino music coming from inside the building, and it makes my blood boil to know I’ve been stressing for seven fucking days while *he’s* been here enjoying music and God knows what else.

*God knows what else...* I gulp back a jealous heave.

I peer about for a door, spotting one tucked under a leafy archway. It leads onto a shadowed passage where smoke tints the air in lazy, gray streaks. It stinks of potent herbs.

Scorching body heat comes up beside me, and I flinch until I see it’s just Nic. “Sure you want to go in there?” he asks, nodding ahead.

“I’m sure.”

Ignoring several doors, we follow the sound of pounding music to the very end, walking out onto an enormous, open courtyard. It’s decorated in wooden benches and bushy plant pots lining every edge, under soft mood lighting. I don’t know what I was expecting to find—armed men, or maybe a bordello—but this certainly wasn’t it. The energy is strife, bustling with the sorest sights: naked girls, some bloody and bruised chained up on podiums, while others are being forced to serve in the most debauched fashion. Cock sucking. Fucking. Caning.

Petrified screams pierce over the music, coming from a young girl taking one hell of a beating. She’s bent over cuffed to a bench, thick welts covering her body from her shoulders to her butt—minus the kidney area. The man in the mask caning her black and blue seems to know what he’s doing, but that doesn’t make seeing it any easier.

Disregarding the sights, I scan for Charlie. There’s an open bar across from where I’m standing, *drogas y licor* written across the top in florescent red lighting. Older women dressed in leather gear tend the station, serving Los Zetas with alcohol, smoking joints, and glass trays mounted in dusty, white cocaine.

My mouth dries with hatred at the mere idea that Charlie would seek

mental refuge in a place like this. This is hell—Maksim’s idea of heaven.

“Hey, man!” A large guy comes up to us, wearing a pair of leather pants with his cock bulging at the seams. I don’t know where to look. “Got yourself a redhead mamacita?”

“This is Señorita Blaire,” Nic says, making the guy pale in an instant. He then tells him to *fuck off* in their own language before his tattooed hand appears in my line of vision, pointing in the direction of an iron staircase. “You’ll find Charlie up there,” he says in my ear, so I can hear him over the music. His warm breath tickles my neck, and I step away to put some distance between us, heading for the staircase.

It leads up onto a vine decorated balcony top that circles and overlooks the courtyard. There are at least twenty rooms up here with numbered plaques hanging above each door. They go off in every direction, sectioned off by thick, red drapes.

On instinct, I glance down at the debauched, bustling courtyard. I spot Nic leaning idly at the bar, looking up at me shaking his head. He gestures left with three fingers, signaling at the numbered plaques above the doors. Clocking onto his hint, I pace for room three, pull back the curtain, and enter another corridor. I sneak down, following a thin row of lights on the ceiling, leaving behind the thumping music for more tranquil, sensual Latino tunes. I turn left at the end and enter a heavy wooden door. I have to shove with my knee to get it open, letting out a thick smog. Choking on a breath, I realize what the potent, herby stench is: cannabis.

I want to be angry at Charlie for taking drugs, but I feel like a hypocrite since I was having cravings not half an hour ago.

I shove the door closed and project a wide view of the smoky room, uncomfortable under the amatory music. Dim, red moon lighting burns the high, stone ceiling, pulsing in tune with the sounds. It’s a large, open space, dominated by a half-moon leather seating arrangement set around a paddle bench that’s armed with cuffs.

Sharp hairs come up all over my body, as I sense *it* in here—painful sexual acts.

Stiletto scuffs mar the stone floors, and deep scratches blemish the polished wood on the paddle bench. The walls are covered in purple drapes, except for the one at the back. It’s exposed redbrick. There’s a tiny girl standing there facing away from me, arms slack at her sides.

My blood pressure soars at the sight of her—and it bubbles about to boil

over when Charlie ducks in through an open archway behind one of the drapes.

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Charlie pauses dead in his tracks, nostrils flaring at the sight of me.

I'm furious to see he's high on liquor and drugs, claspng a glass of brandy in one hand and a fat joint in his other, pinched between his fingers. I can't tell if he's angry or shocked by my presence, but he's pulsing with lethal energy, commanding the mood in the room.

I don't say anything right away. I couldn't speak if my life depended on it. I barely even register the two henchmen standing at Charlie's sides, blinking at me like idiots with their mouths hanging open. I'm too wired, focused on that girl, some little *suka* homing in on my life.

Through the smoke, I can see dark, copper colored hair pours down her spine, nearly covering her boney ass. Her toothpick fingers wiggle at her sides, an act of nervousness. She attempts to peer back at me but flinches to resume position. Definitely nervous, and she should be because if she thinks she's walking out of here alive, she's seriously mistaken.

Horribly engrossed, I study her clothes: tight, black sports trousers, white trainers, and a casual black sports top clinging to her narrow ribcage. She's a lightly tan, Latino señorita. Not exactly my doppelganger, but Charlie has tried to imitate me.

"Who the fuck is she?!" I finally scream through the room, breaking our mute state, and the henchmen step back with caution. Charlie doesn't move an inch, reserving himself for whatever reason. "By God," I hiss, holding his strangely deadpan gaze while mine is ablaze with insanity, "you had better say something, Charlie...!"

"Leave, now," he orders in Spanish to the men, the raspy notes in his voice unbelievably calm.

The men grab their drinks from a corner table, head-bow, and walk past without looking at me. I glare to watch them go, then I glare over at Charlie. He watches me back through the heavy blueness of his eyes, creating a dark orb of silence around us, even over the music. It makes me feel spidery and prickly. It makes me feel...anxious.

To chase away the intensity of his presence, I scan his appearance, not really sure what I'm looking for. His glossy, black hair is tidy, pulled away

from his fiercely handsome face in a ponytail, and he's wearing the usual: fitted jeans, tanned boots, a long-sleeved black sweater, and a large silver watch clasped around his veiny, left wrist. His body is still buff and trim, a machine of muscle, so I know he's in a good physical state of health.

*What has he been doing for seven fucking days?*

"You too, Edita," he says, addressing *her* by name. "Leave."

"Not a fucking chance." I grab her arm as she tries to slip past me. A timid squeal escapes her lips, and her eyes drop to her feet like she's not allowed to make eye contact.

I try to swallow but stop halfway in fear that I'm going to choke on my heavy tongue. Maksim conditioned me to be like this, meek and silent under his govern, so he could feel mighty by dominating himself over me.

I want to puke at Charlie's obvious intentions.

"What are you doing here, baby?"

*Baby!*

"Is that a trick fucking question?" I shout, blazing in anger, but again, he doesn't react. He merely stands there observing me, head tipped to the side. "What do you have to say, Charlie? *Get the fuck out? I don't want you here?*" I mimic what he said to me word for word in a deep, sarcastic voice.

He shakes his head, blinking slowly.

"Good," I growl. "Because I'm not going anywhere this time."

"I'm sorry for the way I shouted at you last week," he says softly, the power of his eyes glancing between mine. "Truly. My intentions were never to drag you down to my mood level."

I scowl at him, offended. He didn't just shout at me. He threw me out of his office!

He strolls across the room to flick a switch on the wall, causing a suction sound to come from the air vent near the door. It begins clearing the smog, cleaning and cooling the air. Charlie then stubs out his joint in a crystal ashtray on a side table, knocks back the rest of his drink, and puts the glass down. He moves to switch off the stereo hanging above a corner unit, drowning us in real silence. I wait on pins and needles for him to speak but he doesn't pivot to me right away. He remains there, arched at the neck, staring down at something on the floor.

"Charlie, what the hell is going on?" My Russian accent slices through our quietness, dripping in apprehension. "Have you been here with *her* this whole week?" I tug at the girl, enjoying her squealing resistance. "Why

wouldn't you return my text messages?"

"Nothing's going on, baby. I just needed some space."

"Needed some space?!" My voice hits ceiling high. "I've been worried sick about you and James, since you just pissed off for a whole week, and I find you here, stoned, with her, taking some space?" I drag the girl forward a step, causing her to yelp again. "Who the hell is she?!"

Charlie finally turns on his feet, smoothing a hand down his chest in an act of reservation. "She isn't what you think."

"No?" My eyebrows shoot up. "What am I thinking?" *You're fucking her. You left me for her!* My stomach coils with dread at the mere thought of it.

"She's just a visual." He gestures a dismissive hand, then spits in Spanish that she must leave, right now.

"She's a, what?" I ask, snatching her back a step. "Ohhh no, I want you here, *suka*. I want to know what your deal is. Sit down." I shove her onto the couch, and her long red hair slips off her head, spilling down her scrawny frame onto the floor at her feet.

Things rarely shock me, but the wig makes my jaw drop.

She curls up in the corner with sluggish movements, and a docile moan escapes her lips. She's stoned, too. I fucking know it. A stomach-churning image of her and Charlie sitting here getting high together ignites my jealousy. It's like razor prickles in my belly. I could scream I'm so furious.

"Have you been fucking him?" I kick the couch when she doesn't answer, making her flinch. "Have you been fucking her, Charlie?"

He shakes his head, maintaining his cool, but I flip. I go for her, and Charlie lunges at me. He grabs my wrists, telling me to stop and listen, but I twist out of his hold and boot him in the stomach with a deafening scream, knocking him into a unit of objects. I bend over the girl, battling through her pathetic attempt until I finally grip her jaw in both hands and snap her neck. It causes one hell of a **crack**, making my body rush with the strangest feeling: liberation. Ecstasy educed liberation.

I exhale, high from murder, while she sprawls out lifelessly on the couch with her head bent to the side, eyes emptying of life.

"What have you done?!" Charlie dashes to his feet, but I step in front of him like a wild Russian wall. "She did nothing wrong!" His hands wave about in a craze, face screwed with lunacy. "Dios mío, I paid her to stand there and look like you!"

*He, what?*



Rage explodes behind my eyes. I draw back and smack him so hard his head whips to the side, the sound ringing through the space between us. “You go near any woman, and I will fucking kill them!” I shout so hard it burns my throat. “I should snap your fucking neck for what you’ve put me through this last week!”

He kneads his anew, bristly jaw, staring to the side until his eyes find mine, pulsing with indignation.

“Is this how you want us to be, huh?” I flash a glance at the dead girl, abhorring how broken my voice sounds. “Me belonging totally to you while you momentarily belong to whoever your cock is buried in?” I gulp out a whisper, “*Just like it was with Maksim.*”

Charlie’s expression drops, mood coming down a mile. I feel it as strongly as I see it, realization hitting him like a thunderbolt. “No...” He shakes his head, disgusted by what he’s done to me. “Don’t say that, Blaire. We...we will never be like that.”

“We already are! Look!” I jab a finger in her direction, but he takes my hand, actually trembling to hold me. His touch scalds, creating a stir of emotions in my belly, and I hate it.

“I haven’t laid a finger on her,” he says softly, curling his hands around my fist. “I wouldn’t, Blaire. I fucking swear it! Regardless of what you might think, I haven’t wanted another woman since I laid eyes on you. I haven’t been with anyone else since I bought you from Maksim.”

I don’t believe him, and it hurts. *Fuck*, thinking about him with other people hurts right here in my chest. My eyes sting as my chin quivers to say, “I hate you so much right now.”

“Ohhh, baby, don’t say that.” He steps up to me but I step back, pulling out of his grasp to cuddle my middle. “Blaire, please...”

“I do hate you,” I snivel, smudging a tear from my nose. “I don’t even know if James is okay, no thanks to you. I trusted you, Charlie.” I blink up at him through watery eyes. “I swore to hold back on all questions for two weeks, for you, and look at what you’ve done.”

His mouth tightens as he swallows past what looks like a lump in his throat. “Lo siento.” *I’m sorry.*

“Sorry won’t save my brother!” I scream, tensing on every word.

“James is fine.” The backs of Charlie’s fingers brush my cheek to catch a tear, sending a wave of emotions through me. “I promise, your brother is okay. You shouldn’t be worrying about him, Blaire. We had an agreement.”

I scoff. As if that matters anymore.

I step away when he tries to touch me again, blocking him with my shoulder.

“Blaire, baby, c’mon. Let me hold you. I fucking miss you.”

“No,” I say to the floor. “You sought refuge in this place with *her* when I was there for you, Charlie. I called your phone.” My eyes flicker up to his, stomach panging at the sight of him. I miss him, too, even though he’s here. “Why didn’t you come to me? Why did you come here to *her*? Don’t you love me anymore?”

“What?! Don’t be so silly.” He walks to me, backing me in to a wall so I can’t get away from him. “I love you more than I love anyone, Blaire.” He stoops at the knees so we’re eye to eye, staring for prolonged seconds. “You know I do.”

Shaking my head, I shrink into myself. I try to refuse him, but his rough hands cradle my cheeks. They’re large and warm and...*home*. My heart squeezes against knowing better.

“Why...why did you go, Charlie?”

His eyes chase between mine in a painful, long moment of silence. “I stayed away because I don’t want you to see *that* side of me.”

*That*, side of him?

His admission sparks my curiosity like wildfire. I go over and over in my mind trying to figure out what he means, but I can’t come to a conclusion.

“What side of you?” I ask, but he doesn’t fucking answer. His eyes shut down. His hands slip away from my face, and now, he’s the one to wander back a few paces.

I brood, demanding his reason, anything at this stage. “I won’t stop, Charlie.” I follow him in his silence around the room, tugging at his arm. “I’ll go on and on and on, in your sleep if I have to, so just tell me what you’re talking about.”

“The monster!” he spins around to yell in my face, causing me to cringe in reaction. “When I slaughter people, I like it. After, I like causing more pain—specifically on women. And I...I...” He stops and starts on his words, building to the anticipation, making my heart race its way out of my chest.

“What?” I gasp to ask. “Tell me.”

“When you barged in on my moment of peace last week, I wanted to hurt you, Blaire.”

My racing heart bottoms out of me as the one thing I never thought

Charlie would do to me almost becomes my reality.

I subconsciously step away, putting distance between us in caution and defense. “Stop it. You-you’re not like that,” I insist, though I feel like I’m trying to convince myself. “You’re being stupid. You-you couldn’t hurt me.”

“In my heart, I don’t want to hurt you. I know it’d ruin what we have.” I grab my stomach as he says that, heaving with fear that we’re breakable. “I can’t be around you,” he acknowledges, adding fuel to my rising panic. “When I’m in that murky place, you have to understand, I just...I just can’t be around you. I can’t risk being around you.”

*Risk?*

I glance away, feeling ill that this is happening. When Nic agreed to bring me here tonight, I never in a million years expected this. Charlie is many things, but he’s not a monster. I tell him that he’s not. “I trust you, you know I do—you made me!” I shout with despair, pointing out on every word I say. “You, severed the link between me and Maksim. You, made me trust you. And I do trust you, Charlie.”

“Your trust isn’t the problem. I don’t trust myself!” He punches his own chest as an act of passion. “You don’t know the other side of me.”

“What side of you?” I tense all over with frustration. “Stop talking in damn riddles and just tell me what’s happening!”

“I loathed women before you,” he confesses without hesitation, staring me right in the eyes. “Thought they were nothing but toys to play with. Hurt. Take revenge on. And I did in tenfold. You heard Celine,” he gestures out to emphasize her, “she told you in detail how I liked to hurt her. She wasn’t exaggerating.”

I’m silently gaping at him, sucking in deep breaths until I whisper, “You said you’d never do that to me.”

“I know I did. I don’t want to—I didn’t want to.” He battles to explain what’s wrong with him, wiping his mouth when he takes long pauses. “I thought it was all past tense. I thought falling in love with you fixed me somehow, since I’ve never had the uncontrollable urge to make you cry. But when we got back from Dover, I personally butchered someone for the first time in months, and after, I wanted to make a woman cry.”

My cheeks turn white, hairs pricking all over my body. I try to swallow, but I can’t. I try to process what he’s saying, but I just can’t.

“I wanted to cause a woman unimaginable pain,” he continues adding to my horror. “I wanted to squeeze delicate little throats and literally hold lives

in my hands.” He knots his fingers together and performs the act midair, the veins in his hands pumping. It’s fucking petrifying to watch.

“Why?” I barely hear myself ask, and I know I shouldn’t ask, but I can’t stop myself. “Why do you like hurting women?” I pull his hands apart to make him look at me. “Tell me, please? I-I want to understand.”

We gaze for an age, both desperate beyond desolation to fix what is so clearly broken.

“You know what I did to my *máma*...” he says, and he doesn’t need to elaborate. I know he butchered her for her heart, so that’s probably why butchering people triggers his demons. I also presume he loathes women because his mother committed the one act a parent should never commit on their child: she sold his little sister to a criminal, who was likely a human trafficker.

The fact that he knows why he’s fucked up sends icy chills ripping through my body—and I suddenly realize why he’s stockpiling medication for disorders like bipolar. It’s to battle his darkness.

Pulling back again, I rub my arms, trying to warm myself from the outside in. This is...horrific.

“I’m sorry, Blaire,” he says, scorching with guilt. “I didn’t want to burden you with my demons. That’s why I left. I wanted to keep you safe.”

Well, he didn’t keep me safe. He became the devil of my mind, crafting a black place of total loneliness for seven, miserable days.

“You’ve never hurt me, Charlie, not really.” I gaze up at him, so desperate to go back to before. “We’ve fucked around loads of times, and you nearly always know when to stop. Even when I barged in on you in your darkest hour, you didn’t physically hurt me.” *Because he wouldn’t. He wouldn’t.* “I know you wouldn’t.”

He looks me dead in the eyes, to say, “Now, I *do* want to hurt you, and I *would*.”

“No.” I shake my head, retreating into myself. “You don’t mean that.”

“No?” He grabs my arm and yanks it out, so I’m no longer in the comfort of holding myself. “Want to see how far I’d like to push you before you break, hmm? Bite you. Belt you. Shove my whole fucking fist up your—”

*Belt me!*

Through clenched teeth, I warn, “Get your fucking hand off me before I snap it. No joke.”

He lets me go right then and holds up his hands like I’ve got him at gunpoint. I step away, glaring at him from under my eyebrows. I’m not scared of Charlie or traveling into his darkness, I just won’t let him hit me. Maksim did that for ten years, and it’s not something I enjoyed.

“Do you crave it daily and hide it from me?” I ask, lifting my chin so my voice comes out strong. Before things get out of hand—before he tries to push my limits—I figure I need all the facts about his demons so I’m always ready for them, so I can find a way to control them. “Are you *that* addicted to hurting women?”

“No. Not anymore. The desire spurs when I get blood on my hands.” He lifts his hands to show me, as if he can see blood on his them right now. Then his eyes droop in a mixture of sadness, happiness, and pity, as he says, “Time with you seems to be my cure. Maybe I’ll learn how to take a better dose, and this won’t happen anymore.”

The wind is knocked out of me with a powerful urge to sob for him consuming my body like another entity. I gulp when it reaches my throat. I am no one’s cure to anything. I bring out wickedness in people. Maksim and Charlie are evidence to the fact. Even James fucked himself over because he claimed to love me.

“I’ve been trying to train myself to be around you while I’m in that dark frame of mind”—Charlie gestures at the dead girl, and now she makes sense—“I was gonna try the other night, too, before I kicked you outa my office.”

“What?”

He nods a couple of times, saying he’d planned on coming to bed and telling me that he needed me. “I needed to feel close to the only thing in this world that softens me. I needed to feel close to you, Blaire. Since this *thing* happened between us, since you saved me from myself, I’ve realized that’s the only way to stop my monster...I have to focus on something good.”

“Then why didn’t you come to me?” I squeak, barely holding back the tears. My throat is on fire with the biggest lump.

“You wouldn’t have let me in,” he huffs, shrugging at a loss. “You never let me in.”

A tiny sob escapes my lips. This is so unfair. How can he say that when he didn’t even give me a chance to let him in?

“I ended up brooding in my office,” he whispers, glowering with bewilderment. “*Should I go to her? Shouldn’t I go to her?* But you came in before I could decide, and the first question on your tongue was James. I knew then my despair wouldn’t matter.”

“That’s absolute bullshit!” I scream at him. “I was trying to break the ice. You felt...different. Dark and different. Charlie, I didn’t know what else to say! You know I don’t know how to communicate properly!”

“Doesn’t matter.” He shrugs. “It was already too late. Above my want to hurt you to satisfy my monster, I got jealous.”

*Jealous?* My mouth drops open, flabbergasted by his admission. How can he get jealous of James? He’s my brother.

“I deal with that jealousy every fucking day, you caring about James more than you care about me, but right then, I couldn’t handle it. It was swallowing me whole.” His hands clasp at his stomach, highlighting exactly where he felt the jealousy was swallowing him. “I was terrified of myself. I was almost certain that if you had stayed one more second past what I could handle, I would have hurt you, badly. That’s why I threw you outa my office.”

He threw me out because he was *almost* certain he’d hurt me? He’s insane. He didn’t actually know. He didn’t give himself a fucking chance to know.

“This is unjust,” I croak the words. “You should have spoken to me. If you had just told me—if you had just tried to tell me—I would have listened. If you needed a distraction, I would have given you one. I was there...”

A moment shifts between us as he bends at the knees and leans so close I can feel his brandy spiced breath on my face. “And what if I had snapped and raped you or beat you, hmm—like I used to rape and beat Celine and many other women who let me act out my desires? Would you have forgiven me, Blaire?” I feel meek as his full lips press to my cheek, sending my heart crazy with nerves. “Would you have told me it was okay, and promised to be there for me always?”

I try to muster up my voice to tell him, *yes! I would have!* But my mouth is bone dry. He’s frightening the living daylight out of me like Maksim used to.

“You can’t even open up to me about the deepest, most darkest parts of you,” he whispers in my ear, “so how can you possibly expect me to believe that you’d forgive me of anything I’d do in my

blackest hour, hmm?”

Another huge, pulsing lump expands in my throat, and I want to cry. For him. For us. I can't even look at him. I sink into my shoulders, staring at the dead girl's feet.

“This thing we have is one way,” Charlie whispers, deeper now. “I give you my everything, and you give me whatever Maksim would allow you to give. I mean, fuck, Blaire, I had to forcefully make love to you for the first time to get past Maksim's conditioning.”

His name on Charlie's lips chokes me twice, and the fact that he's right cuts deep. I don't know what to tell him. I don't know how to salvage this.

“I love you far too much to ever risk breaking you,” he says, “so if I need headspace to ensure that effect, you will give it to me.”

Tears finally slip down my cheeks, and I nod, knowing he's just fighting to keep *us* safe. I need to fight for us, too, but how? How can I show him that he means everything to me? How can I let him in?

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## 28

Charlie and I drive back to the house in his Range Rover, and I'm brooding in the passenger seat, nervous about how we go forward from here.

He's made it perfectly clear that he wants more from me—he wants in my mind—but I'm not sure how I can give him what he needs. I don't even know where to start. Do I just come out with it and divulge my life with Maksim, every sordid detail and every sordid trick, or should I wait until he asks again? How do people even begin conversations like that anyhow?

My mind should be firmly on James and getting him back, but it's not, and I hate that it's not. Charlie has gotten under my skin in the worst way, consuming my every thought.

My eyes flicker to him behind the wheel; his powerful outline shaded by the night. As he steers up to the gates of the house, they buzz open, and I look onward at *my home*. It's in its most beautiful form, every window gleaming in the night. From this angle, it looks perfect—as I'm sure we do on the outside. But the outer surface of everything is just a facade. It's what lies beneath that reveals depth, danger, and darkness, something I know all too well. People only need to remove my clothes to see my scars.

I look away when Charlie catches me staring, picking at a frayed piece of material on my hoodie sleeve. I am a little uncomfortable in his presence right now. He hasn't said a word to me since demanding I give him headspace when he needs it. He sent numerous messages on his phone to shut down the debauched party at his safe house, as he didn't want me to see any more than I already had. Upon confirmation that the party was dead, we exited the safe house through a herd of Los Zetas—who were all desperate to shake their leader's hand. On our way, Charlie snapped at Nic to *get rid* of that girl I killed. No salutation. No physical gesture. He was as blunt as a blade, livid that Nic brought me here tonight, I presume. The eldest Decena didn't utter a word back, just nodded. I sort of feel bad for him. He only did what I asked—or demanded. Wasn't like he had another choice; I was going to go find Charlie with or without his help.

“What are you thinking about, Blaire?” Charlie’s deep voice impales our silence in the car, and he gazes left at me with lazy, hooded eyes. Stoned eyes.

I shrug, but he presses me for an answer, so I ask if he’s angry at Nic.

“I don’t know,” he says honestly, pulling up outside the house. “He knew never to take you to the safe house unless we were under attack. That place is full of perverted monsters—they’re not even allowed near the house because you’re here.”

“I made him take me,” I say with a shrug. “I wanted to see you, Charlie, and I wasn’t accepting no for an answer.”

He sighs, looking between my eyes and my mouth. “That’s why I don’t know if I’m angry at him. Andres texted to inform me you went crazy trying to leave, so I can only imagine Nic’s predicament.”

A hint of regret washes over me as I know Luna must’ve stood witness to my outburst, and I can only imagine what she’s going to say—because she will likely say something. That woman couldn’t keep her mouth shut if her life depended on it.

“Do you think I should be angry at Nic?” Charlie’s question surprises me. I shake my head because I don’t think he should. Then he wonders, “Since when did you care about other people, hmm? Why do you care if I’m mad at my brother?”

“I already told you; I forced Nic’s hand. It wasn’t his fault, Charlie. And he is part of your family,” I can’t keep the sarcasm out of my voice, “I’m aware of what they mean to you, so I’m trying with them, you know?”

Charlie sighs again, deeper this time, and climbs out of the car. He comes around to let me out, and I step up to him, eyes on his face.

“What’s happened is my fault, not Nic’s.” He takes the blame, as he should. He hooks a finger under my chin and strokes me there, gazing down on me with sympathy. “I shouldn’t have left you in the dark for a week, and I’m truly sorry for that.”

*No, he shouldn’t have.*

The anger I felt earlier tonight rushes back, and I smack his hand away. “So, what happens now, Charlie? Do I have to tell you everything about Maksim?” I look around the front yard, emphasizing on our location. “Here?”

He pulls me under his arm to shut the car door and ushers me inside the house. On our way, he tells the Los Zetas guards to get out and man things from the outside.



“I’m gonna go take a shower,” he says to me, confusing the hell out of me. “Luna has made sandwiches, so why don’t you eat something? I know you barely touched your dinner.”

The fact that he knows makes my blood boil. Does he know I’ve been sick all week, too, unable to sleep properly?

Before we end up in a blind, mad argument, I wander off into the kitchen, and he jogs up the staircase two by two. I find a mixture of sandwiches in the refrigerator and pick at first, eventually consuming half the plate while standing to eat at the kitchen counter. I’m starving, and so exhausted I’m surprised I haven’t expired. The food offers much needed energy, filling my stomach to the point of bursting. I clear up to leave the kitchen as I found it, and prepare for round two as I make for the staircase, going up to Charlie in his bedroom. His mood is still off kilter, and I can’t figure out why. If his demons were tormenting him, he’s had a week to check himself, so why isn’t he better yet?

Maybe he needs to take some of the medication he stockpiles. I want to suggest that he takes some, but at the same time, it feels too personal to mention.

When I walk through the bedroom door, I notice the intense state of the ambiance. The lights are on low, an orange glow piercing through the room, and the balcony doors are ajar. The heavy drapes flow against the night breeze, a cool, refreshing chill.

Charlie wanders out of the closet archway within seconds of my arrival. He’s stark naked, droplets of water trickling down his large, muscular body, coming off the ends of his hair. He looks powerfully terrifying, staring for long seconds.

“Did you eat, Blaire?”

I nod, clasping my arms around my middle. He stalks up to me without delay and takes off my clothes, my hoodie first, trainers, and then my joggers. He peels off my underwear slowly and with intention, grazing his thumb nails down my outer thighs.

Inside, I’m a ball of nerves. I have no idea what the fuck is going on with him tonight.

Hot lips touch the crook of my thigh where it meets my groin, and my toes curl against the wooden floors. He licks across my sharp hipbone, and then the other, leaving warm, moist trails in his wake. I’m expecting him to go all the way and kiss me down there, but he stands to tower over me. I peer

up at him, wondering what he's doing, shrinking under his scrutinizing stare.

"Charlie?"

Without answering my nervous start, he takes one of my hands and walks me over to the seating area. He lowers onto one of the armchairs and forces me to settle between his open legs, like his pet bowing at the ready. We're so close I can smell the aromatic spice of soap on his skin; feel the rough hair on his legs rubbing the sides of my arms.

"Do you know what I want, hmm?" he asks, fisting his vein swollen cock in one hand while circling a spot on my inner wrist with his other.

My tummy turns upside down as I look at him in a mixture of apprehension and desire. I nod, and he pumps his shaft back and forth in slow motions, making the veins pulse.

"Tell me what I want, Blaire. I want to hear you say it."

"You want me to suck your cock?"

Grinning like the devil himself, he nods. "That's right."

I'm not sure I like this, him dosed up on drugs while seducing me. But I need to be here for him—he said he needed me—so how can I say no?

I fold my free hand behind my back, tugging for my other which is still cuffed in Charlie's grasp.

"Why do you do that?" he asks, the spark in his eyes intensifying. "Why do you put your hands behind your back?"

I'm so caught off guard by his question that I can't string two words together. My cheeks singe, and I'm barely able to look at him.

"Why, Blaire?" he asks again. Letting go of his cock, he sits forward and brushes my hair back over my shoulder, creating a universe of intimacy around us. "Talk to me, baby. Let me in, please, it's all I want."

The hairs on the back of my arms shoot out as he strokes around my face to pinch my chin. He makes us stare eye to eye, so I can see the raw expression on his face.

"Erm..." I tuck my free hand in my lap, boiling with shame. "Well if you want to know what Maksim taught me, I can tell you, I guess."

"Blaire..." he elongates my name to say, "I want to know everything about what he did to you. I want to know everything about what and who you are."

"Everything?" I can't hide the horror in my voice. "Like, from the beginning?"

I wait for his reply, holding his intense scrutiny, but it doesn't come. He's

silent in his pressing, urging me on without words.

I glance away, willing myself with inner strength to open up to him. *Speak to him. Let go.* This is the price of us.

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I squeeze to blink, unsure of where to start. I have no real beginning, and what I can remember is fuzzy.

“From what I can gather, as it’s when he stole me,” I say the first thing that pops into my head, “I was eight years old when Maksim’s conditioning began.”

Charlie sucks in a breath, and I shatter into a panic saying I’m not sure. “I don’t remember!” I tug and tug to get out of his hold. “It’s fuzzy. I-I just don’t remember much before—”

“Hey, hey, calm down! S’all right.” He curls both hands around mine, ensuring a sense of safety. “Just breathe, Blaire. Tell me whatever you can. Whatever you want. There’s no rush. Just take your time.”

I try to swallow but I can’t get past the ache in my throat. I can’t fucking believe I’m doing this. I barely recall my life myself, and having to tell another is disturbing.

In my state of nerves, most of it comes out robotic, and I don’t even hear myself speaking.

“Maksim locked me in a cold, dingy cell for years, to study and become an incredible hacker.

“Maksim dosed me up on drugs and deprived me of sleep for so long I lost track of time.

“Maksim ensured I was in an exhausted state when he started playing his voice on repeat to condition me with promises and commands, until I lived and spoke those words as second nature.

“Maksim had a *man in a mask* whip me until I was rotten with welts and blood, until I would call for him to save me.

“Maksim started beating me himself when he realized I wasn’t frightened of him, since I saw him as my savior for saving me from *the man in the mask*.

“Maksim strapped me to a chair and made me watch movies of blood, murder, and rape.

“After the movie process, Maksim started torturing me, preparing me for what others would do to me if they ever got their hands on—”

“What promises?” Charlie cuts in, and it sends my heart racing like crazy. “Just slow down, baby, and tell me what promises.”

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, shrinking away bit by bit. “I’m nervous.”

“I know you are.” He gives my hand a reassuring squeeze, reminding me that he’s here. “You don’t need to be nervous. Tis’ just you and me here. Nothing to be scared of, okay?” I nod to answer him, and he whispers, “Buena niña.” *Good girl.* “Now, tell me, what promises?”

“There were lots of promises.” I touch my chest with my free hand to ease my anxiety, staring at the rough hair on Charlie’s stomach. “*I was his. We were each other’s.* He mostly made me swear that if anyone other than him ever touched me, I’d kill them. He said I’d have the ability to kill them one day.” I bite my lips closed, suddenly remembering the time Maksim strangled me while electrocuting my sex with a cattle prod. It was because I let *the man in the mask* touch and taste my bloody skin. I see the memory now, clear as day. It was then I knew how far Maksim would go to punish me should I ever disobey him. It was then I swore an oath to myself that no one would ever lay a hand on me without Maksim’s permission.

How did I ever forget?

“That’s why you wouldn’t let me touch you,” Charlie says, finally understanding. He shifts back in the chair, but I can feel him watching me, his eyes practically glued to my face. “Go back to the movies he made you watch. What was the purpose?”

“That was the most important phase,” I say, peeking up at him. “I’d already been conditioned by his voice and by his violence,” I carry on, “so he wanted to rid me of fear. It was one of my jobs to protect him, but how could I do that if I was always scared?”

“So, he always knew he wanted you as a hacker *and* a soldier?”

I shrug. “He was Russian. Who knew what went on inside his depraved mind?”

“Tell me what happened there in detail, Blaire. I want to know.”

“About the movies?” I ask, looking up at him again. He nods, so I rake through my fuzzy memories to explain, “Maksim would strap me to a chair daily, tape open my eyes, wire me up to machines and medical IV leads, and he would make me watch uncountable movies of a redhead woman murdering anyone who’d dare harm her master. I had to watch Maksim do things to people, too, to learn I was never allowed to stop him. This was his trick; he conditioned me to accept all of his darkness, so he never had to hide

who he was from me, so he never had to fear I'd snap and turn on him."

Charlie's breaths come heavier and faster with my every confession. It's the tension in his body, hemorrhaging into our stratosphere. I try to ignore it. I carry on as best as I can, determined to make sense.

"The redhead woman in the movies was brave," I say, "wielding a sword and governing the most powerful guns. Her master was Maksim, and in reality, she was me. He told me so, and that my job was to protect him always, no matter what—just like she protected him in the movies." I feel myself smile with a shady sense of proudness, but I push it away, reminding myself that I am not *her* anymore. "In the movies, when she killed for her master, he rewarded her with kind touches—a kiss on the cheek, a pat on the head—and I saw how empowered she felt by his affections. I wanted that so much. I'd never known kindness." My voice disappears with sudden tears trickling down my cheeks. I don't even know where they come from. My nose is tickling, and my throat is swelling beyond capacity.

"Go on," Charlie rasps, reaching out to touch a spot near my eye, to catch a tear. "Tell me, Blaire, how did the movies make you feel?"

*How did they make me feel...*

"In the beginning, I remember feeling scared," I choke to say, gulping back my tears. "It was a strange sense of fear. It paralyzed me; made me cry so hard I could hear my own voice howling down the bricked lobby outside." I remember it now, the vibrating echo of my cries. It's so strange. For years, I couldn't conjure an image of before. Now, I can actually feel it. "My pulse on the beeping monitor next to my head was wild," I say. "When it shot too high, I'd vomit over my naked body, rotting in my own filth because Maksim wouldn't clean me up. When I relaxed, I was fine. I was never sick." I frown. "Maybe it was the IV fluids. Maybe the pulse monitor was reading for my fear, feeding me something that made me sick whenever my pulsed soared.

"Anyhow," I shake my head, since the *whys* don't matter anymore. "The movies got darker with rape and bloody slaughtering's most couldn't even envision in their wildest nightmares. There was so much blood and death and...it was horrific. But then, one day, it wasn't. It just didn't bother me anymore. My pulse didn't change. I didn't feel sick. I wasn't scared anymore. I was...numb. I heard Maksim say, *she's no longer responsive to fear*. He uncuffed me from the chair and peeled the tape off my eyes. He stared at me in that moment, right in the eyes. *Perfect*. That's what he said. *Perfect*. I was the perfect shell for a soldier. That's when he introduced me to my trainer,

Demetrius. That's when he put me through tests of brutal, agonizing torture to ensure I wouldn't crack under the pressure if anyone else ever got their hands on me. And that's when I met James. I think I was around eleven or twelve."

"You didn't know James before this?"

I shake my head. I tell him about the day I met James, how thin and malnourished he was, and how curiosity gleamed in his eyes when he saw me. "I always felt like he knew me somehow, though I was certain he couldn't have since I didn't even know myself.

"We trained with Demetrius," I say, "and I sometimes fought James, but he wasn't a fast learner like I was. He always got beat up, and then Maksim would beat him, too, for being so weak. It turned James the wrong way though. While Maksim's brutality worked on me, it didn't work on my brother. He wanted to escape, but he wouldn't leave without me. That's when my loyalty to Maksim was truly tested. I attacked James for merely mentioning trying to escape, and Maksim tagged him. Shortly thereafter, Maksim freed me from my cell and let me live in his house with him. It was the first sense of liberty I'd ever felt—before he let me move out and have my own apartment—and I knew then that my loyalty to him was my salvation."

"Had Maksim ever touched you at this point?" The second Charlie asks, I clam up. I try to turn away, but he grips my shoulders in his large hands, insisting I stay put. "You can tell me, Blaire. C'mon, don't stop now." He tugs me a little closer, pressing on my shoulders to arch my head back. I look at the determination on his face, his insistence. "C'mon, baby, speak to me."

I shake my head, trembling in his hold. "He started touching me and forcing me to do things to him before then. It was when James first came along. But it didn't happen often because when James discovered what was happening, he would always step in."

"Sorry?" Charlie asks, absolutely stunned. "What do you mean, James would step in?"

"James manipulated Maksim's lust to spare me, Charlie. Sometimes, when Maksim was too focused on me and wouldn't leave me alone—day after day coming in my cell to toy with me for hours—James would deliberately make Maksim mad. He knew he'd receive our master's full attention, and he knew that meant I would be spared." I blink away from Charlie, ashamed for my brother's honor. "That's when Maksim would rape

James right in front of me in my cell, to punish us both, and I had to sit and watch because I wasn't allowed to stop Maksim from doing anything, no matter how horrid or disgusting."

"Holy fuck..." Charlie breathes, ill with shock.

"You must understand," I say, "we had rules." My eyes flicker up to his, to make him see. "Punishments for being bad and tenderness for being good. It's how Maksim worked, and it worked for us. We fell in line—or, I fell in line. James operated on a different level than me. I still don't understand some of the stuff he did. I don't understand why he ever wanted to leave because I didn't want to leave. I didn't know anything else."

Charlie is as white as a ghost as he whispers, "That's why you love him. He saved you. He protected you."

I nod, relieved that he gets it. I don't hold affection for James because his blood courses through my veins. I hold affection for that man for all he did to spare me.

Charlie gulps loud enough for me to hear, and I do, too, terrified for my brother and where he might be right now.

"I have to save him," I choke on my words, "I don't care what he's done. I don't care that he tried to kidnap me...I owe James my life."

"I understand." Charlie let's go of my shoulders and sits back, rubbing his mouth in a state of revelation. "I understand now."

"Understanding isn't enough!" I squeeze my hands into fists. "I-I need to know where he is. I need to get him back, Charlie! Giving you my vow of silence in James' hour of need is one of the hardest things I've ever done. But I knew you were testing my trust in you as Maksim used to test my loyalty to him, so how could I say no?"

"Blaire," he looks me dead in the eyes to promise, "you have my word that I'll make damn sure that boy has a life again, a good life. Anything he wants or could ever need will be his."

I shut my eyes to let out a long, relieved breath. I believe Charlie will take care of James, regardless of his own hatred or jealousy. He knows why James means so much to me now, and if he truly loves me, how could he overlook my brother's acts of selflessness?

"What happened next?" Charlie asks in a gentle whisper, squeezing the rest of the story out of me.

I don't hold back this time, nor do I let myself shut down to a robotic state. The rest of what I can remember of my life with Maksim pours out of

me: the painful training with Demetrius, all the broken bones; the hidings I received whenever I failed on jobs; the sexual abuse in raw detail, when and where and how; the first day out of my cell; meeting Tatiana; buying my apartment in London; how Maksim would travel to my apartment to beat me if I was bad, so I knew I could never escape him; the last moment of savagery when Maksim nearly killed me for falling for Charlie. “But, even while I was on death’s door,” I say, slowing down here to remember how I felt, “nothing hurt. Only you hurt.”

Charlie’s eyes don’t leave mine for a second, wide and beautifully broken in the shade of the bedroom. He doesn’t speak, either, just sits there giving me his full, devoted attention, exactly what I need.

“You changed everything,” I say, gripping his thigh. “I’d never felt the things you made me feel, and I wanted more, just like Maksim knew I would. After you were done with me, when you sent me home—”

“Hey,” he stops me from speaking, “I was never done with you.” I search his eyes as he says that, thawing under his powerful adoration for me. “I was in love with you, and I was giving you a rightful choice.”

“I know,” I say softly, “but whatever happened, I wasn’t the same person anymore, and Maksim punished me for it. He wanted my bracelet.” I glance at it on my wrist, savoring the sensation of how much I love it. “I said he couldn’t have it because you told me it was mine, so he dragged me up to his bedroom and fucked my ass so badly I puked, and then I bled for a week. But even then, nothing hurt more than missing you.”

Charlie’s eyes glaze over, red and watery, and he gulps past a knot in his own throat. “I should never have sent you home.” His voice crackles, guilt scorching on his surface. “I will *NEVER*, ever, forgive myself for that.”

“It doesn’t matter now,” I say, smiling at him through my sadness. “I’m here and we’re together. That’s all I wanted. That’s why...why I killed that girl tonight, Charlie, because I don’t want you to be with anyone else. I want you to myself.”

“You’ve got me to yourself, Blaire,” he swears, and I’ve never seen such a powerful look of love and loyalty in his eyes before now. “I’m all yours. I’ll always be yours.”

In that second, I leap to bind my arms around his neck, burying my face in the crook of his throat. “That’s all I want,” I say, relishing in the feeling of skin on skin. “I don’t care about anything else. I just want to know James is okay, and I just want you.”



He wraps around me like a flag of protection, squeezing me tight to his body. It's only when I come down from my rush of need that I settle back on the floor between his legs, breathing carefully to calm myself.

"Are you all right to keep going?" he asks softly, wanting more information. "I know you're upset. We can stop if you want? I'm just worried you won't open up to me again, Blaire."

I wipe my nose with my inner wrist, telling him we can keep going. He is right. The next time he tries to tap into my mind, I might not be so open.

"Why didn't he ever have you, baby?" I nearly fold up on that question, the most private yet. I cower into my shoulders, screwing my eyes shut. Charlie bends forward to put a hand on my face, and says, "Stay with me, baby. Let me in." His thumb strokes my upper lip, sending tendrils of strange lust through my body. "Let me in," he whispers again.

"He told me that he couldn't risk unleashing my emotions," I say with painful regret. "That's why he wouldn't have sex with me...he couldn't risk showing me what true love felt like. He said it'd change me. He said I'd want more. And he couldn't give me more because he craved darker things."

"That's ridiculous. Solidifying an emotional connection with someone isn't just about sex," Charlie says, as if to make me understand. "That cabrón didn't know what he was talking about. A single touch can change everything"—he strokes a finger down my cheek, igniting my body—"a single look can change everything, and it did."

Charlie and I smile at each other, recollecting those moments between us: the first look, the first touch, the first kiss...

Though I didn't know it back then, the moment he kissed me, we were already each other's.

I tell him about when Maksim used to make me do things to him, like suck his cock or milk him with my hands. "He used to say he only ever wanted those moments with me, that they were precious—not like when he fucked the *sukas*. But still, I hated doing *it*, Charlie. I hated being with him like that. I felt...*dirty*. Yes, I felt dirty. But, Charlie," I turn up my face to look at him, eyes thinning with inquisitiveness, "back then, I didn't know what feeling dirty meant. But, I do now."

"I understand, baby," he says, holding my gaze without ever looking away. "Didn't he ever let you touch him while you were being intimate with each other? Did he always make you put your hands behind your back?"

"He let me touch him sometimes." I shrug. "I was mostly trained to put

my hands behind my back though.”

“I see,” he says, frowning to himself. “Did he kiss you, like I do?”

I nod, tipping my head as I confess, “But it didn’t feel nice like when you kiss me. Not ever.”

The triumph that flashes across Charlie’s face...it’s his most formidable reaction yet.

“Did he ever make you cum, Blaire?”

My eyes widen. I shake my head, telling him *that* was never Maksim’s goal.

“That motherfucker...having a nice girl like you and not showing you an ounce of pleasure amid all the pain...” Charlie emits a sound like a growl, deep from the pit of his throat. “He didn’t know how lucky he was, owning you. From the second I laid eyes on you, I was reeling. In the space of one meeting, I’d changed my mind so many times even I was confused. I wanted to spare you, have you for myself...”

“Charlie, can I ask you something?” I interrupt, springing with questions of my own.

“Anything,” he whispers, sitting forward with elbows on his knees to gaze right at me.

“Who did you kill?” I search his pooling blue eyes. “Who did you butcher last week when you snapped?”

“Robert’s brother...” he sounds tormented, glancing away for a second, “the one we kidnapped in Paris. He wasn’t in the game. He had a wife and a child on the way. He begged me to spare him but I couldn’t, not after what those Arabs and Robert did to you. Everyone has to pay.” Looking back at me, Charlie curves a hand around my cheek, a powerful demonstration of adoration. “I love you, Blaire, so fucking much, and I’d never want to hurt you like how Maksim hurt you. Do you understand? That’s why I left for headspace this week. I don’t ever want to hurt you.”

*I love you, too.* It burns my lips, but I just can’t say it. Flooding with panic, I scramble to reach between his legs, so I can show him the supremacy of my emotions. I *need* to show him.

“Whoa!” He catches my hands and crosses them over each other, to restrain me. “Slow down.”

“Charlie,” I husk his name while arching my neck back, allowing him to see the desperation on my face. “I want you. I-I don’t want to talk about Maksim or James anymore. I just want you.”

“You don’t have to suck my dick, Blaire. Not after what you just told me.”

“No!” I try to yank my hands from his, so I can touch him. “I want you!” I say through clenched teeth. “All of you! What happened with Maksim doesn’t matter. I don’t want him coming between us, Charlie. He cannot define how we indulge in each other.”

Unexpected silence submerges us while Charlie’s eyes flicker back and forth between mine, searching my soul for truth. Blood screams in my ears, and my heart is charging like a racehorse. *Please. Please.* I mentally beg in tune, knowing the abuse I’ve suffered could change things between us forever. It’s one of the reasons why I’ve never spoken of it; I know the effects this could have on Charlie and me.

“Please?” I beg aloud this time, using his cuffed hold on my hands to tug him a little closer. I stuff my face in his lap, forming a physical connection. “Please?”

“All right,” he rasps, and relief washes over me. I sag against the chair between his legs, shutting my eyes.

“I’ll show you what *I* like, Blaire,” he whispers, kissing the top of my head. “You’ll like it too—I’ll make sure of it. But first, you have to promise me something.”

“Okay.” I nod in submission. “Anything.”

“You’ll forget ever satisfying that Russian *maricón*, do you understand?”

I nod again, more than willing. I’m ready to try and forget Maksim ever existed if that’s what it takes.

Letting go of my wrists, Charlie pinches my chin and tips my head back, consuming me with his blue gaze and that unholy expression on his face. “You will never again feel shame for the things you’ve done or for the things he made you do because I’m not ashamed of you.”

A heavy frown falls across my eyes, in question and confusion. “You’re not?”

“No. I’m not.” He bends forward and presses his lips to mine, taking my breath away. “I’ve never been prouder to have someone at my side. You are a strong, beautiful, powerful woman, and there is no room for shame in your heart.”

## 29

Charlie rests back in the chair with his hands draped over the arms, observing me under his watchful eye.

From my knees, I watch him back, waiting for his guidance, building with anticipation. I wonder if he'll want me to milk him while I suck him dry, and if he'll want it deep throat. Does he like his balls played with? Licked?

I'll happily lick them. I'll do anything he wants.

His guidance doesn't come for a while. We just sit here soaking up each other in a comfortable, bonding state of silence. It's so raw and open between us that I flinch when his voice cuts through us, summoning his first order. "You will put your hands on me at all times, Blaire," he says, face casting over with lust, "and you will maintain eye contact, *comprender?*"

"Okay, Charlie." I couldn't sound anymore devoted to him if I tried, ablaze with yearning. I grip his inner thighs, making his muscles tic.

"Buena niña," he rasps, *good girl*, a soft smile reaching the fiery glow in his eyes. "I don't like it when you put your hands behind your back, and I don't like it when you shut your eyes. I can't sense that you're here with me, baby."

"I understand, Charlie." I tuck my feet under my butt, prepared for this, prepared to learn, then I can cater to whatever he wants.

He fists the base of his long, fat cock, standing it up on end. With his other hand, he grabs one of mine and pulls me closer. He leans forward to kiss the inside of my palm, and I feel the gesture tingling all the way down to my toes.

"Where do you want my other hand?" I give his muscled thigh a squeeze, causing his cock to twitch. "Here?"

"How about...on your *bonita* little pussy," he says, sending my pulse through the roof. "Touch yourself. Slowly. Don't cum though, Blaire," he warns, "I want you high on lust, not falling over the edge."

I slip between my legs where I'm already sopping wet, smearing my fingers in my tender folds. It makes my toes fist. It aches as I watch him

massage his swollen cock, causing the head to glisten with pre-cum.

“Now, I want you to touch me here.” Charlie uses my fingertips in his hold to trail the line above his pubic bone, through the thick hair there. His muscular stomach quivers, and I realize he likes that. His pupils expand, turning the paleness of his eyes black.

“Where do you want my mouth?” I ask, passively licking my lips.

“Shhh,” he hushes me, blinking heavily. “Just touch your clit for now.”

I do. I soak my fingers in my dampness, and then I massage my inflamed bud, shuddering as I do.

“Does it feel as good as when I touch you, baby?”

I shake my head, trying not to moan but I can't. It comes out low and violent, right from the depth of me—and I feel all tingly and prickly when my shoulder brushes Charlie's inner thigh, causing goose bumps to break out all over his legs.

Letting go of my hand on his stomach, he grips the back of my head and tows me forward. While he holds the base of his cock still, mashing it against my neck, he makes me kiss his quivering stomach, across the thick hair there. *Hmmm*, he smells all musky and manly, and his skin is on fire, burning my lips.

“Slowly,” he says. “Like you want to do it.”

“I do want to do this, Charlie.” I pepper kisses all over him, then I use my tongue, leaving warm, wet trails. His shaft swells further in his fist, jutting against my neck with eagerness. I have to swallow to restrain my hunger to taste him.

“You really are a fucking treat, you know that?” His fist twists in my hair as he pushes me down, rubbing my cheek on his engorged length as he holds it up for me. “Tongue,” he orders, and I stick it out the side of my mouth. It isn't even half the width of his shaft, a tiny, pink piece of flesh teasing him with endless endeavor. I lick every inch of his musky cock while still rubbing it with my cheek.

My eyes flash when I remember he did this to me once, licked my underwear—and then he blew on them. It was nice.

I breathe out, and he groans, and my soul explodes with pride.

I learned from the master.

I do it again, and his body tremors.

“Trying to tease me, hmm?” he asks, knowing what I'm playing at.

I smirk in secret, still licking him as he steers me about with his hand in

my hair.

“Are you playing with yourself?” His voice comes out deeper than usual, and he groans again when I say that I am. I’m gently strumming my clit, tiny girl moans escaping my mouth.

“You like that, don’t you, Blaire?”

“Yes,” I breathe the word, a wave of heat washing over my body. “But, I wish you were touching me.”

“I will. Soon,” he promises, stroking near my eyebrow with his thumb.

Forcefully turning my head, Charlie smears my lips up the other side of his erection, from the depth to the tip. He rubs my other cheek on him, too, telling me to lick him. I do everything he asks while picking up the pace to stimulate myself. My pussy tingles, shivers racing through me. I want to cum so badly, but I won’t because he said I’m not allowed.

He orders me to swirl my tongue around the head of his cock now, and I greedily lap up his delicious, salty flavor. I grab his hand clasping the base of his cock, digging into his fingers with my nails, until he lets go and gives me full control.

“Does that taste good, Blaire?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want me to cum in your mouth?”

“Ah-huh.”

“Down your throat?”

“Yes!” I gasp, all but whimpering because I’m so turned on. Who knew sucking cock and masturbating at once was this hot?

As he demands, I wrap my lips around the head and suck hard enough to make him jerk in his skin. A whole bead of pre-cum seeps into my mouth, spreading out on my tongue.

“Hmmm.” I swallow ravenously, turning him on with my humming, making him moan in a feverish state.

When I suck the tip again, creating a suction that hurts my eyes, he grabs at the chair arm, turning his knuckles white. I glance up at his hooded eyes, desperate to see his expression. It’s raw. His lips are parted, accommodating faster breaths, while the expanse of his buff chest rises and falls.

“That’s it, baby,” he croons with hooded eyes, sounding lost in desire. “I love it when you look at me. So fucking beautiful.” He asks for my wet hand, and I give it to him, crafting a string of arousal in the space between us. His lips smudge on all my juices; his tongue tasting them. His eyes grow heavier

and darker, getting high on my nectar, and the pulse near his temple throbs like crazy.

I want more of his high. All of it. I want to wring this man dry.

Without an order, I squeeze the base of his cock, mold my lips around the tip, and draw down, sliding along every ridged vein. My cheeks stretch to the point of burning. My eyes water, and I'm half gagging, but I push a little harder. He shoves past my throat boundary, choking me, and shudders in reaction. When my lips meet his thick, pubic hair and his balls are crushed under my chin, he groans so hard it beats through his body.

“Ohhh, just like that, Blaire.” His teeth clench on my fingers, holding on by a thread, and I use my thumb to stroke his lips, a display of affection and acceptance. “You’re doing everything right, baby. Suck it just like that.”

Pride swells in my chest, and I draw back, gargling against the thick saliva clotted in my air passage. I take him deep throat again, moaning as I do. It's easier to satisfy him like this while holding his cock in position, easy to settle into an erotic rhythm of backing and forthing on him. I want to knock him over the edge of bliss, so I pick up the pace, getting faster and deeper, mouth-fucking him with pleasure. His legs tense, body rigid with tension, crushing me in his thighs, but I don't stop. From under my eyebrows, I watch him slowly come apart, relishing in the now familiar look on his face as his jaw ticks and his nostrils flare. It's pure, inhuman desire. It suits him. It's worth all the gagging. It's worth the training to become a maven at sucking his cock.

Maksim used to say that girls who suck good are keepers.

The mood in the room charges as Charlie tinkers about to tumble over the border of insanity. I yelp when his hand smacks into the back of my head, fingers tangling in my hair to hold me down while brackish liquid spurts down my throat.

“Oh, fuck, Dios mío!” he growls, squeezing me tighter in his powerful thighs, tensing and shaking with an orgasm so severe it suffocates me. I cough and splutter, choking to keep him down, but he's gushing to the point of overflowing. Thick, stringy saliva and his cum coats my chin, dripping off and onto my lap every time I retch.

I yelp again in panic and pain when he drags me to my feet by my hair, hands thrashing out to stop whatever he might do. Liquids trickle out of my mouth and down my front, all over my breasts and stomach, but Charlie seems to like it. Gathering me on his lap with my knees open on either side of

his waist, he grips my middle in his large hands and tugs me forward, going crazy kissing and sucking my breasts, slavering over his cum.

“Charlie, what—”

“Hush, chica, don’t be scared,” he pants over me, lost in his mind. “Just don’t be scared.”

I’m not scared now. I’m...spellbound. He’s so dirty, but I can’t look away. I watch as he sucks my nipples one by one, poking them out like bullets, teasing them in his teeth. I hiss when he nips too hard, and his eyes glance up at mine, buzzing on lust. It sets me off. My pupils explode with white light. I thrust my fingers in his thick, silky hair and pull, arching his head back, giving myself full access to his mouth. Our teeth clash, with his cum, mine, and our saliva all blending together as one flavor.

We moan and groan in harmony, all hands, kisses, and bodies rubbing against each other.

“Fuck me, please,” I beg on his mouth, clinging to him desperate with desire. “It’s been a week too long, Charlie. I miss you. I want you, now.”

Without delay, he fondles to reach between my legs, and I gain a little height on my knees to give him the room he needs. He splays my folds, brushing his thumb across my clit as he does. I shiver all over, an outer bodily reaction, and he buries two fingers in my inundated sex. I whimper, my lower belly forming with pressure as he curls those fingers on my magic button. He twists and turns his hand to open me up, and I cry out loud.

“Yeah, you like that, don’t you, baby?”

I nod, all but sobbing as he power-kneads my G-spot. My body scorches with heat, heart roaring with adrenaline. The build climbs stratospheric until I combust with convulsions and screams, streaming with tears of ecstasy.

Charlie pulls his fingers out of me while I’m mid-high and positions his cock, so the damp, warm head is touching my still hungry lips.

“Sit on it,” he says, his eyes blazing like blue flames. “And look at me as you do. I want to see your face.”

Doing as I’m told, all shivery and tender in the aftermath, I lower onto his fat shaft. I cry through the hedonistic pain of him stretching me wide, filling me up inch by inch until he’s completely sheathed in my decadency. The burn is both delicious and sore, turning my legs to jelly, but I like it. I want more.

And Charlie gives me more than I was expecting.

Crushing me to his body in one arm, he spits on his other fingers and



reaches around my waist, under my butt, and works my tight ass ring. My head spins. The feeling of him playing with me there is wild. It radiates through my center, creating a stir of powerful sensations in my belly.

I gear up, wrapping my arms around his neck, just as he massages the tip in. It stings, forcing my muscles to work the wrong way. When he's knuckle deep, I feel too full but not full enough all at the same time.

"Charlie..." I don't even know why I husk his name. Looking up, all foggy and majestic, I lock eyes with him, and I can't hold back any longer. I rock my hips, using my knees to move so my entire body waves like the ocean, and his eyes nearly roll.

The gravity of my last orgasm lingers, enhancing the build growing inside as my clit rubs on his pubic bone. It's a feeling like no other, caressing me in places I didn't know existed before him. I moan in melody with him—fiercer when I start riding him up and down, then around and around grinding on his shaft, without ever breaking our gaze. Harder and faster. My lungs burn with breaths, inhaling the sweet, fragrant scent of sex. My breasts bounce, ass cheeks smacking his muscled thighs as he meets my thrusts pound for pound.

"Fuck, you're so fucking sexy," he hisses, tensing his face as his own orgasm approaches. Sweat gathers near his eyebrows, the veins there ticking.

His finger in my asshole hooks, pressing down on what almost feels like the back of my G-spot—and I bury my face in his hairy chest. I screech through the sudden, blissful agony of rapture, a wave of pleasure beating at my senses. It makes me ride sky high, turning the world into a blast of colors.

Only when I hear Charlie yelling a frenzy of Spanish curses do I register I'm still in the room. He's still balls deep, pulsing and swelling in my passage. He's cumming, too, surfing his own design of paradise.

We float back down together, shells of sweat and pants. His free arm holds me close so we're chest to chest—then I turn up my head again so we're mouth to mouth. We gaze intensely at each other, heavy and hooded, trapped in a moment of connection and knowing. We know how we feel about each other. We know who we are with each other now. Darkness and light at once. He bends to kiss me, the softest, most tender peck, but it's full of severe emotions only Charlie can emanate in his silence.

"*Gracias* for letting me in," he pants to whisper, blinking slowly and hypnotically as he rests his forehead on mine. "Knowing exactly who you are only makes me love and cherish you more, Blaire—if that's even possible."

I put my hands on his face and smile hazily at him, pressing my lips on

his to hide the confession burning my tongue.  
*“I love you, too, Charlie.”*

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# 30

I jolt upright in bed when a shrilling, angry scream rips through the house. It's mirrored by lightning strikes, flashes of silver illuminating the room.

"Agh," I hiss, grabbing my stomach as it cramps under the sudden movement. I gaze through puffy, wary eyes, wondering what the hell is going on, but I can't quite get my bearings at first.

Rain hammers at the balcony doors, sounding over the low, rumbling thunder. I think it's nighttime which is odd because the last I remember, Charlie and I were making love far past dawn—his apology for abandoning me the past week and equally his reward for opening up to him about my life with Maksim. He then woke me with breakfast. We made love again. I took a bath at sunrise, and then we watched a movie. *Did I fall asleep?*

Turning my head in every direction, I take note that the balcony curtains are open, but it's still dark in the bedroom. Definitely nighttime.

I heard someone scream.

My eyes bulge like saucers, and my heart goes like a jackhammer, panic setting in.

Maybe it was the lightning? Or maybe I was dreaming? I could have been dreaming.

*Charlie.*

On instinct, I reach out for him in bed, unexplainably uneasy, though I can't feel his warmth in the crumpled sheets. There's a scrap of paper on his pillow. I flick on a side lamp and lift the paper to my eyes, squinting to read the handwritten note.

I had to go to work, baby, but I'll be back when I can. Don't worry.

Everything is okay.

I miss you already, Charlie. X

*He's gone to work?*

My eyes dart to the electric clock on the bedside cabinet, blinking that it's zero two hundred hours. I've slept a whole day away, but that isn't what's making me feel...I can't put my finger on it...something feels off. Something feels wrong.

I grab my mobile from the nightstand to call Charlie, to make sure he's okay, but I notice there are notifications on my Dark Web profile. It's a string of messages from Oliver—James' old associate. He's informing me there's been a week-long terrorist attack on France, mass bombings and bloody shootouts, wiping out an entire human trafficking organization: the Albanians.

*James.* The first thing I think about is my brother, and what's possibly happened to him. If the Albanians are gone, then where the hell is he?

Oliver has sent a link to a video that's been floating around The Dark Web. Frowning, I click on the link, and a fuzzy image focuses to a visual of a Los Zetas hidden behind a black mask. I know it's a Los Zetas by the combat attire he's wearing: the red Zs printed on the chest of his bulletproof vest. He talks of successfully punishing those who have wronged his leader in a robotic voice-over, and how their syndicate has seized the Albanian affairs. Tonight, their last enemy will die a painful, slow death. That's the last thing he says before saluting a strange symbol, and the screen switches back to a fuzzy visual.

Charlie said exactly those words to me when he first saw the needle marks on my arms: *"Whoever did this will die a painful, slow death."*

*What the fuck is happening?*

"Blaire," Luna's voice whispers over the storm outside as she clicks open Charlie's bedroom door to let herself in, "Blaire, you have to help me."

*Help her?*

Sparkling with panic, I drop my mobile and lunge across the bed, digging into Charlie's side cabinet drawer for a gun. I pull one out, snap in a magazine, and aim past Luna.

"Whoa!" she squeaks, cringing in her shimmery, red robe. "Don't shoot! Please, don't shoot!"

I clasp the heavy gun in both hands, finger hovering on the trigger. My eyes scan past Luna for signs of danger as I know she would never enter Charlie's room without reason.

Her shadow streaks up the buffed floors and up the walls, emphasized by the light on my nightstand.

One shadow.

One person.

Just Luna.

“Please don’t shoot!” she cries, lifting one leg in an act of protection. “Please, please don’t shoot!”

“What’s going on?” I croak to clear my throat, lowering the heavy gun on the bed. “Are you hurt or something? Where is Char—”

“No,” she wheezes, gripping her slender neck. “I-I’m fine.”

My features coil with confusion, and then I raise my eyebrows as she settles on the bed, causing the mattress to dip near my feet. “I’m not hurt,” she wheezes again, patting her chest. “I-I’m fine.”

“Are you lost, then?” I ask, blinking at her like she’s grown a second head.

I don’t get a reply.

I study her body language, how she’s hunched over, shivering. Water is dripping off the ends of her dark hair onto the bedspread, her nose is a plush shade of pink, and the silky material of her robe clings to her pimpled body.

“You’ve been outside in the rain?” I ask. “It’s two in the morning...what’s happened, Luna?”

Does she know what the Los Zetas have been doing? Has trouble made it back to the house?

“Señor Charlie is at the guardhouse”—she cups her mouth to hold back a heave, and I’m half expecting her to say he’s dead by the way she’s acting—“he’s preparing to torture...”

Hackles stab the back of my neck while my eyes widen in the shadows, waiting on her to elaborate.

“It’s going to be bloody,” she whispers word for word, “so, so bloody.” She rambles in her own language, speaking to herself in a state of numb shock.

“Radi boga,” I gasp, *for God’s sake*, desperate to know what she knows, “spit it out, will you? Why are you so anxious?”

“I’m sorry,” she suddenly weeps in her hand, shoulders hiccupping. “I need your help. It’s Andres—”

*Andres?*

Fuck, trouble has reached the house.

My attention snaps into focus a second time, and I dash out of bed in one of Charlie’s baggy t-shirts. I struggle to pull on my joggers with the gun in

hand, knowing if Charlie isn't here, it's my job to make sure his family is safe. I follow protocol, to extract information before acting. I ask for Andres' location, if he's hurt, and how many enemies there are.

"No, no!" Luna tenses her fists over her stomach, stressing her frustration. "Andres is okay! It's just..."

I wait, and wait, and wait, and my heart is roaring. I watch her with intense observation, but she doesn't elaborate on our danger.

"Andres, *por favor*," She gasps, still muttering to herself. "I need your help, Blaire, so badly."

"For what? Iesus Khristos, lady!" I slap her face hard enough to turn her head, causing a loud *wa-tch!* to cut through the room. "Pull yourself together, dammit, and tell me what the hell is going on! Where is Andres?"

She curves a trembling hand around her reddening cheek, staring deadpan at the floor, at her naked feet. "He-he's at the guardhouse, too, with Nic and Charlie."

"Okay...so, why are you in such a state?"

"They're torturing that man who had your brother."

My heart plummets, and I'm suddenly so light someone could knock me over with a feather.

"It's going to be so bloody. Andres is going to lose his mind again!"

"Robert?" I say in a dry murmur, gaping at her. I gulp to wet my heavy tongue but nearly swallow it down. "Do you mean, Robert, the Albanian?"

Luna nods, tiny robotic movements. "Yes. I mean, Robert, the Albanian."

The second she confirms my suspicions, I spiral in awed panic. I crouch at her feet with my head arched back, eyes locked on her unusually white face, and my mind rushes with questions that I say without thinking, at what feels like a million miles per hour. "Is James there? A tall, slender guy with dark red, almost brownish hair—did you see him, Luna? Or did anyone mention a James or Blaire's brother? Is he harmed? Do you know if he's alive?" I shake Luna half to death, demanding answers. "For crying out loud, talk to me!"

She shakes her head, lifting her lashed, watery brown eyes to mine. "You don't understand, *cariño*. Your brother and that man, Robert, have been on Los Zetas lockdown for just over a week now. Charlie hid the fact from you."

---

While thunder crackles through the night, Luna explains what's been happening, how Charlie has had Robert and my brother captive for over a week.

"The morning we had coffee, when I first met you," she says, sniffing back her tears, "I overheard Andres tell one of the men it was Robert who attacked the house. He brought your brother as collateral; threatened to shoot him on the spot if Charlie didn't give back his daughters. But the Los Zetas had him outnumbered—that Albanian *cabrón* didn't stand a chance against Charlie's arsenal."

She doesn't stop talking for a single breath, divulging every fact, and I don't interrupt her. The gun weighing heavy in my hand, I stare down on her with reserved anger. I soak up every word she says, absorbing every shred of information before I act.

"Robert attacked in a stupid panic," she waffles on, shrugging with her hands, "but he knew it was now or never to bargain for his daughters. You see, Blaire, he was warned by someone that the Los Zetas had found violating footage of *you* in one of his daughter's dorms in France, and he knew Charlie was going to go wild."

I take note that Charlie lied to me. I asked if the footage was of me—because I saw the way Rico looked at me when he told us they'd found violating footage—and Charlie said no.

He must have had his reasons. Charlie wouldn't lie to me over something petty. He stressed to me that if we're going to work, we have to trust each other. And I do trust him—I think.

Luna stoops at the shoulders with her face in cupped hands, shaking and falling apart with sobs. "I don't know what the footage shows, exactly—Charlie won't discuss it with anyone—but I know it's dark, Blaire. Really, really dark. Andres and Nic were discussing what it could be in the lounge when they thought I was napping, when you went to Dover. And, you know why you went to Dover, right?"

I don't reply. I knew we were collecting a package of some sort—Charlie told me before we left the house. He also told me he was sending a bomb across the English Channel, after the explosion went off in the Dover Port area.

"You went to Dover to deliver a bomb," Luna confirms. "It was supposed to cross the English Channel to France, to kill an entire village of Albanians nested there. And Charlie had to collect the laptop containing the violating

footage, too, because it couldn't be emailed...Nic said the software was embedded or something."

I blink away from her, remembering the dimensions of the package we collected. It was laptop sized.

Everything makes sense now. All the clues were there, I just didn't notice.

"When you came back from Dover, after Dr. Shyam checked you over," Luna snivels, "Charlie must've watched the footage because he went crazy saying Robert and his entire family will pay. You weren't there—you were in bed, asleep." A cold shiver chases down her spine, and she shakily grabs her throat. "Los Zetas brought a man here to the house, to the office, and his head was stabbed in needles—he could barely walk, covered in blood and gore! Then you came down after your nap and argued with Charlie, and he went missing for a week, you remember?"

"James," I gulp his name, trying to stay on point because she's rambling. "How do you know Charlie has got James?"

"The day I met you—when Robert attacked the house—I saw him from my bedroom window," she confesses, and my eyes widen. "He looks like you, though without freckles, and he's a lot taller... Once Robert's men were dead, and once Robert was under Los Zetas arrest, James was cuffed and taken away"—she points out on the word *away*—"they were going to kill Robert that day, too, but Nic called another meeting; asked Charlie what he thought about eradicating the Albanians."

"Eradicating them?" I whisper before I realize, digesting things.

She shrugs, as if she could do nothing to stop what was happening. "Nic wants to abandon the idea of ever returning to Mexico, and he wants to take over the Albanian syndicate here in Europe. You see, Blaire, his life in Mexico is strained because of his wife, Mariana. He's not allowed to divorce her and move on with his new *toy*," she practically spits *toy*. "It's Charlie's number one rule when it comes to family: no divorce."

"The terror attacks on France," I say to stray away from her consistent rambling, and she seems to understand where my thoughts are going.

She explains that Charlie agreed to Nic's idea to eradicate the Albanians, and ever since, they've been torturing Robert for information, locations, and Albanian secrets. "They've been threatening to do horrible things to his daughters should he withhold any intelligence." Her voice sharpens, as she lists the many ways they were threatening to hurt the girls. "The Albanians



are all dead now—I mean, you’ve obviously heard the news? So now, Charlie is ready to kill Robert—that’s what he’s doing right now! Right this very moment!”

I want to be glad Robert is going to die a brutal, measured death for what he did to me, but I can barely process a thought on what’s happening let alone bask in gratification and relief.

“Why has Charlie kept James locked up?”

“He was highly addicted to heroin,” Luna says without remorse, and my heart sinks to the deepest depths of me. “Charlie locked him up to get him clean—or, so I assume.”

I gawk at her, disturbed, mentally vacant for a second. Of course James was hooked on heroin. Why didn’t I guess? The Arabs drugged me to subdue me, so why wouldn’t they subdue James in the same fashion? And Charlie requested two weeks of *no questions asked*, the same amount of time it takes to flush heroin out of one’s system.

I should have realized. He kept promising James was okay, and he always sounded so certain.

The memory of my own withdrawals flood tsunami high: the paranoia, cold sweats, sneezes, angry outbursts, puking, burning diarrhea... I can’t handle the idea that James has suffered through the same. He’s been through enough. Ten years of rape and hidings, and now this?

And it hasn’t been two weeks yet... I calculate timeframes in my mind from the coffee morning, certain it’s been eight days. That means James is possibly still withdrawing.

“He’s been spouting some crazy stuff about being in love with you,” Luna says, referring to James, “swearing he’s going to take you far, far away from Charlie. I snuck a peak at the live CCTV footage on Andres’ cell phone, of James locked up withdrawing, going insane about you. My, my, your brother really is insane! He said, *by the time I’m done, Decena, you and Blaire will be finished.*” She mimics James deep Russian voice, like this is a huge fucking joke. “*If you kill me, she will find out, and she will leave you. If you free me, I will beg her to come with me, and she will leave you. If you keep me locked up, she will find out, and guess what, Charlie Decena? She. Will. Still. Leave. You.* His iniquity knows no bounds,” she says. “He didn’t care that Charlie had a twenty-four hour medical team assisting him during the withdrawals. He didn’t care that Charlie had been trying to help him recover.”

“Who gives a fuck about what he’s been saying?” I snort at her, at her mighty high morals. “How is this even relevant, Luna?”

“You-you must understand Charlie’s dilemma”—she cuddles herself, creating a false state of safety in her own arms—“you must understand that he has no other choice...”

“What?” I say, face screwing tight with confusion. “Understand what?”

“Charlie is going to kill James,” she declares, and her eyes wander off across the room. “He won’t allow James to take you a second time, so he’s going to kill him tonight and make it look like Robert did it.”

My world narrows, hairs all over my body rising. She’s still speaking, but I don’t hear a word she says. I lower onto the bed at her side, trying to convince myself that she’s either lying or maybe she’s got it wrong. Charlie wouldn’t kill James. He wouldn’t! He knows how James tried to protect me from Maksim, and he’s been looking for him... He swore he’d get him back for me alive and well. And why the hell would he waste resources trying to get him off heroin, just to kill him?

No. I won’t believe this until I hear facts. I need to know who told her. I ask who told her, demanding information right fucking now. Her hesitation holds my full, undying attention. I stare at her from the side, watching her squirm. “How. Do. You. Know, Luna?” I hiss every word. “Who told you Charlie is going to kill James and make it look like Robert did?”

“I can’t,” she says, with her eyes flittering about all over the place, avoiding mine, “I can’t tell you how I know.”

I think she’s lying, as no matter how hard I scrutinize her, she just can’t seem to look at me.

I stare onward, a part of me wanting to climb back into bed and wait for Charlie to come back, so I can ask him myself. But how can I risk ignoring my gut instinct screaming at me to get James out of here? My ignorance could cost James his life.

“Why did you need my help?” It’s the next logical question. She’s disclosed many secrets but hasn’t accentuated why.

“Tonight, they’re murdering that man, Robert.” She twists at the waist to face me, dashing tears from her cheeks. “They’re going to do it slowly,” she says, “and Andres has been ordered to participate.” She begs me to ask Charlie to spare Andres being there, tugging on my arm to emphasize her desperation. “He’s an ex-drug addict, Blaire. He cannot stomach the guilt of murder. Not like this! It’ll set him back ten steps—he’ll use again. My

children and I can't go through that again!"

I laugh with sarcasm, hardly believing her request. "So, my brother is rotting in a Los Zetas' jail, mere moments from his death—as you claim—and you want me to go ask Charlie to spare Andres' presence while they murder a man I want to murder myself? Have I got that right?"

She glances away in what could be mistaken for mild shame. "I should have told you that your brother was here. I know that now."

"And yet, you didn't?" I scoff in disgust, snatching her hands off my arm. I stand from the bed, leveling my emotions. I can't afford emotions right now. Emotions get people killed.

James is the target. Find him, free him, and help him run.

*Target one and two...* it hits me then, like lightning. Robert and James were target one and two.

"Blaire, please," Luna whimpers, "I'm sorry I didn't tell you about your brother sooner, cariño. You must believe me! You have to help me!"

"Where is James?"

"The guardhouse cells." She sniffs. "Why?"

"Where are the guardhouse cells?" I demand to know, and she gapes at me, her dark, water-glazed eyes scorching in fear. "Where is the access, Luna?" I bark through clenched teeth, repeating myself more times than I care too.

"You're not going to ask Charlie to spare Andres' presence tonight?"

I hunch to her, glaring, and she sinks into her shoulders. "I couldn't give two fucks about Andres right now," I growl. "Where are the guardhouse cells? I suggest you tell me before I paint this house in your blood." I click back the hammer on my gun and press the barrel to her temple, making her cringe and cry with desperation. "How about I count down for you, Luna, yes? Five...four...three...two..."

"It's in the fields!" she squeals before I get to one, and the exact location pours out of her.

I nod, satisfied by her answer, and rummage through Charlie's bedside drawer for a silencer to my gun.

"Los Zetas guards are all over the cells!" she sobs, tears streaming down her face. "You won't get past them!"

I glare at her, kicking the drawer shut. "I don't need to get past them if they're dead."

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# 31

I reach the heart of the staircase in Charlie's house and pause to assess things, staring over the banister.

Darkness swallows the entrance hall except for a streak of light from the outside lanterns, piercing the glass on the front doors, shimmering against the marble floors. It's dead quiet, not a breath of sound under the rain hammering at the house. Four armed Los Zetas man the front doors, clasping rifles over their middles. One must sense my presence because he turns to me, squinting through the shadows.

"Señorita?" he croaks, asking in Spanish if I'm okay. "The Señor expected you would be in bed. Do you need anything?"

I debate on asking them to let me leave of my own free will or just killing them to avoid a conflict I don't have time for. Asking would prevent a probable rift between Charlie and I, but only if they let me go—which I'm almost certain they won't.

No. The latter is safer, less time consuming—and they deserve to die if they support my brother's death.

"How many of you are guarding the house tonight?" I ask, my Russian accent coming out cold and detached. "Four here"—I point outward—"I assume four at the back doors, too?"

"Why, you don't need to concern yourself with guards, Señorita," he says softly, a forced smile reaching the brown gleam in his eyes. "You are very safe. Señor Charlie has ensured that."

*Señor Charlie* has done more than ensure my safety. He's tried to guarantee that I can never get to my brother. I realize that now. Our current enemy is here, imprisoned, so why else would the house need to be fortified this heavily?

The loaded gun is heavy, silencer fixed on the barrel. Lifting it, I aim and shoot without thinking, not daring to leave anyone between me and my objective tonight.

***P-taff!***

***P-taff!***

***P-taff!***

***P-taff!***

My arm jolts against every shot, but I exude strength from my belly and hold the gun steady.

Their heads whip back, bullets plummeting in their skulls, and they drop to their knees slamming face down on the floor. Four more dash out of the kitchen, aiming ready to fire. I take them out next with one quiet shot for each man. They buckle and skid across the polished, marble floors, landing to their deaths.

Eight men in total.

Four bullets left.

Before executing the next stage of my plan, I pause in position, listening for other signs of life. Luna said Charlie's at the guardhouse with Andres and Nic causing bloody murder, so I don't worry about bumping in to any of them. I suspect I won't see Charlie for a few days given what happened the last time he went on a slaughtering bender.

Plenty of time to get James to freedom.

The downpour outside turns up a notch, thunder crackling, beating down on the house. I crouch behind the banister rails when a few dark figures wander past the front doors on late night guard. They have the full house perimeter to patrol before they come back, so I use every second of time to my advantage. I tie Charlie's baggy t-shirt in a knot at my back, so it doesn't restrict my movements, tuck the gun into my joggers, and pull out my mobile. I navigate to my Dark Web profile application to message the one person I know will help me get James to safety.

It's a mistake getting her involved, a big fucking mistake, but I have no one else.

Unread messages stream down the luminous mobile screen, most of them from T1. My stomach hangs at the sight of them, all blatantly angry with capital letters.

*DID YOU KILL MAKSIM?*

*WHERE IS HIS BODY?*

*CONTACT ME, NOW.*

*WE NEED TO TALK.*

*IT'S BEEN TWO MONTHS ALREADY, AND I'VE HEARD NOTHING  
FROM YOU, BLAIRE.*

*YOUR LACK OF COMMUNICATION RILES ME, MY GIRL.*

Familiar, cold shivers chase up and down my spine, nerves once wielded by my master now wielded by his. I should really call her in person to beg for forgiveness and plead for her help, but she doesn't appreciate pathetic displays of weakness. She'll also be more interested in me than James. He is her means to an end. I am her goal. And I don't have time to dally with conversation. Every second spent waiting is a second closer to James' alleged demise.

Certain of what I must do, I pull up a new message and type like my life depends on it.

*I NEED YOU TO HELP ME GET JAMES OUT OF ENGLAND.*

Tatiana-Victorovna, please, accept my apology for what I did, and for not contacting you sooner. I need your help. James is being held prisoner by the Los Zetas because he took me from Charlie, and Charlie is going to kill him. I can get James to either an airport or a shipping port. Will you collect him and keep him safe? I'm willing to pay whatever price your favor costs.

Sincerely, Blaire.

Pressing send, I rest on a step, hunched over with elbows on my knees, passively tapping my nails on the mobile screen. I strategize a plan B for if Tatiana refuses her aid in fear of enraging Charlie—it is a possibility. She handed me over to Charlie without a blip of hesitation, I suspect knowing she'd reap his Godly wrath if she didn't.

I'll need to run with James, raid Maksim's place in Dartford for funds—since Charlie gave mine back to Tatiana—and travel to the safe house in Ireland. No one knows of its existence—Maksim made damn sure when he bought the place. We'll be safe there. Once the dust has settled, I'll return to

Charlie and have it out with him over the rumor that he planned on murdering my brother. He'll be mad as hell that I've killed his men, but if he loves me as he says he does, he'll get over it. I would forgive him of virtually anything, so he should forgive me of the same.

I nod a few times, confident of tonight. In my head, my plans seem bulletproof.

But I myself know things can go wrong.

I strategize a plan C, just in case, but it's not so easy to stomach. If I can't get James to safety through Tatiana or running—if we're cornered—I need collateral. Luna is an easy target. A gun to her head will ensure James' and my getaway. I wouldn't kill her, not unless I absolutely had to because I know Charlie and I would be over.

That's one thing I wouldn't expect him to forgive me of, murdering his sister-in-law.

Sighing, I cuddle my head in cocooned arms, hating where my mind is going. But I must consider every possible scheme, and plan C is just a reserve. I don't want to execute it. I don't want to kill Luna—even if she does deserve punishment for keeping my brother's state of affairs from me.

The thread holding my stomach together splits when a new message vibrates and blinks on my mobile screen.

*Re: I NEED YOU TO HELP ME GET JAMES OUT OF ENGLAND.*

Get James to the Port of Dover. My men will be there in five hours to collect him. I trust you will not speak of my involvement to help you.

The price for this favor? I want to see you in person, soon. We have things to discuss. And I mean it when I say, soon, my girl. James will remain with us until you come home.

Regards, Tatiana-Victorovna

My head darts up from my mobile at the sound of deep murmurs cutting through the house. It's Charlie's men, communicating that we've been attacked. I snatch the gun from the back of my joggers and stand to aim, eyes widening to examine the shadows. Five Los Zetas clad in black combat suits prowl through the kitchen doors. They're handling heavy rifles, red lasers pointing in every direction.



“Find Blaire first and get her to safety,” one says in their language, “then find Luna.”

They spread out on gestures, and I come down the staircase squeezing the trigger, bursts of orange lighting up the hall.

*P-taff!*

*P-taff!*

*P-taff!*

*P-taff!*

Four of them fall like dominos. The last man stands gaping at me, eyes bulging with shock. His lips part to speak but nothing comes out as I saunter up to him, gun leveled at his head. His red laser gleams across my eyes when we come toe to toe.

“Blaire?” he finally wheezes my name, and the lump in his throat bops up and down.

I nod, holding his silence for a moment.

“What are you doing?” he asks, starting to lower his gun but then lifts it back into position. “Why did you kill our men?”

“You should put down your gun”—I motion with my weapon where I want him to throw it—“you won’t shoot.”

He chuckles in disbelief. “You don’t know us very well if you think we wouldn’t shoot.”

I gesture about the hall, at every corner. “The house is rigged with CCTV cameras. If you even try to shoot me, your *Señor* will know what you have done.”

His expression tightens as he hisses in Spanish, “You will kill me if I put my gun down. I’m no idiota!”

“You’re going to die tonight whichever way you look at it.” I shrug. “Say some last words if you wish—perhaps to your family, if you have one?”

He gasps, grimacing at me. “How cold are you? How can you kill us when we’re here to protect you?” His eyes stream across his men as he spits untold Spanish curses. “They had children! They had families!” He steps up to me, so close I can smell the spice of cologne on his skin. “How could you do this?”

I sigh, tossing my gun aside. It’s rendered useless anyhow. I’m out of bullets.

My posture appears slack as I roll my shoulders, shutting my eyes in a moment of reserve. ***Just kill him.***

“Blaire, what are you doing? *Por favor*, think about this before you—”

I flip to kick his rifle out of his grasp and flip again to kick his head back, sending him flying across the entrance hall. He crashes into the wall with a grunt, and I walk up to him. On my way, I bend to grab his rifle from the floor.

“Padre nuestro, que estás en el cielo...” he says, *our father, who are in heaven...*

*He’s praying?* I nearly laugh. He’s a murderer—just like I am—and he thinks praying will pardon his dark deeds?

“What are you asking God for?” I wonder aloud, looming over him with a heavy frown of curiosity. “Do you truly believe someone is up there”—I thumb-gesture at the ceiling—“waiting to pardon us of our sins?”

“My wife believes,” he speaks through clenched teeth, sitting up on his elbows, “my children believe. One day, you will know.”

I search his hard face for fear and sadness, noting it’s there, glittering under pathetic tears. *Just like it always is when one knows they’re going to die.*

“If you have any final words,” I say, “express them now.”

“Señor Charlie is going to kill you for what you’re doing!” he shouts, his powerful body tensing to get it out. “We are his brothers,” he warns, narrowing a finger at me, “know you won’t get away with this.”

“Charlie plans on killing *my* brother”—I press the barrel of the rifle on his throat and shove to buckle his elbows, so he lies flat on the floor under my rule—“my actions are just cause.”

“If that is what helps you sleep at night,” he chokes without bothering to deny they have James captive, wrapping his fingers around the barrel to hold the gun in position, “keep telling yourself that. But know, what we do in life always catches up to us, Blaire. Guilt catches up to us.”

His words don’t move me. In fact, nothing moves me. I feel empty and lost in myself. I feel like the old Blaire, and I’m not sure I like it.

But, I have no other choice than to be her. She will save James.

I whack to elbow the handle, shoving the barrel through his throat, then I pull it out and throw it through the open kitchen doors. His cheeks bloat as he gargles for air, hands flaying at the wound.

“Because you are dying,” I say, crouching at his side, “I will tell you something about your God that *they* don’t want *us* to know.”

Blood oozes out of his mouth as he splutters profanities, staining his teeth

red. “You know...nothing of God...*hijo de puta!* You’re the...the Devil!”

“There is no God and there is no Devil,” I say under my breath, reaching out to trace his unshaven face with a single finger, avoiding the touch of blood, “there is only heaven and hell: a place of paradise and another place of endless torment. And you and me?” Leaning down, I whisper in his ear, “We’re going to hell.”

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After lugging all the bodies under the staircase, stacking them up in a hefty pile, I click open the front doors and poke out my head to be sure the coast is clear.

I clock movement far down the driveway, three Los Zetas pacing back and forth in front of the gates. It’s the rain that makes them stand out, hitting their bodies and spraying outward, catching the ghostly light from the lanterns lining the front yard.

Sneaking out of the house, I jog down the porch steps and duck near a prickly bush, waiting, waiting, and waiting for them to move out of sight. Icy rain pours from a blackened sky, soaking my face and through the clothes I’m wearing. *Mind over matter*, I tell myself, resisting the urge to shiver out of control.

When the guards disappear, I sprint across the driveway and leap for a bushy wall behind all of Charlie’s cars. I groan as I grip the jagged edge, straining and gritting my teeth to pull myself up, grunting for a last bout of strength to hook one leg over the edge. When I’m on the top, I sit there staring out over acres and acres of misty, overgrown fields. They surround Charlie’s estate, lined in clustering trees. A small house lies in the distance, some sort of rolled-log cabin.

I arch a hand over my eyes, shielding them from the rain.

The cabin is circled by four choppers and a group of black SUVs. An orange light burns in the window with smoke searing out of the chimney in a wild dance against the rain.

That must be the guardhouse. There is nothing else around for miles beyond what my eyes can register.

I don’t see any Los Zetas guards, so I shimmy to the edge of the wall, both legs dangling, and I jump. I land on my feet with a moan and roll in to the waterlogged grass to break my fall, immediately unfolding myself to

stand. I jog for the guardhouse under a hefty, grumbling sky about to break with thunder, lightning clashing in a flash of silver, rapidly illuminating the field. The ankles of my joggers soak through, and my trainers squelch with every step, weighing me down.

Male screams echo out of the cabin, and I rush to crouch in the grass, on high alert and ready for trouble. Another scream tears through the hammering rain, followed by a bluster of curses.

I think it's Robert. That means Charlie is occupied, but I still need to move fast. I'm not certain how long it takes him to torture someone to death.

Still searching for the guardhouse cell's hatch, I hunker through soggy lengths of grass sticking to my face, elbows seeped in clotted mud. Luna said the cell's hatch is back here behind the cabin, about one-hundred yards out. It leads underground. One way in. One way out. But *back there*—as she expressed—could be anywhere. The fields are as far as they are wide, and the rainy night doesn't make seeing easy.

My pace slows when I spot two large figures dressed in black, standing a few feet apart with their backs to me. Guards.

I get up to crouch behind a chopped wood pile and peer around for an empty patch in the ground, peeking up and down, left to right. Then I see it: a perfect square splashing in rain. That must be the hatch.

I stand holding my breath and stalk up behind the largest man, wiping my hair back out of my face so I can see properly. I reach up on either side of his face, clamp down on his jaw, and twist to snap his neck with lower body strength.

"No!" the other guy shouts under the clashing thunder, as his friend slams face down on the ground "¿Qué estás haciendo?" *What are you doing?*

Fast as light, I yank a knife from the dead guy's holster belt and swipe up with a loud, "*Aargh!*" slicing the other's throat. Blood squirts across my face, the metallic flavor coating my lips. In that instance, a heave leaps to my throat, and I nearly vomit.

The man buckles to his knees, panic-grabbing to stop the bleeding, and my hands thrash to wipe off the blood before I puke. He begs me to help him, gargling to say something about being here to keep me safe.

"Your role here is irrelevant," I state, smearing my hands down my joggers, one clasped around the knife. "You shouldn't have held James captive."

Before he can answer, I shove the knife in his temple, whacking the

handle to ensure it goes right through. He spasms, and breaks into a seizure, crashing back on his ass. I snatch a bunch of keys from his belt and squelch over to the patch in the grass—but powerful arms cuff around me from behind.

“What do you think you’re doing, Señorita?” a deep voice rasps in my ear, grunting against my resistance.

I scream for vigor, kicking up my legs, my heart soaring as he gets me in a chokehold. One of his hands cups the back of my head while his other arm crushes my windpipe.

Acting without thinking, I drop the keys. I buckle to one knee and use his hold on my neck to flip him over my shoulder, shrieking for strength. He smacks the wet grass, scrambling to his feet. But I’m on him straddling his body, jabbing with the knife like a wild animal. His face and neck gush with blood, hands flailing out of control as his system goes into shock.

My eyes immediately whizz about the field, surveying for more Los Zetas, but I lose focus as a sharp pain shoots through my stomach. I double over to spew on the grass. The need comes up so hard and so fast I can’t stop it. It burns my throat and the back of my nose, spluttering everywhere, and my eyes bulge to the point of nearly popping out of my skull.

In pain, I slip off the dead Los Zetas guy and hunch there on all fours heaving from the depth of me, cuddling my belly with one arm. It’s like a jagged knife twisting at my insides, deep in my lower abdomen.

Assuming it’s the blood—assuming I have no tolerance for it anymore—I crawl away from the dead. I smear my face in the wet grass to taste its freshness, to take a beat and compose myself. I must remember what I’m doing. *Freeing James. Time is of the essence.* I cannot let pain be my defeat.

*Come on, Blaire.*

I fight to my feet, straightening one knee at a time. A rush goes through my head, whirling for a few seconds. I knead my temples, breathing in my nose and out of my mouth, heaving on the taste of vomit. The cramping subsides enough to function, and I swipe the keys from the sodden grass before slogging over to the hatch. I reach for the oval handle and yank it up, groaning because it’s so heavy. It leads down a curving, concrete stairwell soaking through with rainfall, a row of tiny lights stretching across the pebbled walls, barely visible.

I stuff the keys in my pocket, step inside the stairwell out of the rain, and pull the hatch shut, causing the sound of it closing to resonate downward.

Using both hands, I touch the damp, bumpy walls for guidance, sneaking further and further underground. It stinks of something musty, like stale water and bitter, rich cigars. At the bottom, I duck under a low bearing ceiling and stand upright in an oval room of cells. They're each separated by a thick brick wall, and the doors are made up of rusty bars. I can't see past the shadows to count how many cells there are. The lights are too dull, buzzing and flickering like Morse code. I can't hear anything, either. Not even the Albanian daughters. *Where are they?*

"Blair?" James' deep, Russian voice pierces the eerie silence, coming from directly across the room.

A circle of light clears the shadows, revealing a tall figure looming behind the bars—who shouts, "Iisus Khristos, it is you!"

## 32

I dash over to James' cell with the keys jingling in my pocket, pulling them out in a panic to set him free. He's hooked a tiny lantern on the bars, so I'm able to see what I'm doing as I jab keys one by one into the lock.

"I didn't think Charlie would ever let me see you again," James says in Russian, his deeper notes thick and hoarse. "I've asked—I've begged—but he always insisted it was not going to happen. That *pizda* has some answering to do!"

"I'm sure he had his reasons," I say in a blank state, occupied by still checking the keys. "Just don't worry about Charlie."

"Just don't worry about him?" James is aghast, reeling with hatred for my lover. "That *mudak* has had me locked up for over a week! That *mudak* wouldn't even entertain the idea of me seeing you! He's a jealous jerk! He's twisted, just like Maksim! Look at where he's holding me, Blaire!"

My attention strays past James at the cell he's residing in—a big cell with heavy, dark drapes hanging on the walls. The toilet is sectioned off by a blacked-out roller blind. The double bed in the heart of the space is dressed in clean, red sheets and big, fluffy pillows. A side table, with a low burning lamp, houses a whole stack of books. There's even a thick carpet in there, with James' tanned boots sinking into the softness.

This is confusing. Why would Charlie hold James prisoner with luxuries if he wants him dead?

"Blaire? Are you listening to me?"

When my brother says my name, I look up at him, at the haunting blueness in his wide, elongated eyes. He appears well—which surprises me even more, given he should still be withdrawing. His oval face is sharp and defined, the pallor of his skin glowing against the orange lantern. His dark red hair looks almost chestnut in this light, a scraggly mop framing his hard features, hanging on his shoulders.

My chest feels tighter with every second passing between us, as it's like seeing him for the first time as my brother. Not just my teammate, or my

friend, or my opponent.

My brother.

My brother who I am unexpectedly angry at.

I coil my lips, and his expression drops.

Yes, I am fucking angry at him. He's caused so much trouble. Because of him, I've slaughtered half of Charlie's crew. Because of him, Charlie might struggle to forgive me.

"Ty prishla," James says, *you came*, I think to break our awkward ice. "I knew you would the moment you discovered I'm here. I'm sorry for rambling on about that Los Zetas meathead. I'm just...I'm so glad to see you, Blaire. Look at you"—he visually takes me in from head to toe, turning up his thin lips in a heartfelt smile—"you look amazing. Healthy. I've never seen you carry this much weight before."

"You can't only hate Charlie because he refused to let you see me," I say with purpose, tipping my head to study his reaction.

His eyebrows wrinkle, evidence of his bafflement. "What do you mean?"

"Well, he wants to kill you, doesn't he?" I ask, lifting my shoulders in a shrug. I'm surprised by how frail my voice sounds, but I'm suddenly nervous. If James says yes—if he confirms what Luna said—what's going to happen between Charlie and I? Will it be over? Can I forgive that level of treachery?

Silence submerges the cell's, making my chest drum at a million miles per hour. I hold eye contact with James, trying to be brave and strong, but I am not brave and strong right now. I'm mentally begging a higher power that I'm certain doesn't exist, *please say no. Please say no. Please, let Luna be wrong.*

I can't bear the alternative.

"Yes, he does plan on killing me," James confesses, and it knocks the air right out of me. "He told me earlier today. He's coming back soon! You-you need to get me out, Blaire. We need to leave!"

I buckle to my knees, the sudden ache in my heart and the recurring cramps in my stomach becoming unbearably crippling. It's emotional pain physically personified, to know I exposed my soul to Charlie—I let him in—and he's betrayed me. I told him all James had done in aid of sparing me of sexual abuse. I told him why it's important to keep my brother safe. He said he understood. He promised to give James a better life, and I believed him.

Like the idiot I am, I fucking believed him.

I groan to squeeze out the pain, clutching at my stomach. I press one hand



in to the floor, balancing myself on my knees.

Panicked yells echo in the distance, James desperate to know what is happening to me. “Talk to me! Tell me what’s wrong!”

*Block it out. Block it out.* I shut my eyes, willing my emotions away. *Just block it out.*

I shakily stand, fumbling to shove the keys in the lock again, searching for the one that’ll let him out.

“Blaire, what is wrong with you?” James yanks at the cell door, causing deafening *clangs* to resonate up the stairwell. “Will you say something? What is wrong, dammit?”

*My life was perfect before you ruined it. That’s what is wrong.*

I can’t speak. Can’t think. I’m too angry and wired and...broken. *He betrayed my trust.* I don’t know why it only now hits me, but knowing he was going to kill James and knowing he betrayed my trust is agony.

James’ knobby fingers touch mine where I’m handling the keys, but I pull away—though not before I notice his skin is warm. I scowl at him, at his lanky body clad in clothes: a heavy, beige sweater and baggy sweatpants over tanned boots. Charlie’s boots.

“You’re warm,” I say, glowering harder now.

James breathes out in relief at my response, gesturing at a small oil burner in the corner. It’s smoking, filling the air with heat. I can feel the heat now, lingering on the coldness of my lips.

“Charlie set up the heater when he brought me here earlier tonight; said a cold, rainy night was forecast.” James bends at the knees to meet me at eye level, observing me. “Are you okay? You looked like you were in pain.”

“Where were you before tonight?”

A scowl lays thick across his unnaturally dark eyebrows. “What does that matter?”

*What does that matter?*

Hackles itch the nape of my neck.

“Tell me where you were,” I speak through gritted teeth, stepping up to his cell so we’re mere inches apart. That’s when I catch a sniff of his scent: fresh soap and fabric softener.

So, he’s warm, comfortable, and clean.

“I won’t ask you three times, James,” I warn, my gut instinct yelling at me that something is very wrong. “Tell me where you were before tonight, right fucking now.”

“I-I was in some kind of hotel,” he stutters, holding my ominous stare. “I-I don’t know where it was.”

“Charlie kept you in a hotel?” I question, while my brain collectively stores the information, to weigh up facts. “Did he provide you with a medical team to help you?”

His eyes widen, but he nods.

“So, you were hooked on heroin then?”

He glances away, sinking into his shoulders with shame—but I feel no remorse. All I feel is rising anger, as I’m almost positive he and Luna have lied to me. It’s in the way he’s acting. He can’t look me in the eye or give me a straight answer to anything. And now that I come to think about it, he paused when I asked if he thought Charlie planned on killing him.

Luna couldn’t look me in the eye when she told me, either.

I assess James’ cell once more, again wondering why Charlie would fix him up with amenities like heaters, bedsheets, and warm clothes...why would Charlie put James up in a hotel and pay a medical team to help him recover, if he wants him dead?

“If you’ve lied to me about Charlie’s agenda,” I warn in icy Russian, lifting an accusing finger, “I will never, *EVER*, forgive you, James.”

He blinks a thousand times, frozen with panic.

“James...” I prompt, and he cracks.

“Please don’t hate me, Blaire! I-I couldn’t bear it!”

My face lights up, stunned, while anger explodes inside my body like an erupting volcano.

“You should have thought about me hating you prior to stealing my happiness!” I scream before I can stop myself, making him recoil in reaction. I’m suddenly so fucking angry, realizing and accepting this is all his fault. He took me from Charlie when I didn’t want to go. He got me kidnapped by money-hungry, drug-crazy Arabs who sold me to an enemy.

*Fuck.* I killed Charlie’s men to save him when he didn’t even need saving.

I can’t hold back my madness. It bubbles and boils while I spill over shouting that it’s all his fault, emphasizing the hell I endured while dosed up on drugs and withdrawing. “I was alone for two weeks rotting in my own puke and filth, paranoid that no one was coming for me!”

“What?” he gasps. “No...no! Charlie didn’t tell me they’d hooked you on drugs, too? He-he always insisted you were healthy and happy. He-he told

me—”

“Maybe he didn’t tell you to spare you of the guilt!” I carry on screaming, barely hearing a word he says as he tries to plead his case. “You screwed it all up! I was happy with Charlie! I wanted to go back to him after Maksim! Tatiana said I could stay with him! You texted and told me to stay if I could!”

“I’m sorry!” he sobs, reaching out to me. “Please, Blaire, you must be quiet before someone hears!”

“Screw being quiet!” I screech so hard the vein in my forehead pops out. “He loves me for me! He doesn’t want to use me or hurt me! He came for me when I needed him! He went against the Russians, for me! He hunted Robert, for me! And he was searching for you, too, to fucking save you, you pizda!” I kick the cell bars, knocking him back a step on instinct. “You nearly got me killed! You stole me when I still needed medical attention! And I murdered his men to save you when you don’t need saving...! Fuck—fuck! Why did you do this?!” My final words come out so loud my ears pop, ringing through my skull.

James collapses with apologies, but they turn my anger into a crazy need for death and blood—his death and his blood. I watch on the outside as I tear at him, face squashed against the bars as I reach through to grab, scratch, and yank at his clothes. “I fucking hate you for what you’ve done! You had the power to let me be happy, and you abused it for your own selfishness!” My nails form bloody, red streaks down his cheeks and neck, but he doesn’t stop me from attacking. So I keep going at him, insane on rage. It’s only when a severe cramp rips through my stomach that my psychosis breaks, and I have to wrench my head aside to puke on the floor. It comes up in a thick lump, making my eyes swell to get it out.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” James asks, dropping to his knees to see my face. “Is your stomach hurting? Why are you sick?”

I shake my head because I can’t speak through the vomit, gulping back more heaves.

“Blaire, will you say something?” He stretches through the bars, trying to reach for me, to smooth my hair back. “You’ve never been ill like this before.”

He’s right. I have never been this physically ill without reason—but there is a reason. I think this is my emotional agony epitomized. The mere thought of being without Charlie actually makes me ill. If James has his way, this is what I will exist of. If James has his way, I’ll suffocate in the miserable

loneliness of missing Charlie.

I can't allow that to happen. I won't!

I lift a hand to point at the keys still jammed in the lock, performing my obligation. I have to help James to freedom, no matter what he has done. I owe him. But this is where we end. I want to be with Charlie. I deserve to be with him. Ten years of agony and abuse says I deserve him.

"You need to go," I say, wiping my mouth with my inner wrist, "or you won't get away."

"What?" James' face empties of color. "I don't care about that right now." His hand brushes my cheek, making me cringe. "Why are you sick, Blaire?"

"Head east to Dover," I speak over him, ignoring his concerns. "Tatiana's men will pick you up from the port. But I'd advise that you form another plan, if you can, since I'll have to bargain your freedom from *her*," I scoff *her*, glaring at him from under my eyebrows. "That is the cost of everything, isn't it, James? Everyone wants something from me. Even you."

"Huh? No!" he shouts in distress. "I don't want anything from you, Blaire. I just want you!"

Huffing at him, I struggle to my feet. Pain will not conquer me tonight. Nothing will conquer me tonight. I need to get back to Charlie.

"Wait...what? *I*, need to go?" James asks, catching up to what I've said. He meets me on my feet, knuckles turning white in his grip on the cell bars. "Aren't you coming with me? I mean, except for being angry at me for lying, are-are you okay? Are we okay?"

I shrug, unsure of what else to tell him—I can't even look at him. I was better than okay. My health is at one-hundred percent and before tonight, I was happy.

Then I murdered Charlie's men... *Fuck*. He's going to hate me.

"Blaire, don't do this. It's me. *James*." He lets go of the bars and presses his hands together in a desperate act of prayer. "We've always been together. Us against the world. You know that."

"Us?" I glower at him with revulsion. "Stop talking like there is an us. There is not and never will be an *us*, James." I jab a finger at my heart, to articulate my feelings. "I love Charlie."

My brother's face...I swear he could puke. He scrambles to snatch the keys out of the lock, but I rip his hands away and yank them out first. I step back, watching him with extra attention.

“Blaire,” he says my name in a nervous tone, “let me out, now. Calm down before you do something you know you will regret—like you always do when you get mad—and let me out.”

I shake my head.

“Yes, Blaire. Whatever our issues are, we can sort them. But if you don’t let me out, then I’ll be stuck here.”

“I will let you out, but only once you agree to leave and stay away.”

“Leave? I am not going to leave without you!” he yells, snatching through the bars at me. “You need me. You know you do! Give me the damn keys, Blaire!”

“I don’t need you,” I say, cuddling my middle. “You might not believe me, but it hasn’t even been a struggle to move on from Maksim, and do you know why?”

His eyes beat with fear, flashing like fire as I confess, “Because I love Charlie.” Every nerve ending in my body prickles when I say it again, and it’s such a relief. I never knew saying something could be such a huge fucking relief. “All along, I wondered how I broke Maksim’s conditioning so easily, but it wasn’t easy. It was love, and it was so, so hard.”

My brother’s quivering lips curl against his teeth as he spits, “You don’t know what love is, you ridiculous girl!”

I scoff at his mockery, stating that he sounds just like Maksim, and he retches.

“I know love doesn’t hit you or bruise and scar your skin,” I say, motioning at my mutilated back. “I know love doesn’t rape you. I know love doesn’t lie out of selfishness. Love is being there in one’s hour of need, no matter what. No matter how dark or sinister.”

“Blaire”—his entire face screws with warning—“don’t...”

I shake my head to stop him from speaking, eyebrows drooped in sudden sadness. “I love Charlie, and he loves me. He tells me, and he shows me every day.”

James whacks the bars, his revulsion of Charlie rushing to the surface. “He doesn’t love you—no one does! They all see value in you, that’s all! Charlie will have you working like a dog, just like Maksim did! He will rape you when you say no! He will hit you because that is who he is! You just wait and see!”

“No,” I whisper. “You’re wrong.”

“I’m wrong, yes? Well, why don’t you ask around about him, you stupid

*suka!* I've heard the stories about him—I know he's a monster! He ordered his ex-girlfriend's jaw to be broken! I saw her at Maksim's house, the bloody, beaten state she was in after she confronted you—"

I shake my head again, slower this time, and take a few paces back. "Say what you like. I'm staying with Charlie. And we're done, James."

"No," he gasps, and his mouth clenches with loss of control. "We will never be done! I will never stop until you're mine! I deserve you! Maksim is gone, so you're rightfully mine or Tatiana's!"

"I am not a toy to be passed around," I say, keeping my voice calm and collected. I don't want to hurt him. I just want him to understand. "I'm a person, and I have the right to choose. Charlie gave me a choice, and I choose him."

"No, you fucking do not choose him!" He punches the cell, shattering in a senseless craze. "You can't! I won't fucking let you!"

I talk over his mad yelling, telling him I will iron things out with Charlie to ensure that he doesn't go after him. "I'll always safeguard your life because—regardless of all that's happened between us, even after all you've done—I do care."

"I am not scared of Decena!" His face burns with red rage, the veins in his fisted hands pulsing. "The only fucking reason I've been passive this past week is because I knew he would lead me to you! I'll kill that pizda!"

Ignoring him still, I continue saying my goodbye. I insist that if he ever needs my help, if he's ever in trouble, he can contact me on my online profile. "I will always be there for you as you were always there for me, but only if you're in danger."

"What does that even mean, Blaire?"

"Stay away from me," I point at the space between us, "and stay away from Charlie."

"No!" he roars. "No, I won't fucking let you walk away! I love you, Blaire!"

"I don't love you," I say, unwelcomed tears dripping down my cheeks. "I'm sorry, but I don't." It hurts to crush him like this, as I know all too well that when his anger wears off, all he'll feel is empty dread. But I can't lie. I won't lie. I try to carry on, croaking that I will hold off the Los Zetas for one hour. Then I toss the keys in his cell, making them hit the wall and bounce onto his bed. "Don't dally as it will only result in your recapture, and I can't guarantee I'll be able to get you out next time."

“Iisus Khristos, Blaire, don’t...” he chokes on a sob, dropping to his knees in a state of defeat, “please, don’t do this to us. I’m fucking begging you,” he grips the bars, imploring, “Don’t walk away. Without you, I have no one. What will I do?”

I cannot look at his face. I cannot see the tears of heartbreak swimming in his eyes; so much fucking pain. So I pivot away, and whisper a tragic, “You will do what I did, James. You will figure it out as you go.”

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## 33

I climb the narrow stairwell in a state of numbness, with a mantra in my head: *I feel no guilt or shame for choosing Charlie. No guilt or shame. Why should I? I've suffered a brutal life for just as long as James has, so why can't I have a happily ever after?*

He would have one, too, if he would just allow himself to move on from wanting me. He needs to accept that I want to stay with Charlie. I feel liberated to admit that I love Charlie, and once he tells me he didn't plan on killing James—because I am convinced he will profess what I know deep in my heart—I will tell him how I feel, and everything will be perfect. Now that James is safe, and now that Robert is probably dead, Charlie and I can leave for Mexico.

I can't deny I feel...somewhat selfish for abandoning James, but what else could I do? I can't stick around and support him. All the time I'm in his life, he will lust after what he shouldn't—I know how that feels and how tangible the pull can be. I'd be giving him false hope.

Reaching the top of the stairwell, I attempt to whack open the hatch, but a sharp twinge rips through my lower stomach. It cripples me to squatting, making me hiss in pain, but I thrust upward a second time, knocking the hatch open. It lands on the wet grass with a sobby thud, and a downpour soaks through, spitting across my face. I manage to climb out, ignoring the dead Los Zetas sprawled out on the grass, and immediately jog for the guardhouse cabin. James will be hot on my heels if I don't hurry and get out of sight, and I have no time to argue with him. I just want to watch him leave—so I know he's gotten away safely—then I'm going home to get warm and dry and wait for Charlie.

At the guardhouse, I tuck myself under a roof overhang, crouched on an upturned crate with my eyes cast out over the field. It's nearly too difficult to see James in the dark torrent when he crawls out of the hatch, but his beige sweater stands out like a ghost in the pitch black. He scurries about in a fluster of mud, patting down the dead bodies like a scavenger for weapons.



His eyes flicker about—I assume searching for me—so I duck out of sight, hiding behind a stack of chopped wood. That’s when he disappears into the clustering trees, fast on his feet.

I let my head rest back, sighing in relief that he’s free, that my job here is done. Whatever happens now, I don’t regret setting him free. When all is said and done, he’s my family.

“You ready to answer my fucking questions yet?!” Charlie’s yelling pounds through the cabin walls, and I flinch in reaction, skidding forward on all fours. The sharp movement pulls at my cramping stomach, and I wince, squeezing to blink back the pain.

Lethargic moans follow Charlie’s yelling, with spluttering and coughing. I crawl back under the roof overhang and press my ear to the damp, exterior wall. I can hear murmurs, though nothing is clear. My eyes thin. Something topples over and crashes on the floor, but no one speaks.

My curiosity piquing, I slip around the cabin, getting closer and closer to the moaning. There’s a window half opened. Nearing it, I can hear the moaning a little clearer. It’s a man, wheezing for breath. It’s Robert. I can’t explain how, but I know it’s him.

I kick up a log to gain a few inches in height, grip the ledge with my fingernails, and peer in through the window.

The cabin is lit up with down lighters covering the pitched ceiling, and there’s a dank, woody scent in the air. It’s kind of rustic with scuffed timber floors covered in worn rugs, a bench in the heart of the space decorated in beer bottles and a smoking ashtray, and the rolled-log walls are wreathed in hunting objects, from knives to huge guns. There’s blood splattered everywhere, drying on nearly all the wooden surfaces in dark patches.

I cower an inch when I spot Robert, knowing I should go home right now, but I can’t seem to tear myself away.

His eyes are clamped shut, and he’s trembling from head to toe in obvious agony, moaning and puffing through closed lips. He’s naked, strapped to a chair with his legs spread open, feet tied down on wooden stools that clatter with his trembling. His bulging, hairy stomach is covered in bloody, animal-like scratches, angry red cigarette burns, and between his legs...blood pumps from his crotch, dripping down the chair onto the floor, soaking through the rug under him.

My cheeks bloat to heave.

There’s a metal bucket next to him on the floor, drenched in fresh blood

—so much fucking blood I swear I’m on the verge of vomiting.

“I was in a meeting with Tatiana...” he grumbles in clatters of breath, wincing on every word, and I realize he’s confessing what happened to me. “James texted her to ask for help...with locations and a whole plan to get Blaire out of England... I spilled my drink over her cell phone, so she didn’t see the text...then I contacted the Arabs to hijack James’ plan...to go fetch Blaire... I would have done it myself...but I knew the Arabs were in England...and I knew they’d get to Blaire quickly...” He pauses between words, panting for his life. “I knew there was a chance they would screw me over on our deal...I was aware they’d likely auction her off...as she was worth a fortune...but I didn’t care...I just wanted to make you suffer for taking Arjana...”

“What about Tatiana?” Charlie’s rough voice comes over us. My eyes dart from left to right, but I can’t see him.

“Tatiana had nothing to do with Blaire’s disappearance...” Robert wheezes. “I swear it, Charlie. Now please, please...spare...my...daughters...” He breaks into anxious puffs and coughs, head flopping about in a state of weakness.

I stare out, shocked and enlightened to finally know how those dirty Arabs got their hands on me. It would make sense that James contacted Tatiana for help to kidnap me as even I turned to her in my hour of need. Over Maksim, she’s the only adviser we know. It would make sense that Robert oversaw a text on her phone, too, otherwise, how else could he have known James’ plan to kidnap me?

James doesn’t even realize what he did. I’m still so angry at him.

A broad-shouldered man comes into view, heavy footsteps thudding in his wake. I duck a little under the window, only my eyes visible at the ledge. He’s carrying a long, brown tube in large, veiny hands, juggling it in an act of play. It’s Charlie, and his presence in there sends icy tendrils down my fucking spine. He’s dressed in a thick, black sweater with the notorious red Zs printed on the chest, black combat trousers, and hulking boots, his sleek, inky hair tied away from his face. The arms of his sweater are doused in blood, thick drops trickling off his fingers.

“So, if I have my hacker check Tatiana’s cell phone,” he rasps, “he’ll confirm that James texted her? And if I call her now, she will confirm that you ruined her cell phone?”

“Yes...” Robert struggles to say.

“Hmmm.” My wicked lover muses, wandering about the cabin with affluent confidence. “I will spare one of your youngest for your honesty—if it is honesty—but you still have more questions to answer.”

“Ohhhh...ohhh! Please, Charlie! Don’t...don’t do this...!”

“Screw your begging, *hijo de puta*.” Charlie spits Spanish curses while twisting the cap off the tube. “Blaire begged, and you didn’t hear her, so let’s see how you like being played with while you’re powerless, yeah?” He shoves Robert’s head to the side and empties the contents of the tube into one of Robert’s ears.

“Aargh!” Robert shrieks, cheeks scorching and flapping with panicked breaths. I cringe into myself, feeling his agony emitting into the atmosphere. His legs bat against the stools while his big hands yank at the straps on his wrists, desperate to get free.

That must be some kind of acidic paste. I’ve seen others use it before, and it’s supposed to burn like a bitch.

“Don’t struggle,” Charlie says in an oddly calm voice, slapping our enemies face hard enough to knock his head back. “You know it only makes it worse.”

Nic appears, stalking across the cabin like an untamed animal hunched at the neck. He’s also clad in black combat attire with the sleeves of his sweater rolled up tattooed forearms. He leans over to playfully smack Robert’s cheek, teasing, “It’s a shame my hermano took your balls”—I feel pale when I hear why blood is pumping from Robert’s crotch—“we could have given them the same attention we’re giving your ears.”

“Ahhh, it teaches him a lesson for not hearing Blaire, no?” Andres’ gruff, Latino voice appears. My eyes whip from left to right searching for him, but he’s well out of sight.

Nic laughs, nudging Charlie in a playful manner, and Charlie nudges him back, nodding at Robert. “Pathetic motherfucker, isn’t he?”

“El fruto no cae lejos del árbol.” *The fruit does not fall far from the tree.* “Perhaps his parents were *tontos*, too?”

Charlie bursts out chuckling at his brother’s mockery, and I immediately notice a strange, boyish vibe about him. He seems to be in his element in there, torturing someone.

“Just...kill...me...” Robert barely manages to say, his head dropping back. “Just...do...me...the...mercy. Kill my daughters, too, quickly...please...”

“Did you show Blaire mercy?!” Charlie yells suddenly, and I squeal to

duck another inch. “Did you look after her when she was dosed up to the eyeballs on heroin, hmm? Or did you toy with her and scare her?” While he talks, he squeezes the tube in both hands, trailing it across Robert’s fat, battered stomach.

Robert goes crazy screaming and shaking, so loud it pierces through my ears. I recoil, cupping them in both hands.

“My girl has lived a dark life. I promised her light, and you, you *maricón* motherfucker”—he points a steady finger—“you thought you could steal my promise? I’ll take your fucking hands and then your feet, more and more until you’re nothing but pieces of flesh. You deserve every fucking inch of the pain—tape open his eyes,” he says to either Nic or Andres, reaching for a washcloth on the bench. He wipes his hands before dropping it on the floor, then inclines over our mutual enemy. “You’ll watch something unbelievably disgusting and violating, Robert, as a punishment for what you did to my girl.” His lips curl against gleaming white teeth as he hisses, “By the end of today, everyone will know that if they dare to harm a hair on her head, I will torture them with no compassion.”

“I...did...nothing...to...her...” Robert says, spluttering and coughing up clotted blood.

“You can’t lie to me.” Charlie grabs Robert’s jaw to put them eye to eye. “My men found the footage on the laptop in your daughter’s dorm in France; the recordings of you sexually toying with Blaire... Passive on the heroin was she, hmm?”

I go cold on the spot, wondering what the hell he’s talking about.

I duck completely under the ledge when Nic walks past the window, trying to listen over the sudden monsoon.

“Your daughter will be passive with a dick in her ass, pussy, and mouth,” Charlie rasps, his deeper notes darker and utterly chilling. “Yeah, that’s it. Open his eyes wide, so he doesn’t miss a thing—you’ll be alive long enough to watch this, Robert.”

A female voice screams the place down, and things tumble about hitting the floor like she’s kicking out for freedom.

“Papa! Me ndihmo!”

“No! Charlie! Please!” Robert implores, finding inner strength to argue for his child.

“Not her,” Charlie snaps. “She’s too young, idiota. Bring me the eldest.”

The girl’s screams fade into the distance, drowning the cabin in

threatening silence. Blood booms in my ears while Robert is wheezing and gargling for breath. “Please...” he cries. “Please...”

“Ahhh, that’s it,” Charlie rasps. “The pretty, Drita. Well, she won’t be so pretty when I’m done.”

“You asshole!” a young woman screeches in accented-English, spitting curses in her own language. “You’re going to fucking die for coming at us! I’ll kill you myself for hurting my papa!”

Charlie chuckles. “You’re a feisty one, girl. My men will like that.”

“Shkoni...qij...nëna...juaj,” Robert stammers, barely coherent.

Charlie asks in amusement what Robert just said, and the young woman tells him that it means, *go fuck your mom*. She then hocks up a ball of phlegm and spits it at something.

“Well, my mamá is dead,” Charlie says, laughing with his brothers. “But I could fuck your daughter—what do you reckon, Drita, hmm? You’d like that, wouldn’t you, you perverted pequeña puta.” She squeals in resistance like Charlie is doing something to her, and Charlie laughs harder and deeper, seeming to take pleasure in her fear. “You are lucky I’ve got a nice girl at home, otherwise, I would fuck you black and blue, you bitch.”

I can’t help myself—I need to see what’s going on! I grip the window ledge, gaining height inch by inch to look inside. Andres is in sight now, arm to arm standing with Nic. Charlie’s half facing away from me. His bloody fingers are wrapped around a tan, slender arm, holding a young woman prisoner at his side. He’s brushing her dark hair down her spine, saying stuff in her ear that’s making her recoil. She’s not wearing any clothes, cringing in her shoulders trying to hide herself. Her ass globes wobble as she trembles, covered in big purple bruises. *Ow*, those are some heavy thwacks she’s taken.

“Why did you have the footage?” Charlie questions softly, and she flinches, insisting she doesn’t know what he’s talking about. “Don’t lie, *la zorra*.” He calls her a *bitch* in his own language. “I know you had the footage of your father making my girl suck his cock when she was all fucked up on heroin. My men found it in your dorm. I collected it myself.”

My eyes shoot away from the cabin, realization hitting me, hard. When I woke in Robert’s company, it was to a choking sensation, and I had that horrible, salty taste in my mouth.

I cup my mouth, feeling green and mortified with shame. Robert fucked about with me while I was asleep, and Charlie has seen it.

“Is that what gets you off?” Charlie asks. “Watching your father sexually

abuse young girls? My girl?"

I glance back in to see the young woman shake her head, but she doesn't utter a word. She cringes again when Charlie kisses the side of her face, as he says, "S'all right. You don't have to answer. But, you can't escape punishment. Let's see how you like being taken against your will."

"No!" She grips his arm in a panicked appeal. "Please!"

"You...stole...Arjana..." Robert slurs, head knocking from left to right with fatigue.

Charlie clicks his fingers, and Nic walks up behind the chair to grip Robert's chubby head, to hold him still. I figure he's forcing Robert's line of vision, so he has no other choice but to watch what cruelty is unfolding.

"Yeah, I did take Arjana," Charlie admits, yanking the girl back and forth against her struggling.

"Why...?" Robert slurs again, hardly awake now.

"Why, is none of your fucking business. But, I will tell you something that certainly won't bring you solace. After my medical team cleaned up Arjana, she was so *bonita* I gave her to my brother—the man who's holding your head still, Robert."

*Gave her?* He told me she was living happily in Mexico.

Robert tries to spit in disgust but doesn't have the strength. "Does Blaire know that you..." he breaks between words, breathing heavily, "that you don't have...*his*...body? Does she know that you...lied?"

I lean a little closer to the window with my ear, frowning.

"What do you...think...Blaire will say when she knows...you've been lying...?"

"There's no need to upset Blaire," Charlie says, with his mood tangibly softening at the mention of me. "Wherever Maksim's body is, it's a million miles away from her, rotting in hell. That satisfies me."

*Charlie hasn't got Maksim's body?*

My eyes bulge in disbelief, head swimming in the unknown. I can't keep up with tonight. He told me himself that he had Maksim's body in Mexico. Or, he said to tell Robert it's in Mexico.

I recall the shifty glances Charlie and Nic were tossing each other on my first day back, when we were forming a plan to buy time to save James.

This is so confusing. Why would he lie and say that he had Maksim's body when he didn't? I don't understand.

I fleetingly wonder if Luna and James were telling the truth about Charlie

wanting my brother dead, and I hate myself for it.

“Papa, please,” the young woman cries, and I glance back in to see she’s wiggling about, trying to get free of Charlie’s grasp.

“Now, now,” he says, and his voice alone subdues her. “It’ll be over soon, chica, I promise.” Before anyone can react, he swipes one arm across the bench in the center of the room, sending bottles and ashtrays flying across the wooden floors. He slams her face down on the bench, crushing her cheek against the wooden surface.

I flinch and squeak in shock, ducking under the window.

“Men!” he shouts, and I hear them piling in from another room in the cabin. “Fuck her properly. All of you—but not you, hermano,” he adds, and I assume he’s referring to Andres.

“No! No, please!” the young woman cries. “Don’t do this!”

“You think begging will save you?” Charlie asks, slowly simmering with rage, every word he spouts coming out colder, deeper. “Blaire begged for your father to stop the agony when she spent two fucking weeks withdrawing from the heroin...she begged for me to come, but I couldn’t because I didn’t know where she was!” he shouts over meager gargles and gasps, the young woman trying to breathe. “While I was busy searching through my enemies trying to find her, a friend had her all along!”

“Mátalo, Charlie!” Andres shouts, and the rest of the men follow suit, chanting for their *Señor* to kill Robert.

“I’m sorry,” the young woman shatters into pathetic sobs. “If I had known who she was, I would have—”

“You’re not sorry!” Charlie screams back at her. “You watched that perverted footage over twenty times! My hacker was able to do a replay count, you fucking bitch!”

***Wa-tch!***

A delicate tumble hits the floor, and then she’s screaming at the top of her lungs. It’s sharp. Cringing. I recognize the sound of her being slammed on the bench again, and then I hear the soft hiss of a blade being pulled from its case. My ears narrow. I peer up, seeing flecks of silver glimmering on the cabin’s wooden walls. I gain another inch in height, until I see Charlie holding a huge machete.

“While they fuck your daughter,” he says, speaking to the blade in his hand, eyeing it with odd lust, “I will dismantle you, Robert. When you’re dead, she will die too.”

“Please...” Robert weeps like a baby, begging for his daughter’s life. “Kill her quickly...”

“No,” Charlie says. “Once she’s suffered enough, just like Blaire did, only then will she die—go on, Antonio, fuck her. I know you want to.”

Heavy rustling, struggling, and then one long, howling wince tears through the air.

I turn around to sit on the log because I can’t even chance to look anymore. I hug myself. I hug my head in my arms when her squawks fill the cabin, mixed with deep male moans and the table banging and creaking against the floors.

“Another!” Charlie yells.

“If you bite me,” someone says in gruff English, “I will pull out your teeth.”

The young woman’s squawks become muffled, and the bench bangs harder on the floor.

“Are you gonna admit that you were watching your father fuck around with my girl, hmm? Are you gonna admit that you enjoyed watching my girl suffer with heroin withdrawals?”

“Okay!” the young woman heaves, and I pull my arms from my head. “Okay! I watched it!” The entire cabin drowns in silence, as she shakily confesses that it was the Spanish Mafia leader who ordered her to get the laptop containing the violating footage of me.

“Gina?” Andres questions, but I don’t hear a reply. I wonder if they’re talking about Charlie’s sister, Gina, but I’m confident they can’t be. He said she was dead—or, he certainly implied it.

“Yes, Gina Guzmán,” the young woman confirms, panting to get her words out, and I’m stunned on every account. “She was looking for the Russian girl...somehow found out my father had her—even provided photos of him loading her limp body into a blacked-out car.” She gulps, pausing for a breath. “I couldn’t deny the evidence...it was a clean, camera shot of the redhead’s face...and my father’s.”

“Why would Gina be looking for Blaire?” Nic asks, but Charlie hushes him, wanting to know more. I want to know more, too. *Why the hell would Gina be looking for me?*

“The Hispanic woman showed me old movies of what you do to traitors,” the young woman continues, struggling to speak to Charlie. “She-she said she’d already tipped you off that your girlfriend was sold at an auction... She



warned if I didn't get her what she wanted, she'd tell you who bought the Russian girl..."

"What did she want exactly?"

"Proof my father still had her," she pants. "My word wasn't enough...she wanted a precise location on the Russian girl...but my father doesn't give me those details." When she pauses again, I hear she's wheezing for more breaths, waning from the abuse she's suffered. "I had to steal his laptop," she eventually puffs to say, "as I knew it'd have CCTV footage of his hideouts. I intended to hand it over to the Hispanic woman, but it was already too late...we were kidnapped by *you*."

"Why did you watch the footage your father had?" Charlie asks, having already processed all she's said while I'm still digesting it, baffled out of my mind as to why Gina was looking for me. "Don't try to lie," he warns one last time. "I know it was watched from your dorm location, replayed twenty times in one day."

"I was fascinated!" The young woman's voice completely breaks, and she can hardly get her confession out now. "I-I'd never see-seen someone suffer b-before..."

"Take his arm," Charlie says.

"No! Please, I-I said I'm sorry!"

Regardless of her pleas, the blade comes down and chomps on a wooden surface. Robert hollers in agony, and I can't fight the gory images in my head. A leg hitting the floor. A hand landing to roll across the rug.

"Another dick in her fucking ass!" Charlie yells, and then the knife **whacks!** the wooden surface again. "My girl has been through more than you could ever know, you fucking whore! You think fascination is a good enough fucking reason to sit back and watch her suffer?! How fucking dare you...?!" He really loses it, **whacking** and **slapping** and screaming at the top of his lungs that she's *gonna* die a painful, slow death. "You motherfucking puta!"

Robert wails in agony and sympathy for his daughter, who's groaning and sobbing, being fucked by God knows how many Los Zetas. "It's my fault!" he insists. "I planted the seed of curiosity! It's my lifestyle...the murder... Charlie...please!"

"No one dares to harm my family and lives," Charlie growls, followed by a powerful chop, and the woman's voice fades to black.

I feel it...her death. It's cold and haunting, especially when a piece of her thuds on the floor. Robert explodes with tragic cries, while a strange feeling

comes over me. I rock myself back and forth to keep warm, to let the alien feeling pass. That's when a Los Zetas guard bolts across the field past me, coming from the cell's hatch direction, and my head whips up.

"¡Sonar las alarmas!" he yells over the rainfall that we've been attacked, and I stand in defense. My eyes scatter around the field as a team of Los Zetas move in from the clustering trees, swarming the place aiming guns, searching for something.

Searching for someone.

*James.*

He disappeared into the trees, where they're coming from.

*Fuck.*

A loud *weeoo-weeoo!* rings out, making me flinch in shock, and lights surrounding the field pop on, half blinding me.

I hear the cabin front door whack open, Charlie's voice cutting over the blaring alarm, "Surround the perimeter! Get a team to the house for Blaire and Luna, now!"

The spitting sound of a radio connection kicks in, a rush of Spanish words I can't make out due to the poor frequency. I hear James' name several times and then mine, but I can't understand what they're saying in between.

"Blaire isn't there," someone says. I lean out to see what's going on, but they are all around the front of the cabin.

"What the fuck do you mean, Blaire isn't there?" Charlie snaps. "Where is she?!"

"I don't know, Señor. The men who were on patrol guarding the house are dead—there's been a shootout. The others who were on station at the gates are inside the house now, and they said Blaire isn't there."

Without a second to spare, Charlie orders everyone to spread out and find me. "Forget looking for James. Just find Blaire—Nic, pull up the internal and external CCTV, including the guardhouse perimeter and the cells."

CCTV monitor's the guardhouse cells?

*Fuck.*

## 34

Charlie's men spread out to scour his land for me while he and his brothers watch tonight's CCTV footage.

They remain in the front by the cabin, out of sight, and I steal back into the shadows. I tuck up behind a pile of chopped wood, taking a moment to compose myself before I fess up to what I've done.

I'm not scared. I'm fucking terrified, certain Charlie is going to go crazy at me when he learns I've murdered his men and freed my brother. But I expected that. I was subconsciously prepared. What I wasn't prepared for was him discovering that I roped Tatiana in to help.

I thrust my fingers in my hair, tugging with frustration. I should have disconnected the external CCTV system—or at least checked to be sure it didn't cover the guardhouse cells.

I should have done many things tonight, but because of my psychotic tendencies, I blacked out, unable to think rationally, and now I'm screwed.

My heart races when I hear Nic point out exactly where I am on the CCTV—hiding behind the guardhouse—and it sinks when Andres snaps that I've killed their closest friends, including Rico.

“Keep your fucking voices down,” Charlie barks, ordering his brothers to come around the side of the cabin, nearer to where I am. I cover my mouth to muffle my heavy pants while he reels with Spanish curses and orders of death, insisting there's no time to waste. Apparently, anyone who has access to their British CCTV system must die right now. Apparently, they could speak of what happened here tonight—plus the fact that I won't be punished—and it could cause an uproar between his Los Zetas.

That's another thing I didn't consider, what would happen to my position in Charlie's world after slaughtering his own. I've made myself a target for inside assassination.

“Where did you say Blaire was?” Andres asks, insisting that he should grab me and take me back to the house. “You're not in your right mind to be around her, hermano. She'll be safer with Luna and—”

“I’ll decide what fucking frame of mind I’m in,” Charlie’s voice beats over the tension as he paces across the crunchy, wet stones in a rage. “I’ll grab Blaire. You need to disappear out of sight, Andres, so we can inform everyone you’ve got her. Nic, line up the men outside, thank them for being loyal subjects, then waste them.”

“Now?” Andres gasps. “You want to kill them now?”

“Even Diego?”

“Even Diego,” Charlie replies to Nic, lacking in any remorse. He’s in true leader mode, dishing out instructions and strategies without a glitch. Andres must shoot when Nic does, and Charlie will fire from inside the guardhouse, covering all grounds. Once all the men are dead, they must collect their dog-tags for their wives, before burning the bodies in the furnace. “After,” Charlie reels with his final orders, “call in the men from the safe house to hold the fort. I’ll fly our backup details in tomorrow.”

Nothing else is said, and they each leave to fulfil their duties. I stuff my face in cupped hands, hardly believing this is happening. My tummy aches, churning with fear and the need to puke. I nearly do when heavy feet crunch toward me, and a looming shadow emanates over mine, blocking the heat from the beaming lights surrounding the field. I stare at it through gaps in my fingers, knowing exactly who it is: Charlie. I can sense him, darkness and utter rage searing off him in a globe of energy.

I should try to explain that I thought he was going to kill my brother, so my actions have justification. And I should beg him to spare Tatiana. She was doing me a favor, and now...

Words don’t come to the surface, no matter how many times my lips part. I’m verbally comatose, and a heavy lump is growing in my throat.

Vomit. I think I’m going to vomit.

“How dare you?” Charlie says under his breath, hunching over me. “You killed my men? My friends?”

I cower in to my hands, hoping we can add together our wrongdoings and see them as equal. I hope we can forget this ever happened. But I don’t get a chance to fight my defense. He fists the front of my hair, making me yelp, and drags me to my feet. The first thing I see is a black machine gun hanging over his middle with the strap hooked around his neck, and I panic. My hands flay to grab at his, clawing at his wrist trying to pry him off.

“Stop,” he orders, and I do. I clutch at the joggers I’m wearing, detaining my hands, cringing under his rule. He yanks to arch my head back, and I yelp

again. He demands that I look at him, so I do, but I wish birds would descend and pluck out my eyes for what I'm seeing.

Charlie glares down on me with blue madness, painted in Robert's blood. It defines the strength of his nose and the sharp outline of his cheeks, speckled around his eyes. Near his temple, a pulse throbs, evidence of barely controlled fury.

"Charlie," his name trembles on my tongue, "I'm...I just..."

He shakes his head, and I squeeze my eyes shut, biting my lips closed to refrain from crying for his forgiveness. It's not the right time. Whenever Maksim got mad, it took at least a day for him to calm down and forgive me—after a beating, that is.

Luckily, I know Charlie won't hit me.

I squeak when he hauls me along, nearly pulling out my hair. I stumble and trip to keep up as he tows me around the cabin, up the wooden porch steps, and through the front door.

I smell the stench of raw flesh before I see it, and blood. Lots of blood. It's splattered on all the walls and on the floors, forming puddles in places. My stomach lurches when my eyes land on Robert's decapitated body, fingers and feet, arms and legs scattered across the rug under his middle. There's another naked body by the bench, but it's so mangled I can't make out any features.

It's the girl.

"This way." Charlie drags me left off the living area and throws me inside a narrow room, onto a springy, single bed. I paddle around to face him in a panic, eyes bulging to see. He kicks the door shut with a loud **bang!** and I cringe in return.

Nothing happens for a moment, silence swallowing us whole, and my entire body trembles, petrified beyond belief.

"Char-Charlie?" I whisper, but stutter his name instead, gulping down a heave. The lights are off, emitting darkness, and all I can hear are his deep breaths virtually growling at me. "Charlie, I-I know you're mad," I lift defensive hands, "but, you have to listen to—"

"Quiet!"

I jump in my skin as his voice feels like it's everywhere in the darkness, in every corner of the room. He finally flicks a switch, letting a ball of light form around us, and I can finally see where we are.

The room is long and wide with rustic, rolled-log walls and bare, wooden

floors. It smells like musky, male bodies. Eleven single beds line the back wall, dressed in white sheets, and edged in bucolic nightstands housing chrome lamps. The only other piece of furniture is a large dresser under a huge, square mirror hanging on the wall, directly opposite a single, curtainless window.

I think this is where some of his men stay—men Charlie won't have near the house because I'm there, as Nic told me.

"Keep your mouth shut until I say otherwise," Charlie warns, narrowing a finger at me, and I put my eyes down. "You dare to say one word and I'll—"

"I won't!" I squeal, shaking my head. "I-I won't speak."

On my word, he thunders across the room toward the window, lifts open the pane, and leans down to look outside. I watch him from beneath my eyebrows, studying the tense stance of his body. His shoulders are tight, and his knuckles are white where he's gripping the ledge. He's fucking furious, but understandably so.

*What the hell have I done?*

"Ven aquí!" Nic's voice carries in, yelling for his men to *come here*, and my eyes whizz past Charlie's large frame dominating the view out the window. "Listen carefully! You're all being gathered for a moment, so my brothers and I can show gratitude for your dedication to the Los Zetas! We've found Blaire! She's safe, thanks to you all!"

Radio fuzz drowns him out, sounding from Charlie's pocket. It's Andres, informing his leader and brother that he's in position.

My heart is a riotous howl in my ears, building to the anticipation of what's going to happen. I cannot believe they're going to kill their own men, for me. This is madness. I try to figure out how I can stop it, to spare Charlie having to slaughter his subjects, but all I can think about is how they will want my head when they discover what I've done.

It's too late to form a plan now, anyhow. Los Zetas chant in unison when Nic has finished acknowledging them for their loyalty, mere seconds before a heavy machine gun blows through the night.

***Bratatata!***

Charlie locks, loads, and fires from the cabin, with his formidable body trembling against the power of the weapon.

I hold my mouth in a state of horror, sitting here watching it all unfold. The bullets let off crazy bursts of orange, and men scream for their lives—saying Charlie is their king, that they'll do anything for him as they always

have—but it doesn't matter. The Decenas have no mercy. Another gun **boom! boom! booms!** and I assume Andres has stepped in. I recoil with every blast, squeezing my eyes shut.

Then comes the humming silence, wrapping around us in a blanket of death. It's cold, and it's ominous.

Charlie unhooks his weapon strap from over his head and drops it on the floor at his feet, clutching his face in a fluster. I don't know what to say or do, so I just sit here, apprehensive for the moment he speaks. I taste the sharp, tang of gunpowder in the air, listening to the piercing ringing in my skull.

“Motherfucker!” Charlie suddenly shouts to himself, swinging around to punch the wall, making me flinch. “Thirty men dead! Thirty fucking men...!” His head turns to me, eyes blazing. I buckle to my elbows and bow on the bed, cringing with my face stuffed in the sheets. “Come see what you've done, Blaire. Come see what the fuck you made me do!”

I shake my head, but he marches up to me anyway. He snatches my wrists and yanks me off the mattress, dragging me over to the window. He shoves me forward and forces me to bend, trussing his forearm across my back so I have no choice but to look. It's a gory, raw sight. My eyes stream back and forth across the bodies lying in the field as Nic and Andres do a round of gently toeing everyone to be sure they're dead.

“All those men have risked their lives to find you and keep you safe,” Charlie hisses in my ear, causing a violent shiver to rip down my spine. “They would have died for you, and you killed a whole fucking detail of them to save your smack-head brother—who's still addicted to opiates, by the way, and you fucking let him go?!”

“He's, what?” I scuffle around to gawk up at Charlie, holding his arms to keep him at bay. “What do you mean, he's still addicted to opiates? He looked fine when I saw him.”

“No, Blaire”—Charlie leans down, putting us nose to nose—“James isn't better, you senseless idiota. His withdrawal process was medically handled.”

“I-I don't understand?” I whisper, eyes glancing back and forth between his. “I-I don't—”

“He was given substitutes for the heroin to avoid the dire withdrawal effects—opiate based pills that he doesn't have since *you* let him go. And it's only been eight days, Blaire...you yourself should know it takes at least twelve days to fully recover from withdrawals. You've been through the fucking process!”

“Charlie,” I croak his name, lifting a trembling hand to my throat. “I-I didn’t know. You didn’t tell me!” I scream with sudden fear, horrified at the idea of James out there struggling to handle the withdrawals alone. “I-I have to go find him. I-I need to go get him.” I shove past Charlie, but he snatches at my arm and tugs me around. “Hey, let me go!”

“You’re not going anywhere.” His grip on me tightens as he yells in my face that I should be ashamed. “My men are dead! And you’re more concerned about your fucking brother—who caused all this?”

“He’s my brother!” I shout back at Charlie, lashing out to slap and tug, desperate to get free. “Charlie! Let. Me. Go!”

He does free my arm, but only to shackle both hands around my throat. In a flash, he yanks me forward and slams me back into the wall, hard enough to knock the air out of my lungs. Then he kicks my feet out from under me and slams me down on the ground. I gasp on impact, frozen with shock as he straddles me under his powerful body.

“Charlie! What are you doing?!”

“I should fucking kill you for what you’ve done!” he roars, twisting his hands on my throat, half choking me to death. “You deserve punishment! I had to make my brother kill his fucking friend because of you!”

“Char-Charlie!” I cough, choking up strings of saliva. “Stop! You-you’re going to...you’re going to fucking kill me!”

He doesn’t hear, too blind with rage, transforming into someone I don’t recognize. His face turns red, eyes dilating as he squeezes harder to drain the life out of me. Pressure forms in my skull, and my eyes bulge, lips pulsing and swelling. I splutter and gasp, pressing and opening my eyes trying to clear the dark spots gathering in my vision but nothing will do.

His hold eventually loosens, long enough so I can suck in some air, but he merely shifts his grip to strangle me in one hand while fumbling to unloop his belt with his other.

The sound of metal *clanging* on metal registers, flipping something in my mind, and I go absolutely crazy.

Drawing back, I punch the inside of Charlie’s elbow to buckle his arm. I draw back again, and punch him in the face. His head whips to the left, blood spraying from his mouth across the walls. I pull up my knees and kick him in the chest with a deafening scream, sending him tumbling back on his ass. I don’t want to hurt him—and I won’t—but there’s something about him tonight...I need to get away.



He's on his feet before I am, lunging at me while I'm choking and wheezing for breath. I turn over on my knees, thundering with adrenaline, and scramble to stand—but something loops over my head and tightens around my throat. The leather material cuts into my flesh, and I realize it's Charlie's belt.

I spin around and pound at his chest, then I tackle him, ramming him with my shoulder. We somersault across the room, crashing into a bed, and I whack my head on something. It knocks me sideways, causing a wave of pain to pulse from my cheek all the way down to my stomach. I hiss to handle the pain, and I try to roll over on my side, to curl up in a ball, but I can't...I can't move.

I'm so...dizzy.

I register movement around me, heavy trudges pounding back and forth across the floor. A loud **smash!** hits the wall behind, and shards of glass rain down on me, flecks of silver flashing in my eyes. The mirror. He threw the mirror. A piece of furniture scrapes and struggles on the wooden floor, and I hear Charlie grunting, as if for strength.

*What the hell is he doing?*

I don't like that he's not speaking at all. I know Charlie isn't a huge talker, but his present silence terrifies the life out of me.

Still dizzy and hurting, I groan, reaching out for something—anything to use in defense—but the belt wrapped around my neck pulls tight. I choke in a panic, forced over on my hands and knees to crawl across the shards of glass.

“Char-Charlie!” I wheeze, hand slapping between the floor and my throat. “Charlie...stop! Charlie, talk to me!”

He doesn't listen, and with the lack of oxygen and the dizziness, everything seems to happen in a blur. I'm lugged to wobbly feet, the movement intensifying the cramping in my stomach, and my chin is forced up. Charlie tacks the belt to the wall, on the hook that was holding the mirror, leaving me dangling on tippy toes. I struggle to suck in meager gulps of air, fighting to grasp control—but one of my worst fears personifies in Charlie.

He pounces on me, tearing at the t-shirt I'm wearing from the neck to the hem.

I scream so hard it explodes through the room, but he's ruthless. He tugs the t-shirt down my arms, causing friction to burn my skin. He yanks off my trainers one by one, then he tears off my joggers and my underwear, snapping the elastic at my ankles.

*He's going to rape me...he's going to rape me.* The epitome of fear shouts in my head.

I claw at his face, wildly trying to impede him, but he grabs my jaw and shoves to turn me to the side, squishing my throbbing cheek on the wall. The power of his muscled body is like gravity pinning me, subduing my fight. I screech for him to stop before he goes too far, desperately petrified of his silence, and that's when my world submerges with darkness.

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Charlie rears back and a powerful **wallop!** strikes my naked ass, going through my mind in a flash of red.

It's so quick and so hard that I don't register he's hit me at first. My system blacks out, and warmth trickles down my inner thighs, soaking the floor at my feet.

I think I've peed myself. I struggle to feel between my thighs, frantically humiliated, but Charlie pulls back and slaps me again, and again, and again.

**Wallop!**

**Wallop!**

**Wallop!**

Hot welts come up all over my skin, thickening with each strike. I dance about on my toes to escape his abuse, screaming out the pain, but I'm choking from the belt. If I had any sense, I'd attack now while he's at his most foolish. Men who fight in anger, fight stupid. They don't think properly.

But I'm not thinking properly, either.

*Please, stop hitting me.*

"You'll do as you're fucking told from now on!" Charlie breaks his ominous silence and yells in a gust of smacks. "If I tell you to stay away from the guardhouse, you'll stay away from the fucking guardhouse, do you fucking understand?!"

I cower under his mad yelling, eyes screwed shut to hide from what's happening.

*The guardhouse... He said I'm supposed to stay away from the guardhouse.*

He also said he'd never hit me.

**Wallop!**

*"What she said... I would never do anything like that to you. You know*

that, don't you?"

*"I love you, Blaire."*

"Fucking answer me, Blaire!"

"Aargh!" I screech in emotional agony, with his promises and the illusion of safety suffocating me. "You-you said you wouldn't do this!"

***"Podgotovsja!"***

*"I don't want to do anything that causes you harm...I love you, Blaire."*

***"Podgotovsja!"***

***Wallop!***

"Ow! Stop," I cough, scratching at the belt around my neck. "Stop, stop...stop! Go away!"

He won't stop, no matter how hard I plead and beg. I try to block it out, searching for that empty place in my mind, but I can't. My head twitches as my consciousness confuses memories and present reality. I can hear them both, Charlie and Maksim morphing into one entity, tormenting me.

***"You're my little pet."***

*"I stole you because I wanted you. I'm keeping you because I love you."*

***"Kill him."***

"No!"

"No?" Charlie roars in disbelief, and my entire body sinks. He grips my upper arm and turns me to the side, yanking me in position, then I hear the soft whisper of his hand cutting through the air again.

***WALLOP!***

That smack takes my breath away, the hardest yet. It hits the bottom of my ass and the tops of my thighs, over a spot that already scalds. My head thumps the wall, causing a deep ringing to set in my ears, and my vision blurs.

My weight hangs, the strap around my neck pulling tighter, and everything feels slower now, more...hazy. I can barely make out shapes and colors. Fresh liquid skates down my inner thigh, forming another puddle under my feet. It's thicker and warmer. It doesn't feel like pee.

I blink about, snapping fuzzy shots of reality.

Charlie's face is in mine, coiled with abhorrence while screaming at me to say something.

*Blink.*

Charlie yanks the belt off the wall, and I buckle at the knees, landing in his arms.

*Blink.*

Charlie cradles me in his lap, crying for Andres to help him.

Every time I blink, I see something different, and I'm so numb I don't really feel like I'm here. Until a hand touches the flesh between my legs, hooking a finger inside my sex.

The most unexplainable thing happens inside. I rush with a fear so violent it breaks me. The blackness of my mind fades and I crumble, begging Charlie not to rape me. "Please! I'm sorry...I-I know what I did was wrong! Just please...please, don't rape me!" It's hard to beg, choking against the leather still cuffed around my neck, but I can't stop. I can't let him rape me. "Charlie, please"—I grab at his arm, pulling at the material of his sweater—"please, I'm begging you, don't rape me!"

"I'm not gonna rape you...just relax, Blaire." His voice echoes, unfocused. *What's happening?* "Don't tense, Blaire...don't panic."

*Don't panic?*

"Please, don't hit me any—agh!" I scream, pain shooting through my stomach. I curl over, crumpling my face to handle the agony. "Fuck—agh!" Before I can stop myself, I vomit across the floor, heaving so hard my eyes swell. It burns. It stings and it burns. I cough to get it out, but I'm choking.

"Andres!" Charlie yells, patting and rubbing my back. "Andres, you need to get in here! Call the MDs! Fucking call the MDs! S'all right, Blaire. Everything's gonna be all right."

The door whacks open, letting in a gust of cool air. It swamps me, making me shiver out of control. My lips feel blue, teeth chattering to the wild boom of my heart. I shakily reach between my legs, smothering my hand in ready liquid. Blood. The blurry sight of it coating my fingers rocks my head, causing another bout of dizziness to wash over me. I squeeze and blink through the fog but it increases, turning white and bright.

"What the hell have you done?" Andres shouts, and I hear mobile buttons **bleep, bleep, bleep**, in a haste of dials. "Pick up, Shyam. Fucking pick up!"

"I-I don't know what happened to me..." Charlie's voice is wrecked, and I feel his body jerking like he's crying or something. "She's bleeding, Andres. She's in pain and she's bleeding. She's vomiting!"

"I told you to let me take her home! Fuck! Just keep her still! Hold her and keep her warm!"

"Charlie," I heave his name, lifting my hazy eyes to his, "wha-what's happening to me?"

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## 35

I lie in Charlie's bed the morning after he beat me with his hands, wrapped in a bloody blanket.

The curtains are drawn, allowing just a crack of light to stream in across the buffed floors, so I'm resting in the darkness. It's a familiar notion. I used to do exactly this after Maksim beat me.

I'm still unclothed, staring at the ceiling where the chandelier burns on low. I'm thinking about James and where he might be right now, what kind of state he's possibly in, craving opiate-based medicine or hardcore drugs. It's an anxious musing, as I can do nothing to help him. If I try to leave, I risk unleashing Charlie's wrath again. If I try to leave, he might punish James.

I probably wouldn't get very far, anyhow, as my head is all floaty like I'm hovering in a cloudy fog. I think someone injected me with something after I passed out last night. There's a ball of cotton taped to my inner elbow—I feel it every time I shift position in bed, tugging at the fine hairs. But it's only a slight discomfort.

It doesn't hurt anywhere near as much as *he* hurt me.

*He hit me.* My lips quiver as I remember, causing a huge swell to form in my sore throat. I cannot get my head around the fact that after his promise—a promise that once held so much value to me—and after I was finally able to admit that I am in love with him, Charlie actually hit me.

I want to die.

Tears roll out of my eyes and down my temples, soaking in my hair.

I just want to die.

Luna creeps in the bedroom when the sun hits a peak in the sky, shimmering on the matte gray walls in shades of orange. She carefully opens and shuts the door, and *clink clinks* over. It's her heeled slippers that give her away; she's the only person in the house who wears heels. My side of the bed dips, and her aromatic, floral fragrance mists my ozone. A light gasp escapes her usually glossy lips, as she whispers, "Dios mío, your face."

My face...it's likely black and blue from where I hit my head, or from

when Charlie was beating me and knocking me into the wall. Perhaps I deserve it for what I did. Perhaps I look like the old Blaire. *Well done, Charlie.*

I turn my head, so she cannot see even an inch of my eyes. The movement makes my throat twinge, and it stretches the skin on my ass, reminding me of the welts—from where he hit me.

*He hit me.* Oh fuck, Charlie actually hit me.

I push the memory from my mind. It's agony, like a fist in my chest squeezing my heart until it is nothing. The emotional pain hurts more than the physical.

"Blaire, cariño, I'm so, so sorry," Luna snivels, and I feel her hand slipping toward mine on the bed, an act of comfort. She blubbers with apologies for using me to her advantage, explaining how she had just wanted to ensure that Andres wasn't present at Robert's brutal murder—reiterating how he turns to drugs in his darkest hours. "I couldn't risk him falling off the deep end," she says. "I had to do something—I would have done anything!" She confesses that she was aware I might not ask Charlie to send her husband away, so she thought if I knew about James—if I believed Charlie was going to kill him—I would go after him, and Charlie would come after me. They would have stopped murdering Robert long enough for her to get Andres on a plane out of the country. "I just needed to get him home," she whispers, on the verge of sobbing. "I really, really didn't think anything this bad would happen, Blaire, I swear it. Please, try to understand my plight."

I do understand, and I have to admit, her plan was good. I am impressed by her cunning. If only I had applied the same attention to detail...

Turning over with a hiss of discomfort, I put my back to her. She doesn't seem to mind my ignorance. She sits with me for a while in total silence, assessing me, I imagine trying to read what's going on inside my head.

When she finally departs from the bedroom, I sigh in relief that she's gone. But then she returns and puts something on my cheek, making me flinch and rasp in slight pain.

"It's just an ice pack," she says in her husky accent from behind, stroking my hair. "It will help bring out the...bruising, so your cheek can heal."

I allow her to hold it there, welcoming the numbness that sets in my brain, and this is just the beginning of her tender nursing. She disappears again at some point during the day, coming back to handfeed me sweet biscuits and soup. I briefly look at her, at the burning guilt in her deep, brown

eyes. She's wearing baggy gray joggers and an oversized, round-neck t-shirt. She doesn't look like Luna. She looks wrecked, with her usually glossy hair bundled on top of her head, and her face is pale because she's not wearing any makeup.

"Blaire," she sniffles, her chin quivering, "please, say something? Do you forgive me? Please, say you forgive me."

I blink a couple of times, holding her shattered gaze. "Don't be sorry." That's all I can manage. I don't give her a chance to answer or argue with me. I groan that my bladder feels like it's going to explode, and she jumps to help me to the bathroom.

I pee blood. It's my heaviest period yet, and it aches when I push.

"Don't worry about that," Luna says in a fluster, reeling out some tissue. "The bleeding will slow down soon."

I take her word for it, assuming she's had periods like this before. As I stand from the toilet, I catch a glimpse of myself in the full-length window behind the shower, and I recoil. I'm hunched over and fragile, naked and unashamed of it standing at Luna's side. It's a blurry image, but I can see the thick, purple bruises wrapped around my neck.

*From where he strangled me.*

It fills my stomach with knots to remember. It makes me feel ill.

I take a shower, ritually to wash away what happened. Luna kicks off her heeled slippers, steps in the shower with me, and sponges me down with tears in her dark eyes. The water scalds Charlie's handprints stamped on my flesh, and I try so fucking hard, but I can't hold back from sobbing under the agony.

Then the other pain emerges.

At first, it's just a twinge, until my stomach is cramping so badly I can't stand it. I lean against the tiled wall on my forehead while the water beats down on me, hissing through clenched teeth. Luna softly insists I need to get dry, pull on a pair of panties, and a sanitary pad. "I'll go get you some pain relief medication once you're in bed."

I don't want any pain relief. Why numb out the only thing I can feel?

I shake my head and slam my eyes shut, lips pressed together holding back deeper cries.

"It's okay to feel broken," she says, wrapping around me from the side. She's soaked through from the shower, but she doesn't seem to care. "It's okay to need someone," she adds in a whisper. "I'm here. Let it out, Blaire. I'm here."



Her words disrobe my barrier, shattering my numb state, and my desperate howls tear through the bathroom over the spraying shower. It's like there's a pinprick hole in my chest, and it's getting bigger and bigger with every breath, every thought, so huge I know it won't be able to heal.

I can't seem to stop now that I've started crying like a maniac, tensing and screaming to let it out. The spraying water washes away my tears but new ones come just as quickly. I punch the wall, wishing for it to hurt but it doesn't. Nothing will ever match this agony in my soul.

When I'm reduced to a state of existing, worn out and raw from crying, Luna flicks off the shower and pats me down with a towel. She wanders off to dig some underwear out of the closet drawers and fits the panties with a pad before helping me step in them. She gently clasps a hand around my arm and chaperones me into the bedroom, matching my slow lumber. I notice straight away that the sheets have been changed—all the blood is gone—and there is a letter on Charlie's pillow, handwritten from him with his elaborate signature and his personal X.

At the sight of it, a weird sensation morphs in my belly, knots and twists and...dread.

*Don't think about it.*

Shutting down mentally, I don't open the letter. I crawl into bed and lie with my back to it. I battle to sleep without nightmares of Charlie's angry, haunting face, his ominous stretch of silence, and then his voice, his words...

*"You will do as you're fucking told from now on!"*

I dream of the aftermath; a reality I've created in my head. He's standing there at my bedside in the shadows, and he stinks of alcohol. The stench is so strong I can almost taste the spice of brandy on my tongue. It's weird, as Charlie rarely smells like this.

A rough, cold hand slips under my blanket, and I flinch in reaction. I pull up the blanket to my chin, just as the hand retreats. I hear the friction sound of palms rubbing together, then his fingers touch my belly again, splaying out to feel me. My chest constricts, hurting with heartache. That's when I hear him sobbing in a voice weaker and deeper than usual. Broken.

I awake in that moment to my own tears, squinting through the night at a large, dark silhouette of a man exiting my bedroom.

*It's just a dream.*

Over the duration of the next day, pain comes and goes in my belly, canceled out by the painkillers Luna serves like they're going out of fashion.

Maksim used to refuse the idea of me ever taking drugs to kill pain; said it was weak, that a trained killer must learn to own their pain, that it makes them stronger. Yet here I am, summarized to nothing. I am not strong anymore. All those years I trained and learned were for nothing. Charlie has stripped that girl naked, softened her... I will put on clothes again, but they'll only cover my transparency, the weakness inside.

I am no longer Blaire-Markov.

I am no longer my hopeful Blaire Decena.

I am just...Blaire.

I am empty.

The bedroom casts over with another night. Luna plays a movie on the flat screen hanging in the bookcase, I suspect hoping it'll evoke something in me. It doesn't. I just stare at the screen, barely registering the images. She tries to talk to me, even while I'm verbally incoherent. I do ask if she knows where Charlie is, but that's it.

"He's not at the house, cariño," she says. "He's been mostly staying away because he thought that's what you would want. So, if you would like to leave this room at all, you are safe to do so."

*Safe.* That's such a powerful word with such little effect when one says it. I was safe—and happy. Charlie was my whole world. I chose him over my master, who was evil, but at least I knew where I stood with him. I chose him over James, when I had the chance to run with him.

*What have I done?*

I cuddle a pillow and sob my heart out after Luna says Charlie is staying away, and she lets me. She cuddles me from behind and tells me everything is going to be okay.

I don't believe her.

I don't believe anything will ever be okay again.

But I also don't push her away. I need someone, arms to hold me and make me feel loved.

I'm not certain if I sleep. I think I just lie here daydreaming, tormenting myself. I think about how perfect Charlie can be sometimes in the way he touches my face or plays with my hair. I imagine—and almost feel—the way he kisses me: unholy, all-consuming desire, radiating through him and into me. Real love.

*It won't ever be the same again.*

"Blaire, this is Mary," Luna says at sunrise the next day, standing at my

bedside. “She’s a nurse. She needs to take a blood sample and check you over.”

A thought flickers through my head—she’ll stab me with a needle. *Please, in my heart.*

Elastic wraps around my forearm, my inner elbow pricks, and I feel the pressure of my blood pumping out. I focus on a spot on the bed to forget anyone is here, and Luna fades into the distance of silence—but I can’t mentally wish the nurse away. When she’s done taking my blood, she tapes another ball of cotton over the tiny scratch on my inner elbow, and then wants to check my face.

I shut my eyes.

Her fingers are short and stumpy yet warm as she touches my cheek, adding too much pressure in places. She asks if it hurts more than an ache. I shake my head. She’s convinced that my eye socket and cheek aren’t fractured. She then asks a few more questions: when was my last period, and if I feel sick or if I’m in any pain.

*Only in my heart.*

“Do you know what is happening to you, sweetie?” Her voice makes me feel...peculiar. There’s a tender undertone to what she’s saying. “You can talk to me. I’m here for you and only you, to help you, sweetie. I have the results of your internal scan that was taken two nights ago.”

I pull the blanket up around my neck as more tears prick my eyes. *Don’t talk to me like that.*

“She thinks it’s her period,” Luna whispers, materializing from the silence. “The Señor insists.”

The Señor. Their master. My new design of hell.

*Don’t think about him.* But I want to think about him. I want to think about the good Charlie: the man who adored and loved me. Not the man who went crazy hitting me. He didn’t mean it. He was in that dark place in his mind. If I had just run, if I had gotten away, none of this would have happened. He told me he can’t be around me after spilling blood. It messes with his mindset.

He still hit me though.

*Don’t think about him.*

I try to focus on the nurse instead, really looking at her. She’s English with golden blonde hair under the funny looking white hat she wears. All the English women I see are blonde, as was the woman Charlie was drooling

over at Maksim's party—the night he bartered me to clear Maksim's debt. She doesn't realize how lucky she was that he came after me and didn't pursue her.

No, she's not lucky. Charlie can be good. *Charlie can also be bad.*

*Stop saying that!*

I've finally gone crazy, but I'm desperate to go back to before, when my life was full of love and magic—but the darker me knows that's not possible. The darker me is realistic. The darker me knows better.

“Can I feel your tummy, Blaire?” The nurse's voice penetrates my mind, pulling me into the physical present.

I briefly wonder why she wants to feel my tummy, though I don't vocally answer her, just nod. She rolls me on my back, pulls the blanket aside, and uses her stumpy fingers to prod and poke me. I groan when she hits a spot in my lower abdomen that sends a surge of pain throughout my body, making me heave.

“I know it hurts, sweetie, but it will go away. I promise.” There's that tone of voice again, the sympathetic *there, there, it'll all be okay.*

I hate it.

She also checks the huge, angry, purple bruise enveloped around my neck, and the welts Charlie created on my butt. She touches and kneads spots there at the hardened flesh that's grown thicker under the bruises.

I'm glad when she leaves, so it's just Luna and me. She comes back a few days later to take more blood and practically shoves soup down my throat because I haven't eaten. She asks again if she can feel my tummy, too. It doesn't hurt so much when she presses down on that same area.

After my final physical examination, she and Luna talk. When I hear the mention of Charlie, I zone out. I become engrossed in the bookcase, where hundreds of stories have been stored on paper for people to relive. How many of those stories are true? Will anyone ever read mine? Would anyone even want to read about the brutality I have lived with, man after man dominating their power over me for nothing more than their own satisfaction.

I smile to myself, thinking about my story and how it would start.

*I, am the equivalent of a honeybee in their world. I, am their pollinator, edified only to fertilize their desires. But, if I accidently sting them, they will kill me, just as one would kill a honeybee.*

I have been killed by both Maksim and Charlie, abridged to nothing but a shell of a person.

It's so sad. I just wanted to be free. I just wanted to be happy.

---

A week later, when all the stomach cramps have passed and my period is lighter, I wake to the sight of flowers.

They're lying on Charlie's pillow next to the unopened letter, blood red petals on long spiky stems, wrapped up in clear packaging.

Roses.

A horrible, sinking feeling of dread comes over me as they look like the roses Maksim used to burn before putting on his parents' graves.

For a second, I consider the idea that Maksim isn't dead—as Charlie doesn't have his body. He's alive, and he's here to torment me. He's come to punish me for what I did.

In a panic, I scramble out of bed in my panties, brushing my wild mane back out of my eyes. I rush around to Charlie's side of the bed and poke about searching for a note, finding it crammed in the bouquet.

I'm so sorry, Blaire.  
Te amo, Charlie. X

It's from Charlie, obviously. The notion calms my rising nerves, but I'm offended by the minimalistic apology. I stare at it with affront, then at the flowers. Note. Flowers. Note. Flowers.

*He's sorry?* I ask myself with sarcasm. He hit me, and he's just sorry? So, does that mean we're okay now?

*No.* Anger comes over me in a wave of fire, balling in my belly. *No,* we're not okay. I don't want things to be okay. I don't want to be *that* girl anymore, who must accept what is. I want to love and be loved in return now that I know how wonderful it feels.

I. Want. To. Be. Free.

I. Want. To. Be. Happy.

I. Want. To. Be. Loved.

My dreams and needs are a mantra in my head, and I refuse to let them go. As soon as I can find a way to ensure James' safety, I'm out of here. I'm done living in this fucked up world of crime, evil, and danger.

I peel open the clear packaging wrapped around the bouquet and wander

across the bedroom to lay out the roses on the coffee table, patting them down flat. Nine roses in total. The amount must have meaning—Charlie’s actions always have hidden meaning. I would Google the concept, but I don’t have my phone. I lost it the night I set James free.

Thinking back, I count how many roses Maksim use to burn before putting on his parents’ graves. Two. It was always two, to show mutual feelings.

*“People lay flowers on graves to symbolize their emotions,”* he once said, watching a single rose smoke in the breezy, Russian wind while I was watching him speak. *“I hate my parents, My Little Pet, even now when they are dead. I do not love or miss them, and I do not think they deserve pure, beautiful flowers. So, I burn them.”*

I had already figured that’s why he burned them, to show his hatred. He was right to hate them, too. They didn’t deserve pure, beautiful flowers. They raped and beat Maksim whenever he was bad.

They were bad.

Maksim was bad, too.

And Charlie is bad.

Reminding myself of how viciously he beat me hurts. It makes my heart ache, and the pain swells so fiercely I can hardly breathe for a second.

Everything we had is gone in the space of one night. One fucking night.

Anew tears in my eyes, I cast a glance across the room at the vase on my bedside cabinet, to stare at the flowers Charlie bought nearly two weeks ago. They are brown and crunchy, decayed petals scattered about the cabinet surface around the vase. The irony of them dying is sickening.

I rub my bruised throat, broken emotions resurfacing, threatening to consume me. It’s a mixture of things, as usual. I want to cry, scream, and laugh all at once since I don’t know how to level how I’m feeling inside.

“You can’t go in there!” Luna shouts from outside the bedroom door, and my heart drops like a rock. “I don’t know if she wants to see you—stop!”

“Tell her I want to see her then, Luna. I miss her.”

*It’s Charlie!*

I freeze on the spot at the sound of him, totally blank. My breaths come harder and faster, lungs struggling for air, but it’s my only reaction.

“I don’t need permission in my own house,” he hisses, and whacks the wall outside the door. “Move your ass, now.”

“Why don’t you make me, *hijo de puta!*”

*What the hell is she doing?*

Nervous she's making him irrevocably mad, I lower on to the big armchair and hunch over, cuddling my middle. From this angle, no one can see me tucked into the chair. In my mind, I am hidden.

In my mind, I am not here.

*I am not here.*

I try to mentally block the sound of them, rocking myself back and forth in a wooden stance, but it's so hard. Their voices grow louder and deeper, entwined in a shouting match. Charlie is desperate to see me. Luna is refusing to let that happen.

"This isn't about you!" she screeches. "Chocolates won't help either, *idiot*! She's ruined!" Something thumps the floor, and I assume she's knocked the box out of Charlie's hand, still going mad with screaming. "You need to leave! I told her she's safe to wander the house! I told her you're never here!"

"Andres!" Charlie roars at the top of his lungs. "Come and manage your fucking wife before I do! I'll have your fucking head—I should! After what you've done, I should put a bullet in you!"

"That's your answer to everything! Blood! Murder! If you didn't—"

"Don't!" he barks over her, momentarily subduing her arguing. "If *you* had kept your mouth shut of lies...if *you* had just stayed outa my business, this wouldn't be happening!"

"I was trying to spare my husband!"

"I wasn't gonna let him do anything!" Charlie yells back, saying he only wanted Andres there to display a united front. "You stupid bitch! I love my brother—he's the only reason I haven't cut out your heart!"

Luna gasps, and squeals, "Cut out my heart?!"

I grab my face, unsure of what to do. I feel like I should get out there and defend Luna, but I'm just not ready to face Charlie yet.

Andres' voice interrupts the chaos, struggling to contain his wife.

"No!" Luna fights for what she believes in, groaning and grunting as if someone is tugging at her. "I am not leaving! ¡*Que te jodan!* I've watched that girl die inside this past week! I am not leaving her alone with you!"

"This is none of our business!" Andres yells. "Ay Dios mío, Luna, Charlie already forgave you once...if you don't stop—come, now! I won't tell you again!"

"No! No!" she cries. "Charlie, don't go in there!"

The bedroom door opens anyway, creaking on its hinges, and my pulse hits an all new high. I want to get up and find some clothes but at the same time, I can't move.

I'm paralyzed.

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## 36

“Blaire?” Charlie softly calls out from the threshold, his voice raspier than usual.

I lick my dry lips, scratching a spot on my neck. I subconsciously knew this was going to happen, him wanting to see me, but I haven’t mentally prepared.

*Just nod and say yes to everything.* It’s what I did with Maksim, and it worked every time.

Charlie shuts the door, and then his heavy footsteps get closer and closer, causing a clammy sweat to break out all over my body. When he’s standing in front of me, dominating my personal space, I meekly look up at him through scraps of my hair.

His expression drains, turning white with guilt at the sight of my bruised face, but I don’t look away. I study his clothes—baggy black joggers and a matching black hoodie—aware it’s not his usual, fitting attire, but the material still defines his bulky, muscular frame. His hair is a rowdy state like he hasn’t washed it in days, inky strands sticking out all over the place, and the typical bronze color of his face is gray, unkempt stubble dressing his full mouth. He looks a mess, and I don’t understand why. Glancing at his blue eyes, I notice they’re sunken and tired with dark circles lining the sockets. I can smell liquor on him, too; spicy, stale brandy. He smells exactly like he did in my dreams, when I imagined he was checking in on me after what happened.

Maybe he feels guilty for what he did? Maybe that’s why he looks like this?

I finally blink away at the floor, at his feet, and cuddle myself to hide my naked breasts.

“I hope you don’t mind me being here,” he says, settling in the chair next to me, sitting forward with elbows on his knees. “I miss you, and I wanted to see you—I’ve wanted to come see you every day for the past week, but I-I just...” he trails off, brooding in struggling silence.

I don't know where to focus my eyes, nor do I know what to say. I feel naked—and I am naked, apart from my panties.

“Blaire...” he croaks eventually, I assume preparing to apologize. But then he clears his throat and seems to change direction, stating that the nurse said I'm supposedly feeling better now. “She informed me she's been checking you over, and that you're eating a little more every day?”

Still half hiding behind my hair, I scowl at him, at his soul penetrating gaze, but then I glance away. *I need some clothes.*

He shifts forward on the chair, making it creak under his weight. “What is it, baby?”

I recoil against his endearment. He has no right to call me that anymore. He hurt me.

“Can you get me a top or something to wear?” I say to the floor.

He's on his feet rummaging through the closet before I take in my next breath. He comes back and tells me to lift my arms, so he can help me into one of his big t-shirts, a black one with a deep v-neck. I reach out with trembling limbs, detesting my obvious nerves. His grip on my wrists is shaky but delicate as he loops the arms of the t-shirt over my hands, then over my head. When I'm swamped in the soft fabric, he carefully pulls out my hair and drapes it down my back.

I let out a long, relieved breath, feeling so much better now that I'm clothed. I lean away from him, and he resumes his position on the chair, elbows on his knees. One of his feet passively *tap, tap, taps* on the floor. He won't stop observing me, either. I wish he'd just say something, so we can get this over and done with, and then he can leave.

I rub my throat where the bruises from his belt still spoil my skin. His breathing changes as I do, coming deeper and harder.

“Blaire, I-I don't even know how to begin apologizing for what I've done,” he whispers eventually. “I know I need to apologize but at the same time, no amount of words will matter.”

I shrug, using my feet to push myself back in the chair, to stuff myself in the corner.

“I don't know what happened,” he confesses, watching me as he does. “I just...snapped.” A moment of silence falls on him, creating a sphere of distance between us until he asks, “Are you in a lot of pain, baby?”

I shake my head, moderately ashamed that I didn't fight harder when he was attacking me. If I had, he'd be sitting here bruised from head to toe. Not

me.

But, when all is said and done, I care about Charlie. I couldn't ever hurt him.

My name crackles in his throat like he's going to cry as he says, "I'm so sorry, Blaire."

"Don't be. It's my fault."

"No...no it's not. Hey, look at me, please?"

The back of my neck pricks as I peer over at him. His intense, blue eyes are red and watering, bloodshot with obvious exhaustion.

My chin quivers uncontrollably. I want to cry so badly, for him, for us.

"It's not your fault," he says softly, glancing back and forth between my teary eyes. "I spent an entire evening butchering men; I knew I shouldn't have come near you while in that state of mind. It's my fault—oh please, don't cry, baby."

"I killed your friends," my voice comes out low and beaten, spilling with tears, "you said I deserved—"

He shakes his head, cutting me off from speaking. "Doesn't matter what I said. Nothing you could do would ever justify me hitting you." He glances down and pinches the bridge of his nose. "You're my queen...I swore I'd never lay a hand on you, and when I said it, I truly meant it."

I know he meant it. If there's one thing I'm certain of right now, it's that I know he snapped in his mind. I know he didn't mean to hit me.

But he did hit me. He broke the most important promise between us.

"When we were together for those three months, when I bought you from Maksim," he explains why he's never snapped before, "things were different. Things were so good. I wasn't working properly. I wasn't butchering people. I was in a good place...you brought me to a good place, Blaire. You saved me from myself."

"I understand," I say. It's all I've got.

"You shouldn't have to understand, baby. What I did was wrong. I'm supposed to look after you, make you happy, and keep you safe." There's more to what he's saying, a silent confession, but he just can't seem to find the right words. "I shouldn't be the creator of your hell."

Well, at least we agree on something.

"After what happened, I sent my men to go find James."

"No!" I yelp, sitting forward so fast my stomach pangs. "I-I haven't left, Charlie." I hold my belly to ease the ache. "I'm here and...I'm here because I

knew if I left, you'd go after him. Leave him alone, Charlie!" I yell, defensive of James.

"Hey—" Charlie gets up to kneel in front of me, and he tries to take my hands, but I shrink away. "Sorry," he whispers, drawing back. "I-I won't touch you."

"My brother..." I say.

"James is all right." He lifts a hand to emphasize the piety in what he's saying. "I've supplied him with sufficient funds and told him to go live his life, under the agreement that he doesn't try to take you again, and that you don't try to leave."

I can't fucking believe what he's saying. It's like he's hammering nails in my coffin.

"Tatiana and everyone else knows to leave him in peace, too, or I'll have their heads. I promise, your brother is okay."

We stare each other out in a second of tense quietness. I try to relax back in the chair, but it's nearly impossible. I don't like the agreement that James is only safe as long as I stay, but what else can I do? I'm only here right now because of James. He spent the better part of his life trying to protect me, so now, it's my turn to repay the favor. I might be angry at him for setting the wheels in motion to my downfall, but he's still my brother.

"Blaire, please, talk to me. Scream. Hit me. Anything." Charlie knots his hands together as if praying to me. "I watched the CCTV footage...I know you told James that you loved me."

*What the fuck does that matter now?*

Growing angry, I breathe in the stench of alcohol on him, detesting the idea that he's been living it up getting drunk, probably at the safe house with another redhead imitation of me, while I've been here emotionally decomposing in my own misery.

"All you've done is lie"—my face turns with repulsion, while his lights up in shock that I'm speaking—"I know Arjana isn't living *happily* in Mexico. I know you don't have Maksim's body. I know you had my brother and Robert... And, do you know what is worst of all this, Charlie?"

He shakes his head, practically holding his breath for my revelation.

"I didn't care," I say, and his blue eyes rush with tears. "I had already forgiven you."

His head hangs in shame. "I can't warrant giving the Albanian girl to my brother," he says, and his shoulders lift in a defeated shrug. "He wanted her,

and it's who I am—though, I knew it was wrong because I couldn't bring myself to tell you.”

I fiddle with the neckline of the t-shirt I'm wearing, lifting it to cover my mouth, while watching him collapse with confessions.

“I told you I had Maksim's body because I thought that if I didn't, you'd go looking for him. And I had just got you back...I couldn't risk you running off with all that was going on.”

“Where is he?”

“I don't know.” Charlie shrugs again, tenser this time. “I sent a team to go fetch him from Rumo's driveway after you shot him, when we were at the hospital, but he was already gone.”

This baffles me. I can't imagine who would want his body—apart from wild foxes. That includes Tatiana.

Thinking of her makes me wonder if Charlie has pursued punishing her for agreeing to help me get James out of the country. I wouldn't be surprised if he has. He seems to be the master of retribution.

“Rumor has it that your old trainer, Demetrius, took him,” Charlie says, and my tummy knots, “but a previous acquaintance of mine—who's been training with him—insisted he didn't. She vouched for him.”

I trust Demetrius doesn't have Maksim's body, either. Why would he want a corpse?

And who is this *she*? Who is Demetrius training now? How does Charlie know *her*?

“I'm aware Luna told you that I had Robert and James,” Charlie admits.

“So, what, are you going to hit her now, too?”

His head darts up, aghast by my rebuke. “No, course not. I-I wouldn't dare...” Words fail him. He knows he has no merit to back his defense.

“Why didn't you tell me you had Robert?”

“Oh, c'mon, Blaire...if I did, you'd have lost your mind worrying about where James was.”

“So, why didn't you just tell me you had my brother, then? Or, is it true that you were hiding the truth to kill him? Make it look like Robert did it, right?” Of course, I know he wasn't planning on killing him—Luna confessed she lied—but I'm bitter. Right now, I'll say anything to hurt him as he's hurt me.

“No,” he snorts with affront. “I wasn't gonna kill him. I wouldn't do that to you, no matter what bullshit he was spitting at me. I know you love him,

and he spent his life trying to protect you, Blaire...I hold that boy in high esteem for what he did for you.”

“Then what happened, Charlie, because I’m confused?”

“When I got my hands on him, he was all fucked up on heroin, and after the state you were in when you came home, it felt cruel for you to see him like that. So, I set him up in a nice hotel with a twenty-four-hour medical team to get him clean. My intentions were to reunite you both as soon as he was well—that’s why I needed two weeks, Blaire.” The lump in his throat bops up and down as he pleads his case, swearing he was going to get rid of Robert, then talk to me about James, and let me decide what to do with my brother. “That’s why I brought him back here to the house, so you could see him once we’d talked. But, I didn’t get a chance to talk to you, no thanks to Luna.”

I hug my knees to my chest, blinking at him, wishing I didn’t believe him. But I do.

“Why did you wait so long to kill Robert, Charlie? If you had him for over a week, why did you wait?”

“We were getting rid of the Albanians in France as a punishment—and Nic wants to take over their affairs, so I needed Robert alive for internal intelligence on his syndicate,” he confirms what Luna told me, word for word. “Trust me, it wasn’t easy letting that motherfucker live a second past what he deserved. I wanted to butcher him every fucking second of every fucking day.” His head hangs again, hands pressed to the floor near his knees. “How can I ever show you how sorry I am for hitting you? You name it, Blaire, and I’ll do it.”

The one thing I want from him burns on my lips, daring to come out.

“I won’t let you go,” he says to the floor, dashing my hopes. “I love you too much.”

“If you did, then you would let me leave. You would let me go and meet up with my brother, so I can at least try to find some peace.”

He glances up at me, devastated, touching his chest as if hurt by my words. “Can’t you find peace with me? Has it all been so bad?”

My heart squeezes against knowing better.

I stuff my face in my knees, wanting him to go. If he isn’t going to set me free, then what’s the point in discussing things? He’s basically apologizing and saying, *but fuck you. Nothing changes.*

Perhaps I can save the Albanian girl at the least. If I ask him to set her

free, will he? I hate the thought of another girl living in misery with the Decenas, a reproduction of me.

“Is your tummy still hurting, baby?”

I shake my head in my knees.

“Are you still bleeding a lot?”

I shrug. “Not really.”

“That’s good,” he says under his breath, talking as if my period is something of a big deal. “The worst of it should be over by now.”

“Will you let Arjana go?” I ask in my knees, croaking to clear my throat. If I can spare her, it’ll mean something.

“If I do,” Charlie says, his voice just as croaky as mine, “will you try?”

My head lifts, and I scowl at him. “Try, what?”

The remorseful look on his face suggests he means *us*.

*No!*

I won’t lie. I won’t pretend I can emotionally recover from what he did to me. He hit me! He hit me when he swore he wouldn’t!

I look at him, painfully gutted that this is what we have amounted to. Bargaining. The true cost of love.

“All right,” he says, nodding a couple of times. “Whatever you want me to do, I’ll do it.” He pulls a mobile from his jogger pocket, and without my promise to try, he dials someone. He presses the glass button, so his phone is on loud speaker.

The dial tone sets in, and Nic answers in Spanish with a casual, “What’s happening?” His words are muffled like he’s eating. “Is Blaire okay?”

“Blaire’ll be fine.” Charlie sighs, kneading his temple. “I’m calling about the Albanian girl.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah,” Charlie says. “You need to get rid of her.”

There’s a long pause, and my heart is hammering in my throat.

“Why?”

“I can’t sugarcoat this, Nic, so, I’m just gonna say it. Blaire knows I gave the girl to you, and she wants you to let her go.”

Nic laughs, then I hear slurping. “Course she does. Girls don’t like knowing other girls are being abused. Just tell her Arjana is gone. She’ll believe you.”

“Tis’ not about just making Blaire feel better anymore. You know what’s happened. I want to make it right.” He glances up and between my eyes, as if

it matters—as if I’ll believe him.

I want to believe he’s truly sorry. Something in me is screaming, *just let this go*. But I can’t. I won’t! I do believe he wasn’t going to kill James, and that everything he’s ever done was for my benefit, but it doesn’t change the fact that he laid his hands on me. He’s just like Maksim. Worse. At least my master didn’t hide behind reasons and false merits.

“Buy her something pretty and she’ll—”

“It’s not enough!” Charlie yells at Nic, and I flinch, pulling the big t-shirt over my knees. “My girl’s upset, and I’m not having it. Find another toy—perhaps your wife, the one you seem to have forgotten. I know she misses you; she bombards my cell with calls every damn day.”

“You want me to kill Arjana?” Nic says, ignoring Charlie’s insistence that he should reunite with his wife.

“No,” Charlie says. “Give her some cash and a passport, and send her on her way. I want to know she’s gone within the hour, Nic, or you and I are gonna have a problem.”

When he hangs up, I tell him that he can leave now.

He shoves his mobile in his pocket, looking at me with intense panic. “You’re not even gonna try?”

I tuck my arms in the t-shirt, so every inch of my body, but my face, is hidden. “What’s the point? It doesn’t matter what I want, Charlie. Whether I try or not, you’re going to make me. You’re not going to let me go.”

“You belong with me,” he says, shakily gesturing at the tiny space between us. “You know it, and I know it.”

“There’s a difference between belonging and wanting to be somewhere,” I say. “I’m not your toy to do with as you please. Just because you say I have to stay, doesn’t mean I want to. I...I’m scared of who you are now.”

His knees buckle under him and he crumbles, begging for my forgiveness. “I won’t ever lay a hand on you again, not like that, I swear it, Blaire! Give me a chance, please? I’ll prove it to you, baby. I won’t hurt you again!”

“You can’t possibly know that, Charlie.”

“I do know that. I fucking swear it, Blaire! I-I will admit, it’s gonna take time—but it’s time we won’t have if you leave.” He reaches under the t-shirt I’m wearing while still pleading with me, but I kick at him to get him off, warning him not to touch me.

“Oh, please, Blaire...don’t do this!” His hands rest on the edge of my



chair, scorching with urgency to touch me, to physically reconnect with me.

“What I want or need, doesn’t that matter to you anymore?”

“Course it does!” he says with desperation. “What you want or need means more to me than anything else—but I won’t let you go. I can’t.”

“That’s because you’re selfish,” I spit wrathfully. “You’re fucking selfish.”

He hangs his head in deeper shame. “Yeah, I know I am. I’ve always promised to give you choices, but I can’t this time.”

I scoff at him, looking away. I kick at his hands once more, telling him to go and leave me alone. “I don’t want you here.”

“I don’t want to leave you,” he chokes on every word, battling desperately to reason with me. “Please, tell me what I can do to make you happy again. You wanted me to set that girl free, and I have. You want me to ensure your brother’s life, and I will for as long as he needs my protection. Anything you want, anything but a life separate from me, you can have.”

“I want you to go,” I say through gritted teeth, narrowing my eyes. “I don’t want you here. Why won’t you go and leave me the hell alone?”

“All right! All right!” He lifts defensive hands. “If you want me to go, then I’ll go.” The floor creaks under him as he stands from kneeling, dithering about for a second like he has something more to tell me.

“What?”

Reaching for his face, he nervously scratches his stubble. “We’re boarding a plane for Mexico tomorrow.”

*Mexico!*

I gawk at him, horrified by the idea of spending more than five minutes with him, let alone leaving the country with him.

“No, Charlie, I-I don’t want to go.”

He regards me with upturned eyebrows, hemorrhaging pity. “I’m sorry, baby, but I need to go home. I’ve been away from Mexico for nearly a year now. My people are forgetting what I look like—and they want to meet you. I want you there, Blaire.” He pauses and sighs through his nose, as if choosing his next words carefully. “I’ll fix this. When I get you home, I promise, I’ll fix what I’ve done. I. *Need. To. Fix. This.*”

What about what I want? Doesn’t he care that he hurt me, that he made me cry? He knows I want to leave him, yet he’s just going to take me to Mexico?

My heart drums in my throat, while a million bogus reasons for why we

should stay here whizz around my head. None have credibility. So I resort to crying.

“Charlie,” I sob his name, sudden tears pouring down my cheeks, “please, don’t make me go to Mexico. I’m begging you!”

His head tips to the side, scorching in pity. “Stop crying, baby.”

“I will stop when you tell me we’re not going to Mexico!” I screech, shaking to get my words out. “Charlie, please?”

He stares past me at the door, unable to look me in the eyes now. His shoulders are hunched, fingers itching at spots on his legs, and he constantly chews at the corner of his mouth. I think he’s considering my request, and I’m absolutely stunned.

I wait, and wait, and wait, expecting him to say yes. My pulse is screaming and my hands are shaking. But he doesn’t say yes. He shakes his head and wanders off for the door, dashing my hopes a second time.

I frantically tug at the t-shirt so I can move. I turn around on the chair on my knees, looking at him from over the back. “So, what, you can beat me, and I just have to suck it up, or you’ll hurt my brother?”

He flinches to a stop, visibly injured by my words.

“Charlie, why are you doing this to me? I’ve always wanted to please you and keep you happy. I never wanted to do anything bad to you—just let me go!” I scream, and he steps forward, but I shout at him to stop. “Don’t you dare walk away!”

My heart hurts as I watch him watching that door like it’s the means to his salvation. Seeing him so broken hurts. But I can’t live like this. I don’t want to exist in a world where people hurt me, and I have to forgive them for them to do it all over again. Because I don’t doubt he will hit me again. It’s in him. That darkness never leaves someone.

“Is this how the other half lives?” I ask, erratically pointing at the balcony doors. “Out there in the world, is this how people treat each other? Because if it is, then perhaps I should just let this go, no?”

Charlie is honest in telling me that if a normal man did what he did to his girl, they’d be in jail.

“Though, not you, huh?” I say, my voice shattering with more tears. “Because you’re Charlie Decena,” I hiccup with sobs, “you can do whatever you want and fuck the world, right?”

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Blaire,” he says softly, taking another step toward his salvation. “I expect you to let this go and try.”

“Or what?” I hiss. “Are you going to hit me again? Or strangle me a little harder? Or perhaps rape me this time?”

“Or you’ll just be miserable!” he spins around to yell, and I cringe in to the chair. “I’m sorry.” He massages his temples, screwing his eyes open and shut, and turns for the door. “I-I need to go.”

“Why?!” I scream suddenly, so hard my eyes bulge. “So *you* can take some time to crawl out of the darkness while I’m left here rotting in it?!”

His head whips around to me again, and he looks at me with such intense sympathy it drives me crazy with anger. I won’t pity him. He doesn’t deserve it!

A red mist comes over me, and I scramble off the chair running up to him. I scream that I hate him and smack his face hard enough to make my palm sting, knocking him into the door. “I hate you! Why did you do this to us?!” I go into a blind rage of hitting him, slapping and punching, and he just stands there letting me. My knuckles crack when I clout him in the face, causing his nose to burst open with blood. “I fucking hate you...” I choke on sobs, crumbling to the floor. He crumbles with me, cocooning me in his arms and legs, in his warmth and his once homely smell that is no longer *my* home. That’s agony, Charlie no longer feeling like Charlie. I make another pathetic attempt at slapping him, but it’s a light thud on his chest. I am defeated with what’s happened to us.

“You ruined everything,” I whimper, gripping his hoodie with my nails, “and now, it’s over.”

# CHARLIE

Checking my watch for the time, I note it's been twenty-four hours since Blaire demanded I leave her alone.

It's been twenty-four hours since I unwillingly left her broken and hiccupping with sobs on my bedroom floor, a tormenting sight that'll forever be burned into my mind's eye, but it's what I deserve.

Because I hit her, and I killed my unborn...

*Don't think about it.*

To chase away a feeling of aggregate dread, to cloud the wicked images branded in my mind, I pull out my wallet and check the inside photo. It's a CCTV shot of Blaire perched on the hamper in my en-suite bathroom, absolute *paraíso*.

I smile and stroke her image with my thumb, fixated on the enigmatic, deliciously haunting visual I couldn't recreate even if I tried. It was taken a morning after I spent the whole night getting her sky high on orgasms. Her freckled cheeks are scorching scarlet while her dusty blue eyes are glowing in the aftermath. She's lazy in a strappy green tank top and matching skimpy shorts that I bought, dripping in unruly, dark red hair. It hangs down the length of her narrow waist to her ass, catching the morning light in fiery, coppery shades. Her slender frame is deceptively delicate, tiny toes curled, with her fingers gripping the hamper's wooden edges. Just stunning, and the expression on her face of wholesome exaltation melts my heart. She's leaning forward to squint up at me standing at the sinks, as if I'm the most significant thing in her world.

*Was.*

It aches to remind myself that I *was* the most significant thing to her, before I hurt her.

Fuck, I can't think about the damage I've caused right now. Too much is riding on my focus.

I search Blaire's oval shaped face in the picture, fixing my thoughts. Her unnaturally thick, dark eyebrows dominate her features, making her stare

almost wolfish. Entrancing. Sexy as hell. She is sexy as hell. Even with her imperfect fair skin, she's so fucking pretty. Besieging freckles cover her strong jawline, her sharp cheeks, narrow nose, and her gentle forehead. Nice, curving pink lips, not too plump and not too thin. Perfect for kissing.

Back to her eyes. I always go back to her eyes. Wide and elongated, like a cat, feathered in heavy lashes. She's got the most severe, mysterious blue gaze. The best place to get lost in. To stare is to forget.

*"Charlie...stop! Stop before you go too far!"*

I can't seem to forget this time, no matter how hard I keep trying. Whenever I see flashes of what I did, I cannot breathe properly. Whenever I see her face *that* night, her eyes burning into mine with heart-broken betrayal, I swear I could actually die from emotional asphyxiation.

*Don't think about it.*

"Are we loading the crate of weapons from your office, Señor?" one of my men asks in Spanish, interrupting my train of thought.

Flipping my wallet shut, I shove it in my coat pocket, as I'll die before I let anyone see intimate photos of Blaire. I turn to see my man is straining under boxes of trinkets in the entrance hall, and I remember we're packing to leave.

Oh, how I cannot wait to leave.

"Yeah, gather all the weapons," I say with a firm nod, pointing past him. "I don't want anything left—"

A heavy **crash** echoes through the house, and my man's head and mine whip to the staircase. Ear-piercing, Russian screams follow over a heavy **smash**, like a mirror or a picture hitting the wall.

*Her feet...*

I start in a panic, thinking she might step on something sharp. She might cut herself. But then I force myself to a stop, knowing she specifically asked me to leave her alone. *I must leave her alone.* She's in hell because of me. The least I can do is try to respect her wishes—if nothing else.

"Ay Dios mío, Señor"—my man scowls in concern, juggling the boxes he's holding on his knee—"is everything okay?"

*Do things look okay?* I glare at him, lips pressed in a stiff line. Motherfucker. Nothing is okay. My world as I built it is falling apart, and the one thing I need isn't reality. I'd give anything to go back and not hurt her. I'd give anything to go back and agree to let Andres take her home. If I had, she would have been safe from my men, and she would have been safe from

me. But instead, like the debauched *hijo de puta* I am, I let my monster run free, seeking reprisal for my men that she murdered in cold blood. I craved her pain—but not like this. I craved her tears—but not like this. No amount of Blaire’s pain could satisfy me. I know that now. I wish I had known it then. I wouldn’t have hit her. I wouldn’t have caused her to...

*Don’t think about it.*

I can’t think about it. Not even to myself. Knowing I have lost my lover, most trusted confidant, and ultimately, my friend, hurts enough.

“Everything’s fine,” I say while rubbing my stubbly mouth, answering my man’s question. Trying to ignore the craze coming from upstairs in my bedroom, I instruct him to take all the weapons. “Have a team clear out the armory in the guardhouse, too. I don’t want a single weapon left here because we’re not coming back.”

“Sí, Señor. If you are sure.” My man head-bows with respect and exits the house, dishing out my orders on his way.

I’m not sure of anything anymore. Even Blaire’s cabrón brother’s words torment me.

*“...She needs controlling and boundaries, rewards for being good and punishments for being bad. Without those restrictions, she’s dangerous.”*

Sauntering across the hall, I cast a glance up the staircase where I—and anyone around—can hear Blaire destroying my room. Luna went up to tell her we’re leaving for Mexico any second now, and it sent her mad with anger. I watched her meltdown unfold on the CCTV display of screens in my office, Blaire dashing about in a bluster of rage, crying that she doesn’t want to go. She went through my things like they were made of butter, ripped apart the fitted bookshelf and the seating area within minutes, all the artwork on the walls. The last I saw, she was in my closet demolishing everything in her wake, tearing at clothes with her teeth and kicking at shelves. I assumed she had wiped herself out, given the period of silence that followed. Guess she was regaining her strength to go for round two. And round two it is. Her screams reverberate over the **crashing** and the **banging**, and metal **ting, ting, tings**, like she’s tearing the curtains from the balcony doors. I vaguely make out her Russian curses, *mudak* and *pizda*. From what I know of the language, that’s asshole and cunt.

I shudder on the word cunt, a strong use of profanity, even in my language. But that is what I am, word for word.

Trying to block out her viciousness, I wander past the staircase, into the

lounge, and pour myself a brandy at the drinks cabinet, relishing in the hot spice as I knock back a mouthful. I look around the room at the leather seating area where I had Blaire sit, so I could confess my feelings for the first time; where we've lain to watch movies and kiss and talk and... In such a short space of time, this house has accumulated many satisfying memories of us. I'll be sad to leave it behind, but at the same time, I'll be glad to put an ocean between here and what I did to her.

"Nic's getting ready to leave for France," Andres appears in the doorway, informing me that our elder brother is set to take over the Albanian affairs. "Our men are nearly done loading the trucks, too, so we can go whenever you're ready."

I nod a couple of times, mildly uneasy about fetching Blaire. She's gonna go crazy. I consider tranquilizing her, to ensure a safe exit, but it takes at least a minute for the sedative to work. By then, she could possibly slaughter a handful of my men, and I can't risk anymore death between us all.

A drawn-out moment of silence follows my brother's update, but the threshold creaks as he shifts from foot to foot in quiet musing. I frown to myself, unsure of what I'm sensing in him. *Anger? Sympathy? Judgement?*

"What?" I ask, tossing a glance over my shoulder at him. He's lingering in the doorway with a black duffle bag hooked over his shoulder, having accumulated everything I requested—since I couldn't bring myself to pack *that* bag. He's clad in thick trousers full of weapon pockets, a hefty, bulletproof vest over a black sweater, and matching boots, ready for the dangerous ghost flight home.

"You all right, Charlie?"

Ah, sympathy. That's what I'm sensing.

I snort with sarcasm at his idle question, fixing myself another drink. "Yeah, I'm great." Toasting to myself, I toss another shot down the hatch. "Didn't you know, I beat my girlfriend and killed my unborn..." *Don't say it. Don't you fucking say it.* "Things couldn't be better, hermano. Gracias."

I sense my brother recoil under my cynicism, and I toast again with resentment. Anger is better than guilt, so I hold on to it.

"The miscarriage could've started hours before she bled," Andres says, and the glass slips out of my hand, shattering on the floor at my feet. "Shyam told us it could've been any number of things, you know that. It wasn't your fault."

*Why in God's name is he talking about this?*

I stare out into a gulf of oblivion, every gut-wrenching, heartbreaking essence of the empty loss flooding me: the memory of blood slithering down Blaire's willowy thighs, and the memory of it lacing my fingers when I felt her, when I realized what was happening.

I should tell her what's happened, but is it cruel to burden that girl with something I know she won't understand?

*Why did I hit her so hard?*

*Why am I thinking about this?*

Why, why, why...I'm tormented with whys.

"She was showing extremely early signs of sickness and fatigue," Andres is still making excuses, fueling my depression as he was last night when we spoke, "it was always going to be a troubled pregnancy."

*No...I cannot hear that word!*

"You said the men are nearly done loading the trucks?" I ask curtly, and Andres nods with a deep frown. "Then let's go." I gesture outward, ordering him to have his wife bring Blaire downstairs. "Ensure she's fit for traveling. I would go get her myself, but..." She's likely gonna fight me in resistance, and I don't want that. I don't want to fight with her. I can't. I've hurt her enough.

"You're not going back on what we spoke of, are you?" Andres sidesteps me when I try to exit the room, lifting defensive hands. "Charlie, I told you what will happen if you don't do the right thing."

I taper my eyes to mute his insistence, fisting my hands at my sides. He said enough last night over brandy and confessions.

*"You should have let me take Blaire home when I insisted."*

*"You should have told her you had James right from the start."*

*"You should have watched the CCTV footage of when you disappeared for a week, then you would have known Blaire was pregnant by her daily vomiting."*

The last verse he spat before I vacated his company hit hard, like a slug to the gut.

*"You can't buy love. You can't steal it. And you certainly can't hold it prisoner. Set her free, Charlie."*

The idiota actually assumed I didn't already know. I understand what's gonna happen between Blaire and I if I can't bring myself to do what is right by her. I understand she might hate me forever without end. I also understand that my brother is nervous I might never recover from my loss of her, that it might turn me inside out, recreating the blackness I once carried after



butchering my parents. But it's probably already too late. If she cannot forgive the wickedness I subjected her to, then the damage is done, and I hold myself fully accountable.

"Have your wife fetch Blaire, now," I lean to hiss in my brother's face, "don't make me instruct Luna myself—this conversation is over, Andres," I cut him off from speaking, shouldering my way out of the room.

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The curtains and blinds in the house are pulled, internal and external doors locked—bar the main entrance.

It's happening, and I realize now there's no going back. I've made my decision. I just need to follow through.

*I will follow through.*

My man Carlos is loading the duffle bag Andres packed plus a small suitcase in the trunk of the car, newly appointed Los Zetas are dotted around the garden ready to go, and I'm watching from the driveway waiting for Luna and Blaire to come down the staircase.

It's an ominous moment. My stomach is dangling over an obscure abyss, uneasy of what could transpire—but I'm prepared for a thousand different scenarios. If Blaire attacks, all my men are armed with tranquilizer guns. If she runs, the estate is surrounded.

Yes, I'm prepared for the worst. James was wrong about me. I can control Blaire.

She and Luna appear on the staircase side by side, and my gut knots. Blaire is drowning in one of my white t-shirts, with a deep v-neck exposing the tiny, plump curves of her breasts. It stretches the span of her arms down to her elbows, hanging past her knees. I notice she's nervous. Really fucking nervous. Her feet are bowed inward, and she's sinking in to herself, hiding in that lustrous red hair spilling around her delicate frame.

"She will be okay, hermano," Andres whispers from my left, but I'm not paying attention.

Blaire turns up her tear soaked face and whispers something to Luna, trembling as she does. I can't make out what she says. My eyes thin, and I focus on her lovely mouth to read her words, but I just can't make it out. Luna gives Blaire's hand a tender squeeze—an act that surprises me—though it does nothing to diminish Blaire's misery. Her eyes land on the floor at her feet with her chin quivering out of control.

I glance away, the knots in my stomach twisting, filling me with guilt. This is tragic, seeing her so wrecked, knowing there's barely anything I can do to ease her grief.

*What the fuck have I done to her?*

"Should we help the señorita over the stones?" one of my men asks, and I'm right back in the zone, realizing all eyes are on Blaire exiting the house.

"Get in the cars," I virtually growl, glaring through the masses, and they spread out adhering to my order. Slipping out of my knee length coat, I walk up to wrap it around Blaire, covering her half-nakedness from prying eyes.

I'm angry that my sister-in-law didn't get Blaire dressed. I know she showered, brushed her teeth, and ate a few mouthfuls of scrambled eggs, so why the hell didn't Luna help her dress?

"Charlie," Blaire squeaks my name in her husky accent, tipping her head to gaze up at me in tangible fear, "please, don't—"

"Why aren't you dressed, baby?" I interrupt what I know she's gonna say, unable to hear it right now. Too much is ricocheting around my head already. We're hunting down my sister, Gina, so she can pay for knowing Robert had Blaire; Nic has impending meetings arranged in our endeavors to govern

the Albanian affairs; I'm tracking James to ensure his wellbeing; and I must guarantee a safe flight home to Mexico for my brother and all my men. But above it all, I need to try and fix what I've done to Blaire, and I have no idea how I'm gonna do it without ruining one of us.

She visibly flinches under my *baby* endearment, lowering her eyes again—or perhaps it's my hands on her? Regardless, I slip one behind her knees, the other around the back of her shoulders, and I lift her weightlessness into my arms, to cradle her as I would carry my bride. She yelps in resistance, curling up with her tiny feet hanging over my arm.

To think this delicate, little creature is more than capable of killing is...bewildering. I often find her bewildering.

"S'all right." I kiss the top of her head, breathing in the creamy cocoa butter scent of her, a scent that will haunt me to my dying day. "Everything's gonna be all right."

I feel her head shake back and forth on repeat, a frantic act of defiance.

*It will be all right.* She doesn't realize what I'm gonna do for her.

I don't fully realize what I'm gonna do for her.

"I tried to get her dressed," Luna snuffles in our language, arching her shoulders in a naïve shrug, "but she didn't want to, and I couldn't force her. Look at her..."

My eyes narrow, curses burning my tongue. I fucking hate *la bruja* with a passion. She lied to Blaire about my agenda with James, claiming I was gonna kill him when I was actually trying to help the boy recover from heroin addiction—for Blaire. She set the wheels in motion to mine and Blaire's demise—and I don't give a shit what her excuse was. I don't care that she was trying to buy time to get Andres out of the country, to prevent him from doing something that'd screw with his mind. It isn't reason enough.

She's lucky she is the mother of my *sobrinas* and *sobrinos*, or I'd cut out her heart and store it in a box for all to see that I don't fuck around when it comes to defectors.

"Fuck off, Luna," I hiss, and saunter toward the Range Rover, nodding at Andres to open the back door. When he does, I duck to slip in the car where it's tinted and dark. *My domain.* I huddle Blaire in my lap, pulling up my knees so she's enveloped in. She begins trembling as if freezing to the bone, so I rub her toothpick arm to create some warmth but it does nothing to ease her jittering.

"You cold?" I whisper in her thick hair, nuzzling my nose in the silky strands. "Do you want the heat on?"

She shakes her head, gripping my tee at my chest. "Charlie, I-I don't want to go to—" Her head whips around at the sound of my door slamming shut. Carlos climbs in to the driver's seat and fires up the roaring engine, making eye contact in the rearview mirror while asking if I'm ready.

Blaire kicks at me, battling to put some distance between us. Knowing she cannot go anywhere, I let her shimmy to the other side of the car. She turns her back on me and curls up in my coat, face buried in her knees, and I'm not nearly ready for it when she splinters with husky sobs. The sound splays me open, catching my breath. I try to ignore it—the burning ache of guilt—but I can't.

And I fucking hate that I can't.

I tell my man that he knows where to go and shove my head back against the headrest, shutting my eyes to block out the notion that these could be my final moments with Blaire, and she hates me.

---

The drive is long, giving me much unwanted time to reflect.

Every so often, I look over at Blaire—who's still sitting with her back to me—and I wonder what she's thinking. I'm aware it's likely the obvious; hatred for me. But I want to know what's running through her head exactly. Fear? Regret? Sadness? Is she sad that we're over?

The second I say it to myself, I feel my face turning pale. It starts to sink in that, if I were to let her go, I'll sleep in a cold bed. I'll wake to mornings without seeing her equally sweet and intense face. I'll spend afternoons alone. I'll train solo. No more kisses. No more love making. No more touches. No more intimate, interesting conversations with my closest friend.

*Don't think about this, Charlie.*

Redirecting my emotions, I ask Blaire if she needs anything, desperate for her to respond. But she doesn't utter a word. I assume she's fallen asleep. Bending at the neck, I lean over to hook a finger around the hair curtaining her face, to check on her. I know she hasn't faded in a slumber when I hear her sniff back a running nose, when she shoves her shoulder to push my hand away.

My heart rushes with guilt.

I resume position on the seat, pulling out my cell to check for messages. One from Andres, informing me the plane is ready. Another from Nic, telling me he's pumped and ready for France and anyone who'll dare to stand against us. That'll be a treat. Murdering enemies usually takes my mind off things.

Shyam updates me on Blaire's latest blood report. Her HCG levels are dropping but not as quickly as he'd like. He's requesting more blood, but I can't appease him, given what I'm about to do.

I scowl when I scroll to a message from Celine asking if she can return to The Site to be with her ill mother.

She can kiss my fucking ass. *La zorra* is lucky she got away with only a broken jaw for confronting Blaire at my house. If I had gotten my hands on her first...I'd have torn her to pieces.

The anger that keeps surfacing embodies, and I want to strangle someone—anyone, just to feed my monster. When he's out to play, nothing hurts.

The cityscape comes into view, dominating the windshield, and my mouth dries like the Sahara. I cast an edgy glance at Blaire, seeing that she's still curled up in herself, bundled in my coat, unaware of where we're heading.

*Not long now.*

We cut up past the River Thames and steer into the underground parking lot of her apartment building, going down three levels before Carlos pulls up next to Blaire's old Porsche. He clicks open his door, climbs out of the car, and crosses the lot, heading for my detail in SUVs parked at the exit.

Out the corner of my eye, I clock Blaire breaking in to a sudden panic. Her hands flay at the door, grab the handle, and yank to get it open. My own level of panic leaps, and I'm quick to snatch clumps of her hair, to stop her from running off.

"Ow!" she screams, unwillingly yanking the door shut. "Ow, you're hurting me!"

"Fuck"—I battle to catch her wild hands, desperate not to hurt her—"hey, stop!"

"Let me go, Charlie!"

"You don't need to run—stop, Blaire!"

"I don't want to be here!" she screeches, making my ears pinch. Grunting for strength, she shoves between me and the door, making the vein in her forehead pop out. "Why have you brought me here? Are you going to hit me again? Shoot me, like Maksim did?" Our eyes align when she says that, both buzzing on different levels of adrenaline. "Or are you going to blackmail me for sex before you —"

"What the...no!" My face blazes with shock as she gives me an inkling in to what happened that night, the week after *he* raped her—when I tried and failed to save her. "Blaire, I would never..."

"What?" She shoves forward to glare at me, so we're nose to nose. Her nostrils flare and her teeth flash, as she snarls, "You practically raped me the first time you took me from Maksim! You raped me to take my virginity, you pizda!" Every square inch of her body trembles, frantic to scream out the pain.

I blink at her, horrified, and my mouth parts to speak but I can't seem to summon my own voice. I know what I did the first night I fucked her ass—I'm aware it was wrong in all the right ways—and ever since I realized I was in love with her, I've regretted it. I don't regret taking her virginity though. I have felt guilt, yeah, but I understood it was then or never. Her conditioning was kicking in. I had to break through.

"I'm sorry," I struggle to say, eyes racing back and forth between hers, begging for forgiveness. "I'm sorry for everything, for buying you, forcing you...I'm sorry I hit you when I swore I would—"

A harrowing sob tears from her throat, ripping my heart in two, and she stuffs her face in my chest. I blink up at the car roof to ease the sting in my eyes. In all my darkness, in all my coldness, I never knew emotion—I never knew guilt could hurt so badly.

Using one hand, I cup the back of Blaire's head, holding her close. "I'm sorry, baby. I'm so fucking sorry."

"You were my hero," she weeps, clawing at the chest of my shirt, "you were my sunshine, and you ruined it!"

The tears in my eyes fall, streaking down my temples.

I know it's my fault. I know I ruined it; ruined us. And I will pay the price for that.

"I want to go," she hiccups to say. "I-I want to be free. Please, let me go, Charlie. Just leave James alone and let me go!"

I nod a couple of times, prolonging my own silence. This is it. The moment I wasn't sure I could live up to.

"*Do the right thing, Charlie.*" That's what Andres said last night, and he's right. I must do the right thing, for her. It's harder than I thought it would be. Heartbreaking. I've never felt this way about anyone in my entire

life, and I'm just gonna let her go?

I can't fucking believe I'm gonna let her go.

"I brought you here to tell you, you're free, Blaire," the words fall out of my mouth reluctantly, but I can't stop once I've started. I tell her that I can't hurt her anymore, even for my own salvation. "I thought bringing you back to your old apartment would give you a sense of safety, that the familiar aspect would bring you comfort. But I can take you back to the house. I can take you wherever you want to go. Just please, don't cry, baby."

"What do you mean, I'm free?" Her freckly face lifts out of my chest, drenched in tears, and the sight of her makes my throat burn.

I nod to answer her question, gazing between her broken, haunted eyes. She turns ghostly pale, a reaction I wasn't expecting. I watch her rapid blinking and the passive way she licks at her lips. She thinks I'm tricking her. She often looks at me like that, but before, it was with curiosity. Now, it's with a hint of fear.

That chills me right down to the fucking bone.

"I'm not playing games," I rasp, tipping my head in defeat. "I know you want out. You don't want me anymore, do you?"

She explores my face, emotional agony struggling on her lips. "I...I wanted you more than anything," she whispers, and the damaged sound of her voice cuts right through me. "When Maksim was torturing me, punishing me for wanting you, I was willing to die just to see you one last time."

I look away, practically suffocating on her words. To know she would have willingly died just to see me one last time is torture.

I had it all, and I fucked it up.

"Why now?" she whispers, shifting to sit back. "Why would you battle so hard to keep me, to just let me go? What's changed?"

*Everything.*

Mustering all my courage, I manage to ask, "You can't forgive me, can you?" I'm speaking to the window. I just can't fucking look at her.

"You are not Maksim," she says innocently, sniffing back her tears, "I don't know how to forgive you."

I heave, as she knocks the air right out of me by a simple confession. That motherfucker abused her for ten years, raped and beat her, and she could forgive him so easily? I fuck up once, and it's over? Where is the justification in that?

"What about James?" I feel her eyes on me as she asks, studying my reaction. "Will you change your mind once I leave? Will you go after him, to punish—"

"No." I sit forward, elbows on my knees, and hide my face in cupped hands. "I won't go near him, neither will anyone else." *As long as he upholds his side of the deal and stays away from you.* She doesn't need to know that.

"Wha-what about me?"

I frown under her question, unsure of where she's going with it.

"What will I do, Charlie? Where will I live? What will I do?"

"You can live here or at my house," I say, swallowing between speaking. "I won't disturb you wherever you are, not unless you need me."

Threatening silence stretches through the car, so palpable, so thick. It's choking me. I can't stand it. I want to speak just to break it, but I can't. The agonizing ache in my chest won't let me.

"Charlie..." Blaire reaches out for my arm, hesitant to touch me. "Will Tatiana come—"

"No," I cut her off dead, turning my head to assure her that no one will come after her. "Anyone who is anyone knows to stay away from you, or I'll

come for them all.”

She shrinks into her shoulders, frowning, and blinks off into the distance of the car. I watch her intense, freckly features, unable to look away for even a second. Her confusion is like a living thing, burning with tension, and I imagine her stomach is wrapped up in knots, too—because mine is. I can hardly believe what I’m doing.

“I-I can go?” she asks for confirmation, eyes darting to mine.

“Yeah,” I whisper, holding her powerfully wrecked gaze. “You’re safe to go chase whatever happily ever after you desire, Blaire. No one will stop you.”

Her chin quivers, barely a second passing before her face is streaming with more tears. “What if I need you?”

“Hey,” I start, turning to face her with one leg hooked up on the seat, “listen to me, please, and don’t shut down. Just listen to me.”

Her big, broken, beautiful eyes don’t wander from mine for a second, as I tell her that I will *ALWAYS* be there for her. “Anything you want or will ever need is yours. I’ve sorted the important stuff already, if you choose to leave, that is.” I can’t help pausing, in hope she’ll say she won’t go, but she doesn’t. “There’s luggage in the trunk”—I nod to the back of the car—“and a bag with cash, passports, your cell phone, the keys to my house, and the keys to this car. I’ve also written down the latitude and longitude to my Site, so you can come back whenever you want. It’s your home, too.” The second I say it, I lose my voice. It really could have been her home. Our, home.

Fuck, this hurts.

“I thought The Site was a secret, Charlie?”

“It is.” I try to smile, to show her the side of me only she knows. “But I trust you. Always have.”

Her bottom lip rattles again, and I swear, I can feel her heartache in the space between us, threatening to cripple me.

“If you ever need me,” I try to carry on, the aching hole in my chest expanding on every note, “no matter the reason why—whether it’s for money, or someone to talk to, anything—you call at any hour, and I’ll come. No matter where you are in the world or what trouble you’re in, I’ll come get you.” I place a hand over my heart, to say, “You will always have a home with me, Blaire, even if we’re not together.”

“You don’t mean that,” she chokes, her chin wobbling out of control now, ample tears racing down her cheeks. “When I go, you’ll move on. I know you

will.”

“I won’t. I couldn’t if I tried.” I take one of her hands and hide it in both of mine, leaning down so we’re nearly at eye level. “I don’t just love you, Blaire,” I say, searching her depth, “I am in love with you; have been since I saw your beautiful scars.”

“Don’t say that, Charlie.” She drowns in sobs, reaching to grab her stomach. “It hurts.”

My arms are around her before I can stop myself, squeezing so tight I’m sure she can’t breathe for a second. “I’m sorry. I don’t want to hurt you anymore, but I do love you so fucking much, Blaire”—I kiss the side of her head—“and I want you to know, as long as you walk this earth, I’ll never touch or even look at another woman. There’s only you.”

She shatters, shaking with sobs, soaking through my sweater.

“Don’t cry.” I kiss her again, and again, and again, stroking down the back of her long, glossy hair. “Everything’s gonna be all right, Blaire. I promise.”

“It won’t,” she hiccups to say. “It really won’t!”

“It will, because when you realize the world is a lonely, loveless place, you’ll come home.” I fix my eyes shut, stuffing my face in her hair. “You’ll come home, won’t you? Even if you just need a friend, you’ll come back. Don’t walk this world alone for the sake of pride. It’s not worth it when you have a family.”

She pulls back to blink up at me, flooded in tears, and I realize then that she still doesn’t understand what it really means.

She will. When she needs me, I’ll be there. I’ll somehow prove what family means.

I put my hands on her tiny face, to touch her beautiful features one last time, and we look at each other. Really look at each other. I have no idea where her mind goes as I watch the distant abyss of her eyes, but mine drifts with memories of her. As odd as it is, I reflect on the times we’ve talked. I don’t think about intimate moments or the laughs we’ve shared. I recall the way this little girl makes me feel when she freely speaks to me: important and worthy of her trust. Blaire isn’t a great conversationalist, but when her voice breaks through a room, even time stops to hear what she says. She, has meaning. Blaire, is meaning to me. My true friend.

*I love her so fucking much.*

“I thought I could love you,” she says, as a single tear runs down her nose

to drip off the end. “Maybe I did—maybe I do.” Lifting a delicate hand to my face, to touch my mouth, she whispers, “Maybe that’s why this hurts so much, Charlie, because I love you.”

The End

***Keep turning the pages for the bonus scene***

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# There's Something About **BLAIRE**

*a bonus scene from BLAIRE Part 1*

by

**A N I T A G R A Y**

*#1 International Amazon Bestselling Author*

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

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**PLEASE NOTE:**

There's Something About BLAIRE is written in American English with references to numerous languages.

It is primarily set in Britain.

There is a language index at the back of the book for your reference.

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*Dedicated to the love of my life, Shane, and hubba hubba Eli XOXO*

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**Reader reference:** chapter one of BLAIRE Part 1 in BLAIRE’S SAGA, from Charlie’s point of view.

My man Tojo and I are nearing Maksim’s club, so I put the file I have on Blaire in the glove compartment. Not that I need more time to study its contents. This is the thinnest file I’ve ever received on someone. No age. No photo. No physical description, bar, she’s a young girl who looks to be in her late teens with dark red hair. No residence address. Nothing of importance, really. What it does mention amongst the irrelevant information, I already know from my good friend, Carl. Blaire is a martial artist trained fighter, protects her master on instinct as head of his security detail, a high level hacker, and obedient to no fault.

“As soon as she arrives, let me know,” I tell Tojo, and lean forward to tuck a gun in the back of my jeans. “I want to know what this señorita, Blaire, actually looks like, how she’s dressed, and if she’s armed, ¡ya pronto!”

“You’re really going to shoot her?” he asks in Spanish, pulling over ten yards from the club.

I grin at him on a side glance. “You bet I am.” *And I’ll enjoy it.*

I’m told from everyone who *will* talk about Blaire that she is Maksim’s most prized possession. So I’m gonna hit him where it really hurts.

Nearly five years back, we did a bank job together in Russia. It was supposed to be easy; heist the foreign money and leave the country with an hour window free of police. There’s always a chance of getting caught on a job like that, but Maksim promised he had full control of his government. If anyone got arrested, he’d pull some strings and all charges would be dropped. That was the deal. I wouldn’t have committed otherwise.

He lied.

I got caught holding off a surprise police chase and ended up serving four years in a Russian jail, living in overcrowded filth and taking shifts just to sleep. Not only that, Maksim spent the money we stole and didn’t give my men a cent.

Now, it’s payback, and I’ve got four years’ worth of vengeance boiling on the surface.

“When you hear a gun go off”—I pass Tojo an earpiece while putting in

my own—“surround the club.”

“Sí, Señor.” He nods, then radios the rest of my security detail. He orders them to scatter about the place and stay unseen. I don’t want anyone suspecting a hit tonight. Coming alone stows any suspicion. And that was the only way I could get Maksim to agree to a one on one meeting, plus his pet, as he supposedly calls her. He believes I’m hiring her for a job.

*Tonto.*

I get outa the car and walk the empty street up to the club, well aware of my surroundings. It’s an exposed, dead-end road with few places to hide. The parking lot directly opposite is clustered with cars, so I keep an eye out.

When I reach the club entrance, two brawny doormen extend hands to say I can enter. They’ve been expecting me; I’ve already paid them well. That’s the biggest problem with Russians, you can’t trust them. My men would never sell the loyalty they have for me. A price cannot be put on it. We’re a *cadre* for a cause, not money.

I shoulder through the double doors. Thumping erotic music reverberates under my feet. The club is in full swing, pulsing in red lights and iced in whores. One comes up to me as I’m nearing the PRIVATE ONLY door at the back by the bar, a curvy blonde with huge bouncy tits.

“You want a show, hmm?” she drawls above the pumping music, flicking her hair back over her shoulders so nothing hides her merits. She’s Russian, and while I like the accent, its sexy gargling rasp, I fucking hate Russians. “I’m good, you know, and I do more than dance.”

*I’ll bet she does.* I’m certain as her manicured hand touches the belt of my jeans.

Staring at her tits, I flash her a smile and shake my head at once, allowing her to walk with me for a moment. She’s a sure thing, but boring and predictable, and too naked already. She could learn something from my trained women back at The Site. Sometimes, more is less. Clothes should come off bit by bit, not all in one go or before a show. It leaves no room for the imagination. And those gold panties she’s wearing certainly leave no room for my imagination.

Digging into my jeans pocket, I find a fifty pound note. I give it to her, trying to spare her if things turn ugly tonight. “Now piss off.”

“Hello, Mr. Charlie Decena,” a security guard says in accented Russian, pulling my attention from the whore. He’s a big guy, taller and wider than I am. He’s guarding the PRIVATE ONLY door.

“Maksim knows I’m here,” I say over the music, pointing out for the blonde to leave. “I told you to piss off.”

On that note, she drops her head and disappears into the crowd, slipping the money in her panties.

“Please spread out your arms, Mr. Charlie Decena,” the big guy says, using his body to communicate his request, “and your legs so I can pat you down.”

I laugh, throwing my head back, and then stop to look right at him. “Say something like that to me again, and I’ll cut out your tongue.”

The atmosphere turns ice cold. The hard faced Russian holds my stare for a moment, unsure.

I gesture past him with a steady hand. “Open that door.”

He touches his ear as if listening to something, keeping his eyes on mine. Then he pushes the door open and stands back.

*Good decision.*

I shove his chest to knock him back a step, making him grunt in anger, and prowl down the red lobby to Maksim’s office. I let myself in. The place hasn’t changed at all, with deep red walls and polished black marble floors, messy papers stacked about his wide desk in the middle of the room. There’s a lamp on the desk, a dim orange glow offering the only means of light.

Even Maksim hasn’t changed.

He’s on his feet by the door to greet me. He also head-bows. Scraggy shoulder length brown hair frames a tough face, and he’s wearing a showy gray suit against a white shirt. His brut cologne smells spicy, an overpowering scent for a man.

“Hello, my friend,” he says. I’m glad to see he’s alone as I ordered him to be, giving him my word that he’s safe in my company.

That will come back to bite me in the ass. My word is how I measure myself as a leader. If anyone finds out I’ve broken it, it could be bad for business.

“I am very sorry about my doorman.” Reaching out, Maksim gives me his hand to shake. “I should have told him not to frisk you.”

“Seems you still have some learning to do when it comes to playing boss then, doesn’t it?” I don’t return his handshake gesture. I shut the door, cross his gloomy office, and sit in the middle of a leather couch. “You got something to say to me? To my men?”

*Keep it cool,* I advise myself, not wanting to spoil my plan. But he’d



expect me to ask for an apology at the least.

I rest back in the couch to come across relaxed, the leather creaking under my weight. There's an uneasy moment between us. He's just looking at me, calculating things in his bent mind.

"Sit down, Maksim," I tell him with a nod. "You're making the place look untidy."

He does, the muscles in his jaw contracting. He fixes his shirt collar and wanders around to sit behind his desk, facing me in the swivel office chair. "You know I am sorry about what happened, Charlie."

"Oh, you are?" I say, raising my eyebrows.

"Of course I am. I tried to break you out of jail, but my government closed every border." His Russian tone is uneasy, but he lifts his chin in an attempt to look strong and honest. "My government wouldn't give in. The money we took belonged to a man of importance—a Prince."

*Pendejo.*

The fact he expects me to believe that is insulting. I know the money we took was laundered by his President. But, if that was the case, why didn't he give it back in exchange for my freedom? Why did my government have to bargain with Russia, trade a priceless software system to make certain I only served four years instead of fifteen?

"I have been sitting on needles wondering why I haven't heard from any of you," Maksim adds, trying to hold eye contact but he fails miserably, constantly glancing down. "You have been out of jail for a while now. Why has it taken this long for you to come speak with me, my friend?"

"That's why you beefed up security after I went to jail..." I say, observing his words carefully. "That's when this girl, Blaire, came onto the scene. You were worried my Los Zetas were gonna attack."

Now, her position makes sense.

Maksim's face goes blank, his golden brown eyes clouding over in impassiveness. He realizes what he's just done, admitted he was prepared to fight against me.

*Bad move.*

The notion over-fuels my desire to murder his security blanket. But I reign myself in for the objective tonight, keeping my features ironed out.

"I tell you what, if you say you tried to get me out," I shrug one shoulder, "I guess I believe you."

His baffled eyes narrow in on mine. "You do?"

Like fuck I do. But I'm not about to admit that. My plan of revenge won't taste so sweet if I can't lure him into a false state of trust.

"Course I do," I say, ending the conversation. "Where's the girl? You know she's the reason I'm here. I have questions and not a lot of time."

"Blaire should be here any moment. I'm sorry she isn't already." Turning over his wrist, he checks the time on his watch. "She is usually very punctual."

*Maybe she knows she's gonna die tonight.*

"All right then." I drape one arm over the back of the couch to get comfortable, stretching out my legs. "Tell me about her until she arrives. I want to know if she's fit for the job."

I don't want to know any more about her. I'm just killing the silence, ensuring we don't talk about how he betrayed me. I'm not sure what I'll do if he steps outa line, and I don't want him dead. I want him to suffer emotionally.

That is worse than death.

"You say it's a CCTV hacking job you need her skills for, my friend?"

That's the story I fed him. He thinks I'm doing a bank job in London, which I am, but I already have a hacker to fiddle London's CCTV system. I used this excuse to get near Blaire in a safe, private setting.

"Yeah, that's right." I hold his cagey, wandering stare, as he tells me she can manipulate almost every system out there. I already know this. It's gonna be a waste of talent killing her.

"Where does she live?" I ask, maintaining the facade.

The damn idiot tells me her address. Though, I suspect there's motive behind his stupidity.

"A silver Porsche just pulled up in the parking lot," Tojo says in my ear in Spanish. I try not to frown with concentration. "A woman's inside. She's just getting out now. Jogging across the road for the club. Around five foot five, dark red hair tied back in a bun. She's wearing a black leather jacket, sports style pants, and white sneakers. No weapon in sight. She's entering the club now."

In time with Tojo's update, the phone on Maksim's desk buzzes. He apologizes before answering, speaks to his caller in Russian, and then hangs up.

"She is here," he says, glancing at the door and then back at me. "Charlie, my friend, there are certain things I cannot have Blaire knowing." Again, he

glances at the door. “If either of us cannot answer one of your questions, please don’t take offence. I’ll answer all of them once she’s gone. Is that okay?”

“Sure it is.” I give him my best smile. “We’ll talk when she’s gone,” I lie.

“Thank you.” He touches his chest, relaxing under the pressure. “Also, I usually give Blaire a grilling, if you can call it that—it’s our one to one time—so if you don’t mind, I’ll talk to her for a moment and then I’ll introduce you.”

I shrug and nod at once. That’ll be my time to strike.

Three gentle knocks on the door, and I’m already aware this girl is either small or weak. Can’t be weak because she’s a fighter.

Maksim presses a button on his desk, leans down and says, “Come in, My Little Pet.”

It’s interesting that he calls her his pet in front of me. When I read that in the file, I assumed it was a private thing.

The door opens and a sinister presence fills the room before she does, making the hairs on my arms stand up. Then she comes in, a young, slender redhead dressed all in black and awful white sneakers.

I watch in curiosity, my eyes sweeping up and down her body. She moves toward Maksim like a cat with elegant poise, as quiet as the night. If I wasn’t looking at her, and if I couldn’t sense her dark energy, I probably wouldn’t know she’s here.

She’s scowls at me from the corner of her eye. *Fuck*, she’s got nice eyes, evil and haunting. I can’t tell what color because it’s so damn dark in here.

I almost order Maksim to turn on the lights, so I can see her properly. But I don’t. I want to observe how they interact without my influence. I want to know if the stories are true that they connect on a mental level.

She stops in front of his desk and folds her tiny hands behind her back.

“You are late. My. Little. Pet,” Maksim says in Russian, probably thinking I can’t understand the language.

The girl’s very focused in holding his gaze, standing there in stark confidence.

“My phone was accidentally on silent,” she says softly in hoarse Russian. “I’m sorry, Сәп Maksim.” She then half-bows in respect, and my attention zeros in on her perky little ass.

Maksim’s eyes don’t stray from hers. He sits forward, elbows on the desk, and entwines his fingers. I become aware of something I wasn’t expecting—I

think he's in love with her. It's in the way he searches her eyes, how his burn in that foreign emotion.

*Good.* I'm glad he's in love with her. It'll hurt him much more than I could've anticipated when she's dead.

I reach for my gun in the back of my jeans, trying not to make a sound on the couch, but Maksim snaps under his breath, "No more keeping your phone on silent, Blaire."

She flinches and steps back like he just slapped her.

I can't believe it. This cool, sinister little girl is frightened of him?

My plan goes out the window. I resume position on the couch. Now, I'm not only curious, but intrigued.

"You got that?" Maksim says, glaring at her. I think he's trying to show authority here. Since she entered the room, his presence has magnified.

She nods a couple of times, and her throat contracts as if she's gulping.

"What have you been doing for the past few days?" he asks in Russian, holding my interest prisoner.

"Nothing much," she whispers back. I have to cup the crotch of my jeans. She's got a lovely, raspy voice. "I've been training of course, went to the salon yesterday, and I went out to a club last night."

"Yes." Maksim cocks his head, his gaze turning dark with...lust, maybe? "My men saw you driving through the countryside. Did you have fun?"

She shakes her head minutely. "I was just getting out of the apartment, Cəp Maksim ."

"Of course, My Little Pet. Of course. Though, next time you want to visit a club, you come here." He taps his desk. "You do not have to travel to strange places to have fun."

"Okay. As you wish."

Wow. She is flawlessly passive, just as Carl said.

There's a bout of silence, then Maksim gestures at me. "My Little Pet, meet my old friend, Mr. Decena."

Turning her head, she scowls at me. A light above me flickers on and buzzes, glowing over her petite frame.

Deep, pooling blue eyes in an oval, freckly face, and *Dios mío*, she's younger than I expected—could pass for sixteen. Though, I don't buy that. Maksim knows I'd cut off his balls if I found out he's been playing with kids again. I wouldn't pardon him a second time, nor would I let my need for revenge get in the way. I murdered my own parents for selling my baby sister

to a known Cartel pervert.

I hold Blaire's menacing gaze, admittedly engrossed. She's deadly pretty with thick, dark eyebrows over those evil, sexy blue eyes, a narrow nose, and nice natural pink lips. No makeup and absolutely no fashion sense, a leather jacket with sports pants and sneakers. Who wears that?

But I like this about her. She doesn't give a crap about humdrum things most women would die over.

And she's as ominous as hell. I can feel how much blood she's got on her hands.

*Why haven't I shot her already?*

"No matter what happens here tonight," Maksim says in Russian, "you are ordered not to challenge him."

Little Miss Evil nods, still scowling at me.

"Mr. Decena would like to ask you some questions," Maksim informs her. I barely hear him. I'm checking the girl out, staring up and down her slender body.

No curves. She's athletic built. I wonder if she's got a nice pussy. I suspect not. It's probably battered to fuck where Maksim has been screwing her. I know he's a sadistic *hijo de puta*.

I grin, amused at my own sarcasm. She shifts on her feet as I grin, and I realize I make her uncomfortable.

Oh, this could be fun.

Rather than killing her right away, I'm gonna toy with her for a bit. I'll make her think I really do want her for the job. Luckily, I have the note the Chinese hacker gave me this morning in my pocket. I'll use it to my advantage, should I let this show go on to that effect.

"What do I call you, Señorita?" I ask, trying to make eye contact but her gaze is inert. "My Little Pet, or Blaire?"

Maksim nods.

"Blaire." It sounds like she purrs her name, but still, no emotion. She's like a fucking robot. She needs touching in the right place. No woman—or in her case, no girl, can hide arousal.

"All right," I say, determined to make that connection, "you can call me Charlie."

Again, no reaction. But Maksim blinks in surprise.

I let the silence linger for a moment, drumming my fingers against the back of the couch while I think up a way to break through her icy mien.

“Blaire, as in, field of battle?”

There we go. She scrunches up her features, but it only makes her look more sexy and wicked. It seems the file was useful after all. It mentioned the connotation of her name.

Maksim laughs, confirming my statement.

“You never mentioned how pretty she is,” I say, and the girl’s face blanks. “Nor did you mention that lovely, whispery voice.” I’d like her to talk in my ear while I fuck her so hard her pussy bruises.

“Ohhh, my friend,” Maksim smiles at Blaire in pure conceit, “don’t take it personally. I do not boast of her to anyone.”

“Why not? She’s a nice looking girl.” I stare her up and down, and lower my tone to say, “Siempre me he preguntado acerca de los pelirrojos.” *I’ve always wondered about redheads.*

I’ve never fucked a redhead before.

The girl swallows, almost showing how nervous she is, though not quite. She’s very good at this.

“I wouldn’t want you excited to see her,” Maksim says, growing in confidence, “for she is mine and mine alone.”

“Hmm.” I hum, ignoring him. I can’t stop looking at her, at her toned legs in those tight pants. I’d like them wrapped around my neck. “She sounds kinda Russian,” I say, ceaselessly drumming my fingers in interest. “Where’s she from?”

“She’s not Russian.” Maksim shakes his head, his face tense in anxiety. That’s one question I’ll be gutted never knowing the answer to, what ethnic blood runs through her veins.

I nod at Maksim to show I understand.

“How old are you, Blaire?” The question comes out before I can stop it.

“You can answer him.”

“Eighteen,” she says.

My eyebrows shoot up. Old enough. And fuck, that voice...

“What do you do, exactly?” I ask, searching her soulless eyes. “I’ve heard various stories.”

Maksim grants her permission to speak, so she says, “I deal in technology.”

“And she’s also on my security detail.”

“This small girl is part of your security?” I act as though I didn’t know, frowning in a false state of confusion.

“She is.” Maksim smiles at her like a pretentious *joder*. “She is a beauty in battle. Trained to defend me on instinct unless I say otherwise.”

I’d like to see this girl fight. The file stated she has no losses under her belt. In fact, I’d like to fight her myself, throw her around a bit before tearing her outa her clothes.

“And your parents?” I say, still frowning at her. If I could persuade her into going home to them, into turning her back on Maksim, that’d hurt him more. Then I might be able to spare her life.

For some strange reason, I don’t want to kill her anymore.

Maksim doesn’t give her permission to speak. So she just stands there looking at me, empty of sentiment.

It pisses me off. No one refuses to answer me.

My expression hardens in anger, and Maksim breaks the silence to say, “Erm, Charlie—”

“I’m not talking to you, am I?” I turn my head to him, throwing daggers. Then I look back at the girl. “Don’t you understand me, girl? Where are your parents? I won’t repeat myself again.”

Maksim punches his desk. “Answer him, Blaire.”

She cowers into her shoulders. I notice it’s only ever when he calls her by her given name.

“I only have Cəp Maksim,” she says with innocence. The first shred of humanity.

My balls draw up, making my spine tingle. The mixture of danger and innocence in her is strangely alluring.

Silence wraps around us once more. I’m sitting here looking between them, analyzing things. Why does she find it traumatizing to hear her given name on Maksim’s tongue?

“Where are her parents?” I say to Maksim. “Dead? Did they sell her to you? Where are they?”

Maksim shakes his head in secrecy. I realize he’s been doing it for a while, but I’ve not been paying close attention. This is frustrating. If her parents are no longer alive, I’ll have to rethink my strategy.

Perhaps I could manipulate her into wanting me over him somehow. *¡Joder!* Imagine that. He’d be reeling. And I’d be balls deep in the most important thing to him, either by force or seduction.

Keeping up the momentum, I state the girl’s address and ask if that’s where she lives. Maksim gives her consent to reply, and she nods. I then ask

if she lives alone. I hope she does. I'd like to sneak into her apartment and fuck her in her sleep, wake her to a mind bending orgasm.

That'll put some life in her eyes.

She nods again with her master's approval, and my dick swells in my jeans. I will fuck this girl. I don't give a damn what Maksim says. He owes me.

"Is the apartment yours?" I ask, raising my eyebrows.

She nods on Maksim's approval.

"And you drove here tonight on your own?" I gesture at the office door. "You have your own car?"

"Yes, the car is hers," Maksim answers.

How odd that his pet has her own car and lives alone in the city? The girls he's trafficked and decided to keep for himself aren't allowed to leave his house—I remember how possessive he was over them. And he's obviously fond of Blaire... Surely he'd want her by his side at all times?

"I have her on the payroll," Maksim explains, confusing me further. "She's not a prisoner like the rest."

His dogs, he means. The trafficked girls.

"Is that right?" I explore Blaire's face for a reaction but still, nothing. "So, you trust her completely?" I glance over at Maksim. "Because if you have any doubts, I can't risk having sloppy workers on the job."

I won't kill her. I'm gonna hire her. I'm hungry to know more. And I'm gonna make her turn her back on Maksim, no matter the cost.

"With my life," he says truthfully to my question.

"Okay." I nod a couple of times, digesting things. I'm never one to change my plans, especially not several times in one sitting, but I'm intrigued by this wild thing. "Blaire, Maksim tells me you can hack into any computer system."

"You can answer him," Maksim says, and she nods.

"How can you do that?"

"My friend," Maksim croaks to clear his throat, "the details are better left unsaid. Just know that my little pet is masterful at—"

"I'll decide what details are better left unsaid." I sit forward on the couch, elbows on my knees, and glare at Maksim. I'm not gonna let him evade this question. I want to know how. "I'll *consider* pardoning things that might make this girl feel uncomfortable, but you'll tell me the finer details." I grind my jaw, then stare up at Little Miss Evil. "How can you do that, Blaire?"



“I spent three years in a room with books, codes, and computers,” she says without Maksim's authority. “I taught myself the things I know.”

“She actually thinks she became a hacker in three years?” I rake my fingers through my hair. They're playing me for a fool. “C'mon, don't try to take the piss outa me.”

Maksim shakes his head, his eyes bulging in panic. He's mentally telling me that's another question for later.

Why won't he let her explain how she became a hacker? What's the big secret? She's known worldwide for her profession.

I lift an understanding hand, because now, there's going to be a later. I then dig into my jeans pocket for a note and pass it to Blaire. She glances at Maksim, who waves to say she can take the note, and she reaches for it. Her cold hand touches mine, causing a sense of death to come over me. It actually takes my breath away, leaves a disturbing, eerie sensation lingering in my bones. *Fuck*, I don't think I've ever met a person who reeks so badly of death. And I've met a lot of cold blooded murderers in my time.

I think Blaire feels something too, as she's just gazing at me right in front of Maksim. Not scowling. Her deep blue eyes dazzle in something hypnotic, though her softened expression does nothing for her intensity. One single look and this girl could tear out someone's soul.

I want her. I want to feel what she feels inside as I bathe in the hell of darkness that is her.

“It's the latest in technology for a certain CCTV system,” I say softly, urging her to take the note. “Here you go.”

Tearing her lethal gaze away, she scans what's written down, blinking hard a few times.

“Can you shut that down for fifteen minutes?” I ask, stuck in a moment of staring at her now concentrated face. She's not your average beauty but, I dunno...there's something about her. Her freckly face should be veiled for one set of eyes only.

“Can you shut it down, My Little Pet?” Maksim repeats my question, I assume to keep me cool.

“I can shut this down for four, maybe five minutes before I get locked out.” She gives me back the note. I screw it up and toss it across the office.

“I need fifteen minutes.” And that's the truth. If I'm gonna make this work, she needs to get me a fifteen minute window. So I speak in a harsh capacity a toddler would understand. “You said the redhead can get me

fifteen minutes. I. Need. My. Fifteen. Minutes.”

Blaire moves closer to Maksim’s desk and opens her legs for balance. Her missile eyes lock on me, prepared to kill. This must be what the file meant when it said she protects Maksim on instinct.

I remain sitting forward on the couch, unaffected by her feral nature.

“Can you do it, My Little Pet? Can you get the fifteen minutes?”

“I’ll need a few weeks,” she whispers, and for some reason, I don’t believe her.

I can always use the Chinese boy as a backup hacker. But I need to put both her and Maksim under pressure, so they know not to fuck with me ever again.

Maybe I’ll have the boy block the server at eleven minutes, making Blaire fail in her endeavor. She’ll owe me personally then. If my men and I work fast enough on the bank job, we could get it done in eleven minutes, it’s just risky.

I have no idea why I’m doing this, trying to spare her life. But I fancy her, and now I think it’ll be a waste to murder such a fine little thing. She’s not really my type—I like my women with enough meat to grab a hold of—but with her, I don’t think it boils down to a type.

She’s pretty, smart, and dangerous. And I like danger.

I nod at Maksim. “Two weeks is fine.”

“Don’t run over schedule, My Little Pet,” he says, his voice low and hard. “You know what will happen if you do.”

What will happen? What does he mean by that? He’ll belt her?

I’d like to belt her for having such haunting eyes. She should only look at her lover with such intensity, evil or not.

“I won’t,” she says under her breath.

Now, to keep tabs on things... I pull another piece of paper from my jeans and kindly ask Blaire to give it to Maksim. It’s my contact details. I gave them to the Chinese boy but he took one look and gave it back to me, having stored the information in his memory.

Must’ve been fate.

Blaire pinches the piece of paper from my hand without making physical contact, and puts it on Maksim’s desk.

“That’s a Dark Web link. Don’t lose it. To contact me, the password is Guzmán Decena.” I spell out my full name, sure the girl gives me a funny, offended look as I do. “Keep me updated regarding Blaire and the job. You

can e-mail me any time, and I'll get back to you within the hour.”

“Of course, my friend.” Maksim touches his chest in respect. “Of course.”

I notice a deck of playing cards on his desk, and it sparks me to think of Rumo’s poker game next week.

I stare at Blaire, wondering if she’ll be there. And so I ask.

“She will be.” Maksim grins at his pet. “I might even put on a little show for you.”

“A show?” My stomach ties up in barbed wire. His ‘shows’ consist of sex, torture, and sometimes murder.

*Not on my watch.* I need her well and intact if my plan is gonna work.

“Like I said a moment ago,” he husks out, “ she's a beauty in battle.”

Ah, he means a fight.

“ You will come to the poker game, won't you, Charlie? You will come watch her fight?”

“Oh, I wouldn't miss it.” *I wouldn't miss it for the world.*

“Good. Very good, my friend. Now that business is taken care of, tell me how things are.”

“Same old. Same old.” I shrug, and then listen to him boast about what he’s been doing over the past few years, murdering to seize control of drug cartels in London and Europe, *blah, blah, blah.*

Tojo calls him a *Maric ó n* in my ear, a *faggot* in Spanish.

My eyes constantly wander over to the girl. I picture her in the Porsche she owns. I bet it suits her. In fact, I want to see if it suits her.

“I have to go,” I stop Maksim from waffling. “Time’s getting on.”

“Of course, my friend.” He nods at me before focusing on Blaire. “Do you have any questions before you go, My Little Pet? Is there anything you need?”

A good fucking, that’s what she needs.

“No,” she whispers in the most blank manner.

“I guess we're all done here then.” Maksim reaches over to shake my hand. I return the gesture this time by taking his grasp in a firm hold. It’s to keep the girl easy in our company. I want her as comfortable as possible for what’s about to happen.

“It's good to see you again, my friend.”

I get up from the couch, looking down at Blaire. She’s tiny—barely comes up to my chest.

A dangerous little angel.

“If you’re heading back to London, Blaire,” I say, fixing the hem of my t-shirt over the gun in the back of my jeans, “I’ll get a lift with you.”

Tojo tells me he and my men are ready to follow in the SUVs.

Blaire’s head whips to Maksim in a panic, a reaction I never expected from her. He nods, and then smiles uneasily at me, laughing under his breath. “You will have to forgive my little pet’s attitude, as I am sure you will learn she has. She’s as arrogant as a redhead comes.”

I laugh with him, amused and hopeful that she does have a bad attitude. Women are so easy these days. It’ll make a nice change to have to work for it.

“I can handle one small girl, no matter how arrogant she might be. Don’t worry about that.”

Maksim seems relieved, letting out a heavy breath. He then tells Blaire in Russian to be polite to me. She’s not allowed to fight me.

I wish he wouldn’t order her to stand down. I want this girl’s claws on my back.

I could always take her against her will to guarantee that. I know she’ll try to resist me.

“You can speak to him, also, just not about me.”

“Of course.” She head-bows to her master, no expression on her face. I hate that I can’t tell what she’s thinking. Is she nervous that she’s gonna be alone with me?

It doesn’t matter if she is. When I get my hands on this girl, I’ll make her feel so good she’ll end up begging me to keep her for myself.

I probably will, just to spite this Russian puta.

The End  
*for now*

**BLAIR3**

*Coming soon*

Want to know when **BLAIR3** comes out? Sign up to my newsletter by

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Thanks for reading, guys. I hope you've enjoyed **BLAIRE & BLAI2E**, and the bonus scene. If you leave a review on Amazon and/or Goodreads, I'll be forever grateful. It doesn't have to be lengthy. Even if it's just a single word against your star rating, I appreciate your effort. ù

**BLAIR3** (Part 3) coming soon.

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Prepare for Nic and James' story – and someone else's (wink face).

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## **About Anita Gray**

Anita Gray is the #1 International Amazon Bestselling Author of BLAIRE, BLAI2E and There's Something about BLAIRE. Since publishing in December 2016, Anita has topped the author ranks on amazon for #2 across numerous genres. Anita has also earned several awards and was nominated for the Summer Indie Book Awards 2017 for Best Romance.

Anita in a nutshell: she's obsessed with The Walking Dead and The Originals, loves books of all genres, tolerates rock music, and detests TV without meaning. She thanks her readers and fellow bloggers – who she adores beyond words – for supporting her throughout her journey. She admits she couldn't live without her family, the beating heart to her life. She owes everything to Shane.

You can find and interact with Anita on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. She's always online – no joke – come keep her company.

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## BLAIRE PART 1: LANGUAGE INDEX

Agradable — Nice/Good/Pleasant (Spanish)  
Amado — Beloved/Darling (Spanish)  
Bonita — Pretty/beautiful (Spanish)  
Cariño — Sweetie/Darling (Spanish)  
Сэр — Sir (Russian)  
Chica — Girl/Young woman (Spanish)  
Como loco — Like crazy (Spanish)  
Comprender — Understand (Spanish)  
Davaj, devochka — That's it girl (Russian)  
Dios ayuda — God help (Spanish)  
Dios mío — Oh my God (Spanish)  
Es una pena — It is a pity (Spanish)  
Eso es bueno — That is good (Spanish)  
Falso — Phony (Spanish)  
Hermano — Brother (Spanish)  
Hijo de puta — Son of a bitch (Spanish)  
¡Hostia! — Fuck! (Spanish)  
Idiota — Idiot (Spanish)  
Iisos Khristos — Jesus Christ (Russian)  
Jesucristo — Jesus Christ (Spanish)  
¡Joder! — Fuck (Spanish)  
Konchaj yego — End him (Russian)  
Lindo — Beautiful (Spanish)  
Maricón — Faggot (Spanish)  
Mudak — Asshole/Motherfucker (Russian)  
Mujer — Woman (Spanish)  
No hay problema — No problem (Spanish)  
¡No me jodas! — Don't fuck with me (Spanish)  
Pendejo — Profanity meaning 'someone who is stupid or does stupid things'  
(Spanish)  
Perfecto — Perfect (Spanish)  
Pizdets — This is the fucking end (Russian)  
Podgotovsja — Prepare yourself (Russian)

Puede ser nuestro secreto — Can be our secret (Spanish)  
Puta — Bitch/Whore (Spanish)  
Relajarse — Relax (Spanish)  
S'all right — It's all right  
Señor — Mr/Sir (Spanish)  
Señorita — Miss (Spanish)  
Sí — Yes (Spanish)  
Siempre me he preguntado acerca de los pelirrojos — I've always wondered about redheads (Spanish)  
Snooker room — Billiards room  
Tonto — Fool (Spanish)  
¡Ya pronto — Equivalent to as soon as possible (Spanish)

## **BLAI2E PART 2: LANGUAGE INDEX**

¡Idiota maricóns! — You idiot fags (Spanish)  
¡No lo dije en serio! — I did not mean it (Spanish)  
¡Rodear la mujer! — Surround the woman (Spanish)  
¡Sonar las alarmas! — Sound the alarms (Spanish)  
¡Tonto del culo! — To angrily call someone 'stupid' (Spanish)  
¿Ella's un poco joven para eso? — Is she a little young for that? (Spanish)  
¿Estas loco? — Are you crazy? (Spanish)  
¿Qué estás haciendo? — What are you doing? (Spanish)  
¿Vienes a jugar? — Have you come to play? (Spanish)  
Abres — Open/open up (Spanish)  
Ay Dios mío — Oh Lord (Spanish)  
Bonita — Pretty/beautiful (Spanish)  
Buena niña — Good girl (Spanish)  
Buenos días — Good morning (Spanish)  
Buenos tardes — Good afternoon (Spanish)  
Cariño — An endearment: sweetheart/darling (Spanish)  
Chica — An endearment: girl (Spanish)  
Comprender — Understand (Spanish)  
Dama — Lady/dame (Spanish)  
Dios — God (Spanish)  
Dios mío — Oh my God (Spanish)  
Dios te ayude — God help you... (Spanish)



Doble los guardias — Double the guards (Spanish)  
Dónde está — Where is... (Spanish)  
Drogas y licor — Drugs and liquor (Spanish)  
Durak — Fool (Russian)  
El cabrón — The bastard (Spanish)  
El fruto no cae lejos del árbol — The fruit does not fall far from the tree (Spanish)  
El hijo de puta — You son of a bitch (Spanish)  
El Señor insistiría — The Lord would insist (Spanish)  
Eres mío — You are mine (Spanish)  
Está bien — It's okay (Spanish)  
Estás bien — Are you okay (Spanish)  
Estas guapa — You look nice (Spanish)  
Gracias — Thank you (Spanish)  
Gracias a Dios — Thank you God (Spanish)  
Hermano — Brother (Spanish)  
Hijo de puta — Son of a bitch (Spanish)  
Hola — Hello (Spanish)  
Idiota — Idiot (Spanish)  
Iisus Khristos — Jesus Christ (Russian)  
Kahunas — Balls (Spanish)  
Khristos — Christ (Russian)  
Khuy tebe — Fuck you (Russian)  
Kurvë — Bitch (Albanian)  
La bruja — The witch (Spanish)  
La zorra — The fox: slang for 'bitch' (Spanish)  
Lavire — Whore (Albanian)  
Lo siento — I'm sorry (Spanish)  
Los atrapamos — We caught them (Spanish)  
Maldita sea — Dammit (Spanish)  
Mamá — Mom/mother (Spanish)  
Mamacita — Means: attractive woman (Spanish)  
Maricón idiota — Idiot fagot (Spanish)  
Mátalo — Kill him (Spanish)  
Me ndihmo — Help me (Albanian)  
Mi nombre es — My name is... (Spanish)  
Mudak — Asshole/motherfucker (Russian)

No estés triste — Do not be sad (Spanish)  
No hablo ingles — I do not speak English (Spanish)  
No puedo esperar — I can't wait (Spanish)  
O da — Oh yeah (Russian)  
Objetivo uno y dos, atrapado — Objective one and two, captive (Spanish)  
Padre nuestro, que estás en el cielo — Our father, who are in heaven...  
(Spanish)  
Papa — Dad/father (Numerous languages, including  
Spanish/Albanian/Russian)  
Paraíso — Paradise/heaven (Spanish)  
Patear el culo — Kick ass (Spanish)  
Pequeña puta — Little bitch/whore (Spanish)  
Përshëndetje — Hello (Albanian)  
Pizda — Cunt (Russian)  
Podgotovsja — Prepare (Russian)  
Por favor — Please (Spanish)  
Por supuesto — Of course/sure thing (Spanish)  
Puta — Whore (Spanish)  
Que aturde — Stunning (Spanish)  
Que te jodan — Fuck you (Spanish)  
Radi boga — For God's sake (Russian)  
Sa gjatë — How long... (Albanian)  
Señor — Sir/Lord (Spanish)  
Señorita — Miss (Spanish)  
Shkoni qij nëna juaj — Go fuck your mother (Albanian)  
Sí — Yes (Spanish)  
Sin problema — Informal: no problem (Spanish)  
Slava bogu! — Thank God (Russian)  
Sobrinas — Nieces (Spanish)  
Sobrinos — Nephews (Spanish)  
Soy un hijo de puta — I'm a son of a bitch (Spanish)  
Suka — Bitch/slut (Russian)  
Te amo — I love you (Spanish)  
Te hice una pregunta — I asked you a question (Spanish)  
Telefonar, el Señor — Ring the Lord (Spanish)  
Tontos — Fools (Spanish)  
Tramposa — Cheat/trickster (Spanish)

Ty prishla — You came... (Russian)  
Ven aquí — Come here (Spanish)  
Y estos — And these... (Spanish)  
Ya kalb — You dog (Arabic)  
Yeb tvoyu mat' — Go fuck your mother (Russian)

### **There's Something About BLAIRE: LANGUAGE INDEX**

Sí — Yes (Spanish)  
¡Ya pronto!" (Equivalent to the term, as soon as possible)  
Señor — Sir/Mr (Spanish)  
Señorita — Miss (Spanish)  
Pendejo — (Spanish profanity meaning 'someone who is stupid or does stupid things')  
Tonto — fool (Spanish)  
Puta — bitch or whore (Spanish)  
Dios mío — oh my God (Spanish)  
Maricón — faggot (Spanish)  
Hijo de puta — son of a bitch (Spanish)  
Siempre me he preguntado acerca de los pelirrojos — I've always wondered about redheads (Spanish)